



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: ANYA MATTHEWS

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“‘With honour yet frugality’”: the rebuilding of the Livery Company Halls after the Great Fire of London’

More than 40 City of London Livery Company Halls were destroyed in and rebuilt following the ‘dismall fire’ of 1666. Unlike the post-Fire City Churches, however, this important group of Restoration buildings has never been the subject of a dedicated typological study.

The pre-Fire Livery Company Halls were rarely purpose-built, tending to occupy medieval town houses or the ranges of monastic complexes dissolved at the Reformation. This paper explores what happened when the City Companies confronted the idea of the Livery Hall as a building type for the first time. Although on one level a straightforwardly architectural exercise precipitated by *Force Majeure*, the paper suggests the design and construction of the new Halls was also a politically-loaded activity at a pivotal moment in the City Companies’ history.

The historiography of the Livery Companies in the seventeenth century has hitherto been very much one of difficulties compounded. First the Companies’ grip on their respective trades was challenged and weakened, and then a series of enforced loans to the earlier Stuart monarchs and Parliament devastated their finances. The Great Fire delivered what might well have been the *coup de grâce*; the loss of their Halls and much of their estates.

That few Companies were prepared to countenance delaying or abandoning the construction of new Halls in such straitened and unpropitious circumstances is highly suggestive. I will argue that Hall-building became central to the Companies’ fight for political survival and economic pre-eminence. Through an analysis of Brewers’ and Tallow Chandlers’ Halls I will consider how the architecture of the post-Fire Halls reinforced the Livery Companies’ physical presence in the City and served a distinct civic identity which was under serious threat.