

THE GRAND LODGE OF ALL ENGLAND AT YORK AND ITS PRACTICES

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The subject of this talk is one that has occupied me fairly consistently for the last five years. Having started to reside in York and then meeting the term 'York Rite' whilst giving lectures abroad led me to examine much more closely the history and background of what many Masonic historians have regarded as the distinctive part played by the style of Freemasonry that started here. What struck me from the start of my search was that whilst numerous writers had tackled parts of the subject no-one had ever attempted any overall survey and even those works which have made a contribution to the subject are now long out of date and far from easy to obtain. It is indeed high time that this significant part of our English Masonic heritage should be recovered and recorded as a whole so that students of the future will at least have a firm base from which to pursue further research.

To understand where the Grand Lodge Of All England at York came from we must start in the 17th century. Following the almost complete demise of the local building site lodges between 1530 and 1630 there appeared in York and Chester new lodges which were attached to the Stone Masons' Guilds / Companies in those cities. These lodges were initially intended for the Freeman Masons who belonged to the Trade Company but evidence reveals that the lodge in York in 1663 also had members who were Free-men of other trades.

What we also know is that after the Restoration of 1660 The stone mason trade had so recovered in the country at large that in both York and Chester there were applications by the working masons to have a new Charter for a Stone Masons' Guild. Quite naturally the municipal authorities in each case pointed out that as there was already such a body for that trade it was not possible to consider another such grant. It is worth our noting, however, that the operative masons gave such proof in both cities that the existing medieval trade guild was not able any longer adequately to represent their cause that it was necessary for another body to be appointed. In 1673 in York and in 1690 in Chester the stone masons were granted a charter for a new trade Company though they were ordered to combine with the bricklayers and carpenters. Whilst the detail of this development is of no immediate concern here the implications of such a step for the Guild Lodge were important. It meant first that any claim that

the Guild Lodge was attached to a recognised Company of the craft of stonemasons, or was effectively governed by that Company's rules and regulations, was no longer true. The Lodge, therefore, was now on its own in a way that had not hitherto been the case and so faced two new questions - first, by what authority was it to function and how was it to develop; and second, in what proper sense could it be considered a Lodge of Freemasons when it was no longer attached to an operative stone masons' craft association?

The other implication that followed was that if this lodge was no longer attached to a body that required its members to be Freemen of at least some trade did it mean that its membership could be open to anyone, whether a Freeman of the City or not? If being a Freeman of some trade was not henceforth to be a requirement then how was Apprenticeship to be viewed? When the members were Freemen they had automatically been apprentices before they could be admitted to the Freedom but if that rule was removed the whole matter of a candidate's preliminary trade status was reopened. This information about the change in the 17th century is invaluable for proper understanding of the Grand Lodge to which we now turn. By 1705 we know that there was a minute book of a Masonic lodge in York and that this was not the first such to be used by that body. That this lodge was the direct descendant of the lodge of 1663 cannot be proved as yet but it does seem likely to have had some sort of connection for the names of those who belonged to the later lodge are in some cases from the same families as those known to have been associated with the Stone Masons' Company or its lodge in the preceding century. That is a matter that need not occupy us here. What are of particular interest are three features of this early 18th century Masonic lodge which suggest its 'ancient' form and ancestry.

First, this Lodge had clearly worked out its pattern of authority. Following the style of the old operative Grand Lodge which ruled the district North of the River Trent this York Lodge believed that it possessed the right to inaugurate other bodies of Free Masons elsewhere in that area. We know that before 1710 it had authorised meetings of gentlemen in both Scarborough and Bradford. It was indeed acting as a Grand Lodge and one which was noticeably different from the local London one that emerged in 1717. The main difference was that whilst the London Premier Grand Lodge was formed by certain private and independent lodges which agreed to accept its authority in certain matters the York Grand Lodge of All England claimed authority from an ancient tradition dating back to immemorial times. Moreover it

viewed any new lodge as actually a part of itself rather than an attached but independent private unit. This was marked by three features:

- 1) any new lodges were known as the Grand Lodge of York in Bradford, in Scarborough, etc;
- 2) the new units were required to record their members names in the lodge book of the parent body and to contribute annually to the York charitable fund;
- 3) one of the documents known as the York Old Charges was used for the obligation of any potential initiate. If the sub -ordinate lodge were to cease working this copy was to be returned to the York Grand Lodge. Five such original copies are still extant in the Duncombe Place library there.

The Grand Lodge at York's ancient credentials were said to date from the reign of King Athelstan. He was believed to have granted a first Masons' charter to his half-brother, Edwin, from around 926 A.D. This claim was said to be substantiated by its being recorded in those Ancient Charges of the 15th century that they still used. It is also from Athelstan's reign that there derives the peculiar name of the Grand Lodge as being 'of All England'. Let me explain.

It was in the reign of Athelstan's grandfather, King Alfred, that the Saxons at last began to construct their own lasting kingdom by conquering and uniting the tribes of the southern counties in a realm called Wessex. Alfred's son, Edward, took matters further by uniting Wessex with the kingdom of Mercia which was made up of the Midland counties, and Athelstan, Edward's son, who was brought up in Mercia, then took up arms against the Vikings who held the vast northern kingdom of Northumbria, which stretched from the River Humber as far north as Dunbar.

When in the year 927 Athelstan captured the ancient Viking capital of York and completed his conquest of the North he began to be called "King of All England" which was meant to indicate that he was now the ruler of all that remained beyond Wessex and Mercia. That title persisted and when there was at last an Archbishop of York his first title was 'Archbishop of All England' meaning of the Northern Province. After the Norman Conquest the Archbishops of Canterbury began to be specially, favoured by the Crown and they resented the title used by York as implying that the latter were more important than their southern counterpart. After a long dispute that even involved the Pope it was agreed that whilst the title of 'All England' should pass

to Canterbury both Archbishops were to be regarded as of equal status and authority in their respective Provinces.

When it came to Freemasonry, however, the old title was retained as was first intended. 'All England' only meant the Old Northumbria with York as its central focus. That is how the members of the Grand Lodge of All England at York understood it and all they were implying was that whilst a Grand Lodge was later established in London and Westminster they had from very early times been the Grand Lodge of Northern England. It was when the Grand Lodge of London began to extend its influence and boundaries that difficulties and conflict were to arise.

Having shared the bare outline of this Grand Lodge's origin and background it is time to turn to the matter of its practice and ritual. Our source for these matters are the surprisingly informative minutes up to 1790 and the Lodge Rules which are included with them. As a result of reading through this unique record I now want to share with you some 10 items that is all that the rest of our time will permit. For the full story of this ancient Masonic body I hope you will eventually have my longer published work.

1) From the outset we note that this Lodge has at its head a member called 'President'. This in itself is unusual and suggests that what we are dealing with was a body that did not regard itself simply as a private lodge. When we learn that the holders of this special office were from the outset those of noble ancestry it seems clear that some special role was associated with the York Lodge. When, further, we find that these Presidents also had a named Deputy, and that Deputy was the Mason who presided over the normal meetings of the lodge, the double nature of what we are dealing with becomes even more obvious.

2) A perusal of the membership lists from 1712 onwards makes quite clear that the main bases of lodge membership were that candidates must be Freemen of a trade in the City of York or be of noble or gentlemanly status. There is little doubt that this became an increasingly awkward requirement in the years following the Grand Lodge's revival in 1761 and it was almost certainly one of the factors that led to the resignation of several members in the late 1760s and the creation of rival Moderns lodges in the City. This was not the only factor but as we proceed we shall note others.

What this membership requirement implied was that if a man was a Freeman he must at some previous stage have served an apprenticeship and therefore there was

no need for that grade of membership to be repeated in this Lodge's practice. Indeed, we know that throughout the period of its existence the Grand Lodge of All England normally opened in only one degree, that of the Fellow (the Scottish term Fellowcraft never being used there). Whilst the exclusion of an Apprentice grade had been quite acceptable, whilst the lodge was held in conjunction with the Mason's Guild, this exclusion was not agreeable to the working masons who continued to attend the Grand Lodge after its severance from the parent body. The working mason members then insisted that, apart from themselves who had served as apprentices in this trade, all those who henceforth entered the Craft through this Lodge should be required to undergo some sort of obligation and instruction. What is interesting as far as this Grand Lodge is concerned is that the grade of Apprentice was conferred within a Lodge of Fellows and until about 1770 brethren were then at once made Fellows on the same evening. At the latter date it was decided to admit men as Apprentices on a separate evening but the Lodge was still opened in the degree of a Fellow. This was quite contrary to Premier Grand Lodge practice where a separate opening and ceremony were devised for the 2 grades.

3) Another distinctive feature of this York Grand Lodge throughout its existence was that it distinguished between being a member of the Craft and a member of the Lodge. This distinction reverted, of course, to the time when in order to join the Guild Lodge a candidate had to affirm his nominal membership of the Mason's Craft to which the parent Guild belonged. This Grand Lodge maintained that when a candidate had been made an Apprentice/Fellow he was simply an acknowledged Freemason so a separate ballot had to be taken on another evening, and then by no means always successful, as to whether this new Mason could be accepted into this prestigious Lodge. This was to be another source of irritation for certain municipally important brethren.

4) From 1730 onwards the influence of what was happening elsewhere spread to York. The Fellows Lodge was regarded as the normal place of meeting but we now find in the Minutes the calling of a quite separate Master Masons Lodge on a different day. This must have been another cause for irritation because not every member of the Fellows Lodge was apparently considered fit for acceptance in the Master Mason degree. It is clear that those who had been rulers of this Grand Lodge, whether as President or Deputy, were influential in the choice of M.M. candidates and the mere

fact that a Brother had discharged his obligations to the Lodge as a Fellow was no guarantee that he would be advanced to the next grade.

What was also noticeable was that it was at the Master Masons Lodge that the names and election of a new President now took place. This must have again disturbed those who believed that as Fellows they had every right to participate in such an important decision. Moreover, as we see from the Lectures, there was Masonic knowledge that was restricted to the Master Masons so the exclusion of faithful Fellows must have caused further division. It is worth noting here, however, that in North America and Scandinavia to this day Constitutions restrict the right to vote in Lodge to Master Masons.

5) One of the most distinctive features of York Grand Lodge working was the predominance of 'Lectures'. Whilst this was the term used we would more naturally describe them as catechismal dialogues. What we know took place at meetings when a candidate was admitted was that, after being taken round the square table at which the Lodge members sat, he was tested by the Wardens, presented to the R.W.M. who obligated him on the Bible and using the Ancient Charges. He was given the grip and sign, clothed with a lodge apron and then shown to a place at the table.

In the early days the R.W.M. or a Past Master then began to ask the catechismal questions around the table, addressing each member in turn. These Lectures became more lengthy and detailed and eventually required substantial memory skills, so that by the 1760s they became the sole responsibility of the Past Masters. Yet they were regarded as so important that after 1765 a jewel was donated to the York Grand Lodge to be presented annually to the most competent P.M. It is likely that William Preston, who negotiated with York to form a possible Grand Lodge South of the River Trent, derived the idea of an annual Lecturer from this York practice.

6) Once a year on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist a special and impressive Installation of the Grand Master took place. Following Divine Service, conducted in the church in Coney Street by the Grand Chaplain, election to the office was confirmed by the Master Masons in the Lodge meeting at their usual Inn. From here, around midday, a procession of the Lodge members in full regalia was formed under their banner and, led by the Town Waites, they marched to either the Hall of the Merchant Adventurers in Piccadilly or of the Merchant Taylors in Aldwark. Here the full and formal Installation took place after which there was a proper banquet. After

1761 it was often the case that non-Masons and ladies were invited to the banquet, so that kind of practice has a long precedent in York Masonic history. It was at just such an Installation that a famous address was delivered by Dr. Francis Drake, the Junior Grand Warden.

7) This address is of paramount importance for our proper understanding of this Grand Lodge's ethos and tradition. What sadly seems to have happened in the 19th century was that attention was almost solely focussed on the Doctor's emphasis on the ancient credentials claimed by this Grand Lodge. Whilst it is true that he did underline this antiquity there are 3 other significant matters mentioned by him which seem to have been overlooked. One is that there was specific reference to the tripartite make-up of this Grand Lodge, working masons, the trading or professional members, and the gentry. For each of these groups he had a specially directed message, making clear the social strata that existed even in their Lodge.

He also spelt out the relationship that was then intended to exist between their Grand Lodge and that of London. As each had their respective areas of operation so complete amity and respect could exist between them. And thirdly he lets us into not only what are obviously quotes from contemporary ritual but no less a secret than that York respected both the Josiah and Zerubbabel legends. I cannot say more here but this speech deserves more consideration than it is usually given.

8) Reference has already been made to the central table in the lodge room around which any ceremonies took place. We know that the Master sat at the apex of the square table and behind him was a rod carrying a letter G. When voting took place the ballot box was placed behind the R.W.M., whilst in front of him were 3 candles in the form of a triangle around the open Bible. A cushion was placed on the ground for the candidates to kneel on. There were no Deacons or Inner Guard but there were Stewards who of course served the brethren in the periods of refreshment that interspersed the ceremonies.

During my time in Yorkshire I have often been invited to old lodges in the two Provinces where I was told that I would witness 'Old York working'. I now have to say that what is meant by such well-intentioned invitations is that I will see old Antients Grand Lodge working for they called themselves 'Old York Masons'. What I can tell you is that if you really want to witness the only remaining authentic pattern of York Grand Lodge practice then you have to go to Pennsylvania to see what they

do. As they have no printed rituals you cannot read about their practice or ritual. [on the other hand you might like to have another talk about it.]

9) By the 1770s the Grand Lodge at York had devised a very precise pattern of working a five degree system which meant that all its members knew exactly what ceremony was to be presented on any Lodge night each quarter. This system comprised the 3 basic degrees, the Royal Arch and the Knight Templar. The Lodge in each case was opened only in that form of degree that was announced and those not involved or qualified stayed away. The ceremonies were all held under the rule of the R.W.M. or a Past Master and the same lodge room was the setting in each case. The conduct of these ceremonies was in exactly the same fashion as for the Apprentice and Fellow, i.e. examination, obligation, vesting and Lectures.

10) In this latter arrangement we see the origin of what was later to be called in North America the 'York Rite'. What distinguishes that practice from what took place in York, prior to the Grand Lodge's demise in the latter years of the 18th century, was that instead of continuing the original method of presenting the Old Lectures new ceremonies were devised and added to the 5 degrees named above. Those additional steps were largely what we would now describe as the Cryptic and Allied systems. It is because of these additional ceremonies that we now more correctly call the York Rite there the American Rite.

Such, W.M. and brethren, is the best explanation I can give you of the Grand Lodge of All England at York in the time at our disposal. There is much more that could be said and has been written but I hope at least that you will now have a more informed sense of what I regard as a neglected but precious heritage.