

L348/3

The Leigh Cup

Although the extract from the Acts of Court suggests that the cup was already in the possession of the Mercers' by 1569, it was officially bequeathed to the Company when Sir Thomas died in 1571:

To 'my loveing Brethren, the Company of the Mercers, one faire cupp, and standing cupp of silver, all guilt, garnished with maidenheads, roses and flaggins, with a cover of the like work enameled blew [blue], as the body of the cupp is, with posies therein graven, and a maiden in the knopp, with a unicorne fawning on her lap; and the same cupp, I give them, to use it at the chooseing of the Wardens of the Company, if they shall thinke it soe good.'

The finial has an elaborately butressed hexagonal boss, and each face bears coats of arms in enamel comprising:

- the arms of the City of London;
- the arms of Sir Thomas Leigh, namely gules, on a cross engrailed, between four unicorns' heads, earsed, argent, five bezants;
- the arms of the Merchant Adventurer's Company;
- the arms of the Merchants of the Staple;
- the cross of St George;
- the arms of the Mercers' Company.

Two bands encircle the cover and body are inscribed in gold on a blue enamel ground with the following couplet:

'To elect the Master of the Mercerie, hither am I sent,
And by Sir Thomas Leigh for the same intent.'

The cup bears an unidentified maker's mark, the date letter for the year 1499-1500, and is said by tradition to have belonged to the hospital of St Thomas of Acon. The 'maiden in the knopp' is the Mercers' maiden and for further information on this emblem of the Company see A.F.Sutton, *I Sing of a Maiden: The Story of the Maiden of the Mercers' Company*, Leeds, 1998.

Sir Thomas Leigh, d. 1571, Mercer and Lord Mayor

One snowy Saturday in January 1559 Leigh, as mayor, escorted the young Queen Elizabeth through London's streets, introducing her to the citizens. It was the day before her coronation. Leigh was among the richest men in England and a Merchant Adventurer, member of a highly profitable company that traded cloth. While still in his twenties he had handled government business in Antwerp. His wife, Alice, was niece of a business partner, Sir Roland Hill. After the coronation, Leigh was knighted, despite doubts about his record on law and order. Church-goers had rioted in over-zealous appreciation of their new Protestant queen, and the mayor had been reprimanded for permitting this 'outrageous disorder'.

Leading City merchant

A native of Wellington in Shropshire, Thomas Leigh was apprenticed to the London mercer Sir Thomas Seymer and admitted to the freedom of the Mercers' Company in 1526. Membership of the Company of Merchant Adventurers followed and by 1528 Leigh had amassed a considerable fortune as a Merchant of the Staple in Antwerp. He rented several properties from the Mercers' Company including a large tenement in Basinghall and from 1546 a "great messuage" in Old Jewry. Leigh rose to a position of prominence within the Mercers' Company and he was elected master three times between 1554 and 1564. His marriage to Alice Coverdale (née Barker), the niece of his friend and fellow mercer, Sir Rowland Hill seems to have been very happy, and must have enhanced his social standing and position within the Company.

Leigh's legacy

Leigh served as alderman of Castle Baynard, Broad Street and Coleman Street wards and was appointed Lord Mayor in 1558. The term of his mayoralty coincided with the accession of Elizabeth I, and Leigh had the onerous task of maintaining public order in the City during a potentially unsettling transition from a Catholic to Protestant regime. Leigh evidently managed the task with diplomacy and tact and his loyalty to the Queen was acknowledged by a knighthood the following year. When Leigh died on 17 November, 1571, his properties in London and estates in Shropshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire were left to his wife and children (four sons and five daughters). He left a magnificent silver-gilt and enamelled covered cup

to the Mercers' Company and was buried in the Mercers' Chapel. His tomb was inscribed:

Sir Thomas Leigh bi civil life,
All offices did beare,
Which in this City Worshipfull
Or honourable were:
Whom as God blessed with great wealth,
So losses did he feele,
Yet never changed his constant minde
Tho' fortune turn'd her wheele.
Learning he loved, and helpt the poore,
To them that knew him deere;
To whom his lady, and loving wife,
This tomb has builded here.

Further reading

On-line resources

- The Mercers' Company: www.mercers.co.uk
- The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: www.oxforddnb.com (note: this resource is available to subscribers only)

Books and articles

- J. Imray, *The Mercers' Hall*, London Topographical Society Publication No. 143, 1991
- D. Keene and V. Harding, *Historical Gazetteer of London before the Great Fire, I Cheapside*, Cambridge, 1987
- J. Watney, *Some Account of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon, in the Cheap, London, and of the Plate of the Mercers' Company*, London, 1892 and 1906
- J. Watney, *An Account of the Mistery of the Mercers of the City of London, otherwise the Mercers' Company*, London, 1914
- F. Sutton, *I Sing of A Maiden: The Story of the Maiden of the Mercers' Company*, The Mercers' Company, 1998