

Early Masonry In England

By Bro. C.N. Batham

The year 1717 saw the formation of the Grand Lodge of England, the "Mother Grand Lodge of the World." The history of Freemasonry after that date is quite well known. But what about Masonry in England prior to 1717? This STB was extracted from an article written by Bro. C.N. Batham and published under the title The Grand Lodge of England (1717) and its Founding Lodges. The article was published in Vol 103; page 22 of Ars Quator Coronatorum (Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Lodge #2076). Bro. Batham is an extremely well known and outstanding Masonic historian and author! – Editor

Introduction – Freemasonry In The Seventeenth Century

That famous Masonic historian, R. F. Gould, once wrote: 'But our "Old Lodges" have, in truth, been too much neglected and forgotten, to the lasting reproach of the English Craft ... our premier Lodges yet await an adequate and enduring memorial of their exertions as the pioneers of Masonic progress ...' This paper will not, by any stretch of imagination, provide that memorial but the gathering together of material about those pioneers, culled from masonic records some of which are not readily available, may perhaps give brethren of the present day an understanding of the debt they owe to them and, at the same time, enable them to explore some unfamiliar byways.

To do that, however, it is necessary first to consider the masonic situation in the seventeenth century and it comes as a great surprise to many brethren to learn that there is no official masonic record of any kind prior to the first edition of Anderson's Constitutions, published in 1723.

Certainly there are references to Freemasonry and to initiation ceremonies in the seventeenth century but they are all of a secondary nature. The first is by Elias Ashmole who records in his diary that he and Col. Henry Mainwaring were made 'Free Masons' at Warrington in Lancashire on 16 October, 1646. How long previously and where the seven brethren present on that occasion were initiated is unknown. A copy of the Old Charges (Sloane MS No. 3848) was made by Edward Sankey and finished on the same date. 16 October, 1646. It seems certain that he was the son of one of the brethren present at the meeting and these two facts indicate that the copy was made for use in the ceremony, as brethren of those days regarded the possession of a

copy of the Old Charges as essential for a masonic meeting in which a candidate was to be made a member of the Craft. It also strengthens the suggestion that this was not a meeting of a permanent lodge but a private gathering of a few friends who were Freemasons, met together for the one and only time for the purpose of admitting two of their friends into the Craft.

The only other reference to Freemasonry in Ashmole's diary is on 10 March, 1682 when he records that he was summoned to attend a lodge in Masons' Hall, London, on the following day when six persons were admitted into the 'Fellowship of Free Masons'. Although there is no mention of Freemasonry in the diary during the intervening thirty six years, Ashmole must surely have maintained some contact with the Craft as otherwise it is inconceivable that he would have been summoned to a meeting after that considerable lapse of time and to a lodge so far removed from the place of his initiation. It seems likely that this lodge in Masons' Hall was of a more permanent nature, though meeting only when the need arose, as all the indications are that there was a lodge within the Masons' Company of London and there are apparent references to acceptances into it at irregular intervals from 1621 onwards. There is, however, no official record of this lodge nor anything to substantiate the claim sometimes made that it became the present Lodge of Antiquity No. 2.

Randle Holme, Deputy Garter King-of-Arms, was a Freemason and was possibly initiated in a lodge at Chester in or about the year 1665. Some eight years later he wrote out a list of twenty-seven members of the lodge, including himself. In 1732, Bro. Edward Hall, a member of a lodge held at the Swan, East Street, Chichester, recorded that he had been made a freemason in a Chichester lodge by the late Duke of Richmond thirty six years earlier, that is to say, in 1696. In 1705-6 Sir George Tempest presided over a lodge in York that probably dated back to 1693, if not before, and there are subsequent references to it until it constituted itself as The Grand Lodge of All England at York in 1725. In 1704 Jonathan Belcher, the first native-born American to be admitted into the Craft and who subsequently became Governor of New Jersey, was initiated in London in what he describes as an 'old Guilde Lodge' that obviously dated back to the previous century.

That is all there is. Those six secondary records are scanty enough though it has to be borne in mind that, in the 1738 edition of his Constitutions, Anderson stated that Sir Robert Clayton summoned '... an Occasional Lodge of his Brother Masters ... to advise the Governors about the best Design of rebuilding that Hospital [St. Thomas's] ... ' and he then refers to seven or more lodges of which there is no other mention, but in view of his unreliability, coupled with the fact that he goes on to say that King William III ... was privately made a Free Mason... ' . it is questionable whether any reliance can be placed on those statements.

Nevertheless there must have been considerable masonic activity in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that has gone unrecorded, activity that created widespread interest and suspicion amongst the public at large. If there had not been that public interest, there would not have been any purpose in including a reference to Freemasonry in the scurrilous sheet Poor

Robin's Intelligence of 1676-7, nor would some unknown person have found it necessary in 1698 to publish a leaflet warning 'all godly people in the cite of London' of the 'Mischiefs and Evils practised in the Sight of God by those called Freed Masons.' He continued: 'I say take Care lest their ceremonies and secret Swearings take hold of you: and be wary that none cause you to err from Godliness.'

In 1709 and 1710 Richard Steele published essays in *The Tatler* in which he referred to Freemasonry and, in the latter year, a pamphlet printed in London mentioned '... a certain Company called the Free Masons.' Finally, Robert Plot in his *Natural History of Staffordshire* (1686) refers to Freemasonry being '... spread more or less over the Nation ', and John Aubrey also refers to the Craft, even though his statements are suspect, in his *The Natural History of Wiltshire* (also in 1686).

Anderson's 'The Constitutions Of The Free-Masons' (1723)

It is against this sketchy background that the first official reference to the Craft appeared in 1723. It was the first edition of Anderson's *Constitutions* and was issued under the authority of the recently-founded premier Grand Lodge of England, the mother Grand Lodge of the world. It was published '... By Order of his Grace the Duke of Wharton, the present Right Worshipful Grand Master of the Free Masons...' who subsequently was appointed the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of France, the only person ever to occupy that office in the two Obediences. The Dedication was signed by the Deputy Grand Master, Dr. J.T. Desaguliers, who had been Grand Master in 1719-20 and was the only Frenchman ever to achieve that high honor.

Anderson's publication consisted of a highly imaginative so-called history of the Craft from the time of Adam to the year 1721, a list of Charges to be read at the making of new brethren, the Regulations of the Craft, the manner of constituting a new lodge, a list of the Masters and Wardens of twenty lodges and a collection of songs, including the 'Enter'd Prentices Song' which is still sung at masonic social boards. He refers to Freemasonry being revived '... under our present worthy Grand Master, the most noble Prince John, Duke of Montague.' But he gives no information whatsoever about the foundation of the Grand Lodge of England.

The picture, then, is of lodges throughout the country meeting irregularly as occasion demanded, perhaps not surviving for any great length of time, and of informal meetings of groups of members of the Craft for the sole purpose of initiating friends of theirs. There is nothing other than brief references to their ceremonies as, unfortunately for masonic historians, brethren of those days were pledged to the utmost secrecy about all aspects of Freemasonry and so committed nothing to writing if they could possibly avoid doing so. When it could not be avoided, they destroyed such writings as soon as they had served their purpose. George Payne (Grand Master 1718-19 and 1720-1) complained that several valuable manuscripts '... were too hastily burnt by some scrupulous Brothers, That those papers might not fall into strange Hands. 'These lodges would have been aware only of other lodges in their immediate vicinity and were

entirely independent and self-governing, as there was no central authority to exercise control over them. Means of communication had not substantially improved since Roman times and, especially as no written records were kept and all instruction was by word of mouth, there must have been considerable variations in the ceremonial details observed in those lodges. Only two degrees would have been worked, often both at the same meeting, until some lodges. but by no means all, began to work the third degree in the 1720s.

Bro. Butham refers to the "Old Charges". The following answer to "What are the Old Charges" comes from the MSA Digest "101 Questions about Freemasonry"

What are the "Old Charges?"

The first book of Freemasonry, printed in 1723. is known as Anderson's Constitutions. In it appear six "Old Charges" which are a statement of the old laws of operative Freemasonry concerning a Mason and his conduct. These six Old Charges are titled: Of God and Religion; Of the Civil Magistrate Supreme and Subordinate; Of Lodges; Of Masters, Wardens, Fellows and Apprentices; Of the Management of the Craft in Working; Of Behavior. The last, sixth Old Charge is concerned with behavior: "in the Lodge while constituted; after Lodge is over and the Brethren not gone; when Brethren meet without Strangers, but not in a Lodge; in presence of Strangers not Masons; at Home and in the Neighborhood; towards a strange Brother."

Many "Books of the Law" – Constitutions, Codes, etc. – of Grand Lodges print these Old Charges. They can also be found in Mackey's Encyclopedia and in the Little Masonic Library.

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