



**The Origin
of the
Third or
Master Mason's Degree
- New Evidence**

According to the accepted history the Master Mason's Degree was created around in London around 1725, but new evidence suggests otherwise.

Thanks to Bro. Robert L D Cooper, PM, Curator GLOS

THE ORIGIN OF THE THIRD OR MASTER MASON'S DEGREE – NEW EVIDENCE

As we are now all aware there are written records from Lodges in Scotland from as early as 1598 and there is evidence from non-Lodge sources that there were Lodges functioning, (but not recording anything in writing), as early as 1481.

These Lodges were stonemasons' lodges.

In certain Masonic circles, it is generally accepted that the third or Master Mason's degree was 'invented' or created in London, England, during the early part of the 1720's. Around 1725 seems to be the best guess.

There are several reasons for this assumption.

Firstly, in the 'The Constitutions of the Free Masons' published in London in 1723, (penned by Anderson), refers to how the affairs of Grand Lodge are to be conducted.

Article XIII, (on page 61), states: 'Apprentices must be admitted Masters and Fellow-Crafts only here...'

This led many to believe that in addition to the [Entered] Apprentice degree there were two others that of Fellow Craft and Master Mason.

Of course, this is an assumption, as there are no actual written documents to prove that.

However, as we know in Scotland from the earliest written rituals (Edinburgh Register House (1696), Airlie (1705) and Chetwode Crawley (c.1710) MSS)) the terms Fellow Craft and Master

Mason were inter-changeable. In other words, these were two terms for the same degree.

Because of the literal interpretation of the rather cryptic, (some would say nonsensical), reference to Fellow Craft and Master Mason in 1723 it became 'fact' that there were three degrees of Freemasonry.

The earlier Scottish rituals were not discovered until much later and could not therefore be used to correct this non-established 'fact' that became embedded in Masonic knowledge.

To make matters worse the earliest reference to the conferral of a third degree was also said to have taken place in London in 1725, but not in a Lodge but in a musical society ('Philo-Musicae et Architecturae Societas Appolloni').

The reference to the Fellow Craft and Master Mason's was like the reference in the earlier Constitutions which were, mistakenly, taken literally.

One error, (a so-called 'fact'), served to confirm the same error as 'fact' also.

Masonic historians are now well aware of those errors but they have become so embedded in the lore of the Craft that they are repeated in the most knowledgeable and respected sources of the history of Freemasonry: Coil's Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry re-printed as recently as 1996, is the supreme example.

The old adage of saying the same lie over and over and eventually the masses will come to believe it as the truth is never more apparent then here!

What, therefore, are the 'facts', (not errors masquerading as facts!), regarding the Fellow Craft or Master's degree?

First and foremost, we now have much more information now than we have ever had, and therefore, we know far more about the ritual used by stonemasons' lodges before any Grand Lodge existed and as we know these rituals were all Scottish, all quite similar in content, and some unknown until relatively recently.

The first of the three was not discovered until 1930 and the most recent, the Airlie MS was accidentally discovered in the year 2000!

Attempting to use these recent documents to overturn almost 300 years of 'facts' is obviously an uphill struggle.

That said, we shouldn't shy away from the task, and this evening I wish to bring to the attention of the Brethren two pieces of evidence that ought, at the very least, cause every respectable Masonic historian to reconsider where and when the Master Mason's degree originated.

The first piece of evidence is well known but I wish to 'tease out' the implications of the evidence in a way that has not been done before.

The effect is I believe quite profound.

This piece of evidence is to be found in the Minute Books of the Lodge of Dunbarton, No.18, (NOT a stonemasons' Lodge but a recognisably modern Speculative Masonic Lodge. I will quote the entries in full:

'At the meeting of the Lodge of Dunbritton [Dunbarton] the 29th day of January 1726 the which day there where present 'John

Hamilton, Grand Master, accompanied with seven Master Masons, six Fellows of Craft and three entered apprentices’

The Minute of the next meeting reads:

‘25th March 1726 – the said day, Gabriel Porterfield, by unanimous consent of the Masters, admitted and received a Master of the Fraternity’.

Gabriel Porterfield was named in the Minute of 29 January a being a Fellow of Craft and on 25 March was admitted and received a Master of the Fraternity.

This clearly shows that in 1726 in Scotland there were three degrees being conferred within Lodges.

BUT, and here is the big BUT, there is a much greater implication than just that irrefutable fact – an indisputable written fact and concerns the first Minute mentioned; that of 29 January 1726.

I’ll repeat it again:

‘At the meeting of the Lodge of Dunbritton the 29th day of January 1726 the which day there where present ‘John Hamilton, Grand Master, accompanied with seven Master Masons, six Fellows of Craft and three entered apprentices’

The enormous significance of this is that in January 1726 there were eight members of a Scottish Lodge who were in the possession of the Master Mason’s degree and that they conferred that degree on a Fellow of Craft.

Where, when and how these eight Scottish Freemasons received the Third Degree before it even existed in England is the intriguing part but sadly, we are unlikely ever to know

because the Minutes only commence at that time. Our best hope is that Minute Books of another, earlier, Lodge reveal to us that it had invented or developed the third degree.

It may strike you as strange to suggest that the third degree was invented or developed in SCOTLAND but there are two reasons why I can make such a claim. The first comes from the earliest rituals in the world, previously mentioned – Edinburgh Register House (1696), Airlie (1705) and Chatwoode Crawley (c.1710) MSS.

At the very end of the Fellow Craft part of these rituals the candidate is asked:

Q 'Are to a Fellow of Craft?'

A Yes

Q How many points of Fellowship are there?

A Five, viz: We should all know what they are and so I shall not repeat them here.

The Five Points of Fellowship were therefore an essential part of the second or Fellow of Craft degree – so important in fact that the candidate had to be able to repeat them exactly before he would be accepted as a TRUE mason. Where do we find the FPOF today? Of course, in the third, or Master Mason's degree.

Sometime between 1710 (and earlier perhaps) part of the Scottish second degree was removed and made part of the third or Master Mason's degree.

Now!

I now come to an artefact, the importance of which has never been fully appreciated before now:

(See picture)



A large brass Square and Compasses (43.7 cm (17.2 inches) wide X (26.5 cm) 10.4 high and weighing slightly more than two pounds (almost one kilogramme).

Inscribed on the arms of the square is the following:

'This square and compass was gifted to the Lodge of Lanark by' (here the text is interrupted by the insertion of an heraldic shield bearing three boars' heads) 'Mr', then a monogram is engraved immediately after 'Mr' and then the inscription continues 'Brother to the Laird of Cleghorn'.

Consulting with the Lord Lyon, he has confirmed that this is a Scottish heraldic device and monogram and are those of a John Lockhart who lived between 13 January 1684 – 26 February 1766.

NOTE the words: “This square and compass”, in other words it was presented to the Lodge a single piece: ‘This’ Square and Compass’.

However, there remain two more revealing things about this object. Firstly, note that the points of the compass are jointed in such a way so that either point, can be concealed behind the arms of the square, or one (or other) point behind one arm of the square or that both points of the compass can be hidden behind both arms of the square.

It would surely be much easier to create a device with only one side hinged if there were only 2 degree?

In other words, the device can be used to indicate a Lodge Working in any of the 3 modern Degrees. More importantly the 3rd Degree!

So, the next quest must be, why should there be such a fuss about this artefact?

Well, simply because the artefact is dated 1714.

And there we have it Brethren and I’ll leave you to consider that fact! That truth!