

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH FREEMASONRY FROM 1350 – 1730

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The talk which I am here presenting to you is the direct result of the last few years of research and the writing of one recent week. It is the considered conclusion of a great deal of thinking based on the collecting of much new information. Because it at last makes sense of the whole period of Masonic development between 1350 and 1730, it has seemed a worthwhile topic to share with experienced and interested brethren. I shall first layout the story of this whole period as I have now come to understand it and then close with some remarks on what seem to be its benefits in terms of solving the age-old question: "Where did our present form of English Freemasonry come from?" I shall then value any comments, criticisms or queries so that I sharpen up what, I hope, will be a useful contribution to Masonic history generally.

I begin with the known form of an operative or building site lodge in the 14th century. It takes its name from a temporary lean-to structure resting against the side of some new erection be it a castle, monastery, church or large house. Its Norman-French name was 'allogement'. In it gathered the work men known as Fellows or Masters of their crafts - those who squared, shaped, decorated, carved, completed and laid the various pieces of masonry required for the nearby structure. In this 'lodge' they also ate, rested, conversed and gathered for any 'business' and the latter could range from discussing wage-rates to welcoming new colleagues and agreeing who would train the apprentices who were introduced, not by them, but by the Master Masons on the same site. For the fact often overlooked, but now proven by reference to contemporary documents is that this kind of site lodge was ruled, not by a Master Mason, but by a Warden chosen by these Fellows from amongst their number. Indeed, the Master Mason was not even allowed to enter such a lodge though he might recommend apprentices to it and knock on its door when it was time for labour to be resumed. It is very important to discern this separation of the roles between the Master Masons and the Fellows or Master Craftsmen as far as building work was concerned.

Alongside these practical arrangements on a building site we have to note that from at least 1350 there is another form of association for craftsmen masons. This was a Guild/Company which appears in what were then the large cities of England as well as abroad. After 1350, when the ranks of the working craftsmen had been severely depleted by the Black Death, with the result that there was a sharp rise in the wage demands of those that remained, the Crown declared that only recognised Guilds or Trade Companies could regulate wages and so that such Companies might be approved they had to produce evidence of their ancient right to represent their trades, show how old those rights were and thus qualify for a new Royal Charter which gave them the right to operate in their trade.

Thus we note the appearance of such masons' guilds in, e.g. Durham, York, Chester, Coventry, Norwich and London. These Guilds were then ruled over by a Court with a Master and two Wardens, the latter usually called Upper and Lower. Membership of the Company was only allowed to those craftsmen who qualified as Freemen of the local Borough. The significant difference between this gathering and that on the working site was that in the Guild both Master Masons and Fellows would be able to mingle so long as they were each Freemen locally. In the Guild the Master and Wardens were elected by the members. Each Guild adopted its Trade's Ancient Rules and Regulations, its record of the craft's history and a Charter. Hence arose the notion that the Freemasons' first Charter was received from King Athelstan around 926 C.E. Those admitted to the Guild had long since been apprenticed to their trade and so were at once accepted as Fellows of the Company.

If you ask how we can be so sure about what I have just told you then I have to explain two other things. One is that from 1350 onwards there appear in records still extant some distinctive documents called 'The Old Charges'. The first of these is now known as the Regius Ms. whilst the second is called the Cooke Ms. Both of these were in circulation prior to 1415 and after them came a whole series of similar publications until the middle of the 18th century. Copies of some of these actual documents are in Masonic libraries like York.

The other fact is that also from the period of 1375-1400 there took place in the cities I have mentioned public processions of plays put on by these trade Companies. As the Latin word for a 'trade' is 'ministerium', which we English soon called 'misterium', these plays have become known as Mystery Plays. We know that the

masons' companies put on their plays along with the other trades. These plays were produced almost every year for the next 200 years and to give you some idea of what was involved in producing them I should tell you that whilst a Master Mason then received a wage of 40 pence a week each of these plays cost £250 per annum to present.

In the first part of the 1500s the mason trade took some very hard knocks. King Henry VII refused to allow any more castles to be built and even caused many castles to be pulled down or reduced in size. Henry VIII, his son, closed down not only the large and small monasteries and convents but also the hospitals, alms houses and chapels which they maintained. In York some 50 buildings were wholly or partly demolished. Henry's son, Edward VI, closed down the religious guilds, their chapels and special places of prayer, as on bridges, called chantry chapels and all stone altars; whilst in the reign of Elizabeth I, even the Mystery Plays were discontinued. It can be imagined how all this legislation affected the working masons. The number of their building sites was greatly diminished and so therefore were the lodges on them. Not only was this the case but we notice in the reign of the Tudors that there was now a preference for building in brick and wood.

The idea of a lodge, indeed, was in real danger of dying out. The masons, however, had another string to their bow. In the cities where they had their trade companies they began to add a lodge to that body. No other trade guild did this, not even the carpenters, who were such close associates of the masons in all medieval building work.

What now happened in at least York and Chester, where we have the evidence from recent research, is interesting. Because there were those in these cities who were deprived of their chapels, their old religious practices, the plays, the saints and parish guilds, they began to look around for other outlets for their piety, their almsgiving and social association.

Compelling evidence of the attraction of this new kind of Freemasonry for those recently deprived of so much religious heritage is provided by the overt references in the Cooke MS. to its source for the Masonic history which it relates. The reader is constantly reminded that what is here recorded is found 'in policonico'. This refers to the 14th century world history, now in 9 volumes, which was compiled by the Chester monk, Sir Ranulph Higden, and named 'Plychronicon'. What greater pull

could there be for religious traditionalists than to join a Guild or Company which still preserved, as part of its ceremonial working, a text deriving from pre-Reformation Benedictine monasticism.

We know that by the mid-17th century in York and Chester there were lodges attached to the Mason Trade Guilds into which those who were Freemen of other trades than the building ones were 'accepted' as lodge members. Since they were all Freemen there was no question of there being any need for apprenticeship in such a lodge and so there was initially only one possible grade for the members: that of Fellow. They still met in a lodge ruled over by a Warden. This, incidentally, explains the kind of lodge in which Elias Ashmole was received 'with Bro. Penketh as Warden' ruling over it.

The important thing to realise is that being a member of such a lodge was not the same as being a member of the Guild. Guild membership was reserved for those in the masons' trade and, of course, any mason in the Company had the right to be a member of the lodge linked to it. Indeed the presence of some working masons in the lodge was essential in order to know how to open and conduct business in a lodge correctly by the old traditions.

What happens now, however, is that slowly but surely the old traditions of the masons are adapted and added to by the traditions that are brought into this new kind of lodge by others. These were they who once had their own religious guild practices, those who had now experienced the new classical education of the grammar schools and the benefit of fresh learning by being able to read the newly published printed books that began to flood this country. Nor is that all. For those being educated in the new Renaissance learning such as the MSS. as the Cooke included, again from its monastic source, its emphasis on e.g. Hermes, Euclid and Pythagoras. The attraction of ancient knowledge was to persist through persons like Ashmole, Randle Holme and Dr. Stukeley.

It is hardly surprising if the working masons began to wonder what the new Guild Lodge Freemasons were starting to do. What also happened is that the style of ruling the Guild Court spreads to the lodge so that it too is ruled by a Right Worshipful Master and two Wardens: and the additional knowledge which had been the preserve of the old Master Masons was now able to be shared in this new body.

This was made part of the additional knowledge restricted to the Masters of this kind of lodge.

Something else of a practical kind also began to happen. Following the Civil War period of 1645-1660 there was a new desire for two things. One was for a place where the bitterness of political or religious conflict could be avoided and the other was, literally, the rebuilding of a whole society. Only one church was built in England between 1640 and 1660, no substantial homes were built or even maintained, for the gentry were heavily taxed by Parliament, and even battered city walls were left unrepaired. The Restoration of the monarchy, the return of noble families to their homes and the emergence of more merchants because of more profitable trade meant that there was a resurgence of the need for stonemasons. The Fire of London, 1666, was not only a major spur to rebuilding in the capital but also elsewhere. The masons' trade started afresh even though the bricklayers and carpenters were also in much demand. This leads us on to the next stage of our story.

As the demand for new building and repair grew so did the renewed expectations of the working mason trade. The return to the previous standards of professional workmanship and the need to regulate wages and terms of employment meant that there was a revived need for a recognised trade body to which the operative masons could belong and which would serve their day to day needs. What becomes clear is that though in York and Chester there already existed such a company from late medieval times it was not now regarded as adequate or appropriate for the needs of contemporary stonemasons. That is why, in both cities in the latter 17th century, there was an application to the municipal authority for another charter to found a Mason Company. Sadly we do not know from the extant documentation why these operatives chose to disregard the older body bearing their name but it would seem as if the activities of their attached 'lodges' had begun to outweigh and even overshadow the original purpose of the Company to which they were attached. In any event the municipal authorities of York and Chester saw fit to accede to the application made to them and charters were granted, though in both cities the masons were required to include in their new companies allied trades such as bricklayers, carpenters or blacksmiths. As far as the actual tradesmen were concerned their previous links with the old Guild were now severed.

What this meant for the 'speculative' Freemen members of the old Masons' Company lodge was that to all intents and purposes the 'Lodge' was now to become an independent body which no longer looked to a parent Guild for oversight or reference. The era of the independent private 'Masonic Lodge' was about to dawn. It would inevitably lead to three clear changes.

It meant first of all that the new kind of Lodge had to discover a fresh type of governance. It was now removed from the connection with municipal oversight that necessarily went with a Guild attachment. In York this had a singular result. We know that from the registers of 1705 at least that the Lodge regarded itself as a self-governing body which was acting as a form of Grand Lodge in the older operative sense. This meant that it believed it had the power to recreate itself in other parts of its old operative territory, North of the River Trent and to authorise gentlemen in Scarborough or Bradford to meet as 'Freemasons' following the customs, and considering themselves an extension, of the York parent body.

In Chester the development was different. As the older Guild Lodge members died off by 1700 some of their relatives and colleagues appear to have decided to continue a private lodge which by 1725 was, says brand new evidence, so large that it was divided into three such bodies, all with differing types of membership. For their authority they turned to the newly developing Grand Lodge of 1717 in London & Westminster and were entered on the latter's register. I am currently studying what pattern of change was followed by the 17th century lodge in Chichester, West Sussex.

The second change concerned the nature of membership. As you may recall the Guild Lodges required potential members to be Freemen of their locality. When the lodges discontinued their association with a Guild or Company this requirement no longer pertained. Hence the door to membership was open to anyone who was considered 'a fit and proper person' by the members of a respective lodge. If, however, it was no longer the case that a candidate had to be a Freeman of some trade the question arose as to whether he had ever been an apprentice as tradition required. The need for some kind of ceremonial Apprenticeship therefore now became evident and it is thus hardly surprising that such a grade of membership was early introduced after 1717 though it is noticeable that even in London the Grand Lodge clearly regarded this as such a novelty that it left such an introductory step for each Lodge to perform privately. What it did encourage, as was not the case in York, was a separate opening

of a lodge in the grade of Apprentice where that was to be conferred. Under the Grand Lodge of All England at York, throughout the 18th century, its lodges only normally opened in one degree, that of Fellow.

The third change was in regard to the ceremony of admission. Whereas York, as in the Guild Lodges, used the Old Charges, Regulations and History as the main content of this act of entry and thus recognised a new Freemason as being a 'Mason of the Craft', the growing tendency in the South was to begin to regard a candidate as a member of the Premier Grand Lodge, accepting the Constitutions devised by Dr. Anderson. What is to be noted is that when a further Grand Lodge began in 1751 its founders claimed that they were seeking to follow the Ancient Constitutions according to the Charter of King Athelstan at York in 926. That is precisely why they were called 'Antients'. What was also a constant 18th century practice in York was that admission to the Craft did not automatically mean admission to membership of a lodge. A separate vote had to be taken to make the latter possible. The old distinction between being a member of the Mason Trade and being a member of a Masons' lodge was still retained. That idea soon faded under the London dispensation.

What I have sought to provide for us is a clearer picture of how English Freemasonry developed from an operative practice to the form of Freemasonry to which we have become accustomed. This narrative, based on all the available evidence suggests not only that our development was a natural one but that it was different to that which took place north of the Border. I would also point out that the two developments are not successive but contemporary and at a time when little love was lost between the two neighbouring nations. What has not been available hitherto is any easy access to the story of the emergence of a Freemasonry in England that was more than a single initiation of Elias Ashmole in 1646. The fact is that there is much more to our Masonic history than that. When we know that, as I have, I hope, begun to intimate, we are able to appreciate much more about where we came from and hence who we really are. When a W. Master invites a Warden to check the door of his lodge, or when the W. Master invites a Warden to close the lodge, we are reverting to a period way beyond the 27 December 1717. We are also back in those early days when an Installing Master opens in the Fellows degree because it was only there that a ruler was elected and obligated in medieval days. (Note that changing the term Fellow

to Fellowcraft was a later Scottish import.) When, however, the Master Elect is asked for an assent to the Ancient Charges and Regulations we are back in a Guild Lodge with a Master Mason about to be in charge. Such, my brethren, are just a few glimpses of what knowing about our true past can provide. Of course it is also perfectly right and sensible to live in the present but only if we really know who and where we are?