

This note is one of a series placed in the Clerks' Almanac by the Livery Committee. Most are written by its past chairman, of whom you may read more at the foot of the [Contact page](#). They are intended to be of guidance to livery clerks, especially new ones, or those seeking advice on a particular topic. They are not prescriptive, and how individual companies choose to conduct their affairs is, of course, entirely up to them.

Seating plans

This note offers guidance to new clerks and others tackling the important task of arranging the seating at a livery dinner or formal luncheon. Many would agree that a good “placement” makes for a good dinner, whilst a bad one can ruin the evening! (the word *Speeches* for *placement* may also be substituted in the above aphorism – see notes elsewhere in the Almanac).

It only offers general advice on principles, protocol, and etiquette – the practicalities of actually doing the job are now largely solved with various seating plan computer programs.

Three categories of diner are covered separately: liverymen and their personal guests; VIP or Company guests; speakers. A paragraph at the end does cover the practical aspects of place cards and displaying the plan.

Liverymen and their personal guests

As with all else, different livery companies will have their own customs about how liverymen are placed, AND whether guests tend to be spouses/partners, or business/friends/colleagues etc. In this writer's experience, couples do NOT wish to be seated next to each other, and much prefer to be eg opposite their spouse/partner. Conversely, if the guest is eg a business colleague, then it would be odd not to put them next to their host.

Exceptions may be when a young liverymen is bringing his/her new partner/spouse to their first livery dinner, in which case it may be kind to place them next to each other. The convention at mixed events is still to place the sexes alternately, though this will not always be practical. But when it can be arranged, it seems to be preferred. An interesting alternative at mixed dinners is to place two male, then two female, alternately. Though rare, this has the attraction of every guest having both a man and woman to talk with.

In days gone by, seniority on the livery would be a good determinate of where diners were placed (senior near the top table). Nowadays, doing the research to try and match compatibility/interests, and hence allow guests to be seated next to liverymen/guests whose company they will enjoy, should trump outdated etiquette. Some liverymen will welcome being regularly seated next to or near an old chum, whilst other will resent being placed next to that “old bore” yet again! Only local knowledge can help.

Another paradox is whether to mix the young and the old (junior & senior), or allow them to enjoy the relaxed company of their peers. Both options have their advantages, but the opportunity for senior members of the court to get to know up and coming future court assistants informally should not be missed.

This note is one of a series placed in the Clerks' Almanac by the Livery Committee. Most are written by its past chairman, of whom you may read more at the foot of the [Contact page](#). They are intended to be of guidance to livery clerks, especially new ones, or those seeking advice on a particular topic. They are not prescriptive, and how individual companies choose to conduct their affairs is, of course, entirely up to them.

VIP or Company guests

Some livery halls have very long top tables, and others very short. Hence what follows needs to be considered pragmatically. The VIP guest list will inevitably have an order of precedence (even if only in the Clerk's mind). Obviously at the top will be the principal guest speaker, the LM, or other major figure, the master of the livery company whose hall is being used, and maybe someone you are keen to impress.

Further down will be eg the masters of other liveries (by precedence), City dignitaries, senior clergy, diplomats, and military officers (by rank) etc.

The Clerk will be wise to bear precedence/seniority in mind, but except at the most formal of occasions, need not follow it slavishly.

The host, almost invariably the Master at a livery dinner, takes the centre position, with the principal guest to their right. If the guest of honour is accompanied, then their spouse would be to the left of the master. Protocol says that if the Mistress is present, she (he) would be to the right of the principal guest.

In this writer's view, every VIP guest should, if at all possible, be placed next to a host liveryman (quite probably a past master or court assistant, though not necessarily). Sometimes the desire of the planner to get all VIPs onto the top table prevents that ideal. But this is very counter-productive, for it inevitably leads to the same old big-wigs sitting next to the same old colleagues dinner after dinner – which, unsurprisingly, they may not appreciate!

The two sheriffs are equal in rank, but the aldermanic is normally placed somewhere to the right of the chair, and the non-aldermanic a similar distance from the host but to the left.

It is common practice to place the clerk or equivalent of the principal guest to the right of the host clerk, who him/herself is traditionally seated at the foot of the centre sprig.

Royalty

If senior royalty are attending, seek advice. (or refer to *Debretts Correct Form* p291)

Speakers

Aside from the Master and principal guest speaker, who will clearly be placed at or near the centre of the top table, care should be taken in placing any other speaker, eg the warden who may be welcoming the guests.

It is quite common practice to place wardens as gunners (at the foot of the sprigs). In a small hall, this works fine, if he/she is to speak. But in a large hall, or in Mansion

This note is one of a series placed in the Clerks' Almanac by the Livery Committee. Most are written by its past chairman, of whom you may read more at the foot of the [Contact page](#). They are intended to be of guidance to livery clerks, especially new ones, or those seeking advice on a particular topic. They are not prescriptive, and how individual companies choose to conduct their affairs is, of course, entirely up to them.

House (MH), the speaker placed at the foot of a flanking sprig can be lost and out of sight to many. And surprisingly, MH doesn't run to a second microphone, so the toastmaster has to delay proceedings whilst he laboriously re-positions the mike. So the advice could be that if in a hall requiring speakers to be amplified, then place all speakers reasonably close together on the top table, in clear view of the assembled company.

Round tables

All the above assumes a formal layout of top table and sprigs. Many prefer round tables for some (maybe less formal) dinners/lunches. If round tables are used (first check their availability, and occasionally there is an additional cost), then most of the above principals apply.

BUT they present the opportunity to mix senior and junior, and by allotting eg a warden or past master to host each table, then VIP guests can be spread around the room to advantage.

Place cards

Place cards serve several purposes, of which the most obvious is to show the diner where he/she is sitting. But they are also most useful to neighbours to be reminded of the name of the person they are sitting next to, or opposite. They are also used by some caterers to indicate special diets.

So for all these reasons, it may be helpful to print **forenames** and surnames on both sides of the card. And to omit titles, post nominal etc, which add nothing (see below), and the hard pressed clerk may consider leaving out ranks also for less formal meals.

Displaying the plan

Debretts Correct Form (the bible for much of this sort of stuff, and what is written above) is interesting on this point. They make clear that the size of the guest list dictates the method used. But the most recent edition was written before the arrival of table plan software.

However, it is not necessarily wise to try and squeeze more than (say) 160 onto the printed menu insert. For large dinners, it may be more sensible/practical to adopt the numbered approach, with a simple plan showing numbered places, with a printed alphabetical guest list showing the key. [Convention is to give each sprig a capital letter, A, B, C etc, but this writer found it easier to use numbers, 1, 2, 3 etc and allot each place a three digit number, the first being their sprig]

This note is one of a series placed in the Clerks' Almanac by the Livery Committee. Most are written by its past chairman, of whom you may read more at the foot of the [Contact page](#). They are intended to be of guidance to livery clerks, especially new ones, or those seeking advice on a particular topic. They are not prescriptive, and how individual companies choose to conduct their affairs is, of course, entirely up to them.

Conversely, for very small dinners (say up to 30) where it may be inappropriate to create individual plans for each guest, then one or two large master plans can be produced, and displayed for all to see – one in the Reception room, and one near to (but not blocking) the entrance to the Hall.

As for place cards, inclusion of forenames is helpful to all, and omission of titles, ranks, post nominal decorations etc etc makes life easier for the clerk, removes clutter and confusion, and importantly removes a great source of possible errors.

Procession into dinner

Elsewhere in the Almanac, this writer advises to keep the number processing to a minimum (master, wardens, principal guest, chaplain, clerk). However if it is desired to include Uncle Tom Cobley etc, then it may be sensible to consider the order of the procession at the same time as considering the VIP seating plan. Getting the principal guests to their right seats, in the often confined space behind the top table, can become an unseemly scrabble before the music stops!

Nigel R Pullman

1st November 2016

Was this note helpful? Do you have comment? Email nrpullman@btinternet.com