



The Overy Papers

Number 21 - The world of the Masonic Lodge

The development of the Speculative Masonic Lodge started, as far as records that are available, during the 1600's and it is thought to have started in England, Scotland and Ireland roughly about the same time.

This period of time known across Europe as the Age of Enlightenment came to advance ideals such as Liberty, Tolerance, and Fraternity.

In England at this time a number of different organizations formed such as The Gentlemen Clubs, the English Coffee Houses and the Freemasons.

A **gentlemen's club**, was a members-only private club set up by and for the British Upper Class and were for the aristocratic classes. They would accept any man with a credible claim to the status of "Gentleman" unless his character was objectionable in some way like a professional who had to earn his income, such as doctors and lawyers.

The **English Coffee Houses**, were public social places where people would meet for conversation or commerce while drinking coffee for the price of a penny.

In a typical coffee house men came from every walk of life it mattered not "Whether a man was dressed in a ragged coat and found himself seated between a belted earl and a gaitered bishop, he was able to engage them in conversation and knew that he would be answered civilly."

Then there were the Lodges of **Speculative Freemasons**. Each lodge in the 1600's would have been independent in its practices, secrets and rituals in fact they really bear no similarity with what we know of our lodge of today. Still they would have been a fraternity and most members would usually have been well educated and from the upper class.

Then in 1717 four lodges in London got together and started to standardize the lodges under a Grand Master and known as the Grand Lodge of England. Mind you even in London, there were many lodges that never affiliated with the new Grand

Lodge. These unaffiliated Masons and their Lodges were referred to as "Old Masons".

By 1725 the Grand Lodge of England lodges had begun to spread to the provincial towns and cities and in the same year, a second Grand Lodge was founded in Ireland.

The Grand Lodge of Scotland kept out of the fight for a time and was not formed until 1736.

Also in 1725 "The Ancient and Honourable Society and Fraternity of Freemasons meeting since time immemorial in the City of York" assumed the title, "The Grand Lodge of All England meeting in the City of York."

Grand Lodge of England made frequent changes to ritual and passwords to make it more difficult for outsiders to pass themselves off as masons but these changes were not universally accepted by affiliated lodges and The Goose and Gridiron (now Lodge of Antiquity No. 2), never adopted them.

On 17 July 1751, six Lodges gathered at the Turk's Head Tavern, in Greek Street, Soho, London. On that night, they established the "Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons according to the Old Constitutions", now commonly known as the Grand Lodge of the Antients.

This situation that lasted all of the 1700's must have been quite a time to be a Freemason but of course most of here tonight would not have been eligible to join anyway. It was only for people of the upper class and the common heard had their own clubs and organisations.

To give you an idea the Ancients had the Duke of Atholl as a member and the Moderns the Prince of Wales. Banter was common and one I like is when the Grand master of the Antients mentioned the "unconstitutional fopperies", of the Moderns and that their greatest Masonic symbols were the knife and fork.

Mind you Scotland and Ireland appeared to have had a field day as they approved any lodges the other two would not, such as the military lodges that had problems as they did not have a permanent address and American lodges were not in favour after 1776.

So just what was it like in the years before the United Grand Lodge of England. Well the rituals were probably not far off from what they are today. They had the 3 degrees and Ireland had started to issue Warrants. The layout of the lodge building as such was established.

Our Masonic ancestors were defiantly not ashamed of the craft. They advertised their meetings in the public press, held public processions and businessmen announced their membership on their bill boards.

At the Festive board the glassware was of the finest crystal and engraved with Masonic Symbols. The china was from the best potteries and many companies produced fine Masonic China and the utensils of silver were engraved with symbols of the craft.

Drinking and smoking in lodge rooms, even during Masonic ceremonies were the general rule. In 1773 one London lodge passed the law that no liquor should be paid for out of lodge funds which is drunk out of the lodge room.

It was common practice to smoke in lodge during a ceremony and tobacco often appeared in the lodge expenditures, which leaves me to believe they smoked a pipe and the long clay churchwarden pipe was very popular in the early years of the 1700's.

Fines for swearing or, as it was described "an escape in point of decent language" or becoming drunk called "disguised in liquor". Although there were numerous cases reported, like the media today only those that were news worthy ones were mentioned. One must also remember times were different large festive boards like large dinner parties were the norm.

When one considered the customs of the outside world in the 1700's great credit is due to the craft for the strictness with which it endeavoured to enforce sobriety of conduct as well as propriety of speech within the lodge.

The practice of frequent toasts was maybe responsible for the heavy drinking at the festive board but there was no evidence that the drinking was any difference than that at the usual church function. Mind you this practice of toasting also gave rise to community singing and for the more important toasts where honoured with the charge; "Brethren charge your glasses to the top, my toast forbids thy spilling of a drop."

For example one held in Sunderland for 33 brethren for which they paid 3 shillings each where they consumed 8 bottles of sherry, 26 bottles of port, 2 bottles of porter, 1 bottle of brandy, two bowls of punch and 16 bowls of negus a port wine mixed with hot water, spiced and sugared.

To put this into perspective if you were a skilled engineer in the 1750's it would still be the equivalent to 7 weeks wages. For this reason alone very few ordinary workers became members.

But times were changing and in 1755 The Grand Lodge of England set an example and banned smoking in lodge and in 1802 all Emulation Lodges passed the No Smoking in Lodge rule.

In 1809 the Moderns appointed a "Lodge of Promulgation" to return their own ritual to regularity with Scotland, Ireland and especially the Ancients.

Then In 1811 both English Grand Lodges appointed Commissioners and over the next two years, articles of Union were negotiated and agreed. A Lodge of Reconciliation was formed to reconcile the rituals worked under the two former Grand Lodges.

On 27 December 1813 the United Grand Lodge of England ("UGLE") was constituted at Freemasons Hall in London and HRH the Duke of Sussex younger son of King George 3rd became Grand Master.

The new Grand Master had high hopes for Freemasonry, stating that as it was pre-Christian it should serve the cause of humanity as a universal religion.

The social order of England was changing under the Victorian values of restraint and the membership became more universal as the old rules were swept aside and with them the elaborate Lodges of the Georgian period.

In fact there was a new culture that moved toward romanticism and mysticism even with regard to religion and social values. Charities were formed to keep Freemasons from the workhouse, and Freemasons became an important part social reform.

By the end of the 1870s Freemasonry had become a perfect expression of the aspirations of the middle classes and the Masonic Lodge meetings in particular and Freemasonry in general had become what we are today.

There were many changes to the movement of people and the decline of small communities, the growth of the cities and this lead a huge increase in emigration to Canada and the North American colonies which became the United States during the period and other parts of the British Empire. In fact we had become really universal.

To ensure that freemasonry did not deviate in 1858, Albert Mackey had set out the true Landmarks of Masonry, mind you in his list of "Twenty-five Landmarks", there were some contradictions with his own definition! But then if you had taken our Correspondence Course you would have already known that.

Thank you and whatever I say may we continue in peace and harmony.

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