

A TOWN CALLED KILWINNING

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Legends abound concerning the antiquity of the craft, but perhaps none are as curious as those surrounding an obscure Scottish town called Kilwinning. Situated on the banks of the river Garnock some twenty five miles south-west of Glasgow, this small community lies a short distance from the Ayrshire coast, where the Irish sea meets and churns with the waters of the Firth of Clyde. Some distance from the town, the ruins of an ancient abbey stand in shadow against the sunlit hillside, punctuating the otherwise featureless sprawl of a modern townscape. At first glance, the town appears just like any other in this part of Scotland, its only attempt at redemption being the occasional pub and social centre, and the well weathered Masonic lodge, which last December celebrated four centuries of known existence.

Numerous myths surround the fabled lodge. After the formation of the first Grand Lodge in London in 1717, the writer and Freemason, Dean Jonathan Swift, published an anonymous letter in Dublin which claimed to have been sent by the Grand Mistress of the Society of Female Free-Masons. In it he linked the 'famous old Scottish lodge of Kilwinning' with 'the Branch of the lodge of Soloman's Temple', later known as the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem and the brother order of the Templars. Although the tone of the letter is somewhat fanciful, it was a story that was to prove immensely popular in the eighteenth century. On 26th December 1736, after a Masonic meeting, a banquet was held in a Parisian restaurant in the rue du Paon.

At the banquet after the ceremony, a Scotsman by the name of Andrew Michael Ramsay, spoke of the great aim of the order, that of uniting all virtuous men of enlightened minds, who possessed a love of the fine arts, science and religion, so that 'the interests of the Fraternity shall become those of the whole human race'. He likened the craft to the mystery societies of the ancient world and claimed the mystic rites performed at these festivals, concealed traces of the unpolluted religion of Noah and the Patriarchs. He stated that the order was revived during the crusades before being brought back to England by King Edward I, whereupon it made its way to Scotland. There, he claimed,

'James, Lord Steward of Scotland, was Grand Master of a Lodge established at Kilwinning in the West of Scotland in 1286, shortly after the death of Alexander III, King of Scotland, and one year before John Balliol mounted the throne'.

It was largely from this much celebrated oration that the popular belief grew that Freemasonry had somehow descended from a religious military order of crusader knights, a myth that resulted in the creation of many new masonic rites and one which still resonates today.

Fact Over Fantasy

The first mention of the lodge at Kilwinning appeared in a unique set of documents known as the Schaw statutes, which were released by the Master of Works in Scotland at the end of the sixteenth century. In 1583, King James VI of Scotland had appointed one William Schaw as great master of the Royal Palaces and overseer of all the masons of the realm. After some years in the job, Schaw, now General Warden, evidently found reasons to reform the craft, and on the 27th December 1598 issued new regulations to be circulated them among all the masons of Scotland. They stipulated that no mason should be admitted to a lodge without being tested and having submitted an essay; that each brother should be diligent, obedient and charitable to one another; a Warden had to be elected for each Lodge and that no master was to work with unqualified masons or 'cowans'. Evidently not everyone was content with the new rules, and precisely a year later, a second meeting was once again held on St. John's day at the Royal Palace of Holyrood. At the meeting a commissioner appeared, having been sent by Kilwinning lodge, to seek clarification on the lodge's status and seniority, as they had not been mentioned in the statutes. This meeting subsequently led to the issue of a second set of statutes by Schaw which specifically addressed the west coast lodge by name. The new statutes emphasised that no apprentice or craftsman was to be admitted except within the church of Kilwinning; that all banquets were to be paid for by the newly made apprentices and fellow crafts, and that the warden and deacon of Kilwinning should take oaths from the ordinary craftsmen. Yet the most significant aspect of both these sets of regulations was the language employed, which has often been conveniently ignored by historians. William Schaw stated, that all statutes made by the predecessors of Kilwinning were to be observed by all the 'maister massounis' as before; that the wardens were to take 'tryall of the art of memorie and science thairof'; that the Lodge of Edinburgh was to be as 'in all tyme cuming, as of befoir' the principal lodge of Scotland, and that Kilwinning was to be the second, it being 'notourlie manifest in our awld antient writtings'.

Clearly from the wording of the two sets of statutes, it would appear that Kilwinning had existed prior to 1598, for which claim, there is some corroboratory evidence. There were also a number of other lodges targetted by Schaw when he issued his new rules, such as the lodges at Aitchison's Haven, Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Stirling, Haddington and Dunfermline. It is known for example, that the lodge at Aitchison's Haven, was probably connected with the Cistercian monks of Newbattle Abbey in Midlothian. In 1526, King James V issued a charter to the monks, authorising them to construct a harbour on their lands, for the purpose of shipping coal from the coalfields of the Barony of Prestongrange. The harbour was first called the Millhaven and is referred to as such in the early minutes of the lodge, but later changed

its name to that of Aitchison's Haven. It is thought that the lodge, now defunct, originated from this time, but unfortunately the minutes which begin in 1599 are silent as to their origins.

Yet there are references to lodges before Schaw's time. At Aberdeen on the 27th June 1483, there is a recorded mention of six 'masons of the luge' who were engaged on work in the city, and in 1536 there is a reference to the old custom of the Lady Lodge of Dundee. Indeed, as any local will proudly tell you, the Mother lodge is popularly held to be of a more ancient pedigree, dating, they claim, to the building of the abbey itself, when the monks settled here in the twelfth century from across the water in France. So if the lodge at Kilwinning had existed at an earlier time, why is there so little evidence today? The answer may in fact be simple, in that Schaw's new rules specifically required all lodges to employ qualified notaries and to keep records, which was seemingly a new innovation, therefore any previous activity would not have been recorded. Further, the chartulary of the monastery of Kilwinning cannot be consulted as the abbey records were tragically lost sometime after the Scottish reformation in the 1560s, which may well have held some vital clues regarding the antiquity of the lodge itself.

Kilwinning from the Earliest Times

The town's name derives from an 8th century evangelical Irish monk, Saint Winnin, who landed at the mouth of the river Garnock in 715 AD, where he established a community or cell of monks, termed cella or 'Kil' in Gaelic, hence Kilwinning. These monks practised an early form of Celtic Christianity, who, for example dated Easter in a different way to that of Rome. In ancient Irish manuscripts they were referred to as 'Cele De', which meant 'God's comrade or sworn ally', which in the Latin form became 'Coli Dei' hence Culdees. During the early twelfth century a group of Benedictine reformed monks journeyed north from Normandy in France, where they came into contact with the last remnants of the Culdees at Kilwinning and other sites across the country. It is thought the French monks began building their new monastery in about 1140, which took over half a century to complete, but it is not known whether a lodge of masons continued after the completion of the abbey. It is however recorded that the monastery was inhabited by an abbot and his monks in 1212, and rose to become one of the richest medieval religious establishments in the whole of Scotland. In 1309, during the Wars of Independence with England, the Abbot of Kilwinning, Bernard de Linton, became the Chancellor of King Robert Bruce, and it was he, who recorded the King's heroic words before the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. After the great Scottish victory over the English armies at the celebrated battle, it was again Abbot Bernard who went on to draft the famous Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, which proudly recorded how the Scots nation had fought valiantly under William Wallace and good King Robert to win their freedom.

Not much is known about Kilwinning during the medieval era because of the scarcity of original documents, but a statement in the Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, does mention how in November 1491, King James IV visited Kilwinning and was entertained at a supper held presumably in the monastery itself. Sadly the abbey itself was destroyed during the reformation by the 5th Earl of Glencairn, who was a zealous protestant and follower of John Knox. Obviously, the building industry in Scotland as in England, suffered as a result of the momentous upheavals, and by the 1590s was very probably in need of some re-arrangement. Perhaps this is why William Schaw issued his statutes late in 1598. By 1643, the lodge was calling itself 'the antient lodge of Scotland', and appears to have been meeting in the upper chamber of a local Inn or alehouse. Like other craft institutions in both England and Scotland during the seventeenth century, Kilwinning began admitting non-craftsmen as full members of the lodge during the 1670s, the reasons for which are not entirely clear. For example, the Earl of Cassillis became deacon of the lodge in 1672, and the following year, four or five other non-masons were initiated, including Sir Alexander Cunningham of Corsehill and Joseph Cunningham of Carlurg. In 1674, these gentlemen were joined by the 8th Earl of Eglinton, Lord Cochrane and Robert Fergushill, the latter being a local clerk, who subsequently became clerk of the lodge. During the latter half of the same century, Kilwinning was clearly practising some form of ritual or ceremony, as the minutes of 1686 specifically record that the lodge should only initiate its members at a specific meeting held once a year, and the earliest extant ritual manuscripts also mention the lodge, some ten years later. Further, in 1705, the minutes forbade any of its members from employing 'cowans', 'which is to say without the word to work if ther be one masson to be fowned' within fifteen miles. Violation of this rule cost the mason responsible a fine of up to forty shillings.

When the Grand Lodge of Scotland was finally formed in November 1736, the question of Kilwinning's antiquity was once again raised. Just as in the time of William Schaw, and partly because Kilwinning's minutes were missing before 1642, the lodge of Edinburgh, was ruled as Scotland's premier lodge, with Kilwinning running at a close second. However, the brethren were unable to adjust to this ruling, and in 1743, the lodge seceded from the Grand Lodge in Edinburgh and reverted back to its former autonomous state. For the remainder of the eighteenth century, Kilwinning doggedly pursued a policy of masonic independence, and its brethren evidently enjoyed a growing mythical status, that extended well beyond British shores. For the next sixty-three years the lodge issued numerous charters to lodges that still bear its name, until finally in 1806, they were persuaded to rejoin the Grand Lodge stable, if they would agree to the concession of being granted the honorary number of 0 on the list of lodges, to which number they still proudly add to the name of Kilwinning, 'Mother lodge of Scotland.'

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