

Feltmakers of London in the Period 1604 – 1704

In the first century of the Livery Company's existence as an incorporated body, following the granting of the charter by King James I in August 1604, the Company's official history on page 11, records that the collective aim of the Feltmakers' Company was the 'better governing of the seven thousand persons of the said trade'.

Who these seven thousand Feltmakers were is a fascinating enigma. Detailed information about the Company's membership, and about the lifestyle of Feltmakers in that first century of its incorporated existence, remains largely unexplored territory, principally because relevant public records and private diaries of Feltmakers of the period are simply not in existence.

One can however gain some clues about the everyday existence and lifestyle of Feltmakers of the period 1604 – 1704, from looking at Wills that are available in the Public Records Office held at Kew. Principal among these records is the archive of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. In the relevant period, if a deceased's estate was valued at over £10 in London (£5 elsewhere) in goods and cash (not real estate) in more than one diocese, the will had to be proved by an archbishop's court, which is where the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) came into the picture as far as Feltmakers of London were concerned.

The PCC records at Kew do not contain the details of the Wills of all the Feltmakers who died in 1604 – 1704, but one can assume that those whose testamentary dispositions are there are among the more affluent Feltmakers of the day. There are the details of thirty six Wills stored there. The names and dates of probate are set out in the attached appendix and their testamentary dispositions cover an interestingly wide range of wealth.

The width of the range of worldly resources is reflected in the following two wills. Ralph Stephens, Citizen and Feltmaker of London, whose will was granted Probate on 27th. January 1688, bequeathed 'to my son William one suit of clothes being my daily wearing apparel and the sum of five shillings of good English money and all the rest and residue of my estate', after leaving 'the lease of my house and equity of redemption of the mortgage thereof and all my books, debts and securities to my three daughters Elizabeth, Sarah and Honor equally'. John Walton, Citizen and Feltmaker of London distributed his largesse in rather more impressive swathes, disbursing four hundred pounds to his wife Isobel and similar amounts of four hundred pounds to his son John on reaching 26 years, his son William on reaching 24 years and his daughter Elizabeth of reaching 22 years among his other dispositions

Other wills give cameo pictures of a variety of life styles. Thomas Gwatkinns's Will tells its own sad story. He, being a Citizen and Feltmaker of London, left to his brother John of the parish of St. Bride's London, Feltmaker, "all my worldly goods in respect of all the charges and relief I have had from him in my long sickness". Was he a victim of one of the plagues that beset London in that century, one wonders?

William Bletsoe, Feltmaker and family man, made provision for his two daughters, Dorothy and Sarah, both infants under the age of 21, with his residual estate, but not before itemising a bequest 'in primis' [i.e. firstly] to one Elizabeth Matthews of the parish of St Martin in the Fields in the sum of Twenty Nine pounds of lawful money of England, in case she shall be in any want or necessity. Presumably his wife pre-deceased him and Elizabeth came to the rescue. He rewards his two executors each of them with a Hat to the value of a guinea "to wear in memory of me".

A number of Feltmaker-testators made specific provision as to how they wished to be remembered by their executors or heirs. They specified in their wills how financial provisions in their wills were to be expended on designated items. Apart from hats, rings appear as favoured items. Joseph Bowden in his Will dated October 1690 left twenty shillings apiece to his 'honoured father and mother', to his uncle Richard Bowden and aunt Joanna Bowden, and to his

two brothers and sister to buy them rings. Likewise John Cooke in his Will of November 1680 left ten shillings to each of his two executors 'to buy them rings'.

The style and language in which the Wills are written bear all the hallmarks of professional will-writers. Feltmaker-testators relied on the experts to get the wording right. They were after all in their daily round engaged in a practical industry rather than literary finesse. The opening ten lines or so of every Will includes a wording along these lines: 'First and principally I commend my soul into the hands of Almighty God hoping and assuredly believing by the death and merits of my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to have full and free pardon and remission of all my sins and to obtain eternal salvation. And I commit my body to the Earth to be decently buried according to the discretion of my Executors...' However, having got the theological preamble in order, the testators could then put the stamp of their own personality on the main substance of the Will – the dispositions. Thomas Parker clearly liked to have things precisely buttoned up, every i dotted and t crossed. In his Will of April 1634 he went into detail as to how he hoped to be remembered by his immediate family by bequeathing one shilling each to the two sons of his lately deceased brother John, the progeny of his married sister Mary, and to his other two unmarried sisters Anne and Elizabeth. He follows up this family largesse by setting aside ten shillings of lawful English money for his funeral sermon, to take place in the church of St. Katherine by the Tower, before leaving the rest of his wealth to his 'beloved wife Barbara', once his debts were paid and his funeral expenses discharged.

For an emphasis on precision in testamentary detail, Thomas Parker's Will is as nothing compared with that of Feltmaker Philip Poole. In a document of February 1681, four times the length of a typical Will, he spells out precisely who are to be the financial beneficiaries on his passing and the exact proportions. He bequeaths to his 'honoured Aunts Mary Young and Jane Moore one piece of Guyny-Gold to the value of twenty shillings apiece' with similar provision for his loving brother and sister William and Mary. Moving on to his nephews, nieces and cousins he leaves them pieces of 'half guyny-gold of the value of ten shillings' and to others, named friends, amounts in shillings, enumerating separately and in careful detail how the smaller amounts bequeathed could be paid in instalments, with payments spread out over a year. He continues with precise details as to how his real property is to be dealt with, and not wishing to miss a trick, sets out with similar precision how his executors are to carry out their duties and who steps into their shoes if they did not fulfil their duties and obligations – clearly a testator who in 21st. century UK would have made an admirable civil servant.

One senses that many a hidden story lies behind some of these seventeenth century Wills. Why, for example, does John Lucas, in his Will of February 1691, in a compact Testament of only seven lines in which to bequeath his wealth, leave what one can assume is his nephew John a modest shilling and his niece five pounds, with the residue to his wife? What moved Ralph Stephens in 1654 to leave his son the sum of fifty shillings to buy himself a cloak and suit, but with no other bequest? Did he need smartening up?

A study of these three and four hundred year old Wills leaves the reader reflecting that every day Feltmakers of that era, while having less disposable wealth than their twentyfirst century successors, had similar concerns, and foibles, and evidenced the on-going fundamental timelessness of basic human nature.

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