



British Freemasonry

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British Freemasonry - We met on the level and parted on the square

Freemasonry has long been known in England and Scotland, some of the earliest records of Masonry in Scotland date from 1390 and in England from 1410. The institution was originally a craftsman's organization, however for a craft that was the elite of all those who must work for a living. Those men were the cathedral, temple, and palace builders. The architects and artisans, who were entrusted with the construction of an edifice that would take years to build and thousands of dollars to finance, must have been people who knew well their trade and how to construct. Training and skill were essential. Engineering problems were diverse, difficult, and complex. The architecture was required to be beautiful and satisfying yet on a scale that would suit both the finances and the visions of grandeur of those authorizing and paying the cost. It was both necessary and essential that those directing the work of the artisans, constructors, and architects be in fairly frequent contact with the nobles or high officials of the church so as to obtain instructions and approval as well as to consult about all the myriad problems that had to be resolved.

The operative masons found it advantageous to admit the aristocrats and upper middle-class men, the contacts were beneficial from a work contractual basis, and those persons most certainly were not going to enter the labour market in competition for jobs. The aristocrats and upper middle class men found, in the lodges, a readily available source of knowledge of conditions, wants, needs, and desires of the operatives and inasmuch as the meetings were held behind closed doors, the possibilities of public criticism for their associations with the lower classes were

greatly reduced. Those who joined the lodges but who were not operatives were given the name of "speculative masons," their participation in the lodges being only at the level of friendship and for the study of moral virtues. Thus, it was that Masonic lodges came to contain a curious admixture of artisans and aristocrats, engineers and merchants, architects and tradesmen, and churchmen and laymen. Men who were linked together by the ties of sincere friendship and the desire to protect the interests of each other so long as moral codes and allegiance to country were not violated.

This set the stage for Freemasonry in Britain and for its stepson across the Atlantic, Freemasonry in the United States. Freemasonry in the United States was taken lock, stock, and barrel from its British antecedents. Ceremonies, titles, and constitutions followed those of England and Scotland. The same kinds of people joined lodges in the new country as did in the motherland. Washington, the rich plantation owner, Benjamin Franklin, the poor boy become rich printer, Paul Revere, the poor apprentice become rich silversmith, and Collins Riddock, an unsung townsman from a small settlement in Virginia were all members of Masonic Lodges.

The existing standard reference works on the history of British Freemasonry reflect this chronological structure: pre-history to 1717; early years of the Premier Grand Lodge to 1751; the period of the two Grand Lodges from 1751 to 1813; and the rest. The accepted chronological structure for the history of British Freemasonry implies the appearance of modern Freemasonry, fully formed, in 1813.

The early 1830s, in Britain were a watershed in political, social, and cultural history, as well as in the history of Freemasonry. The history of Freemasonry does not exist in isolation, so it should also reflect wider historical periodisation.

The first British freemason we know about was Nicholas le Freemason who in 1325 was accused of helping prisoners escape from Newgate prison in London. However, this is simply the earliest known use of the word in English, and there is a reference in Latin to *sculptores lapidum liberorum* (sculptors of freestone) in London as early as 1212.

The origins of modern Freemasonry as a social movement lie in the religious fraternities which flourished particularly after the Black Death of 1349. These fraternities existed primarily to pay for prayers for the souls of their members, but increasingly, particular fraternities were favoured by certain groups of craftsmen, and they began to assume responsibility for trade regulation. These emergent craft guilds began to be dominated by elite groups within individual trades, frequently creating class-based tension. A suggestion that this happened within the craft of stonemasonry occurs in London in 1376, where there is a reference to the guild of 'freemasons' which was afterwards struck out and replaced with the word 'mason', suggesting that the term freemason was a contentious one. There are other indications that from the late 14th century the term freemason was increasingly being applied to the more prosperous masons who contracted for individual jobs.

The Black Death had caused a shortage of skilled artisans, and the government struggled to try and keep wages down. Wage pressure was particularly acute in the building trades. In 1425, a

statute was passed forbidding masons from holding assemblies to demand higher wages. It is in this event that we can find the beginnings of the myths of Freemasonry. Groups of junior masons developed a legend that they had been given ancient charters allowing them to hold their assemblies. They also reacted against the increasing stratification of their trade by developing legends which sought to demonstrate that all masons were brethren of equal status. The two manuscripts recording these legends, preserved in the British Library and known as the Regius and Cooke manuscripts, were apparently used by these illicit gatherings.

The core legends of Regius and Cooke, and in particular the claim that the masons received a charter from the non-existent Prince Edwin, an alleged son of the Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan, remain of fundamental importance to modern Freemasonry. Freemasons have long hoped that these legends embody some kind of ancient legend handed down by word of mouth, but the evident manipulation of these legends in Regius and Cooke indicates that the legends were in 1425 of recent invention and primarily intended to protect stonemasons from the effects of recent labour legislation. These legends were to achieve a new impetus in the middle of the sixteenth century, when renewed inflation led to further attempts to restrict the wages of craftsmen. In 1552, the leaders of a strike of building workers at York were imprisoned. In response, there was a further substantial elaboration of the legends originating in Regius and Cooke, with Edwin's grant of a charter to the masons being placed specifically at York, a new detail apparently intended to bolster the position of the York building workers.

On 21 December 1583, William Schaw was appointed Master of Works to King James VI of Scotland. Two days later, a new manuscript was copied out containing copies of the legends first recorded in the Regius and Cooke manuscripts, which is now Grand Lodge MS 1. Whether it was actually copied for Schaw we cannot say, but we do know that, from this point, copies of these texts, now known as the Old Charges, began to circulate among Scottish masons. Schaw radically reformed the organisation of Scottish stonemasons in two sets of statutes approved at assemblies of Scottish masons in 1598 and 1599. They include the establishment of separate lodges, organised on a territorial basis, answerable directly to the General Warden, holding regular meetings and keeping regular minutes. There are hints that Schaw also sought to interest members of these lodges in the new esoteric and philosophical developments, such as the 'art of memory'. The lodges of masons established by Schaw began to prove attractive to members who were not working stonemasons, such as Sir Robert Moray, who became profoundly interested in the legends and symbolism of the craft of stonemasonry.

While the organisation of English masons remained more informal and ad hoc, some of the features evident in Scotland can also be seen in England from the middle of the 17th century. In particular, meetings of stonemasons also became of interest to those who were not working stonemasons, the most celebrated examples being the scientist and antiquary Elias Ashmole and the Chester Herald Randle Holme. To some extent, this may reflect Scottish influence, as Scottish masons such as Moray spread awareness of the features of masonic organization in the northern kingdom. However, the interest of figures such as Ashmole and Holme in Freemasonry probably

also reflects more local conditions. The membership of lodges in York suggest that local stonemasons may have encouraged influential townsfolk, who helped set their wages, to join the lodges to help create awareness of the traditional claims of the stonemasons to a fair wage, set, it was said, by St. Alban and with a lineage dating back to biblical times.

In London, this process of creating an elite group with organisations of stonemasons in order to bolster the claims and prestige of the trade led to the emergence during the seventeenth century of an inner group within the London Company of Masons known as the Acception, which included some of the most prosperous architect-masons as well as men such as Ashmole. However, there were tensions within the London Company of Masons. These may have been intensified by attacks on the London companies by James II. The London Company became increasingly impoverished and responded by trying to extend its control of the trade and by allowing the Acception to fall into abeyance. Increasingly, the London Masons' company seems to have concentrated on bolstering the position of its junior members. These shifts in emphasis within the London Company seem to be reflected in a change of name from the Company of Freemasons to the Company of Masons. It is in the context of the crisis within the London Company of Masons that the creation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 must be viewed. If the Grand Lodge was indeed a revival, as was afterwards claimed, it was perhaps a revival of the Acception.

One feature of the first twenty years after the formation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 was the articulation of an administrative structure which would have caused some degree of tension within the city of London and beyond. This was most vividly

expressed in the insistence of the Grand Lodge that individual lodges should be controlled by it, holding warrants from the Grand Lodge and obeying its rules. This was by no means accepted by all those connected with the Grand Lodge. Connected with this administrative articulation was the development of an extended cultural and social agenda. This was at one level political, in its extravagant insistence of its support of the Hanoverian succession. At another level, it was scientific, with a stress on geometry and measurement which was explicitly connected to new developments in scientific thought.

The increasing insistence of the Grand Lodge on a distinct political, cultural, and social agenda proved contentious. Likewise, the metropolitan (London) emphasis of this phase of the history of Freemasonry created tension with other towns, as for example at York where its historian Francis Drake eloquently articulated the claims of York to be regarded as the true seat of Freemasonry. The emergence of Grand Lodges in Scotland and Ireland was also likewise a reaction to the growing pretensions of this Hanoverian and Whig London Freemasonry. The tensions created by the emergence of metropolitan Freemasonry came to ahead with the initiation of Frederick Lewis in 1737. This overtly political act by the London Grand Lodge inaugurated a period of tension and fractiousness.

At the same time Freemasonry was spreading beyond the British Isles. Benjamin Franklin had printed an American edition of the Book of Constitutions in 1734, and by 1749 he had been warranted as Provincial Grand Master of Philadelphia.

The Premier Grand Lodge (1717) claimed to be the Supreme Grand Lodge of the world, and energetically promoted its influence through the new British Empire. At the time that Premier Grand Lodge was expressing the loftiest international ambitions, its influence within Britain was being undermined by the success of the Ancients Grand Lodge in recruiting lower class members in the English provinces. Moreover, the Ancients Grand Lodge forged far closer relations than the Premier Grand Lodge with the Grand Lodges in Scotland and Ireland.

The English Freemason William Preston sought to promote a reformation of Freemasonry which would place less emphasis on lively sociability, would stress the spiritual and philosophical benefits of Freemasonry, and, above all, present Freemasonry as a highly respectable and elevated form of social activity. A similar approach is evident in the energetic work of Thomas Dunkerley in promoting the Premier Grand Lodge in the provinces. Like Preston, Dunkerley also sought to enhance the spiritual content of Freemasonry by introducing to the Premier Grand Lodge a whole host of other masonic orders ranging from the Royal Arch to Mark Masonry. Both Preston and Dunkerley also sought to encourage Freemasonry to enhance its respectability by moving out of taverns into specially built masonic halls.

Social and political pressures underpinned the Union between the two Grand Lodges in 1813. In negotiating the Union of the two English Grand Lodges, the Duke of Sussex had a variety of concerns. At one level, he wanted to ensure that there was no danger that Freemasonry could be used by seditious elements. At another level, he sought to make Freemasonry fit for the Empire and sought a uniformity of practice across the British

Empire. He hoped that the Union of the English Grand Lodges would be followed by union with the Grand Lodges of Scotland and Ireland, and this probably explains some of the detail of the resulting reform of masonic ritual and practice. The Duke also had wider ambitions from his reform. He hoped that, in achieving the Union, he would also perform a greater service for humanity as a whole. He was fascinated by the idea that Freemasonry embodied remnants of an ancient sun religion which predated Christianity. Sussex dreamed of using Freemasonry to give a new religion to the world which he felt would be a boon to civilisation. To Sussex, the capacity of Freemasonry to reform society was best expressed in its ability to help transcend Christianity. Despite this religious radicalism, Sussex showed a less assured touch in dealing with social and economic change. He insisted that freed slaves could not become freemasons, creating chaos in the organisation of Freemasonry in the Caribbean which lasted until the 1850s.

It is at this point that Freemasonry becomes an overwhelmingly middle-class vehicle. It is worth noting that this appears to be a largely English phenomenon. In Scotland and Ireland, significant working-class membership was retained to the present day. In England, the importance of Freemasonry for the cohesion of the social elites in provincial towns and cities was expressed in the building of masonic halls (facilitated by the new availability of limited liability companies) as an integral part of new civic centres – in towns such as Manchester and Sheffield, immediately adjacent to new city halls and other public buildings.

One of the many further points for investigation in this pivotal period in the history of Freemasonry in the British Isles is how these changes were expressed in the role of Freemasonry in the

British Empire. Some of the pressures within imperial Freemasonry were different and distinctive – for example, Indian districts were reluctant to allow non-Christians to join masonic lodges and only did so following explicit instructions from London. The reluctance of colonial freemasons in India to share their lodges with natives prompted a particular enthusiasm for the development of Christian orders – Indians might join a craft lodge, but only Christians could fully appreciate the glories of Freemasonry, it was declared from the pulpits of churches in Bombay and elsewhere.

From this contentious period, a consensus emerged by the 1870s, as indeed it did in British society more widely. This late Victorian consensus is reflected in the fact that when the Prince of Wales became Grand Master in 1874. Late Victorian Freemasonry was settled in its position in society. The ins and outs of proceedings in various Grand Lodges were earnestly debated in 'The Times' newspaper. In towns and cities throughout the country, local masonic lodges formed an indispensable part of civic processions such as those organised for the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria. This period also marked the emergence of Freemasonry as one of the most well-resourced and well-organised philanthropic bodies in the country. Freemasonry was just one of many means by which the late Victorian middle classes could affirm their respectability and social prestige and feel a vicarious sense of community. Freemasonry provided one means by which members could claim to be middle class.

As part of this stress on respectability, religiosity proved to be increasingly important. With the adoption of popular hymn tunes, the prominence of the role of the chaplain and the pseudo-

ecclesiastical atmosphere of many of the new masonic halls, attendance at a lodge meeting seemed almost like going to a religious service. The ecclesiastical atmosphere of English Freemasonry increasingly set it apart from Freemasonry elsewhere, most notably from the French Grand Orient which was by the 1870s increasingly atheist and secularist in outlook and was becoming the keeper of the flame of the Third Republic. Some regard the late Victorian consensus in Freemasonry as persisting until the 1960s, with perhaps the celebrations for the 275th anniversary of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1967 marking its last gasp!

Despite its claim not to require belief in any particular religion, from at least the 1870s Freemasonry became a very effective expression of the wider moral, cultural and political consensus which underpinned the British Empire. Regardless of whether they were non-conformist, Anglican, Jewish or Hindu, there was a strong understanding of what constituted proper behaviour for a loyal British subject, and this was underpinned by a kind of instinctive religious and moral discourse that characterised the religiosity of British society through the 1960s. Whether the strong moral inclinations of many of the leaders of Victorian England were a result of the teachings of Freemasonry with a burgeoning militant Christianity is impossible to say. Certainly, a great many of the leaders were not Masons, some sects even forbade membership in the fraternity. However, the Mason could revel in the knowledge that his organization was in tune with the temper of the times.

The 1960s inaugurated a period of decline from the previous high levels of membership. Fraternalism appears historically to have been more important in America than in Britain. While

fraternal organisations were an important, and neglected, part of late Victorian British society, they were by no means such an all-pervasive feature of male sociability in Britain as they were in America. The American sociologist Robert Putnam who has argued that the decline of group-based social activities in America represent a profound crisis for modern American society, confirm that a similar crisis can be seen in Britain, first in the collapse of the friendly societies after the establishment of the Welfare State and second in the fall in masonic membership. What we see in British Freemasonry is an expression of the process described in Putnam. First, fraternalism appears historically to have been more important in America than in Britain.

One of the attractions of the study of Freemasonry is its inherently inter-disciplinary character – to study fully Freemasonry we need the skills of the historian, the literary specialist, the museum curator, the art historian, the sociologist and so on. The subject field in which the study of Freemasonry sits most comfortably is that of the history of religion. Freemasons, anxious to stress that their craft is a moral and not a religious system, have fought shy of admitting that the history of Freemasonry forms part of the history of religion. Freemasonry might not be a religion, but it is a spiritual journey, and the paths along which that journey is directed are those that also shape religions and religious history.

It is well to note that in England public display of Masonic events and disclosure of Masonic affiliation is very infrequent. In England, one does not see the lapel pins and rings with Masonic emblems that one sees in the United States. The Englishman very zealously guards his privacy and considers his club, his

lodge, his private life to be his own affair and cares not at all to have a public spectacle made of it. Though the Masons avoid publicity for the most part, they are not averse to publicity as it related to the good works they do.

Despite the lack of public image, Freemasonry in Britain did not want for leadership. A member of the aristocracy (nobility or royal family) has often been found occupying this office. Installed as Grand Master in 1813 was His Royal Highness, Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, sixth son of King George III. A reader of the accounts in "The Times of London" of the death and funeral of the Duke of Sussex had to be diligent to find that he had been a Masonic Official. He was also the Grand Prior of Knights Templar in England. Also, King George VI among others have been Grand Master in England and Scotland.

If nothing else the history of British Freemasonry demonstrates its durability, and I am sure it will not easily go away.