

Dorcas, or Tabitha

One of our treasures is the lovely silver statuette of Dorcas. Sadly it is little seen by Liverymen or by all but a few lucky guests. This is because when she is on display she has pride of place on the top table at formal events immediately adjacent to the Master. She is there not just as a reminder but as a talking point. Her size, though significant, does not allow a very good view of her except for those fairly close by.



An article by Angie Lewis, Hon Archivist, in the Newsletter of Autumn 2017 said:

The silver statuette of Dorcas was presented to the Needlemakers on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Newey Group, the UK's largest manufacturer of pins, needles and other hard haberdashery and clothing fasteners [at that time]. 'Dorcas' was the prime brand used by Newey for pins and needles and was adopted as a marketing identity in the mid to late 1800s. The name was chosen to appeal to the many Dorcas Societies which were being founded at that time. In the 1800s, following cholera outbreaks when there was a wholesale burning of infected clothing, the ladies of many churches founded Dorcas Societies to make and distribute clothing for the poor and destitute.

The statuette was designed for Newey and manufactured by J W Evans silversmiths of Albion Street in Birmingham's famous Jewellery Quarter. It is 8 ¾ inches high (22cm, or 29cm with the plinth). Its weight is 56.76 troy ounces (1765 grammes).

We know of Dorcas, (which in Greek is Tabitha, the language of the New Testament), from the New Testament. The story is a simple one told by St Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles:

At Joppa there was a disciple called Tabitha, a name which means Dorcas, that is Gazelle. She was constantly engaged in doing good works and acts of charity. It so happened that at that time she fell ill and died. They washed her body, and laid it in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples had heard that Peter was there. So they sent two men with an invitation to come to them. 'Please include us your travels,' they said, 'and don't delay.' Peter started out and went with them. When he arrived they took him up into the upper room. All the widows stood there beside him weeping and showing him the tunics and cloaks Dorcas used to make when she was with them. [William Barclay translation 1968]

Tradition suggests that she was a widow herself and made clothing for other widows as well as for the poor. From the internet we understand that *'Depictions of Dorcas in art can be found as early as the fourth century and is often included in medieval and renaissance illustrations of the life of Saint Peter. Dorcas' acts of charity are a common subject of stained glass church windows. She is represented in a window in the apse of Christ Church, Bath, St Peter's Church, Caversham, in St. Andrew's Church, Cheddar, in St Leonard's Church, Bridgnorth, in Castleton Parish Church in Derbyshire, St. Nicholas' church in Castle Hedingham in Essex, in the Ladychapel of St Michael's Church in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, in St Andrew's Church in Moretonhampstead, in a window at St John the Evangelist Church in Cinderford, in Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff, and in an oriel window at the Head Office of the Retail Trust in north London.'*

It is right that we too venerate her and in our charitable acts try to emulate her simplicity and generosity.

We read that Dorcas (or Tabitha) means a gazelle. Who knows, maybe she was lithe and athletic as a young girl, perhaps even elegant. In my last essay for the Newsletter I wrote about our coat-of-arms. I referred to an early iteration which had as its crest the head of a Moor. I suggested that this might be an allusion to links with needle or steel making by Arabs in or around Toledo in southern Spain. It's perhaps just as well that he did not make it onto the coat-of-arms as granted in 1987. And of course there is no going back for another attempt at a revised coat-of-arms. But, should there be an occasion to add a crest or to make any other alteration, how lovely and how fitting it would be if it could be a gazelle. Come to think of it, there's no reason why we should not adopt it as an unofficial crest anyway. It might look rather good there.

Philip R Grant