

Committee(s): General Purposes Committee of Aldermen	Date: 16 July 2024
Subject: Bridgemasters	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	N/A
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N/A
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?	N/A
Report of: Town Clerk	For Information
Report author: Greg Moore	

Summary

This paper outlines briefly the role and duties of the Bridgemaster, one of the historic offices of the City Corporation which has some element of interaction with the Court of Aldermen.

Following the recent electoral contest at Common Hall for the office of Bridgemaster, and in response to several queries around process and background that arose therefrom, this paper is presented for information in the interests of advancing a shared understanding of the history of the office and the respective remits of the executive bodies of the City Corporation (i.e., the Court of Common Council, Common Hall, and the Court of Aldermen) in relation to it.

Recommendation(s)

That the report be noted and its content received.

Main Report

Background

1. The role of the Bridgemasters dates back to c.1200, when the Mayoralty and Commonalty of the City of London took over responsibility for London Bridge and began the practice of appointing “Wardens” to oversee it. Originally, Aldermen were eligible to serve in this capacity and were often appointed; however, when the rights of the City in respect of the Bridge were confirmed by a Charter of Edward II on 8 June 1319, Aldermen were prohibited from service. The Charter provided:

“that the keeping of the Bridge and the rents and profits to the same pertaining be committed to two good and sufficient men of the City other than Aldermen who shall be thereunto chosen by the Commonalty, who shall be answerable therefore to the Commonalty and to none others.”

2. The Bridgemasters collected and accounted for the rents and revenues associated with the Bridge and had estate management duties. They received salaries and fees on leases and licences, together with a residence and “other perquisites”. The accounts of the Bridgemasters are extant from 1381.
3. An Act of Common Council, dated 23 September 1404, resolved that “two good and discreet citizens” to undertake these duties should be elected as Masters or Wardens of the Bridge at Common Hall each year, following the election of Sheriffs. Attendance (and thus the right to vote) was confirmed to Liverymen by the Court Common Council through a resolution of 13 September 1475.
4. The role of the Livery in the appointments was further settled in the Election Act of 1724, which confirmed the election of the Bridgemasters on the Livery in Common Hall. The Livery is thus the elective body, but the Court of Common Council is the body exercising control over the officers, in accordance with the Charter provision.

Current Position

5. The responsibility of the Bridgemasters ceased for all practical purposes in 1855. At a meeting of the Common Council in 1854, the Lord Mayor declared a vacancy in the office of Bridgemaster occasioned by the death of an incumbent and the matter was referred to the Officers and Clerks Committee to consider the proper course to be adopted. Pending the outcome of the inquiry, the Court of Common Council resolved that the same Committee be authorised to make arrangements for the temporary discharge of the duties of the office.
6. The Committee subsequently reported to the Court of Common Council in 1855 and this resulted in a major change to the duties. In future, the ancient responsibility of receiving the rents and profits of the Bridge House Estates and of keeping the accounts was to be transferred to the Chamberlain. The Committee also reported that it had appointed Mr. Comptroller’s Clerk temporarily to discharge the duties of the office and this practice continued when later temporary vacancies occurred.
7. In response to this, in 1869 the Livery Committee reported to Common Hall advocating very strongly that the functions should be restored and commenting that the Court of Common Council had removed from the ancient offices of Bridgemasters the duties as of right and charter belonging to those offices, and had reduced the offices in question to practical sinecures of insignificant pecuniary value.
8. The report stated: “*The Committee therefore recommended that the spirit of the charters in the matter of the Bridgemasters be carried out; the more so since they find in the records of Common Council very zealous protestations for the authority of charters and the policy of good faith regarding them whenever the rights claimed and asserted by Common Council are threatened by Government schemes.*”
9. In 1880, the Court of Common Council agreed to new duties being assigned to the Bridgemasters, although accounting was to remain with the Chamberlain. A report of the Bridge House Estates Committee to the Court of Common Council

stated: *“The office of Wardens or Keepers of London Bridge was in ancient times one of great importance, but it has long ceased to be so, and for many years it was looked upon as a provision for aged and respectable citizens who have been unsuccessful in business, and the office consequently became reduced almost to a sinecure.”*

10. In 1916, the Bridge House Estates Committee, the City Surveyor, and the Comptroller submitted reports on the office, the Comptroller stating that the licences to assign and demise BHE property were prepared in his department and “the Bridge Masters’ duty of signing the same might well be performed by a member of my Staff who is a Liveryman, and appointed by the Common Hall.”
11. Following some differences of opinion on this issue, the Court of Common Council ultimately resolved that the positions should, in future, be of an honorary character, with the following duties:
 - to attend, when summoned, meetings of the Bridge House Estates Committee (*now City Bridge Foundation Board*);
 - to attend the Comptroller’s Office to sign licences to assign and demise Bridge House property, when required (*NB - this role is undertaken by Officers and so no longer extant*);
 - generally, to perform such duties as the Bridge House Estates Committee may reasonably require of them in connection with the Bridges and Estates under the control of the said Committee.
12. The salary was settled at £25 per annum.
13. In 1957, when there was a possibility that one of the Bridgemasters might not seek re-election, there was a suggestion that the job could be attached to some person in the Corporation’s employment, but the Town Clerk of the day did not wish to take any steps to interfere with the ancient privilege of the Livery to appoint a Bridgemaster.
14. Accordingly, the sole remaining function of the Bridgemasters is to attend one meeting of the City Bridge Foundation Board each year, when summoned. They are no longer required to sign leases of Bridge House Estates property, which are executed under the City of London seal. Other documents, such as licences to assign, are signed by members of the Comptroller & City Solicitor’s staff. There have, to-date, been no additional requests from the City Bridge Foundation Board respect of such duties as may generally be required, although it remains open to the Board to do so.
15. Any Freeman of the City of London may stand for the office, with there being no special qualifications required. Nominations must be submitted in writing to the Town Clerk between 14 February and 1 May each year, in accordance with the provisions most recently fixed by the Court of Common Council through the Act of 16 January 2014.

The Role of the Court of Aldermen

16. As has been set out above, the Charter provisions place responsibility for the regulation of the role upon the Court of Common Council, with the resolutions of that body (as later confirmed by primary legislation) conferring the right to elect to the office upon the Livery at Common Hall.
17. Nevertheless, each year the Bridgemasters, following their election, attend the Court of Aldermen, where a short ceremony occurs with the two elected officers undertaking an oath of office and signing the Oath Book in front of the Court.
18. This is because the Bridgemasters, as with the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, Common Councilmen, and certain other post holders, including some senior salaried officers, are required make a declaration in accordance with the provisions of section 12 of the Promissory Oaths Act 1868 (“the Act”).
19. Section 12(2) of the Act states that, “Where before the passing of this Act an oath was required to be taken by any person on or as a condition of accepting any office in or under a municipal corporation...there shall be substituted for such oath, in the case of an office, a declaration that the declarant will faithfully perform the duties of his office...”
20. The declaration is accordingly in the form: *“I, [Name], do solemnly sincerely and truly declare that I will faithfully perform the duties of the office of [Bridgemaster] of the City of London.”*

Conclusion

21. This report summarises the history of the role of Bridgemaster and the remit of the Corporation’s various executive bodies in relation to the office.

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