

Wardens, My Lord, Aldermen, Sheriffs, Liverymen, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour to be standing here at the very start of my year as Master of this outstanding Company. Thank you all for joining us and I know I speak for every one of us in thanking the Master and Clerk of the Merchant Taylors Company for allowing us to dine in their fantastic Hall.

This Hall is, of course, draped in history. My favourite nugget being that the Merchant Taylors and the Skinners vie for the rank of 6 and 7 in the list which is where the phrase “at sixes and sevens” originates. From a personal perspective, I have hedged my bets at six and a half with my inauguration taking place here many years after my wedding reception at Skinners Hall!

Tonight, however, we are at ones and twos! As Oscar Wilde almost put it, to have one sheriff in attendance is fortunate but two is something to celebrate! Chris – I am so grateful that you have taken the time to be here. Michael – thank you for kind and thoughtful words not just about our Company but also about the context of the City of London Corporation.

The City has, of course, long been a place where connections are made. That’s something to which Rebecca Lovelace has dedicated so much time and effort through the Building People Programme. This was launched a week ago in Birmingham with the potential to be the most powerful platform that has ever existed to connect people with jobs in our industry. We are hugely excited about it as it could make a real difference to the young people we look to support. Rebecca – welcome – and thank you for all you continue to achieve.

I wish there was time to mention every one of you in person but, there again, I assume you have places to be before tomorrow morning! However, I would like to welcome our official guests including the seven masters from financial services group of Livery Companies. And Alderman Alison Gowman, Master Plaisterer and the fourteen Masters who have joined us from the Construction Group of Livery Companies. Evenings like this do so much to enrich and connect us professionally and personally.

As a Company, we have, of course, only been connecting for 43 years. But we hit the ground running and our ethos and traditions are well-established. We gather not just to wine, dine and enjoy but to do good, both by helping people to join the profession and develop their careers, and through our charitable work.

As Senior Warden I spoke to many potential new members of the Company and I was touched by their clear desire to give something back, particularly when recognising their own good run in the industry. That’s the basis for our existence. Helping those less fortunate than ourselves is fundamental. And yet, arriving here from our property businesses in our black tie can, unfortunately, give the outside world a very different impression. I know that’s something we would all like to address.

But I’m getting ahead of myself! Because, a little like Scrooge tonight has made me reflect more than usual on the three periods that dominate all our lives, the past, present and future.

My own past began deep in the West Country far from London and not even close to many buildings. My academic interests were scientific and the Livery was a word I associated solely with horses!

However, there were links to the City. My father's great friend Sir Bernard Walley-Cohen had served as Lord Mayor. And then I went to study in London, where I fell out of love with Biology but in love with the City.

I worked as a builder of sorts meeting Giles Bassett, son of John, then head of Investment at Jones Lang Wotton and Miranda Knowles, daughter of Keith Knowles, then senior Partner of WGS. Keith was a founding member in 1977 and served as our Master in 1987, and John has been a Liveryman for 35 years. I was inspired by their work and embarked on qualifying as a Chartered Surveyor. (This was, of course, completely unrelated to Keith and John owning two of the largest yachts in the Solent! And, as an aside, there will be new sailing events in the calendar this year!)

So I joined the Livery. My passion for what we do here has grown ever since. And I know I speak for us all in praise of Past Master William Hill's launch of our new business plan on our 40th anniversary particularly the focus on apprenticeship programmes with many new surveyors coming through the programme and awareness of activities growing in schools. In time, a route into the world of Chartered Surveying will be available from every school in the land, which is quite some aspiration.

In the very recent past, Digby has had a brilliant year. He has taken our ten-year-plan by the scruff of the neck and run with it. He has an astonishing ability to get the best out of people and to inspire volunteers to work as if they were on time and a half! I know we will all want to congratulate him on a year of multiple achievements.

Which brings us to the present, and the huge debt I already owe to our Senior Warden, Ken Morgan Junior Warden, James Bryer and Renter Warden, Colin Peacock. It is impossible to lead without complete faith in the team around you and I am blessed in that regard with such a dedicated Court and Committees and over 80 liverymen involved. And, of course, my debt of gratitude to Amanda Jackson - our Clerk – is limitless.

As a businessman, I am all too aware of the importance of an organisation having a 'Purpose', a 'Vision' and an 'Ambition'. Our Purpose is clear: To support the property profession and be a force for good in advancing education and helping young people achieve their potential. But it's hard to maximise our potential to do that unless we have a clear and realisable ambition. Otherwise, how will we best judge our success?

In my view, that ambition should not just be driven from the top but from across the Company. Which is why I am organising a series of lunches to ask our members for your ideas and where you believe we can be in another ten or twenty years.

Right here in the present, the Property Committee will pick-up Digby's baton (something we intend to do more smoothly than the British 400m relay squad in Doha!) continuing the excellent series of property tours and lectures that are now becoming a tradition in themselves.

Meanwhile, our new Fund Raising Committee will take-on the new targets we set and work out how to get there. Clearly, one way will be to raise awareness of what we do. So many property people (including chartered surveyors I meet) don't know enough about us. Many don't even know we exist.

So, I am keen to work hard on our communication. We can Tweet and if you are not already signed-up to our Linked In account, you will be shortly! This will be my main medium for communication and a chance for you to share our work and our ambition with those far from this room.

Ultimately, no Master can do any more than help guide a Company towards the future. And as we are already under sail and making good progress my job is to just push us as far as we are capable. For me, that means creating even greater links across every part of the property sector. We should, for example, be working hand-in-hand with the RICS and the BPF who are officially represented here tonight by Chris Brookes and Melanie Leech.

Collectively, we can make such a difference. Take for instance our Livery Schools Programme, The Chartered Surveyors Training trust, and our Apprentice programme created by CSTT now owned and run by the college of Estate Management and Reading University's 'Pathways to Property' initiative. Working together can maximise our impact on those who will benefit.

I also believe we should be raising more money. We have £2m in our charitable trust. If we are really honest, and look at the businesses represented around this room, that's not as impressive as it sounds. Let's push for £20m. Let's push the 10 students we support now to 100. That's a future of which I will be truly proud.

So, let's spread the word together. Let's develop our ambitions and our vision together. Let's raise money and crack a few nuts together. And then let's come back here in the years to come and toast our success together.

I'm hugely excited by the challenge and am delighted that my first duty as Master is to introduce my guest Liz Peace, former Chief Executive of the British Property Federation and now a valued advisor to the industry.

Thanks to you all for making the time and effort to be here. Our past may not be long in Livery terms but it has been packed full of good work. Our present is focused and optimistic. And our future well that's down to us all!

Please would all Liverymen stand and raise your glasses and join me in a toast to our Guests!

John Woodman
22 October 2019