Coopers Company of the Freemen of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne

Children Born Out of Wedlock Discussion

This document is an edited version of discussions between the Stewards of the Coopers Company of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne regarding the admission to the Freelage of children born out of wedlock.

At the core of this discussion is one simple question: What is the function of the Admissions Process?

The Admissions Process was put in place to protect the Freelage from abuse by parties who might not have the interests of the Freemen and/or the Town Moor at heart. Left unchecked a company could, in bad faith, swear in any number of persons who have no familial right to the Freelage and thereafter use their weight of numbers to artificially direct the decisions made at Guild.

We acknowledge that the Town Moor and the rights of the City's Freemen need to be protected and preserved fully intact. The Moor is the City's lungs, a green space vital for the City's residents to use and enjoy. We are the Moor's custodians. If we give an inch then we will lose the Moor and all of our rights. The City will lose a vital resource. In addition, we certainly feel that we should not give away the Moor because it is not ours to give away. We need to protect the Moor for our descendants.

However, we agree that, to survive, the Freemen may need to change the Rules of Admission. They need to stay 'in tune' with societal trends whilst, at the same time, safeguarding our interests.

The Problems with the Admissions Process

We agree that access to the Freelage should be through the parental line. However, we also agree that there is and always has been a problem with the Admissions Process. We cannot use the current admissions process in the twenty first century if we are to retain our position as guardians of the Moor. Society has changed.

Admission by Family / Blood line

The usual route for admission to the Freelage is through a parent. However, the fact that two people are married has never guaranteed that any children from such a relationship are related to the father. Protecting the family name has always been more important than blood lines.

Admission by Apprenticeship

Admission by apprenticeship has always been a questionable practice. Historically, to be admitted to the Company, an apprentice's work was judged by his peers who were taken from within the body of the Company. Having scanned our Company's Ordinary and records of past Head Meetings stored in the City's archives at Blandford House, I can find no evidence of an external examiner. This was an internal process governed by the Company Stewards.

I can imagine instances where this might be problematic. There might be a bias in favour of approving a candidate whose work was not up to scratch, perhaps because of familial connections. Financial inducements could be an issue.

Even today, there is nothing to prevent the son or daughter of a Cooper taking a rather arbitrary apprentice's exam followed perhaps by a basic practical test, which is then assessed by the Stewards of the Company and, thereafter, judged to have met the required standard.

Similarly, a would-be Cooper lacking in skills or the opportunity to make a barrel (or coffin) of his or her own could, in theory, purchase a barrel ready made. Having satisfied the Company as to the quality of their work and later passed the appropriate exams, that person could then become a member of the Company and thereafter a fully sworn-in member of the Freelage.

The present day…

Admission by Apprenticeship south of the border is rare these days. It is far more common north of the border. [We should discount those 'Freemen' who buy their way into the Freelage i.e. London, Glasgow etc…]

There are no active cooperages in and around Newcastle who could train apprentices. There are a few cooperages and coopers still active in England but they are some distance from Newcastle.

Freemasons accepted this simple truth three hundred years ago when they sought to differentiate between practising masons and figurative masons. [It's part of the initiation]. Maybe we should stress that we are figurative coopers?

I can find no information regarding admission via apprenticeship in a recent context. When was the last apprentice admitted?

Fraudulent Claims

I was appointed Senior Steward of the Coopers Company in 2012 and, since then, I have discovered two possibly fraudulent attempts to gain admission to the Freelage. The same family was involved in both instances though the claimants were from different generations. Both persons stated that they had lost their grandfather's/father's Oath paper and were seeking a replacement. I checked our records but could find no mention of their ancestor. I checked with Jim Johnson at Moor Bank Lodge and he could find no such record.

Suspicious, I checked our family tree. I found the relevant person. He was the son of my Great Aunt and I knew for a fact that she had been born out of wedlock and neither had she married a company keeper. Hence, her son could never have been sworn in as a Freeman.

All communication stopped at that point. None of my subsequent e-mails were answered.

Could they have obtained a replacement Oath paper? Could an Oath paper be forged? There are gaps in the records held at Moor Bank Lodge and at the Civic Centre. Could such a gap be exploited?

Admission by Adoption

The right to the Freelage is already available to adopted children. An adopted child could have been born out of wedlock though that is no impediment to becoming a Freeman. So long as they have a piece of paper…

Historically, there was nothing whatsoever to prevent a Freeman having a child with a woman who was not his wife, a servant perhaps, and then adopting any children from that relationship. He didn't even need to adopt the child. He could simply take the boy on as an apprentice.

This is plainly open to abuse. More so, these loopholes are still available. Why were these loopholes tolerated?

If a marriage was barren and produced no offspring, or because only female children had survived into adulthood, then a family line or business might die out because there was no male heir to inherit. Worse, if a Freeman died and his widow subsequently married a non-Company Keeper, then the rights to the business would pass to her new husband, to do with as he pleased. Plainly, the individual Coopers would wish to avoid that. Society has changed.

Also, the Admission of Lady Freemen solves this problem.

Admission of Lady Freemen

We admitted Lady Freemen in 2010 because it was the right thing to do. There was no vote on whether we should admit women. It was morally and legally wrong to exclude them. The issue of admitting children born out of wedlock is very similar. Excluding them is morally wrong.

Human Rights Law

That a child must be born in wedlock actively denies the right of a child to inherit the Freelage. In effect, the current rules punish the child for a choice which was not theirs. This could and probably will be challenged in the European Court of Human Rights.

The Concept of Family Values

The need to preserve 'family values' was argued by Sir Leonard Fenwick and others when this issue was last debated. However, the definition of family values is vague at best.

What are family values? When the Rules of Admission were first set down (circa the 13th Century) and up to the 1970's, the established concept of a family was based upon a heterosexual couple who had been married in law producing children. Divorce was rare.

Family values in Biblical times meant something else. King Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred acknowledged concubines. King David had eight named wives and umpteen concubines. Muhammed had eleven wives. Women were property.

Or should we stick with the Victorian model? Charles Dickens, who pretty much defined the Victorian era, was married but apparently preferred his sister-in-law. Was this a 'model family'?

The above demonstrates that the term 'family values' is too fluid to be used as a yardstick/ argument.

Falling Birth Rates

The fertility rate in England and Wales fell to its lowest level on record in 2024. It was the third consecutive year that record has been broken. (ONS, 2025)

Other than a slight jump during the pandemic, birth rates have been falling consistently since 2010. On average, women now have 1.41 babies, compared with 1.42 in 2023 and 1.94 in 2010.

There is a real danger that a number of the Incorporated Companies will cease to exist because insufficient children are being born to replace the current population.

Modern Bio-Technology and Blood Lines

The Rules of Admission were set down at a time when Bio-Engineering was inconceivable.

In-vitro fertilisation is now commonplace. Almost 21,000 babies were born from IVF in 2023, which accounts for 1 in 32 UK births - roughly around one child in every classroom. (https://www.hfea.gov.uk)

Children can be born of same sex marriages by IVF or surrogacy. Do the Rules of Admission still apply?

In 2025, a child can be conceived from donated gametes, implanted and gestated to the full term. If either of the birth parents has been accepted into the Freelage, then the child is eligible for the Freelage even though that child may not be a blood relation of either parent. What about the donors? If either of the donors was a Freeman, is the child able to seek admission?

Same-sex Marriages / Civil Partnerships

If a child born of a same-sex marriage or a civil partnership - where either or both parties is a Freeman of the City - is sworn in as a Freeman and the government of the day decides that the marriage is no longer valid and can be annulled, what then is the status of the child? Are they still a Freeman of the City? Or would the Freelage be removed?

The Role of the Stewards

Our understanding is that the vote to admit children born out of wedlock will be extended to all members of the Freelage. This is problematic.

The Stewards are the elected representatives of their respective Companies. Ideally, the Stewards should canvas the opinion of their members, providing context and historical knowledge as well as details of past discussions at Guild Meetings. They speak for their members at Guild.

Inviting every Freeman to participate in the vote subverts the role of the Stewards.

Were the Company Stewards consulted when this decision was made? We don't remember being asked.

Removing the Company Stewards from the procedure could set a dangerous precedent. Will the Stewards Committee simply ignore the individual Company Stewards in future votes?

Inviting every Freeman to vote will be difficult to police. Fraud will be an issue.

Furthermore, why should a Freeman who resides in another country and who has only visited Newcastle once (to be sworn in!) have the same vote as a Freeman who has lived in the City (or the Country) all of their lives? Do we restrict the vote to just UK residents?

Voting should be restricted to the Stewards of the Incorporated Companies and only then, after they have provided documentary evidence to prove that they have spoken to their members.

This is an extremely important vote. Only allowing two votes per company Steward is deeply problematic. A small company with only a handful of active members could heavily influence the vote one way or another. Votes should be weighted according to the size of the Company.

The Coopers are an autonomous company

The Coopers Company is an entirely autonomous entity. We are self-governing. We will listen to advice given by the Stewards Committee and advise our Company Keepers accordingly. However, it is the Company Keepers who decide on Company policy and direction. We will not allow any external agency to direct Company decisions.

If the Company Keepers vote to admit children born out of wedlock then that is our position. The Stewards Committee cannot overrule the decision of an entirely independent and autonomous entity.

Senior Steward : Personal comments

We did not have children when this issue was last discussed in 2016, which is why I voted against admission of children born out of wedlock. There was no possibility of children at that time.

However, my position has changed. We are a three parent family. We have a boy, Christopher James Lawson-Coomber-Hughes (6), and a girl, Freya Rose Lawson-Coomber-Hughes (3). Both children were conceived by IVF, a procedure that was not available when the Rules of Admission were written. I am the biological father of both children and can provide documentary evidence to that effect.

The names of the biological parents appear on the birth certificates of both children.

Both children carry the surnames of their three parents.

Both children have been openly acknowledged. We have brought the children up as Freemen-in-waiting. They have already attended several events run by the Freemen, at least one of which where I was the principal speaker. (Astronomy night, November 2023.)

I cannot adopt the children because, quite rightly, the mother does not what to give up her rights to the children and I cannot marry the mother of the children because of an existing long-term relationship.

I have been actively engaged with the Freemen of the City for more than two decades (2005 - 2025) as a Steward of the Coopers Company. My children have more to do with the Freemen and the City of Newcastle than an individual from the other end of the country who was admitted as a Freeman four decades ago and who never visited the City again.

My brother does not have children. The current Rules of Admission prevent my children from become Freemen. Without a change to the rules, the line ends with me.

This is unfair.

The Freelage should always be about more than just a piece of paper.

As Senior Steward and irrespective of the decision of Guild, I intend to ask the members of the Coopers Company to approve an amendment to our Ordinary that allows an acknowledged child of a Freeman to be formally introduced to the Company by the age of fourteen and, once introduced, they can then become a member of the Coopers Company. Under the present rules, they would not be able to be sworn in as a Freeman of Newcastle but at least the Company lineage would be retained.

Suggested Criteria for Admission

Times and attitudes change. More than fifty one percent of births (311,306 out of 605,479) in the year 2021 were out of wedlock or where the parents were not in a Civil Partnership (ONS, 2022).

Three percent of all births in the UK in 2023 were via IVF.

We feel that the rules around admission need to be more flexible.

We recognise that:

1. A connection through the family is the best way to guarantee the safety of the Moor from generation to generation.

2. We agree that the concept of a 'family' should be at the core of the process.

A child should be considered for admission:

1. Where at least one parent is a Freeman of the City of Newcastle

2. Where the names of both parents appear on the child's birth certificate.

3. Where the child has been openly acknowledged by both parents.

4. Where both parents have been fully engaged with the upbringing of the child i.e. the child has not been abandoned by either biological parent. Even where the parents are divorced, then both should be actively involved with the child's upbringing.

Furthermore:

5. An acknowledged child born out of wedlock can be introduced to the Company as an apprentice as soon as they reach the age of seven years. Once known to the Company, the child can then participate in meetings but may not vote until the age of eighteen, when they're allowed to marry and have children of their own.

6. An acknowledged child born out of wedlock must have attended at least three Head Meetings as an apprentice Cooper before they can be sworn in to the Coopers Company.

7. Admission should also incorporate a test of character. Whilst we cannot exclude ex-offenders, we could perhaps consider the completion of The Duke of Edinburgh's award or obtaining an academic qualification as a test of character, to be used in the candidate's favour.

8. A set of hard and fast rules is very important. However, some flexibility may be necessary. We would suggest the creation of an **'Admissions Board'** to oversee the admission of applicants where the rules may not apply. Such a board would judge each case on its relative merits,

subject to legal rulings / case law. The board would be able to retain a record of past admissions to simplify future decisions.

Clarification Required

(We need more information)

- Children born out of wedlock cannot be admitted as Freemen because of the Town Moor Act 1988. Is this true? Are there loopholes that would permit the admission of children born out of wedlock without changing the Town Moor Act? Several Stewards have said this is the case. However, they have not provided any documentation that proves this beyond doubt.

- Can the Town Moor Act be changed without opening the act up to abuse inside the Parliamentary process?

- If the Town Moor Act cannot be changed without opening the Moor up to developers, then no compromise on the ‘out of wedlock’ ruling should be considered. The Moor must be preserved as a Green Space for future generations.

- If children born out of wedlock can be admitted to the Freelage without changing the Town Moor Act, then we should be able to reach a compromise.

Document History

Document prepared by David J. Hughes (Senior Steward), Dr. Peter Blenkinsop (Junior Steward) and Michael Blenkinsop, MBA (Membership Officer), June - August 2025.