

**Speech by Mark Vessey at the Annual Banquet of the Plumbers' Company at Mansion House, London, Monday 8th April 2024**

Master, Wardens, My Lord Mayor Locum Tenens, Visiting Prime Warden, Masters, Liverymen, Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Guests:

*What do we need, in order to see, know and be ourselves, with other people, in the great city of this world?*

For one English poet, the answer was simple: we need a river to cross, and a change of clothes.

*If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of **water**.*

*Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, **different clothes** ...*

Philip Larkin (the poet in question) grew up in Coventry, a cathedral city with the River Sherbourne running under it. Later in life, he took his lovers on day trips to Beverley, the minster town on the River Hull. 'Always it is by bridges that we live', Larkin wrote in a poem for the opening of the Humber Bridge.

Coventry and Beverley. Two places for which (unlike London) we have good records of the drama performed by guilds in the Middle Ages. The 'mystery' plays. Plays put on by craft associations or **mis|teries**, enacting the **mys|teries** of the Old and New Testaments, including—prominently—the story of John the Baptist, impresario of a religion constructed on water.

The Oberammergau Passion Play draws crowds from round the world but it has only been going since 1634 and is staged only once a decade.

Until the Reformation, performances like that were part of the year-round life of English towns. With other shows, they created an immersive spectacle that enrolled male citizens as actors and crew, and everyone else as onstage spectators. The stage was the town. The town was a stage.

In London, masques and pageants for royal entries and for the Lord Mayor's Show blended religious and classical mythology in promotional allegories of city and kingdom.

Before there was large-scale literacy and electronic media, only street theatre had the power to make English society intelligible to itself.

The livery companies sponsored this civic scenography and competed for the limelight.

When the Ironmongers put on a show, there might be a big scene with Vulcan at his forge.

Once, when the Lord Mayor was a Draper, a speech to him began with this immortal couplet:

*What beast or bird, for hide or feather rare,  
For man's use made, can with the sheep compare?*

There is a proud pigman in the hall tonight. But let us still honour the incomparable sheep, and the Worshipful Company of Drapers, and the other originally sheep-powered companies of the greater guilds, namely the Mercers, Merchant Taylors, and Clothworkers—to say nothing for now of the Broderers, Feltmakers, Girdlers, Hosiers, etc., all the way through the alphabet to the Shearmen, Tapicers, Weavers, and Woolmen.

A river to cross, and different clothes.

Waterways dictate settlement—or did until recently.

Towns plant themselves at springs, fords, or natural harbours.

Townsfolk, becoming numerous, distinguish themselves from each other by their attire.

**Livery companies**, like the clergy and other professions, institutionalize that behaviour.

There is no civic sense without costume drama. (Look at us again tonight!)

Geoffrey Chaucer, son of a Vintner, born in a house by the Vintners' Hall, knew the system.

One of his day jobs was Controller of Customs and Subsidies on Wool.

Cross the river to Southwark on another April evening and we'd meet his Canterbury pilgrims.

They included *five* guildsmen in the livery of one religious fraternity, perhaps the fraternity *Salve Regina* in the parish of St Magnus the Martyr [Company church of the Plumbers].

Count them: Haberdasher, Weaver, Dyer, Tapicer, Carpenter.

Four sheep-dependent companies + 1.

Chaucer tells us 'in what array' he finds his pilgrims, meaning how they're dressed.

These five were all in the same livery, and it was pretty fancy.

Their wives were used to sitting in the front pews and having their cloaks carried for them.

Another of Chaucer's pilgrims, the Wife of Bath, knew more about cloth-making than anyone in Flanders, and her hat (!) was a masterpiece.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Not only a sheep reference. Also, a plumbing reference.

As David [the Master] mentioned in his kind introduction, I grew up in a part of Derbyshire where the hills are dotted on the outside with sheep and seamed on the inside with lead.

The Romans mined there. The ancient Britons surely sheared there.

The waters of Buxton (*Aquae Arnemetiae*) were as health-giving as those of Bath (*Aquae Sulis*).

But the Romans left Britain in the fifth century AD, and the locals let the bathwater out.

In his classic history of *The Gilds and Companies of London*, George Unwin claimed it for an unshakable truth that the 'free fellowship' of such associations had been 'the most vitally essential element in social and political progress since the fall of the Roman Empire'.

There was another unshakable truth, according to Unwin: to ensure steady progress, the ‘upward thrust’ of fellowship had to be met by the ‘downward pressure’ of lordship.

The costume drama of late medieval and Tudor London was partly carnival, partly policing. That is the context for *Utopia*, the work of speculative fiction by Thomas More, published in Latin in the year 1516.

As undersheriff of the City of London, More was active in trade negotiations with the Hanseatic League on behalf of City companies.

He wrote *Utopia* while on a legation to Flanders to sort out tariffs on wool.

He was a serious political scientist, in his way. As a young man, he’d given a set of lectures at the church of St Lawrence Jewry [a few minutes’ walk from the Mansion House], on the *City of God*, the big book that St Augustine wrote as the western Roman Empire began to disintegrate.

Forget being a Roman citizen, Augustine had said. Think of yourselves as aliens in the city of this world, travelling to a heavenly Jerusalem. Augustine’s word was *peregrini*, often translated ‘pilgrims’ but meaning ‘aliens’ or ‘foreigners’. The opposite of citizens. Outsiders. Not members of the company or guild. *Non-actors* in the drama of civic life.

Part 1 of *Utopia* is about England. And sheep. Common land was being enclosed for sheep farming. Big bosses were monopolizing the wool trade; simple folk were turning to crime.

Part 2 of *Utopia* is a traveller’s description of a south-sea island, roughly the size of England, where things were done differently. Three of those things now:

First. The Utopians are organized into kibbutzim, each of 30 families, and each with its own amenities, including a hall where meals are taken in common. Everyone—male or female—learns a trade, such as wool-working, metal-working, masonry, or carpentry. All do farm-work. More was playing with the idea that every city might be reconfigured as a supersized, gender-blind, family-friendly, residential livery company with a farm. And yet ...

Second thing. *There is no dressing up in Utopia*. Everyone on the island wears the same uniform. Overseas trade in textiles is tightly regulated. There is no profiteering from sheep. The only people who dress differently in Utopia are the priests, who aren’t yet Christian, and their vestments (we’re told) are ‘made of quite cheap materials’.

Third and most curious thing. *No-one in Utopia learns to be a plumber*.

The water piping on the island is all of tile. And here’s the kicker: the roofs of the buildings are covered with plaster that is ‘cheap, fireproof, and more weather-resistant *even than lead*’.

The Utopians knew the art of plumbing. They had learnt ‘every useful technique practiced anywhere in the Roman Empire’, from certain Romans who’d been shipwrecked on their shores 1200 years earlier. But if the Utopians themselves ever plumbed, they didn’t plumb any more.

To implement the alternative society imagined in *Utopia*, More, as Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, would have had to dissolve the City companies and order everyone to dress the same way.

*Utopia* isn't, however, a futuristic fiction like Star Trek. The only livery company in whose specialist area More credits the Utopians with advanced technology is the Plumbers' Company. Members of sheep liveries would *not* have been chortling over *Utopia* in 1516. But the Plumbers could proudly keep a copy in their library.

As More tells the story, the one thing Europeans of his day could usefully teach the Utopians, and that the Romans hadn't taught them long before, was Christianity.

What did the Utopians have to show the Europeans that they hadn't seen before?

Two things, apparently:

1. They let couples view each other naked before marriage
2. As already remarked, they didn't use lead for plumbing

Religion, water management, and now look—no clothes!

In the event, it wasn't the totalitarian program of More's *Utopia* that stifled the costume drama that was the life and soul of early Tudor London, and in which City companies were (literally) so heavily invested.

The demise of that pre-Notting-Hill carnival was an outcome of the Protestant Reformation. Under Queen Elizabeth I, concern for public order and policing led to the banning of public performances on religious issues.

It was then that Londoners began crossing the river to theatres erected on the South Bank, going outside city limits, making themselves experimental or speculative aliens for the afternoon.

At the Rose Theatre and the Globe Theatre, a new kind of livery company retained the services of professional actors and of playwrights like Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Shakespeare was the first person to use the word 'livery' in print as a verb, meaning (of course) 'to dress up'.

Those acting companies—the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the Lord Admiral's Men, and others—offered citizens and non-citizens from all trades and all walks of life new ways of seeing and interpreting their own and others' roles in the great, rolling tragicomedy of human life.

All the world was still a stage and everyone still an actor on it.

***What do we need, in order to see, know and be ourselves, with other people, in the great city of this world?*** It is good to have a river to cross, and different clothes to put on.

And now please rise for the toast to the Company.

**To the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, may it flourish root and branch, forever!**

