



Where the Bowyers met and worked in the City of London between 1300 and the Great Fire of 1666

Bowyers' Hall City Walk, 18 May 2015
updated 29 June 2015 after further researches

This text follows the path of our City Walk, which starts at St Nicholas Cole Abbey to talk of 1629, then goes back in time to the sites of Bowyer Row c1300-1400 and the Bowyers' Halls by London Wall c1450-1650, with much fresh research included. As well as tracing the sites, the talk also aims to give a short general overview of Bowyers' Company history in the time of its pre-Fire heyday.

1. James Wood

James Wood was the Bowyers' Company's greatest benefactor. We drink a silent toast to his 'pious memory' at our formal dinners, because in 1629 he left us a bequest that was critical to the survival of the Company.

Following the Hundred Years' War with France, the last surge of military demand for the longbow was for the Wars of the Roses, between 1455 and 1485, when it was still a main weapon on both sides. But the Battle of Flodden in 1513 saw the advent of the light field gun, which had a greater artillery range; then along came the musket too, and longbow making declined rapidly. As we shall see later, it appears that the Bowyers had to give up their own proper working hall in the 1560s, and in 1627 a petition to the King recorded that there were only four bow-makers left in London.

As a light passing note, the strain may have begun to tell on the Bowyers quite early: in 1488 they asked the Mayor for permission to impose a fine of 6s8d on anyone refusing the office of Warden!

The Bowyers nearly died out, but James Wood's will in 1629 provided the Company a property income lifeline by bequeathing a manor estate at Isley Walton in Leicestershire, the freehold of a house in Fish Street by Cole Abbey, and also the head leases of a butcher's in Cow Cross by Farrington, a property in Chick Lane (now West Smithfield), and the Cock pub in Fetter Lane.

The Isley Walton rents were stipulated to be 'for the purchase of a Hall' (which confirms that we didn't then have a proper hall) and otherwise 'for the use of the poor and good of the Company'. He also left legacies to fund scholarships of £6pa, three to Oxford and two to Cambridge, *'for sons of Freemen, or to other poor scholars as the Master and Wardens think fit'*.

The Company never did buy another Hall and the properties were variously sold off (Isley Walton finally in 1889). But James Wood's will did set us on a charitable path, and we still provide bursaries for university education as well as charitable funding for the benefit of disadvantaged youth.

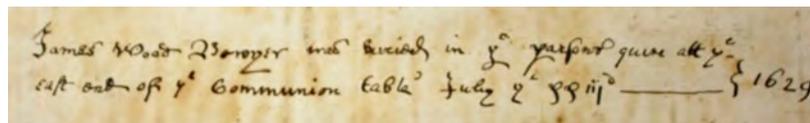
2. St Nicholas Cole Abbey

The earliest record we have of James Wood is in the parish registers of St Nicholas Cole Abbey recording that he was married here to Mary Windell (nee Pate) on July 2nd, 1590. The next mention we have is that when the Bowyers' Company received its Royal Charter in 1621, it listed the names of the Master, Wardens and ten Court Assistants of that date, one of whom was James Wood.



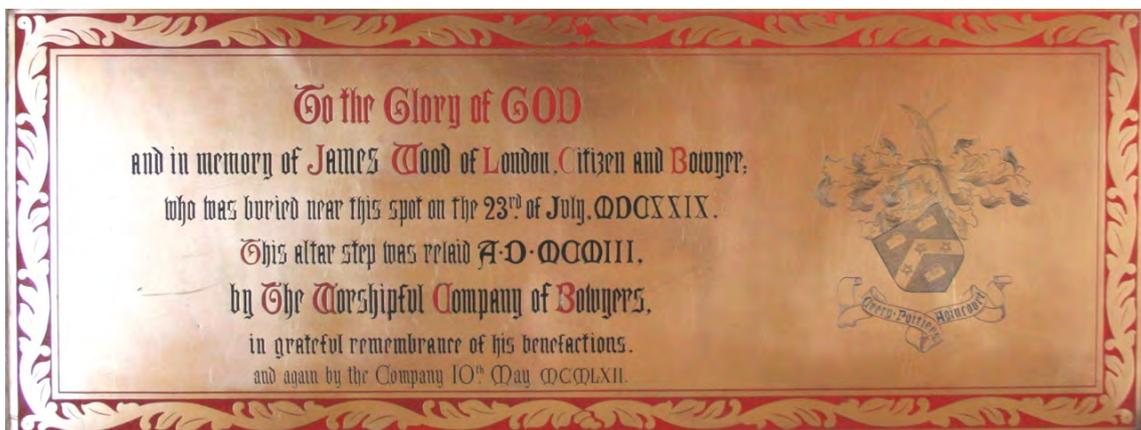
Frans Franken's 'Copperplate' map of 1559, highlighting St Nicholas Cole Abbey pre-Fire, south east of old St Paul's

In his will James Wood asked to be buried in St Nicholas Cole Abbey, with a marble stone he wished to be inscribed 'Here lyeth buried James Wood, Bowyer, and his two wives, Mary Pate and Margaret Browne'. The parish register indeed shows that 'James Wood Bowyer was buried in ye parsons quire at ye east end of ye Communion table, July 23rd, 1629'.



A copy of James Wood's entry in the Burial Register at St Nicholas Cole Abbey

The church of the 1620s was destroyed in the Great Fire, and was replaced by the present Wren church in 1678. The Bowyers' Company arranged for the current brass memorial plaque to be installed on the chancel step in 1903; the last line was added when the church and the memorial were restored in 1962 after the substantial damage suffered from WWII bombing.



The James Wood memorial plaque with Bowyers' crest at St Nicholas Cole Abbey, as it is today

James Wood's will also requested that the Bowyers' Company meet in St Nicholas Cole Abbey, which they did for their formal ceremonies right through till 1978 when the church was about to be declared pastorally redundant. Our then Chaplain the Rev'd Alan Tanner was also Rector of St Botolph Bishopsgate, and that is when (and why) the Company moved its formal ceremonies to St Botolph instead. We are delighted St Nicholas is now open again; while we are here we will toast James Wood's memory, and we look forward to regular visits again in the future.



St Nicholas Cole Abbey as newly rebuilt by Wren in 1678



St Nicholas after being bombed in 1941 (the Bowyers once met in the wreckage)



St Nicholas Cole Abbey now, as restored in 1962

3. St Peter's Hill Pre-1666

Moving on, not far from Cole Abbey on St Peter's Hill, which runs from St Paul's Cathedral down to the river, in 1646 the Upholders' Company acquired their first Hall. Sadly for them, it was destroyed in the Great Fire 20 years later, and they have never had their own hall again.



John Strype's 1720 Survey of London records that prior to 1666 'the Bowyers met on St Peter's Hill'. As we'll see, we now know the Bowyers left their previous premises by London Wall in 1651, so that is probably when they came here. They may have rented a house, or may have met in Upholders' Hall, which was the only hall located on St Peter's Hill. This where the Bowyers (and indeed the Upholders) would have been keeping their records until everything was lost in the Great Fire.

4. Bowyer Row 1300-1400

Moving on again, we now step back in time, to the 1300s, to the very beginning of the Bowyers' Company history. The first recorded military order placed with London bow-makers was in 1304: 130 bows for Edward I's war in Scotland, which would have been work for just a handful of bow-makers. London then was far from being a main centre of bow-making; most of the military use of bows was for the wars with the Welsh (controlled from Chester) and the Scots (controlled from York).

The full-size 6-foot longbow was developed in England (quite possibly in Cheshire) in a very specific period between about 1300 and 1320. Up to about 1295, bows were always depicted as 4'6"-5' in length, drawn to the chest, and their military role was mainly for arrow-storm harassment to break up enemy ranks. From 1320 onward bows start to be depicted (and described in court records) as being 6' in length, drawn to the ear, shooting yard-long arrows.

King Edward III took full power in 1330 at the age of 17, but he had grown up as a student of war. He quickly saw the full-size 6' longbow, shooting yard-long steel-tipped arrows with lethal accuracy, as a weapon that could finally take on and defeat the heavily armoured French knights. He and his advisers built a whole new set of war strategies and battle tactics around the new longbow.

In preparation for his invasion of France leading up to the Battle of Crecy (1346), there is record of a huge set of Crown orders placed for military longbows: over 9,000 of them in 1341 alone. They were ordered from all the traditional centres of bow-making - York, Lincoln, Chester, Bristol et al - but interestingly by 1341 London got the largest part of the order, 2,500 bows. Our bow-making experts reckon that would have been work for some 20-30 bow-makers, a significant workforce of craftsmen.

So we can place the establishment of large-scale bow-making capability in London quite accurately to the 1330s, just after the time when the full-size longbow was first developed, and specifically related to supplying Edward III's ambitious plans for the war with France.

We know where the London bow-makers were based, where they lived and worked, because by the 1350s a stretch of what is now Ludgate Hill had become known as Bowyer Row. It comprised specifically the 100-yard stretch of ground from the top of Creed Lane down to St Martin's Church, immediately past which was Ludgate, one of the City Wall gates.



The 'Copperplate' map of 1559, highlighting the location of Bowyer Row between Ludd Gate and Creed Lane, in front of the old St Paul's (engraved here before its great tall spire burned down in 1561)

5. The Founding of the Bowyers' Company, and the Move from Bowyer Row

The first mention we have of a formally established Bowyers' Company wasn't until a taxation record of 1363. We also know from City of London Rolls that there was not yet a recognised Bowyers' Company in 1351. It seems likely that the famous English longbow victories of Crecy in 1346 and especially by the Black Prince at Poitiers in 1356 (which apparently received greater publicity back home) will have led to the proper recognition of bow-making as a craft, and the resulting formation of the Bowyers' Company some time between between 1356 and 1363, here on Bowyer Row.

By the 1400s the Bowyers started to be pushed out of Ludgate Hill by more affluent trades, and began spreading to other parts of the City. Some of them seem to have gone to London Bridge, and some (perhaps most) to a low-rent area up by London Wall. The City Wall ran from Ludgate to Newgate, then through what is now Merrill Lynch to Aldersgate, then north via Noble Street to Cripplegate. Quite a few remains of the City Wall were revealed in the Cripplegate area by WW2 bomb craters, and it is interesting to see in Noble Street how high the modern City street level has risen since medieval times.



Noble Street (at right) looking north today, several feet higher than the base of the medieval City Wall alongside.

6. Bowyers' Hall 1450-1561

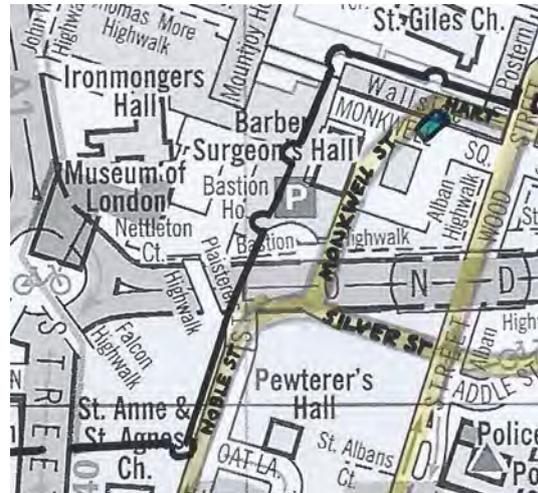
We have no firm data for when the Bowyers first established a hall. The earliest indication we have is a member's will bequeathing silver property to the Bowyers in 1462, leading our historian Barbara Megson to suppose that by then the Company must have had a hall to put it in. So our best working estimate is that our Hall was established between about 1450 and 1460, when the bow-making trade was still healthy, and a low-rent collective workspace would have been an attractive proposition.

We do know the location of Bowyers' Hall: John Stow's 1598 'Survey of London' said specifically that inside the City Wall, on Hart Street, 'by the corner of Monkswell Street is the Bowyers' hall'. Monkswell Street (there had once been a monastery with a well) was also known as Muggle and Monkswell Street.

The most recent street map we have of this area prior to 1598 is Braun & Hogenberg's map of 1572. It shows enough detail to enable the actual Bowyers' Hall building to be picked out, just on the corner where Stow said it was. It shows a 3-storey building about 30ft long and 15ft wide, which would have provided enough workspace for 20-30 bow-makers. By referencing it to the surviving locations of Wood Street and the City Wall, we can identify where Bowyers' Hall stood on a modern street map.



Braun & Hogenberg's map of 1572 showing (by the 'C' of Crepelgate) the long building that was Bowyers' Hall.



The site of Bowyers' Hall on a current street map, at the northern end of what is now Monkswell Square.

The area is now Monkswell Square, and the mapped location of Bowyers' Hall coincides with the front of the modern townhouses at no 6 & 7 Wallside. Today's spacious, leafy square is very different from what would have been here in the narrow, cramped streets of the day, exemplified by this photo English Heritage has of some typical 16th century 3-storey housing which survived nearby until 1900.



Where Bowyers' Hall once stood, on the site of numbers 6 and 7 Wallside, Monkswell Square.



A typical 16th century 3-storey town building, as survived in nearby Cloth Fair until 1900.

7. The Bowyers' Hall from 1561: Bowyers' Court

A fascinating surveyor's drawing has come to light from the Clothworkers' Company archives dated 1612, showing that by then the line of Monkwell Street had been relocated westward, and a row of buildings added along the north side of Hart Street, by the City Wall, so it appears that the late 16th and early 17th century was a time of quite rapid property redevelopment in this area.

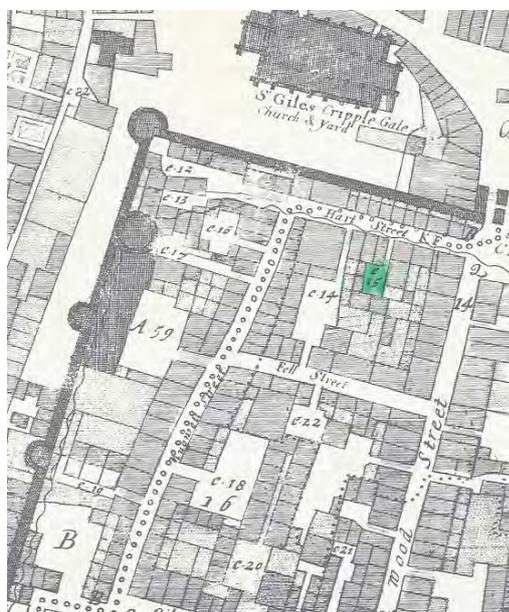
Of particular interest to the Bowyers is that the Clothworkers' drawing noted that the south side of Hart Street in 1612 was *'The Saulters' Lande'*. With the kind assistance of the Salters' Company archivist, we have recently learned that the Bowyers were indeed tenants of the Salters there for many years. The estate on the south side of Hart Street was acquired in 1559 by Sir Ambrose Nicholas, a Salter and later Mayor, who bequeathed it to the Salters when he died in 1578.

The estate inherited by the Salters had included Bowyers' Hall: there is note in the Salters' deeds of *'one cellar with little vault in the west side under the tenement (Bowyers' Company)'* being let in 1555 by its then owner William Bonham (from whose daughter Sir Ambrose Nicholas later acquired the land). This is actually the earliest hard reference we have so far to the existence of Bowyers' Hall.

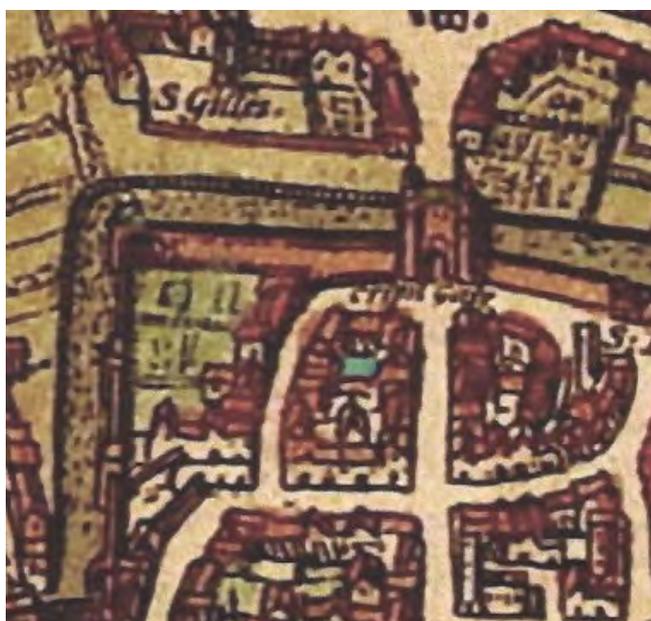
Our next hard date, also from the Salters' records, is that the Bowyers had taken out a lease in 1561 (initially from Sir Ambrose Nicholas, later bequeathed to the Salters) of *'one stone house called Bowyers' Hall in St Alphage within Creplegate'*, and that the Bowyers remained there as tenants right through from 1561 to 1651.

To help identify the site of the *'stone house'* occupied from 1561 to 1651, we have the post-Fire map by Ogilby & Morgan (1676), which marks a courtyard off the south side of Hart Street, further east, as *'Bowyers' Court'*. And John Strype, in his 1720 Survey of London, specifically said of Hart Street that *'on the south side is Bowyers Court, which is but small, and here was, formerly, Bowyers Hall'*.

The 1676 post-Fire layout of streets and buildings (below left) was quite a bit different in this area, so it makes more sense to see if we locate the courtyard on Braun & Hogenberg's 1572 map, our best contemporary map (post-1561 but pre-1598). There was indeed a courtyard on the south side of Hart Street, as highlighted below, quite close to the south east of the pre-1561 Bowyers' Hall.



Ogilby & Morgan 1676 map showing 'Bowyers' Court' (c15) on a post-Fire map with different street layouts.



Braun & Hogenberg's 1572 map, highlighting the courtyard south of Hart Street, likely to have been home of the Bowyers 1561-1651.

It has been speculated that the Bowyers' Court 'stone house' might have been the same building, and that the Bowyers simply renewed their lease there in 1561. This seems improbable, however, (a) because the locations are so differently described, (b) because the 'house' was specified as 'stone' whereas the 3-storey hall would have been wood and lath, and (c) because narratively, what the Bowyers needed as workspace in their heyday would have been very different from the much smaller work and meeting space that is all they would have needed after the 1560s. It seems much more likely that what happened in 1561 was a downsizing from a working hall to a house nearby.

The Bowyers' Hall of the heyday would of course have served as the workshop for working bow-makers, but by the 1550s it must have been clear that with bow-making in terminal decline as a military weapon, the Bowyers would no longer be able to sustain their own full-size working hall, hence the decision to take out a fresh lease in 1561 on smaller premises, hence 'house' rather than 'hall', and hence the description 'stone house' to differentiate from the wood-and-lath hall.

We don't know what happened to the original Bowyers' Hall building after 1561, other than that it was still there 'by the corner of Monkswell Street' in 1598 and 1603 when Stow published and republished his Survey; it would have been a prominent enough building to have retained its long-standing identity as 'Bowyers' Hall' for some time, at least until the time of Stow's Survey.

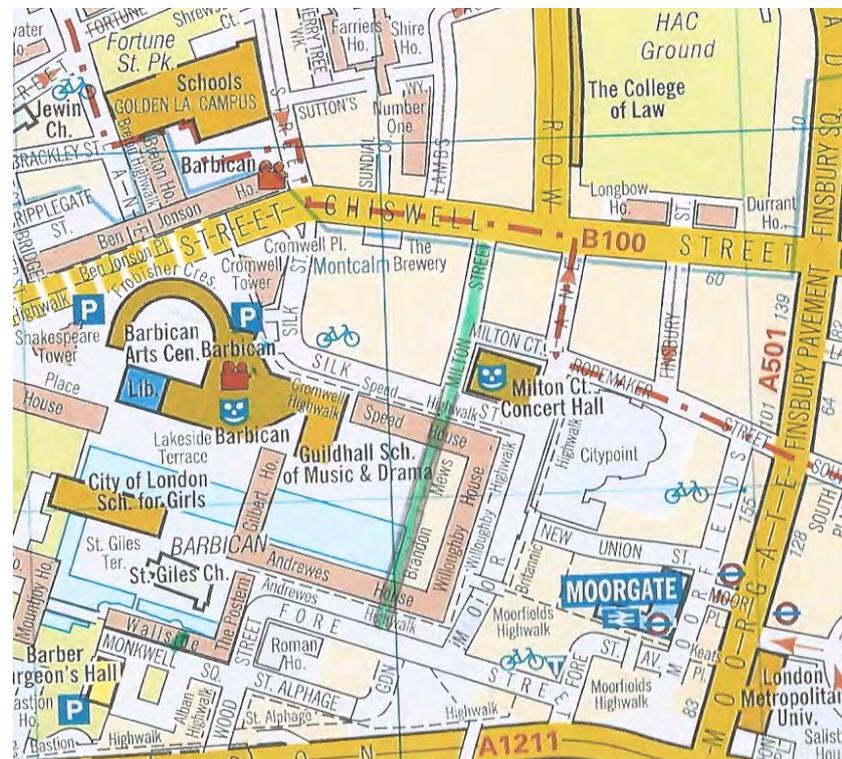
We do now know that the Bowyers left here in 1651, because in that year the Salters re-let the stone house to a Mr Dawes, along with a bakehouse in Monkswell Street (in fact Bowyers' Court was known for a while as Bakers' Alley). Since we know the Bowyers met on St Peter's Hill in the years prior to 1666, south of St Paul's, we can now assume they went there in 1651. There weren't many of them: a petition to the King in 1627 had lamented there were only 4 bow-makers left in London, and the Harleian Manuscript of 1651 showed the Bowyers' Company had only 17 members, the great majority of whom by then would not have been working bow-makers.

8. Grub Street and the Finsbury Marks

To end our City Walk we step outside the City Wall to visit Grub Street, which ran north from Fore Street, near Cripplegate, right up to Chiswell Street, which is where the Finsbury Fields began.

The name Grub Street became associated with cheap journalism in the Restoration era, after the Stationers' Company lost its legal monopoly of publishing in 1641. All kinds of radical political and anti-Catholic pamphlets began to be printed and distributed here in Grub Street, and low writers for hire started living here, where they became known as 'hackneys' (after hackney cabs) or 'hacks'.

In the 1500s, however, Grub Street had mainly been the place where bows, arrows and bowstrings were sold, conveniently for the archery practice grounds of the 'Finsbury Marks' in Finsbury Fields.



Current street map highlighting where Bowyers' Hall and Grub Street were. Above Chiswell Street stretched the Finsbury Fields; the HAC took over the lower part of Finsbury Fields in the 1650s.

The line of Grub Street runs from Chiswell Street in the north down what is now Milton Street. The southern part of Grub Street, which ran right down to Fore Street, by Cripplegate, is now under the Barbican residential development, following the high-walk line of Brandon Mews.



Grub Street from the Speed High Walk midpoint: northward up Milton Street, southward along Brandon Mews.

The Finsbury Fields had been formally reserved for archery practice in 1498, and some draining of the marshes took place in 1527. In the 1500s these archery grounds stretched from Moorfields all the way to Islington, across what is now Shoreditch Park. Military hiring was in decline, but great efforts were made to keep the archers in practice (and off the streets), particularly by King Henry VIII, a keen archer himself, right up to the end of his reign in 1547.

The Finsbury Marks were wood or stone marker posts set out 150-200 yards or more apart; the objective was to land your arrow as close to each Mark as possible, rather like a round of golf. In the 1590s a guide book called *'Ayme for Finsburie Archers'* was published, listing 194 Marks still sited in the Finsbury Fields, and noting the distances between them. A pub called the Rosemary Branch, up by what is now the Regent's Canal in Islington, provided a refreshment point halfway round.

9. Wrap-Up

But the decline was terminal; military hiring had ceased and there was no living to be made. John Stow lamented in 1598 that *'Grubstreete, of late yeares inhabited for the most part by Bowyers, Fletchers, Bowstring makers and such like, now little occupied, Archerie giving place to a number of bowling Allies and Dicing houses, which in all places are increased and too much frequented'*.

In the 1650s the Honourable Artillery Company (originally a corps of archers but by then equipped with guns) were granted possession of the southern end of the Finsbury Fields to establish the HAC Artillery Ground, where they later built Armoury House and are still based today.

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, military archery was long in the past, and archery began to be picked up as a social sport, as it is today. The Society of Finsbury Archers was formed in the 1650s by the charismatic figure of William Wood, whose artefacts were later passed on to the (later Royal) Toxophilite Society when it was founded in 1781, thus creating a link through to the present day, when the Bowyers' Company presents prizes at the two of the Royal Tox's archery events at Archery Lodge in Burnham each July.

In conclusion, we can see that although the timeline of the two Bowyers' Halls was about 1450 to 1650, the real heyday of the Company as makers of the famous English longbow was actually about 1330 to 1480, after which the period from 1500 to 1650 was one of steady decline.

We have James Wood to thank for the fact that we survived after that to tell the tale at all, but as Bowyers what we really enjoy is looking back to the heyday of the longbow, and reflecting on how very lucky we are among all Livery Companies to have such a good piece of history to celebrate.

And finally, there are still many unknowns about our history in the 1400s and 1500s, so plenty of scope remains for further researches to add to our understanding of the Bowyers' heyday.

Tony Kench, Upper Warden
The Worshipful Company of Bowyers
18 May 2015

Updated 29 June 2015 after further researches.

Acknowledgments and References

- (1) Barbara Megson's history of the Bowyers 1300-1600, 'Such Goodly Company' (1993).
- (2) The continuing researches of the Bowyers' Muniments Committee, led by Simon Leach.
- (3) 'Longbow Origins before Crecy', http://www.bowyers.com/bowery_longbowOrigins.php
- (4) 'Arrowstorm: The World of the Archer in the Hundred Years War' (2007) by Richard Wadge.
- (5) The very helpful archivists of the Salters' Company and the Clothworkers' Company.
- (6) 'The Battle of Flodden 1513', http://www.bowyers.com/bowery_flodden.php
- (7) 'In search of Shakespeare' (2003) by Michael Wood.
- (8) 'The Finsbury Marks', http://www.bowyers.com/bowery_finsburyMarks.php
- (9) 'The Society of Finsbury Archers', http://www.bowyers.com/bowery_finsburyArchers