

THE LODGE OF AITCHISON'S HAVEN

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The story of the Lodge of Aitchison's Haven begins in the year 1526, when the Community of Cistercian monks at Newbattle, East Lothian, had so developed their coal mining interests that they wished to export that commodity by sea to other parts of Scotland and to the continent. In order to erect the necessary harbour installations for that purpose they had to obtain a Charter from the King of Scots, and in 1526 they petitioned James V, King of Scots, for that purpose. Their petition was granted, setting off a train of events that was to result in the erection of a Lodge which existed until 1852.

It is of interest at this point to note that the Cistercian Order of monks had, in 1526, been established for more than 400 years, and it appears to have been the only Catholic religious body which had its own masons. It is also worth noting that when the order of the Temple was established during the 11th century by Hugh de Payenne, he and the other eight knightly founders were members of the Cistercian Brotherhood. Furthermore, when the Pope made the Templars into a Sovereign Order (which means they were responsible only to the Pope) the necessary groundwork had been carried out by Bernard of Clairvaux, himself a Cistercian, who was related to Hugh de Payenne. De Payenne had married into the St Clair family, so that from the earliest days of the Templars we begin to discern connections between the Cistercians and the masons.

The position at which we have now arrived is that the Cistercian had the King's permission to develop Aitchison's Haven, but in the absence of reliable records we have to speculate as to when a Lodge of Operative Masons was established in that place. The only positive piece of information that we have is that the Lodge was founded before 1598, because the earliest written record of the Lodge is a Minute dated in January of that year, and the minute records the conferring of the Fellow Craft Degree on one Robert Widderspone. At this juncture it is necessary to explain some of the facts relating to the Operative Masonry of those early days, otherwise we shall be thinking in terms of our own Freemasonry. In 1526, there were three grades of stone masons in the Operative Lodge – the Apprentice, the Entered Apprentice and the Fellow of Craft. It was customary for sons to follow their fathers or uncles into the mason's craft, the young lads beginning their connection with the Lodge at about 11 years of age. When it had become

apparent in the family that a boy wished to follow the Masonic calling, he was taken to a meeting in the Lodge, where he was introduced to the assembly in order that the members could recognise him in the workplace. There was no ceremony, and after being introduced he was ejected from the meeting. For the next year he accompanied his mentor to the workplace, carrying out the many unskilled labouring duties that were necessary. Provided that he had shown himself to be willing and diligent in his performance he was then taken to the Annual General Meeting of the Lodge. Every member who could possibly be there was in attendance, and the new apprentice was put through the booking ceremony. The terms of his Apprenticeship were read for the Members and he was instructed to select two members to act as his teachers. In the minutes these members are referred to as his Instructors and Intenders, and they were responsible for teaching the youngster during the years of his Apprenticeship. The booking ceremony was then carried out, the Apprentice being instructed to note the ceremony, as during the coming years he would be expected to learn the ritual, and to understand it. The secrets were communicated to him, and the dire penalties for a breach of faith were explained. The secrets were entirely theoretical in nature, for it was only after this ceremony that the candidate began his actual practise training. What, then, were the natures of the secrets?

Firstly, modes of recognition were taught – how to discern whether another worker was a member of an Operative Lodge or a Cowan. In Freemasonry, we associate Cowans with Eavesdroppers, the definition most common among our Brethren being that a Cowan was a drystone dyker, i.e., that he was a worker in stone, but not possessing the skills necessary to produce the beautiful stonework seen in our ancient cathedrals and other buildings. This was far from the truth in the old days, for many Cowans were extremely skilful masons, the beauty of whose work was the equal to that of any Lodge member. The Cowan was in fact a mason without the word, which means that he had never been admitted to a Lodge, and had therefore not passed thorough any trade ceremonies.

At the booking meeting, the candidate was taught, in a practical fashion, certain pieces of Geometry which, as a trained man, he would have to use in his work. Two examples are a) that the angle in a semi-circle is a right angle and b) how to copy an angle. The former enabled him to test his that his square was true, and had not become worn, while the latter enabled him to repeat accurately patterns and designs with which to embellish the plain work. Obviously he could not learn the whole complex mystery of the

mason word in one lesson, but he could certainly learn the signs and their acknowledgements. The ceremony culminated with his being booked, that is with his name being entered on the Lodge Roll, and after that he could describe himself as having been entered as an apprentice.

For the next seven years he was entitled to attend all meetings of the Lodge and he was permitted a vote in all the business of the Lodge. At the expiration of his seven years (or whatever other length of training had been agreed) he was allowed, as a fully trained apprentice, to employ labour to a maximum sum of ten pounds. For every further unit of ten pounds he had to obtain the permission of his Lodge.

Because our modern Speculative Craft allows an Entered Apprentice to be passed to the degree of Fellow Craft after a short period, we tend to assume that the old Operative Entered Apprentice became a Fellow Craft once he had completed his successfully his seven years of training. This would be a fallacy, for many Craftsmen never progressed beyond the first degree, the reason being that it was not incumbent on them to do so, unless the apprentice was a man of ambition. The minutes of the various meetings at which an apprentice was passed show that the ceremony was simple. There were no further secrets disclosed, nor were any signs of recognition taught. These factors show that the only difference between a Fellow Craft and an apprentice who had completed his training was in the title – so why did some of the Brethren go for that title? The answer is simple, the rules of the Craft allowed only Fellow Crafts to employ their other time-served apprentices. Therefore, only those who had family wealth of were sufficiently nimble mentally to make their own way in the world took that extra step. Indeed, it was from among the more able and intelligent Fellow Crafts that many of the mediaeval architects appeared, and in the Lodge of Aitchison's Haven we have several examples, in particular from the Ayton family, some of whose members were responsible for the design of some of the buildings in 16th and 17th century Edinburgh.

I have said that the Lodge minute book formed one of the oldest records of an Operative Lodge, and the first entry is worthy of consideration. Putting it into rather more modern language, it reads as follows: '9th January, 1598, on which day Robert Widderspone was made Fellow of Craft in presence of William Ayton Senior, John Fender Warden, John Peden, Thomas Pittencreiff, John Crawford, George Ayton, William Ayton Junior and George Pettencriff, all Fellows of Craft. On which day he

chose George Ayton and John Peden to be his Intenders and Instructors, and also the said Robert Widderspone paid his 20 shillings and his gloves to all Masters present.’

This is a short minute, but it contains a wealth of information. There were eight Fellow Crafts present as witnesses, and this number would only be found only in a flourishing Lodge, a speculation which is proved by the fact that three of those Fellow Crafts attended a meeting at which William Schaw laid down his rules for the further development of the Craft. These men appended their signatures to the minute of the Schaw meeting, signifying their acceptance, on behalf of the Craft, of Schaw’s visionary ideas. The Lodge minute tells us that the Warden, or Chairman, was John Fender, despite the fact that his name appears second to that of William Ayton, who was well known as a Mason and an Architect. This office, Warden, was the equivalent of today’s Master of the Lodge, but in Aitchison’s Haven it was, in alternate years, changed for the title ‘Deacon’. I can only speculate as to the reason for this, but it has to be remembered that before the advent of Lodges, the masons were merely one of the Trades in the Trade Incorporations, and these bodies were governed by a Deacon. The twenty shillings paid by the Candidate was the fee for having his name entered as a Fellow Craft of the Lodge. It is also possible that this covered the cost of having his name entered in the Burgess’s Roll of the area. The twenty shillings would be in Scots money – only a few pence by today’s standards. This leaves us with the gloves, the candidate having presented a pair to each master present, but in an Operative Lodge the only grades were Apprentice, Entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft. Who, then, were the Masters? They were in fact those Fellow Crafts who were employers of labour, and who were working with their employees. The gloves were heavy, clumsy affairs, made from rough hide and used to sweep away dust, stone chippings and other materials which might interfere with the work.

The minute tells us that Robert Widderspone presented gloves to all masters present, but the term Master was not used in masonry until the advent of Speculatives during the 17th century. Before that it was used by the masons only in the same way as in any other aspect of working life. Whatever the industry, the Master was the employer of labour, so in the minute the word is referring to the Fellow Crafts, not in any Masonic context, but in social terms.

It has already been stated that one of the most cogent reasons for an Entered Apprentice to seek the rank of Fellow Craft was that he aimed to become an employer, but not all who had made the transition behaved entirely as we would expect, and the

minutes contain several references to Fellow Crafts who had offended against Masonic law or principle. In most of these cases, the offence was that the Fellow Craft had employed Cowans. The punishments handed out were generally small fines, but where the offence had been repeated several times, the guilty Fellow Craft was expelled to his work. This meant that he was forbidden to employ labour for a certain period of time. In addition he had to work as an employee, but during the whole period of his punishment, his workmates were not allowed to hold any conversation with him. In Aitchison's Lodge this seems to have done the trick every time, for there are several examples of Fellow Crafts employing Cowans several times, despite the fines levied, but I found no case where the offence has been repeated after a man had been expelled to his work.

I have said that in this Lodge the titles of Warden and Deacon were used in alternate years to designate the Chairman, but there was sometimes a lack of consistency in this as in other matters. For example, we read that on 28th May, 1599, John Petticreiff paid his ten shillings booking fee after being made a Fellow Craft. You will recall that Robert Widderspone had paid twenty shillings for the same advancement, and in the minute it says that Petticreiff only paid ten shillings because he was the son of a Free man. In other words, his father was a Fellow Craft. The minute says that Petticreiff presented gloves to the company present in the Lodge, the company consisting of William Ayton Senior, Deacon, John Fender, Warden, John Carwford, Thomas Petticreiff (possibly the candidates father), George Ayton, Henry Petticreiff, all being Fellow Crafts and James Petticreiff and William Petticreiff being Entered Apprentices. Here we have an example of the two Entered Apprentices present at a Fellow Craft ceremony being named. We also have a Deacon and a Warden sitting in Lodge together. This is a puzzling circumstance and I suspect that the secretary made an error. William Ayton the elder was an important man not only in the Lodge but in the Trade Incorporation and in Edinburgh. He was possibly the Deacon of the Incorporation at the time, and the secretary perhaps omitted that fact. The minute goes on to say that on the same day James Fender, son of the Warden, paid ten shillings for his booking, but the line has been eradicated.

The next minute is also dated 28th May, 1599, and tells us that John Low was made Fellow Craft for a fee of 20 shillings. The Entered Apprentices present were James and Richard Petticreiff. Thomas Petticreiff is not mentioned although he was present at the earlier ceremony.

Taking the two minutes together it appears that there must have been a break between them, possibly for refreshment and to allow members who were not particularly interested in the second one to leave, while allowing admission to some who had not been present earlier.

Lengths of Apprenticeship in this Lodge varied between five and twelve years. No explanations are given; we can only assume that such matters depended on the Fellow Craft who was taking on the Apprentice.

Meetings of the Lodge were held at various places in the area, and it is interesting to note that some of the gatherings were held in churches.

The Lodges sometimes increased their funds by operating small businesses on the side, and the Lodge of Aitchison's Haven was no exception. On 7th July, 1542, the Lodge purchased from the Fishermen at Musselburgh a mortcloth of black velvet adorned with silver stars, the cost being two hundred pounds Scots. This was rented out at sixpence per time to non masons, but members of the Lodge had its use for threepence. In those days few families could afford the cost of even a simple funeral which would allow the loved one to take the last journey in dignity. It was customary for the cadaver to be thrown on a handcart and taken to a recognised cemetery field to be interred. Those people able to afford the expense would rent a special cloth in which to envelop the body before it was placed on the cart, and on arrival at the graveside the sheet was removed before the final lowering of the body. Such sheets were called Mortcloths (deathcloths), and the Mortcloth owned by Aitchison's Lodge proved such a profitable venture that on 16th January, 1699, the members spent fifteen pounds Scots on a fringe to enhance its appearance.

It is impossible to give a date for the foundation, or erection of this Lodge. The date must have been after 1526 and before 1598, but of the specific date there is no record. The Lodge became dormant in 1853, at which time one of its oldest Past Masters was asked by the Grand Secretary of the day whether he was able to give the date. His reply was that he could not; for there was no record, but he went on to say that the date which had been passed verbally down the years was 1555. There are no pointers, no hints – we can only guess.

In 1736 the Lodge was one of thirty-three which formed the Grand Lodge of Scotland, but just over a year later when the Lodges were numbered she failed to produce,

on the appointed day, evidence of her great age, with the result she was placed well down the Roll instead of being in the proximity of Mother Kilwinning. Later argument, accompanied by production of her first minute book with the entry of 9th January, 1598, failed to move Grand Lodge, with the result that the Lodge of Aitchison's Haven withdrew from the Roll of Lodges, sending the Grand Lodge the message 'We will trouble you no further'. She later returned to the fold, but in 1853 was declared dormant. This historic minute book disappeared and after reappearing in 1905 disappeared again, to be found more than seventy years later. A few years ago I was introduced to a gentleman in Edinburgh who, on learning that I was Curator of the Museum and Library of Grand Lodge, expressed his great disappointment in the Craft. He was not a member, but his uncle, who had died some few months earlier, was a well known member of Grand Committee. The gentleman's opening remark was to ask if I was at all interested in Aitchison's Haven. On learning that I was, he asked me about the Lodge and the minute book. It transpired that his uncle ...

The remainder of this lecture, which details the recovery of the minute book, is not present in the manuscript in the possession of the Webmaster. It is hoped that it can be traced and published here in the near future.