

PRESIDENT'S MACE

by President Gill Andrews Hon VPSA

"For the first time during my knowledge of the Society of Antiquaries of London the President has before him a mace of fitting character and appropriate design. I must confess that, as some of you know, I have for some years urged the absolute propriety of providing such a symbol to take the place of the very warlike weapon that has been used for so long as a menace to all newly elected Fellows."



With these words in his 1912 Anniversary Address, then-President, Charles Hercules Read announced the "new mace" to the Fellowship. This mace is still used by the President today when admitting new Fellows.

Maces were originally weapons, and ceremonial maces like the new mace which symbolise authority derive from these. A mace was first introduced into Society proceedings in 1736. Council, the Society's governing body, then

ordered that the mace should be laid before the President at every meeting, a tradition which continues to be observed. Its use would have emphasised the Society's status at a time at which it was seeking to assert its authority, not least in relation to that of the older Royal Society, established in 1662.

The first ("old") mace dated from the 16th century and was a military mace of gilded iron. It had belonged to the Society's first President, Peter le Neve (1661–1724) and was presented by the Society's engraver, George Vertue (1717–1756). By 1819 the gilding had largely disappeared giving rise to complaints that the mace was too shabby and did not promote the image of a flourishing organisation. In order to address this Council resolved that a modern replica should be made, the "warlike weapon" to which Read referred. This replica, however, clearly was not thought sufficiently impressive and by the turn of the 20th century Council was discussing the need for a "decent and

proper" mace. (The 1819 replica mace is still used when Society meetings are held away from Burlington House.)

The new mace was a gift to the Society from Col. Croft Lyons, FSA, who expressed the hope that "continued use may endow it with the dignity and interest that antiquity alone can bestow". It is made of solid silver and was designed by Croft Lyons himself, possibly taking inspiration from surviving medieval civic maces such as that belonging to the town of Hebdon in Yorkshire. It was made by Crichton Bros., of Jermyn Street, retail silversmiths and dealers who specialised in antique and fine-quality reproduction silver. The Society's arms are set out in enamel on its flat top with the surrounding inscription:

"The gift of George Babington Croft Lyons, St. George's Day, 1912."

The base of the mace head is engraved with the names of the Society's officers at the time of its donation.

It is interesting to note that the Society's (recently amended) 1751 Charter allows for the appointment of a serjeant-at-mace – "to attend the President or his Deputy upon all proper occasions" and presumably to carry the mace. Such an appointment was raised as a possibility by Read in 1912 but was not pursued.

Further Reading:

Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries (2nd Series, xxiv, p.240)

Council, 11 December 1908

Executive, 14 January 1909

Bicentenary Booklet, p. 44-47

Society Minutes, 16 February 1819

Society Minutes, Vol. ii, p. 136