



The Overy Papers

Number 32 - Top Hats, Clay Pipes and Fines for Bad Behaviour

Fraternal Greetings Brethren

I used the following for research: One Hundred One Questions About Freemasonry - VW Bro. Barry Thom - The GL of Manitoba e-news letters - The University Lodge No. 34, and British Masonic Miscellany volume 11.

This is to remind those of us, who are getting on in years, and those who are new to our Fraternity on the Fashions and Customs that have fallen out of favour well almost.

I first thought about this subject when our Grand Master made the following Ruling - "Lodges instituted prior to the adoption of the BC Ancient Work in 1962, with a documented history of their Masters wearing a top hat, and only a top hat, while at work in Lodge, may install their Masters with a top hat." My imagination of our master wearing just a top hat was not a pretty sight. But then I thought why does the Master wear a hat anyway?

Well it is thought to be a relic of the ancient custom whereby the Kings head remained covered, while his subjects were obliged to uncover in his presence.

Apparently this custom began in English lodges, but is no longer common today but in some North America Lodges a Master still wears a hat as a sign and symbol of his authority.

Nobody seems to know when this custom began but from 1721 onward, the English Grand Masters have always been from Royalty and maybe this could this have been the start of the practice.

In the early days of Freemasonry, in St. John's, Newfoundland the Master wore a Top Hat and all Master Masons wore a Bowler Hat and if they could not afford a bowler it was whatever they wore out on the street.

Drinking in the Lodge rooms even when the lodge was open was the general rule and in 1771 one London Lodge passed the following bi-Law that stated:

That on account of the great expense by allowing wine at supper and in order to prevent the bad consequences arising thereof, no liquor should be paid for out of Lodge funds which is drunk out of the lodge room except for beer or ale that is drunk at supper.

Of course drink caused other problems and in 1769 the Senior Warden of the Ship Lodge was expelled for coming to lodge "disguised with Liqueur" which was a nice way of saying he was as drunk as a skunk.

Another practice of the past was the smoking of cigars and pipes, during meetings and the Master often gave the Stewards "liberty of the floor" in order to refill the glasses and pipes of the brethren. In fact in the early days of our fraternity it was a common practice to smoke in Lodge during performance of the work and tobacco often appeared on the Lodge accounts.

It was not until 1802 that Emulation Lodges passed a law prohibiting smoking in Lodge.

In St. John's this was a 'Carry-over' from the practice in England but around the time of the First World War it had died out in Newfoundland.

Mind you there is a report that in at least one Lodge in the UK cigars are still smoked in Lodge.

In earlier days the Tyler was a far more important office than he is today. Before the days of a postal service it was his duty to deliver the Summons by hand.

He also had to refuse admission to any member who was "disguised with Liqueur" or was not clean and decently clad with a white neck cloth.

In many lodges he was provided with a special uniform for example in one lodge in Leicester England in 1791 he was provided with a blue coat and waistcoat and corduroy britches all with yellow buttons and a three cornered hat.

The lodge of Scoon and Perth went one better and provided their Tyler with a Turkish Costume even to giving him a scimitar.

Often the lodge would provide him with an overcoat which was necessary when he had to deliver the summons in all weathers and in some Lodges his position "outside the lodge" was literally outside the lodge.

Another interesting story I discovered was from a Lodge in St Anthony, Minnesota that was formed in 1851 where there was a tradition that the wife of one of the members acted as the Tyler.

Fining members was also common and one of the most common reasons was when a brother failed to attend Lodge as stated in the Lodge Summons (except in cases of sickness, absence from town, or urgent business).

Officers were fined more harshly than the brethren, with the Master and Wardens being fined about 150% more than the regular members. Prolonged

absences without excuse, or refusal to pay fines would result in reprimand, suspension or even expulsion.

At one lodge meeting in Wigan, in England, a Brother was fined 6 pence for sleeping in lodge and another Brother was fined three pence for assaulting him while he was asleep. The Master was also fined for writing a letter and also for offering to lay a wager. At the closing the secretary reported that the meeting was closed at 10:00 o'clock but not in the good harmony as could be wished.

Swearing in Lodge must have been very common and many Lodge bi-laws contained items such as: The vile habit of profane cursing and swearing or uttering any obscene or immoral discourse or attempt to sing an immodest or obscene song is discouraged by a fine.

Lecturing also played a part in the programs of the lodge and the subjects on which the brethren entertained each other were remarkable on their variety.

There were the usual ones on honesty and charity but others chose to talk on a variety of subjects such as "military architecture" and "The action of the muscles". Whatever the subject they were always received with delight and the toast to lecturers were always honoured with bumpers and for those who don't know what that was it was a large glass filled to the brim.

But as the 18 century came to the close, many noble and knightly initiates began to swell their numbers. The lodges began to adopt the more aristocratic recreations of these new members.

The shilling cold meal and the eighteen penny hot suppers disappeared and were superseded by a more scrumptious dinner and replaced it with the fashion, to "Feed in Style and drink like a gentleman".

And 39 years ago this September when I arrived on the scene the exciting days of our past had all but disappeared but I must admit to "Feed in Style and drink like a gentleman" was still with us and I felt it was definitely my English Cup of Tea.

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

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