

The Beadle, Bedel or Bedell

The word is ultimately from the Old High German *Bitel*, one who asks, but it came from the Old French *Badel* meaning a herald; the Old English is *Bydel*. Originally he was a subordinate officer of the Court, summoning people to appear before it. In early Teutonic times he was attached to the moot as a messenger, under the direction of the Reeve – the minor official or steward on an estate who acted as an intermediary between the Lord and his serfs. After the Norman Conquest the Beadle acted as an ecclesiastical officer and a messenger of the parish.

A Beadle also acted as the apparitor of a guild, thus serving the summons to come before the Court, a duty now largely devolving upon the Clerk. The Ward Beadle occupies an office as a Law Officer at least six hundred years old. The very earliest records of the City of London state that each Bedel should make arrangements in his own Ward for setting two men to watch the gates of the Ward. His own duties consisted of warning the inhabitants who were liable to serve as watchmen, supporting the Aldermen in keeping the peace, arresting evil doers and searching for and reporting any nuisances. The duties are now much simpler: they are to be present at Ward moots, attending the Alderman at Common Hall and assisting him in other matters.

On 3 October 1559, Common Council passed an Act which was destined to become a landmark in the history of street lighting, and the Ward Beadles were the chief participants in the scene. Each household was required from October to March "to cause a good and substantial lanthorn and candle there of eight to the pound to be hanged without their doors to give light into the open streets and lanes every night when the moon shall be dark. In performance of which the Alderman shall cause your Ward Beadle to give warning to every householder, and that between five and six of the clock when lanthorns are to be hanged out give open warning at every man's door ... whereof see you fail not".

It was and still is in some ancient companies the custom for Freemen called to the Livery to pay a fine to the Master and Wardens for the general use of the Society. A smaller sum was paid to the Clerk for entering his name into the Roll and to the Beadle a lesser amount. For example in the Scriveners' Society in the 17th century the sum of £5 was the fine for the good of the company; 2s 6d to the Clarke and 12d to the Bedell. In 1607 the ordinances of the Gardeners' Company provided that members of the Commonality called to the Livery pay 6s 8d to the Company towards buying plate and necessaries, 3s 4d to the Clerk and 1s to the Beadle; refusal to serve on the Livery carried a penalty also. Obviously this procedure was an encouragement to Company officers to obtain new members, besides being a useful source of their income.

The History of the Spectacle Makers' Company records that three hundred years ago their Beadle was elected at an annual wage of thirty shillings and his fee for giving notice to the Court of the dates of Court meetings should be under half a crown. He was held in high esteem as he was provided with a "handsome and suitable coat with such trimmings which the Master and Wardens in their discretion think proper, and a Hatt edged with gold lace".

Beadles carry a mace or staff and still wear long ceremonial gowns at formal functions. Ward Beadles wear a liberal provision of gold braid on their various coloured gowns. Company Beadles' gowns are in Company colours and traditionally covered with tassels.

With regard to gowns of office generally, the social psychology of dress is an interesting subject in itself, with magical, religious and ritual significance the world over. The obvious principle is that solemnity of dress accompanies the solemnity of the circumstances and functions, for dress loses half its meaning except in relation to society.

Since the earliest days of each Guild there was a Beadle who served as the indispensable link between elected officers and members. Unwin says that "He kept a list of members summoned, them to meetings, feasts and funerals, collected Quarterage, distributed alms,

attended searches and where there was a hall he fulfilled every function from Clerk of Works downwards". In the Pewterers' Company, one of the more prosperous of the lesser companies, he was allowed at the Master's dinner "a boiled capon, half a goose, half a pike, half a pie, half a custard, a rabbit, a dish of sturgeon, two casts of bread, a gallon of drink at to have a similar allowance at the yeomanry dinner". What this gallant trencher-man did with the huge allowance is not clear, but history has a habit of repeating itself and five centuries ago food prices were just as burning a question as they are today!

In "The Mark of the Sword" the historian of the Cutlers' Company records in the early 18th century that their Beadle having died, the new Beadle's duties should be stated. "He must be strictly accurate in his accounts, he must collect Quarterage and prevent waste; he must be attentive and obedient; he must attend Common Halls and see that none but the Livery come in; he must oversee dinners, supervising the waiters, seeing that wine and liquors were put on the tables and preventing as much as was in his power their being taken away. At tavern dinners he must be there in his gown and carrying his staff and must see that no imposition is practised by the waiters".

Thus until the emergence of the Clerk in the middle of the 16th century the Beadle was the Chief Officer of the Company with substantial prerequisites. Today the Company Beadle is still an indispensable, busy and dedicated full-time officer in Companies with halls or part time in hall-less Companies. Some Beadles serve part time in several Companies. The Beadle plays an important part in the ceremonies of granting Freedom and Livery at Court meetings; practically he assists the Clerk at various functions, continues the old custom of standing guard at the wicket gate at Guildhall for Common Hall, looks after the maintenance and lettings of the Company Hall, attends to the wine cellars (with the Butler), takes charge of the artefacts and robes, supervises the caterers at functions and, when there is no professional Toastmaster, as often there is not in minor hall-less Companies, acts in this capacity as well.

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