

## **THE GRAND LODGE OF ALL ENGLAND AT YORK RITUAL** **Its Form And Spirit**

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Most English Freemasons today are probably quite unaware what I am going to speak about - the 18th century phenomenon of a Lodge at York that both regarded itself, and acted, as a distinct Grand Lodge able to rule over the Freemasons North of the River Trent. Claiming a traditional origin from a so-called Charter for working masons issued by Athelstan, the first Anglo-Saxon monarch called King of All England, this Masonic unit was known as the Grand Lodge of All England at York. Such a title did not mean what it seems, a claim to oversee Freemasonry in all parts of this realm. All it meant was the area once known as Northumbria, stretching from the Humber to Dunbar. Indeed, one of its Grand Wardens is on record in 1725 as saying that just because of the respective areas of responsibility which were exercised by the two Grand Lodges, one in the North and the other over London and Westminster, there could surely be nothing but peace and amity between the two bodies. Brotherly Love ought to direct them to work with each other in their separate jurisdictions.

Whilst that was certainly the overall desire of the older Freemasons of York in the 18th century it can be well understood, with hindsight, why there should have developed during this century a steadily mounting concern on the part of the Premier Grand Lodge founded in 1717 as to the nature of this distinctive Masonic body in the northern region. What was manifest in the Grand Lodge of All England at York was a continuing attachment to certain older fashions of belief and practice that sat oddly with the rather more liberal and comprehensive approach that was soon established by the Premier Grand Lodge through its fresh Constitutions.

Moreover, the evident dissimilarity of approach to grounds for membership between the two bodies was not simply a matter of spiritual emphasis. It also carried political overtones though that will not be our main concern today. What it is important to recognise, however, is that whilst it will be my purpose today to underline the spiritual aspects of the York Grand Lodge it must not be imagined that these led only to private and individual consequences. The members involved in this body were not just Masons but significant members of the local community. What they believed and practised was bound to have an effect on their daily surroundings. Even we, in our present rituals, are constantly reminded that we are to act and behave towards others "as men and as Masons."

Since what we are talking about here, however, is somewhat unknown to any present-day audience it will, perhaps, be useful if I first sketch in the background to this northern institution which does not fit into our usual understanding of the early English Craft. Conditioned as I was for much of my Masonic career to regard the events of 1717 in London as the proper starting point for all Freemasonry it was a revelation to discover that what a Dr. Plot had said about the spread of Freemasonry across England in the 17th century was apparently based on fact. In Chester, York and London, in Chichester and Staffordshire, to name but a few places, there was clearly an ancestry of Freemasonry that was associated with both working and non-working masons during the previous century. In York we have definite evidence of a Masons's Guild lodge in 1663 and persons connected with that body are linked by family with the Lodge whose continuous Minute books are known to have existed from at least 1705. What is more the Lodge that then emerges is also no longer a Lodge associated only with the stonemasons' trade though members of that trade continue as members of it.

When, in fact, we read the first extant minutes of this York Lodge two things immediately strike us as odd. The first is that this Lodge is headed not by a Master but by a President who is a non-regular attender, and this President is provided with a Deputy whose task is to rule over the Lodge in his absence. The other feature is that already, after 1705, this Lodge is acting as more than merely a private lodge. It possesses its own collection of Old Charges and claims the right to authorize men, albeit gentlemen, to form themselves into attached extensions of the York Lodge in the towns of Bradford and Scarborough. In effect this York body is acting as did the previous operative Grand Lodge North of the River Trent which exercised authority over units of working stonemasons in that area. It is features such as these which illustrate the Lodge's claim to be also a Grand Lodge even before its overt proclamation of such a status at a later date. What is also clear is that this Grand Lodge does not derive its existence from any other body than itself. It is *sui generis* and *sui juris*.

It is also going to persist for most of the 18th century. With that brief background let us begin to address the main theme of my paper, the ritual form and spirit of this Grand Lodge of All England, and the natural starting place has to do with the 2 principal days of its regular meeting. During its lifetime, and prominently marked with special decoration in the Minutes, are the arrangements made for the two Saints Days of St. John the Evangelist and St. John the Baptist. These two traditional holy days of the Masons' Craft are chosen, to the precise dates, as those on which either the Installing or Re-Installing of the President of the Grand Lodge should take place or as a day of special commemoration and festival.

Not only are the days marked with worship in the church in Coney Street, where a sermon was to be preached by the Grand Chaplain, but a solemn procession was formed of the members in their Lodge regalia with their banners, the President walking behind, flanked by the clergy present. They all processed later to a larger guildhall where a banquet was provided with representatives of York's daughter lodges also being requested to be in attendance for these sacred days. It is also worth remarking that ladies and non-masons also came to the banquet.

It might be contended that there is nothing really unusual in what has just been said for many other lodges in 18th century England are known to have followed such a practice. What is significant is that the lodges that preserved this custom were those that followed the Antients' Grand Lodge after 1751 and one of the arguments for establishing a rival Grand Lodge was precisely that the Premier Grand Lodge of 1717 had begun to disregard this ancient practice. Yet it is the Grand Lodge of All England that maintains the double festival whilst the Antients' lodges often kept only the December Installation date. The inference of this is that in York an earlier form of Masonic Guild usage was considered to be essential. It was one that ensured allegiance to the Craft's ancient and saintly patrons.

This observation leads us on to another. Because the York Grand Lodge was the product of development from a Guild Lodge but no longer had a parent Guild since the working masons had created another York Company for their trade in 1671, it had to recreate a basis for its authority and activity as a lodge of Masons. The way to do this was to take over the Old Charges that had hitherto served as the ground for holding a trade company and apply them 'symbolically' to their new situation. That is why, when the request for each new lodge elsewhere in the North was addressed to York, the first requirement was for the new assembly to be willing to abide by, and swear the allegiance of its members on, a copy of the Old Charges. We even know that when any such lodge ceased to work their copy of the Old Charges was returned to York.

This is significant because of what we know happened in London in 1722. George Payne, the then Deputy Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge, produced the Old Charges in the copy called the Cooke MS. that had been used in his native city of Chester in the 17th century. He charged Dr. Anderson to take careful notice of such a document and those like it because on such documents and their contents any new Constitutions ought to be based. They were, he implied, essential if we were to be true descendants of Ancient Masonry.

What we find in York right up to the end of the 1790s is that it was the York Charges, of which we still have 5 extant original copies, that were used in the ritual of this Grand Lodge. Yet their use was distinctive as I will now explain. When there was a 17th century Guild Lodge in York attached to the Masons' Company every person who was admitted to the Lodge had to belong to one of two categories. Either they were working stonemasons who were Freeman of their Trade or they were Freemen of some other Trade who were 'accepted' as members of the Freemasons' lodge. When they were admitted to the Freemasonry of a Lodge they were acknowledged as those who had already passed through the 'apprenticeship' of their Trade and so they were at once made Fellows. If they were not of the stonemasons' trade they would first be asked to assent to the Craft Old Charges which the working masons would have done already in their Guild Court. Both they and the working mason members would then have to take another solemn obligation regarding the secrets of Freemasonry to which initiation would introduce them. This obligation was taken on the Bible open at the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, another pointer to one of the Craft's patron Saints. Initiation was first effected by exchanging a word, grip and token, robing the candidate in a symbolic apron and sitting him down at the table around which the Lodge members met. The ceremony then continued by conveying the history and esoteric meanings of the items used to illustrate Masonic principles by question and answer, the R.W.M. addressing those at the table in turn.

When the Trade Company and its attached Lodge were separated before the end of the 17th century certain new practices began to be required. As the lodge was no longer attached to a recognised Trade Guild it could not insist that all its applicants for initiation were of the same civic status as before. The astonishing thing is that in the case of the Grand Lodge of All England at York this status of Freeman in some trade was still the norm throughout its whole existence, save for one new category. That was the inclusion of the gentry or of the lesser nobility. The result was clearly demonstrated in the address of 1725 by Dr. Francis Drake when he alluded to three types of members in the Grand Lodge. The first were the working stonemasons, the second were the other trades or professions and the third were the gentlemen. At the last Cornerstone meeting I described what took place in the 17th century in Chester. What is remarkable and has just been revealed by new evidence found in Chichester, in the Duke of Richmond's private papers, is that in this very same year, 1725, the Duke recommended to the first P.G.M. of Cheshire that because the ex-Guild Lodge there had grown to such proportions there should be three lodges thereafter: one made up of tradesmen, one of professional people and one of the gentry and Army personnel. That division into new lodges did not happen in York.

There the situation took an interesting turn. Because there were now those seeking entry to Freemasonry who had not been apprenticed in any trade a form of admittance to that status had to be introduced. Non-Freemen and the gentry were now made apprentices symbolically but initially, up to 1770, this was not done on a separate evening. Such candidates for Masonry were made an apprentice and a Fellow on the same occasion. What is more, even when there was pressure at last to make someone an apprentice on a separate evening the lodge was still opened in the Fellow grade. For York there was never a separate opening or closing in an Apprentice degree. The old Masons of York were maintaining their ancient usage. When you joined Freemasonry you were a Fellow and I must add that the Scottish term 'fellowcraft' never entered the York working. Moreover the Old Charges were still being used when the Grand Lodge of All England fades from the records in the 1790s. Conservatism also revealed itself in the fact that if men could apply to join Freemasonry in the Grand Lodge at York this did not automatically entitle them to membership of the Lodge. What happened at their initiation was that they became Freemasons. Another vote on another evening decided whether they were fit and proper persons to be admitted as full members of the Lodge. The old distinction between men being made 'Masons' and being 'accepted' into a specific Lodge was retained.

There were some changes though. I mentioned earlier that when a candidate for Freemasonry had been entrusted and invested he was seated at the lodge table and instructed. As the 18th century progressed the extent of the information that was to be imparted steadily grew. It became so extended that two things happened. A new degree of Master Mason was formed but on a different day, with a separate vote for admission and with the use of new lectures expanding older material. After 1760 this was developed further and instead of their mention in the catechisms separate degrees of Royal Arch and Knights Templar were introduced but again with strict rules for their conferral. These latter steps were only available for those who had passed through the Craft chair. Again the lectures or catechisms which formed the main core of the ceremonies became so complex that a special jewel was donated to this Grand Lodge for the Past Master who gave the best rendition of these lectures each year.

Before I bring this address to a close there are two other points that I want to mention because they reveal the spirit of this Lodge's ritual when we may seem to have been giving most attention to its form. The first is to note that the spiritual ethos of this Grand Lodge was clearly conservative in tone even if that was not the political outlook of its several members. What we know from a careful examination of its membership lists is that so orthodox was its Christian orientation that Anglicans felt quite at home there but Non-Jurors and Catholics were also quite happy to be numbered in its ranks. When we look at the names of Vavasour, Stapleton, Fairfax, Gascoigne and Tempest we are in the presence of local gentry whose family roots straddle the Reformation era as well as determining their social and political viewpoints. In the content of the ceremonies as also in the acknowledged antiquity of the institution they and the brethren they met there shared a common respect for Tradition. That is why, despite the growing influence of the Premier Grand Lodge in London as the century developed, the York brethren insisted on retaining a format and substance of work which was truly Ancient. It is scarcely surprising that in the light of their example the other Grand Lodge begun in 1751 soon became known as that of the Old York Masons following the Old Constitutions of Prince Edwin. That is a story told elsewhere for which there is no time today.

The last point is this. Nothing so defines the Grand Lodge of All England at York as the lectures or catechisms to which it so zealously conformed. When, bending to some influence from the age, it was felt more useful to categorize the teaching contained in what York regarded as the whole Craft system in a series of 5 degrees known as the York Rite it was still by using the catechetical method that it worked. As I come to the close of this address I thought it might be both interesting and revealing if I shared with you three passages from what we know were the Lectures' contents after 1760. Such extracts will best convey the spirit of what I now hope is a somewhat better known 18th century Masonic institution.

*1st degree :*

"Q. What are the ornaments of the Lodge?

A. The mosaic pavement, the blazing star and the indented or tassellated border? ....

Q. Why the blazing star or glory?

A. Because it refers to that grand luminary the sun which enlightens the earth .... is also the emblem of prudence, which is the first and most exalted object that demands our attention .... though we apply this emblem to a still more religious import. It may be said to represent that star which led the wise men from the East to Bethlehem, proclaiming to mankind the nativity of the Son of God and here conducting our spiritual progress to the author of our Redemption."

*2nd degree :*

"Q. Please inform me how the names of the 2 great Pillars originated?

A. After Noah had built the pillar or altar of sacrifice upon his coming out of the Ark, and received the blessing of God on the spot he called it 'Jakin' which signifies 'Established' in commemoration of the rainbow which God established in the Heavens, and 3 times declared It to be so established... Some years after this the noble and godly Boaz erected 2 famous pillars on his own estate in the land of

Bethlehem, the one he called J. after the name of the famous pillar and the other he called by his own name, being that of the great grandfather of K.S.

Q. What enriched them? The network, which from the connection of its meshes denotes unity and furthermore alludes to a saying of our Saviour's to Simon Peter and Andrew, his brother, 'Leave your nets and follow me and I will henceforth make you fishers of men'."

*3rd degree :*

"Q. What was the Grand Secret that the noble Prince Adoniram, nephew to King Solomon and brother-in-law to Hiram Abi, communicated to the perfect Master Masons at Jerusalem?

A. The Grand Word that Moses engraved on the triple triangular plate of gold in Hebrew characters on the sacred mount. From this Grand and Sacred Word proceed the nine names by which the Almighty was pleased to distinguish himself and everyone of those names has a reference to the 9 attributes which serve as the distinguishing characteristic of Free and Accepted Masons .... (and finally reverting to an older, verse form of presentation):

Q. Who laid the foundation stones of Faith? (The names of first, Abraham on Mount Moriah, and second, Jacob asleep at Bashan, are mentioned and then this section closes with the third & fourth:)

"On the Jebusite's threshing floor

David erected an altar pure,

Calling upon the Lord Most High

That he to him would show mercy ....

Q. Since you have explained me Three

Pray tell me whon the fourth may be?

A. Christ the Lord for lo, t'is said

Before the Jews from Egypt's land were led

A Saviour unto them was promised

That who believed in him should happy be

Both in this world and in eternity,

Then brethren, all pray celebrate his name,

He is our Saviour and Zion's Mighty King."

Do you now wonder why the old Grand Lodge of All England at York Masons never really thought the Mystery Plays had finished? They were still being played here.

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