

Vital Work of England's oldest county charity continues to this day

The Gloucestershire Society was founded in Bristol over 350 years ago and, as the oldest charity of its kind in England, is still going strong, helping those in need and having dinners at which members sing a song that makes no sense. **Sir George White, Bt**, past President, tells us its story

THE Gloucestershire Society, England's oldest county charity, has been helping those in need in Bristol and the old county of Gloucestershire for well over three centuries, and today its work has never been more vital as the country faces the biggest cost of living crisis in decades.

The Society was formed on December 1 1657, when 50 Bristol tradesmen, all of Gloucestershire birth, decided they should look after those born in the county, both inside the city and beyond its walls, who had fallen on hard times.

They were not alone in their altruism as an order banning their annual meeting in 1665 for fear of spreading the plague showed there were similar societies for Somersetshire and Wiltshire, but these have long since disappeared.

The initial structure of the Society was very similar to that of a trade guild or livery company, the common interest of its members being county-based charity, rather than commerce.

Its rules required one steward, two assistants and one treasurer to be elected annually at the Society's feast, though for reasons unexplained in the Minute Book, the post of 'Steward' became that

of 'President' in 1682.

The feast was to follow a sermon preached to the Company by a Gloucestershire-born minister, after which "every person, according to his quality, will walk two and two with the Steward to dinner."

Members were entitled to invite other Gloucestershire-born gentlemen to the feast and therefore introduce them to membership, but only by permission of the Steward and on payment of two shillings and six pence.

Most importantly, at the end of the evening they would pass round a hat which they would stuff with money - the more the better - "before the Company depart, for such Charitable uses to Gloucestershire Men as shall present themselves."

The uses varied as the years passed, with funds at first devoted entirely to the relief of poverty among Gloucestershire men, their widows and their children.

The emphasis later changed to the binding of young Gloucestershire apprentices and then the 'Gloucestershire Guinea' was devised in about 1768 - a payment of twenty-one shillings to "lying-in Women, Wives of poor men, Natives of Gloucestershire."



A summons to the Bristol Gloucestershire Society's Annual Service and Feast in 1781. The procession was to leave Merchant Taylors' Hall at 11 o'clock in the morning and go first to St James's Church and then the Assembly Room
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It was a far-sighted act, because childbirth in those days was fraught with danger and expense - the families had to clothe and feed the new child, perhaps calling on a doctor or nurse to help.

So to receive what amounted to three or six months' salary was undoubtedly a blessing for most recipients and undoubtedly saved hundreds of lives over the centuries.

The beautifully-engraved late 18th century summons to the annual service and feast includes the arms of Bristol and Gloucester, together with a depiction of two Gloucestershire apprentices and a Gloucestershire mother with two young children.

As the Society gained in wealth and stature, so it also gained in social status and while the original membership was grounded in manufacturing trades, it was not long before the grandest of Gloucestershire natives began to subscribe, as many had business interests in Bristol.

It is not easy to establish who attended each annual feast, because the Minute Book only recorded the names of those members who sent in subscriptions, and not those who brought their donations in person.

However, in 1750, the Society almost foundered through a lack of volunteers for the post of President

and it was decided to encourage members attending dinners to register in advance their willingness to hold office.

The list began with the Duke of Beaufort followed by the Earl of Berkeley, Lord Botetourt, Lord Clare, Lord Apsley, Lord de Clifford, Lord Sheffield and Lord Charles Henry Somerset and continued with an astounding list of county society, together with Members of Parliament and other resident celebrities.

It was regarded as an unforgivable sin to fail to serve as President once a promise had been given.

Lord Botetourt was serving as colonial Governor of Virginia when his turn came and as a result, he was obliged to send his apologies from the Governors' Palace, assuring the membership that he would hold office as soon as his posting in America came to an end. Unfortunately, his death at an early age intervened.

Details of the annual feast at this time are sketchy, though an undated note is pasted into the Minute Book, which reads: "Each Table to consist of: 2 haunches of Venison, 2 neck of ditto to be served by the President. 2 Partridges, 2 Hams, 12 Fowels (6 roast & 6 boil). 4 Turkeys & Onion Sauce, 4 Chines, 2 Rump Beef, 4 Dishes of Plumb Puddings, Greens, Potatoes, kidney beans, Carrots &c. Mellons,

Peaches, Neckterenes, Pear, Plumbs & Filberts: Four Crown Bowls of Punch to each Table & 14 Doz of Wine & also Table Beer, Cyder &c. If more than the above Quantity of Wine or Punch should be wanted the same to be paid for."

"Boys with Staves" and "Musicians" are also referred to on slips of paper that record the processions from church to feast, but no record was kept of any entertainment that may have taken place during these great county celebrations.

Two 18th century broadsheets survive however, one printed in Bristol in 1771 and one in London in 1796, containing the words of a song written in broad Gloucestershire dialect and named George Ridler's Oven.

This, according to the London version, is "a right famous old

“ To receive what amounted to three or six months' salary... saved hundreds of lives

» EACH year the Gloucestershire Society raises around £100,000-£120,000 and then, via a team of dedicated volunteers, distributes almost all of this at the rate of about £4,000 a month throughout the county, including Bristol and South Gloucestershire.

It responds speedily to a request for help, usually from the social services, with an immediate grant to individuals or families who are in great financial difficulties, often through no fault of their own.

Aid is only given where it is not available from any other source and grants are not large - around £100 - but for those in desperate need they can be of significant help in times of crisis.

The Society has very few costs, so nearly everything raised is given to those who require it - around 750 people a year.

The current President, Alick Campbell of Lochnell, said: "It is amazing how such a small sum of money can have such a life-changing effect for those who receive it.

"But we will need to raise a lot more this year to cope with the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and continue this important work."

If you would like to make a donation to help this worthwhile cause, please visit: www.gloucestershiresociety.org.uk/donate
The website also highlights case studies of recent grants.



Baron Botetourt of Stoke Park apologised for being unable to become President as he was serving as Governor of Virginia



An engraving by Bonner recording the founding of the second London Gloucestershire Society in 1770, noting that its patron was Prince William of Gloucester and the Latin inscription meaning Give a Farthing © GLOUCESTERSHIRE SOCIETY

Gloucestershire ballad, corrected according to fragments of a Manuscript found in the Speech House in the Forest of Dean several Centuries ago, and now revived, to be sung at the Anniversary and Monthly Meetings of the Gloucestershire Society ..."

Gloucestershire, perhaps alone among English counties, can claim an ancient and indisputably worthwhile charity, which has the structure and colourful traditions of a London Livery Company and which its natives and residents (both men and women) can become part of, simply by making a donation.

The modern presidents are most carefully chosen, so that the annual service moves throughout the county, from north to south, east to west, and gives its generous membership the opportunity to enjoy annual meetings in different parts of the county year by year.

In 2011, for example, the service was held in the cathedral-like church at Chipping Camden and in 2012 the society met in the Berkeley Vale, the service being held in the tiny church at Hill, beside the then President's house, Hill Court.

This year the sermon will be preached on Sunday September 25 in St Mary's Church, Beverston, near Tetbury, followed by the feast held in Chavenage House, near the home of the current President, Alick Campbell of Lochnell, and as usual George Ridler's Oven will be sung in dialect with great gusto by rural folk song expert Jeremy Watkins.

Few charities can claim 365 years of such practical experience, enlivened by 365 years of feasting and colourful tradition.

George Ridler's Oven - the words and explanation

**The stwons that built George Ridler's oven,
And thauy qeum from the Bleakeney's quaar;
And George he wur a jolly old mon,
And his yead it graw'd above his yare.**

**One thing of George Ridler I must commend,
And that war not a notable theng;
He mead his braags avoore he died,
Wi' any dree brothers his zons zs'hou'd zeng.**

**There's Dick the treble and John the mean,
Let every mon zing in his aawn pleace;
And George he wur the elder brother,
And therevoore he would zing the beass.**

**Mine hostess's moid (and her neaum 'twur Nell),
A pretty wench, and I lov'd her well;
I lov'd her well, good reazon why
Because zshe lov'd my dog and I**

**My dog is good to catch a hen,
A duck, or goose is vood for men;
And where good company I spy,
O thether gwoes my dog and I.**

**My mwother told I when I wur young,
If I did vollow the strong-beer pwoot;
That drenk would pruv my auverdrow,
And meauk me wear a thzread-bare cwoat.**

**My dog has gotten zltch a trick,
To visit moids when thauy be zick;
When thauy be zick and like to die,
O thether gwoes my dog and I.**

**When I have dree zispences under my thumb,
O then I be welcome wherever I come;
But when I have none, O then I pass by,
'Tis poverty pearts good company.**

**If I should die, as it may hap,
My greauve shall be under the good yeal tap,
In vouled earms there wool us lie,
Cheek by jowl my dog and I.**

» Sir George White explains the curious history of this equally curious song:

FOLK-SONG experts today generally agree that George Ridler's Oven is made up of miscellaneous verses from three completely unconnected traditional songs - one from Gloucestershire about a quarry-owner from Bussage, a bawdy song from London called My Dog And I and a song from Scotland called Todlen Hame.

It could never have made any sort of sense, even to those who were familiar with its extreme Gloucestershire dialect, but it was and remains a very merry song and must have been especially so after "Four Crown Bowls of Punch to each Table & 14 Dozn of Wine & also Table Beer, Cyder &c."

So pleased were the London Gloucestershire Society members when they began singing the 'revived' song that they commissioned a "statue of the celebrated old George Ridler, reclining on a barrel with a pipe and jug, emblematical of his conviviality ... from these his attention has been drawn by the entrance of his dog."

It seems the statue was a collecting box on wheels, which could be passed around the dinner table "to avoid trouble to the stewards in collecting donations."

On the base was a bas-relief of "two boys exhibiting an indenture" and a quote from Shakespeare on the "quality of mercy".

Maybe this curious object still exists in the hands of some ancient Gloucestershire family.

It is perhaps unfortunate for the Society that those living in the age of the 'Romantic Revival' which followed the 18th century 'rediscovery' of the song seemed unable to accept George Ridler's Oven as glorious, entertaining Gloucestershire nonsense.

For an anonymous but solemn antiquary sat down around 1845 to work out what it meant and, unable to make any sense of it as it stood, he concluded it was written in code.

His highly improbable de-coding proved beyond doubt (or so he said), that the Society was not founded with charitable intent, but as a secret royalist society set up in the last years of the Commonwealth, with the sole purpose of restoring King Charles II.

This story no doubt suited the times in which it was written and it stuck, being repeated year after year in annual reports, but in many ways it did the Society a disservice, for it obscured the truth.

Why would anyone want to disguise it as anything else?