

# THE LEATHERSELLERS: A SHORT HISTORY



THE  
LEATHERSELLERS





Henry VI grants the Leathersellers their first Charter in 1444.  
A 19th century oil painting by an unknown artist.

The Leathersellers' Company is thought to have its origins amongst the whittawyers (makers of fine white leather) and pouchmakers who congregated along London Wall in the early thirteenth century. The English word 'leatherseller' is first found to describe the occupations of John and Robert Pointel in 1297, but the earliest official documentary use of 'leathersellers' for a group of London craftsmen comes in 1372, when members of the 'mistry' or craft of Leathersellers and Pursers complained to the Mayor and Aldermen about the dyers who, "in deceit of the people", had been dyeing sheep leather in order to pass it off as the more durable and expensive roe leather.

### BY 1444 THE LEATHERSELLERS WERE SUFFICIENTLY ORGANISED AND INFLUENTIAL TO APPLY TO HENRY VI FOR A CHARTER OF INCORPORATION.

In 1398, during the first mayoralty of Richard Whittington, the Leathersellers applied for 'articles' for the regulation of their craft and the prevention and punishment of dishonest practices in their trade. This resulted in a number of ordinances or bye-laws, in which the Leathersellers laid claim to the right to inspect all leather goods and skins sold in the City of London. By 1444 the Leathersellers were sufficiently organised and influential to apply to Henry VI for a charter of incorporation.

The charter established the government of the Company by four Wardens, confirmed and extended the Company's right to inspect leather,

and granted the right to meet, to wear a livery, to hold land and to use a common seal. Shortly after incorporation a group of trustees acting for the Company purchased five tenements on the south side of London Wall near Moorgate, and from around 1476 the Leathersellers used the upper floor of one of the houses as a Hall.



The Company's charter of incorporation, 1444.

In the fifteenth century most Leathersellers were still living and working in this peripheral part of the City; their parish church was All Hallows, London Wall and the Company's patron saint was Our Lady of the Assumption, whose feast day was celebrated by all the Livery on 15th August each year. Contemporary descriptions of the Hall show that it was well furnished, with tapestries depicting the life of the Virgin Mary lining the walls and a large window overlooking a garden to the rear. The other properties were let out, and part of the revenue distributed amongst poor prisoners for debt in accordance with the will of Robert Ferbras, an early benefactor who had helped with the purchase of the Hall.





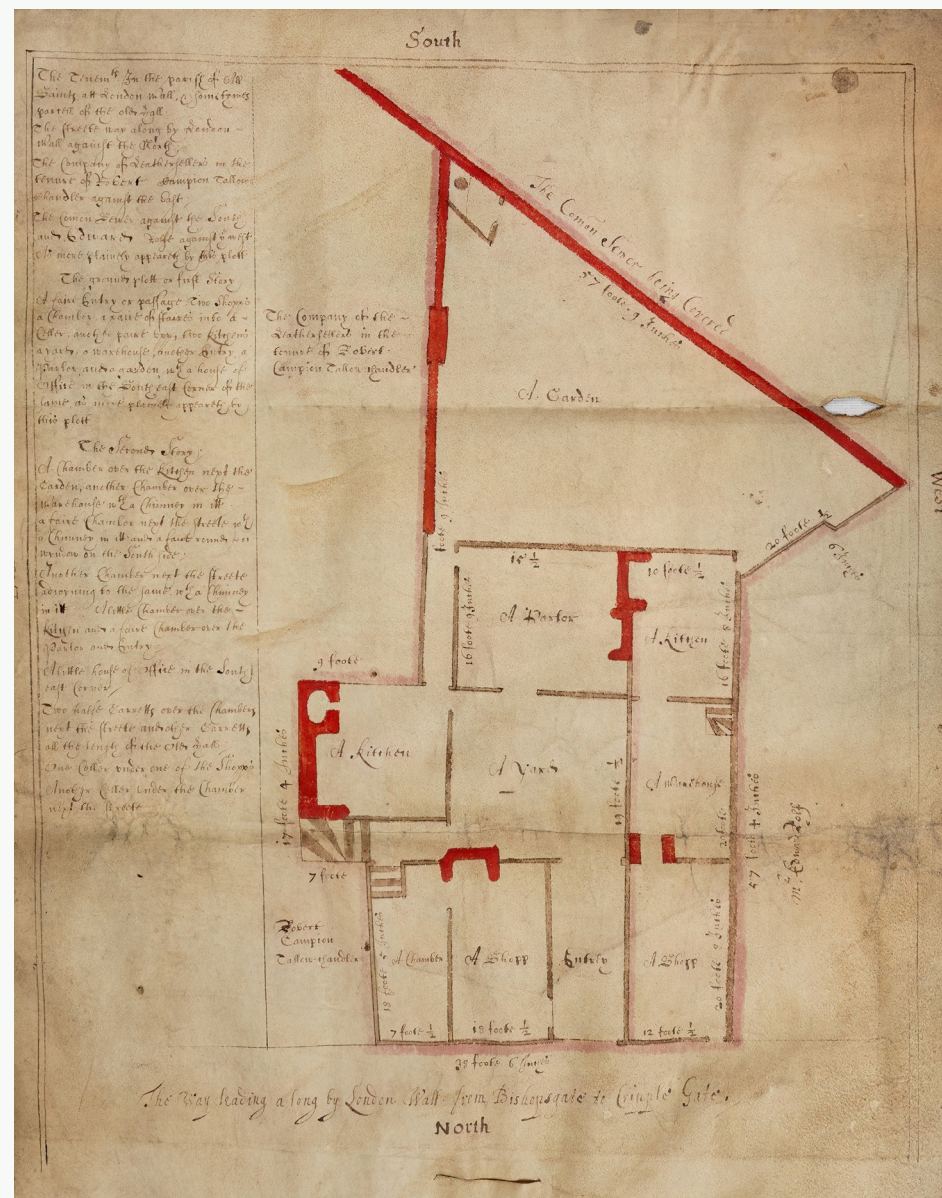
The interior of the second Hall drawn shortly before demolition in 1799, showing the elaborately carved Elizabethan/Jacobean screen.

The Company entered the sixteenth century on a firm footing. A series of amalgamations with the whittawyers, gloves-pursers and pouchmakers (though the Glovers later seceded in the 1630s to form a separate Company) had eliminated potential rivals, and members were generous with bequests of plate, money and property.

### ...IN 1543 THE LEATHERSELLERS SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY TO PURCHASE THE FORMER PRIORY OF ST HELEN'S, BISHOPSGATE, AND CONVERT IT INTO A HALL.

The Company's importance at this point is reflected in its position at number fifteen in the order of precedence, settled by the Court of Aldermen in 1516. This improved standing was naturally accompanied by a desire for more prestigious surroundings, and in 1543 the Leathersellers seized the opportunity to purchase the former priory of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, and convert it into their Hall.

A community of Benedictine nuns had been established at St Helen's in the thirteenth century on the site of a much earlier church. The foundation was wealthy, owning most of the parish of St Helen's, but attempts to evade the Dissolution by bribing Thomas Cromwell were unsuccessful, and the priory was surrendered to Henry VIII in 1538. The Leathersellers purchased the site five years later from Sir Richard Williams, alias Cromwell, Thomas Cromwell's nephew. Most of the purchase money of £380 was donated by a wealthy leatherseller, John Hasilwood, and in return the Company leased him the former Prioress's lodgings and undertook to build almshouses on the estate. Work began to convert the priory into a Hall, but almost at once the Company came close to losing everything. For legal reasons the conveyance had to be in the name of one trustee, and the Company chose Thomas Kendall, "an ancient man...well thought of, being rich and without children", with the intent that the estate should be bequeathed to the Company in his will. However, Kendall lived longer than anticipated and unexpectedly married and produced heirs, who subsequently pressed their claim to this lucrative property. The legal wrangling which ensued was only settled in 1677 with a payment of £25 to Kendall's descendants.



No illustration survives of the Company's first Hall on London Wall, used from 1476 to 1543, though this plan of 1614 (drawn with north at the bottom) shows the premises after conversion into shops and dwellings. The triangular-shaped garden at the top of the plan lay behind the Hall to the south.



In common with other Livery Companies in the Tudor period, the Leathersellers found that their wealth made them a target for substantial financial demands from Crown and City. The Company was obliged to sell its treasured collection of plate to make its contribution to Henry VIII's Scottish wars, and regular demands from the City authorities for money to purchase corn were met by unpopular levies on the Livery.

## AFTER A PROMISING START, THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PROVED DIFFICULT FOR THE COMPANY, LONDON AND THE COUNTRY AT LARGE.

With the succession of James I in 1603 the Leathersellers' Company decided to renew its charter. Many clauses in the first charter, dealing with matters such as points-making and counterfeiting of roe leather, were now out of date, and the Company felt particularly vulnerable in the wake of the Statute of Leather which had opened the trade to non-freemen. The 1604 charter confirmed existing rights to search and inspect leather being sold, but is notably more concerned with the constitution of the Company, which is largely governed by its provisions to this day.

After a promising start, the seventeenth century proved difficult for the Company, London and the country at large. The Leathersellers only reluctantly met royal demands to fund projects such as colonisation of Ulster, and a series of extortionate



Exterior of the second Hall in the mid-18th century, with St Helen's Church on the far left.

'loans' to Charles I drove the Company and the City into the arms of Parliament for the duration of the Civil War. Despite the provisions of the new charter, the Company found its grip on the trade slipping, as craftsmen simply moved into London's expanding suburbs, knowing that the guilds had neither the will nor the resources to search and exert their regulatory

influence there. Adding to the general gloom were the twin horrors of plague and fire: Court meetings were suspended while the plague raged, and although the Hall escaped the Great Fire, there was much loss of Company property elsewhere in the City. In the continuing power struggle between the City and the Crown, in 1684 Charles II revoked all existing charters

and issued restrictive new ones in their place. The Court of Assistants resigned en masse in protest, but the Company was able to do little about the unsatisfactory state of affairs until the more liberal reign of William and Mary when, according to legend, Court members repudiated the 1685 charter by grinding its royal seal under foot.



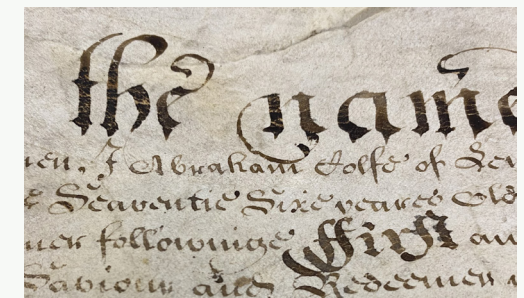


Survey and terrier showing the Company's corporate and trust estates in the parish of Lewisham and the manor of Sydenham, 1723. The trust estate shown was owned by the Company in its capacity as Colfe's trustee and the income from these lands was used to support Colfe's School.

...COLFE INVITED THE LEATHERSELLERS' COMPANY TO BE TRUSTEE OF HIS EXTENSIVE CHARITABLE TRUST, WHICH INCLUDED THE MANAGEMENT OF A BOYS' GRAMMAR SCHOOL IN LEWISHAM.

Despite all the upheavals, the Company continued to improve the Hall. The former nuns' dormitory had become the banqueting hall, while the chapter house had been adapted as the Court meeting room, both decorated with oak panelling and fine decorative plaster ceilings. An enormous kitchen was added, its size reflecting the scale of the entertainments on offer. Outside, Liverymen with time on their hands could spend an hour or two in the bowling alley, or stroll through the gardens lying to the east of the Hall.

A frequent visitor to the Hall at this time was Abraham Colfe, Vicar of Lewisham. Through his connection with the Clerk, William Manby, Colfe invited the Leathersellers' Company to be Trustee of his extensive charitable trust, which included the management of a boys' grammar school in Lewisham. Originally established in Elizabethan times, Abraham Colfe re-founded the school in 1652, and it came into the Company's care after his death five years later.



Abraham Colfe's probate will of 1658, pictured above, entrusted his school and charitable trust to the care of the Leathersellers' Company in perpetuity.



IT WAS DESTROYED BY FIRE IN 1819, BUT NOT BEFORE THE ASSISTANT CLERK AND BEADLE HAD RISKED THEIR LIVES TO SALVAGE MANY OF THE COMPANY'S MOST VALUABLE POSSESSIONS.

The turbulence of the Tudor and Stuart era had a devastating effect on the fortunes of all Livery Companies, and the eighteenth century saw the Leathersellers' Company at its lowest ebb. The increasingly elderly fabric of the Hall and the St Helen's estate was a constant drain on already depleted resources, and membership levels were alarmingly low. Although the Company had obtained an Act of Common Council in 1778, obliging all trading leathersellers in the City to be members of the Leathersellers' Company, it met with great resistance and efforts to enforce it were soon abandoned. In the last few decades of the century, the Company was nearly crippled by taxation, including the newly introduced income tax. There were desperate attempts to economise by cutting back on social events and even closing the Hall, but the Company was forced to conclude that only radical action would offer any hope of survival.

The entire estate was cleared, and the great architect John Nash was commissioned to draw up plans for a grand square. The Company, however, eventually opted for an unknown pair of local developers, William and Thomas Roper, who began work in 1802 on a cul de sac of houses which became the first St Helen's Place.

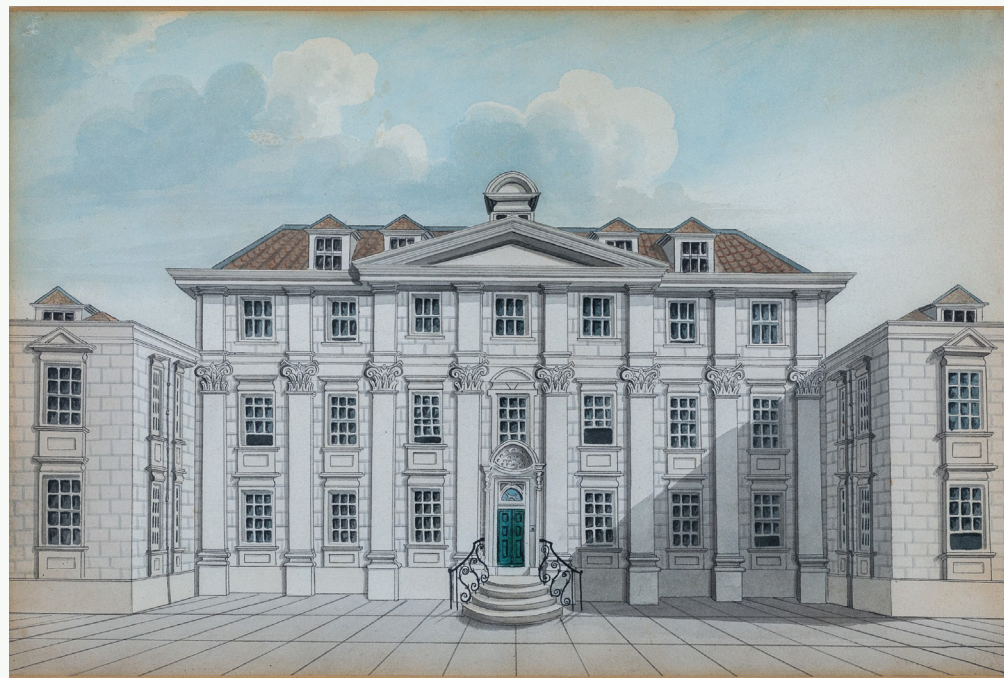
In the meantime, the Company transferred operations to a former merchant's house in the north east corner of the estate. An elegant building embellished with pilasters and topped with a weighty pediment,

the third Hall's history was dramatically brief. It was destroyed by fire in 1819, but not before the assistant Clerk and Beadle had risked their lives to salvage many of the Company's most valuable possessions.

A fourth Hall, built on the same site to plans by William Fuller Pocock, was designed in a style only loosely based on the classical Greek model and had a façade dominated by a huge coade stone representation of the Company's coat of arms. It opened in 1822 and, though sufficient for the Company's needs at that time, was unkindly described by one observer as *'incomparably the ugliest of civic edifices.'*



The fourth Hall, completed in 1822 and used until 1878.



Watercolour of the third Hall. Formerly a merchant's house, it was used as the Company's Hall from 1799 until its destruction by fire in 1819.

Rents from the new street began to come in from 1807 on, marking the beginning of the Company's recovery. Indeed, the Company's finances in the nineteenth century was underwritten by property, since rents in general were rising and the Company's land holdings began to be developed as London grew. Areas such as Barnet, Lewisham and Sydenham, where the Company owned extensive estates, were lucratively transformed from predominantly rural places into built-up London suburbs.

As a consequence of better financial circumstances, the Company's social functions not only resumed but caused it to outgrow its modest

Hall, leading to a decision to build another spacious enough to accommodate the entire Court and Livery at dinner. The resulting fifth Hall, designed in a late Victorian version of the Jacobean style by the Company's surveyor, G. Andrew Wilson, and opened in 1879. The centrepiece was a richly decorated banqueting hall, approached up a grand staircase lit by stained glass windows. The latest modern inventions were not scorned, however, and included electric lighting, using a Siemens dynamic machine – though this was not always reliable, requiring three men to operate and blowing half a dozen bulbs every time it was switched on; the system was removed in 1893.





The Company's almshouses at Barnet in c1871. Built in 1837 at the personal expense of the then Master, Richard Thornton (below), they now comprise twenty one modernised flats known as Leathersellers' Close.



Portrait of Richard Thornton with the silver trowel he used to lay the foundation stone of the almshouses.



Portrait of the Reverend Joseph Prendergast, founder of Prendergast School in Lewisham.

The Company was also able to channel its resources into large-scale charitable works, such as the construction of new almshouses. Livery Companies have a long tradition of providing accommodation for the elderly, and the Company's first almshouses were built on the St Helen's estate in 1543 at the instigation of John Hasilwood. Further almshouses were built in Lewisham, in accordance with the will of Abraham Colfe, but it was not until the more prosperous Victorian age that the Leathersellers could think about constructing their own. A site on the Company's Barnet estate was chosen, and the foundation stone was laid in July 1837 by the Master, Richard Thornton, who generously offered to pay for the six new almshouses himself. Further wings were

added in 1849 and 1866 to house the inhabitants of Hasilwood's almshouses when they were moved out of St Helen's Place. Originally intended for poor members of the Company or their widows, each almsperson received a weekly pension and a coal allowance. In the 1960s the west and east blocks of Barnet almshouses were rebuilt and the site was renamed Leathersellers' Close. The remaining block, containing the 1926 chapel, remained but has been renovated since.

In the 1880s the Company became involved with Prendergast School in Lewisham. The school was founded under the will of the Reverend Joseph Prendergast, a former headmaster of Colfe's School.

**LIVERY COMPANIES HAVE A LONG TRADITION OF PROVIDING ACCOMMODATION FOR THE ELDERLY, AND THE COMPANY'S FIRST ALMSHOUSES WERE BUILT ON THE ST HELEN'S ESTATE IN 1543 AT THE INSTIGATION OF JOHN HASILWOOD.**

Although not originally a trustee, the Leathersellers' Company funded the purchase of a site for the school, which opened in Rushey Green in 1890. Since then the Company has provided financial support, and began to provide governors in the 1950s. In 2008 Prendergast School formed a Federation with Prendergast Ladywell, with Prendergast Vale joining in 2011. Today, the Leathersellers' Federation of Schools comprises three secondary and two primary schools alongside a Sixth Form. The Leathersellers are one of two Corporate Members of the academy trusts, with members of the Company serving at every level of its governance structure. The Leathersellers fund a range of programmes across the schools, supporting students and staff.





Students at the Leathersellers' Technical College during a practical lesson.



The silver table centrepiece with its engraved list of Liverymen who served or were killed in the Great War. The names of five Leathersellers killed in World War II were added later.

## LEATHERSELLERS' HALL WAS OFFERED FOR USE AS A HOSPITAL, AND THE COMPANY FUNDED A MOTOR AMBULANCE AND FIELD KITCHEN FOR THE RED CROSS.

In the nineteenth century, Livery Companies were exposed to public scrutiny as never before. Various official enquiries were made into the running of the Company's charities, and the Royal Commission into the City Livery Companies indirectly encouraged the Leathersellers to focus more on developing technical education for those going into the leather trade. This process had already begun with a donation that helped to found the City and Guilds of London Institute, and culminated with the establishment of the Leathersellers' Technical College in Bermondsey in 1909. There was support, too, for the leather trade in general, including sponsorship of practical research into treatments for anthrax and damage caused to animal hides by the warble fly.

As a new century opened, the Company turned to domestic affairs and began rebuilding St Helen's Place. Work was halted, however, by the outbreak of the First World War. Leathersellers' Hall was offered for use as a hospital, and the Company funded a motor



A motorised Red Cross field kitchen, funded by the Leathersellers, in front of the fifth Hall in January 1915 prior to its departure to the Western Front.

ambulance and field kitchen for the Red Cross. Peace was celebrated with the award of honorary membership of the Company to prominent military and political figures such as Earl Haig and Lloyd George.





The Reception Room in the sixth Hall. Its magnificent Wilton carpet was hand-woven in one piece in the 1950s, and depicts animals used in leather production together with coats of arms of the Leathersellers', Glovers', Cordwainers' and Saddlers' Companies. It is now installed in the current seventh Hall.

In the inter-war years work resumed on St Helen's Place, with Leathersellers' Hall being extensively remodelled; but the Company did not enjoy its new surroundings for long. On the night of 10/11 May 1941, incendiary bombs fell on 16 St Helen's Place and neighbouring Leathersellers' Hall soon caught fire. A low tide on the Thames meant that there was not sufficient water to extinguish the blaze until morning, by which time the Hall had been almost entirely gutted, with great loss of furniture, artworks and treasures. After another spate of bombing in 1944 it was reported that over 400 properties belonging to the Company had been damaged, the most significant loss being Colfe's School. The pupils were evacuated to schools in Tunbridge Wells and Somerset and spent many years in temporary accommodation before the School re-opened in 1964 on a new site in Lee.

Girls were first admitted to Colfe's Sixth Form in 1977 and the school became fully co-educational in 1999. The most recent iteration of the Leathersellers' Foundation's support to enable social mobility through Colfe's School began in 2010. Initially enabling just two scholars to attend the Sixth Form, whose financial circumstances would otherwise have prevented them from doing so, the scheme grew and over the last 14 years has provided access to a Colfe's education for

113 individual "Leathersellers Scholars". Unsurprisingly, property was a major preoccupation in the post-war period. Great tranches of war-damaged suburban housing were sold off in a move to diversify the Company's investment portfolio, while in 1948 the long process of rebuilding Leathersellers' Hall began with the appointment of the Louis de Soissons Partnership as consulting architects.

### ON THE NIGHT OF 10/11 MAY 1941, INCENDIARY BOMBS FELL ON 16 ST HELEN'S PLACE AND NEIGHBOURING LEATHERSELLERS' HALL SOON CAUGHT FIRE.

Work was hampered by post-war bureaucracy and shortages of men and materials, but was finally completed in 1960. Smaller and more intimate than its predecessor, the new, sixth Hall's combination of traditional architecture and expert craftsmanship attracted the attention of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, who paid an informal visit to inspect Louis de Soissons' latest work.



Etching by Stanley Anderson of the gateway to St Helen's Place in 1911, with an early motor car by the entrance to the fifth Hall at the far end of the street on the left. These wrought iron gates were removed in 1926 and are now at Leathersellers' Close in Barnet.





The Leathersellers' Company's Technical College in Tower Bridge Road, seen here in the 1930s.

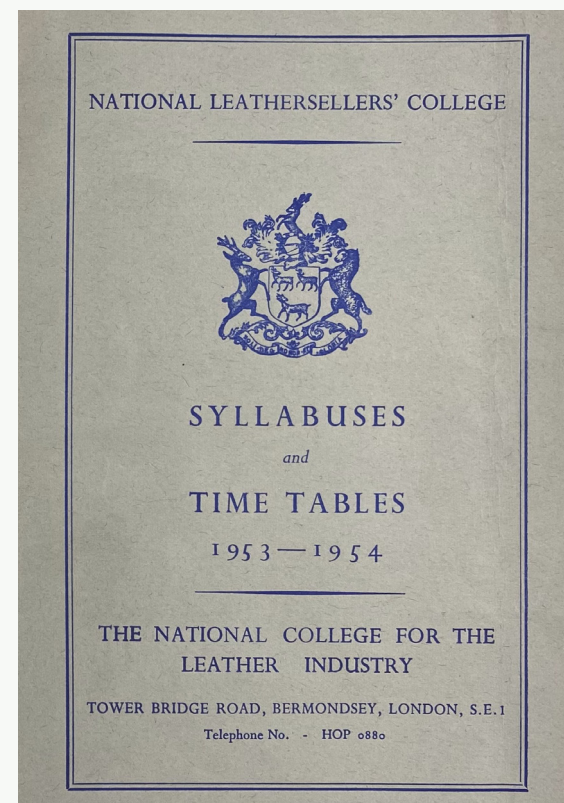
London's leather industry was another casualty of the war. Many of Bermondsey's tanneries had been destroyed, and demand for the heavy leather they produced was falling, as were student numbers at the Technical College. In 1976 the decision was taken to amalgamate with the leather department at University College Northampton, and the Company funded the construction of a new National Leathersellers' Centre. The Centre was subsequently re-named the British School of Leather Technology to reflect its international reputation. Close by, in purpose-built accommodation largely funded by the Company, was located the Leather Conservation Centre, where skilled staff restored Britain's rich heritage in leather.

In 2019, with further investment, the BSLT was relocated to the Waterside Campus and renamed the Institute for Creative Leather Technologies. Following this move the Leathersellers continued to provide support to the ICLT with the provision of equipment, core funding, and scholarships for the full range of courses. In December 2023 the University of Northampton made the decision to close the Institute. However, the Leathersellers' Company and Foundation remain committed to the future of leather education and are currently involved in an industry-led initiative to re-imagine the future of educational provision in the UK.

The same year as the BSLT's move and renaming as the ICLT the Leather Conservation Centre also

moved, relocating to new premises in Northampton alongside the Museum of Leathercraft. The museum was founded in London in 1946 but had moved to Northampton in 1978, and was supported by several livery companies including the Leathersellers' Company. In 2023 the collections of the Museum of Leathercraft – renamed to The Leathercraft Trust – began to move into the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery for a long-term sustainable home, combining and enhancing the collections there and giving more opportunities for objects to be seen by a wider audience.

Enabling individuals and communities, fostering opportunity, and supporting the leather trade have been at the heart of the Leathersellers' identity



National Leathersellers' College syllabuses and timetables, 1953–1954.

NATIONAL LEATHERSELLERS' COLLEGE



SYLLABUSES

and

TIME TABLES

1953 — 1954

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE FOR THE  
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since at least 1471, much of this made possible through the generosity of benefactors such as Robert Ferbras, Elizabeth Grasvenor, Hugh Offley, Robert Rogers, George Humble and Abraham Colfe, who entrusted the Leathersellers with benefactions to help poor prisoners; support members to establish new businesses; fund student grant-giving and accommodation for the elderly; and enable wider charitable giving. Over the centuries these charitable trusts have been rationalised, combined and tailored to modern needs, most notably with the creation in 1979 of the Leathersellers' Company's Charitable Fund, now named The Leathersellers' Foundation.





The Reception Room in the current seventh Hall, with its centrepiece, a striking glass sculpture by artist Dale Chihuly.



Bomb damage in the Reception Room of the sixth Hall, 1993.

In 1992, almost fifty years of peace in St Helen's Place was shattered by a terrorist bomb that exploded in St Mary Axe. Buildings in the immediate vicinity, including St Helen's church and the Company's Exchequer Court development were damaged, some irreparably. Repairs were still in hand a year later when a massive device exploded in Bishopsgate. St Ethelburga's church was destroyed and every window in St Helen's Place was broken. Inside Leathersellers' Hall doors were blown in and pictures cut by flying glass. Reinstatement works began again, and the Company took advantage of the disruption to improve the appearance of St Helen's Place. To celebrate the Millennium, the Company commissioned two bronze sculptures to flank the entrance to Leathersellers' Hall. Made by Mark Coreth, the sculptures represent the ram and roebuck, the Company's heraldic 'beasts' that feature on its coat of arms.

The first decade of the 21st century was dominated by plans to redevelop the St Helen's estate. These plans resulted in the building of 100 Bishopsgate, a 40-storey development on the corner of Bishopsgate and Camomile Street, and the rebuilding and fitting-out of 5–7 St Helen's Place as the Company's seventh Hall in 2012–2016.

Intricately and beautifully designed by Eric Parry Architects, and with interior features designed or created by artists and designers such as Victoria Crowe, Bill Amberg and Dale Chihuly, the seventh Hall was officially opened by the Earl of Wessex in 2017.

## THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY WAS DOMINATED BY PLANS TO REDEVELOP THE ST HELEN'S ESTATE.

Its major features include a large, central spiral staircase leading down to a subterranean dining hall dominated by a stunning new tapestry designed by Victoria Crowe and made at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. This tapestry, and the new Hall itself, are tangible expressions of an identity formed both by historic precedent and by a responsibility to future generations.





THE  
LEATHERSELLERS

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