

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF MASONS AND ITS CONNECTION WITH FREEMASONRY

BY

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THERE are many mysteries in freemasonry, and none less puzzling than the origin of the name. We are so accustomed to its use that it does not occur to us to inquire into its meaning. Was a freemason a freeman and mason of a gild or company ? Was he a purely operative mason, or was he in some way connected with esoteric masonry, the operative being the germ of the ritual and mysteries of the craft as we know it to-day ? Were the terms mason and freemason identical ? or is a freemason one who worked freestone, in contradistinction to the mason who was employed in rough work ? In the London Assize of 1212 we find the term *sculptores lapidum liberorum*, and the use of "freestone mason" in its Norman-French or Latin form is fairly constant in the thirteenth century. There are doubtless omniscient masons who can answer all these questions, and can say with the late Master of Balliol, "What I do not know is not knowledge" ; but most of us can make no such claim to universal learning. As I have been asked by the kindly editor to contribute to this first volume of the "Authors' Lodge Transactions," which he has so generously inaugurated, I propose to, treat of a subject which may throw some light upon these vexed questions.

Some years ago I wrote a volume on "The City Companies of London and their Good Works," and found amongst these interesting fraternities the Masons' Company, which, though now a small minor company, possessing no hall and few records, at one time was of great importance. Its historian, Mr. Edward Conder, junr., who occupied the honourable position of Master in 1894, in his book, "The Hole Craft and Fellowship of Masons," makes the stupendous claim that it is the principal connecting link in that chain of evidence which proves that speculative masonry is lineally descended from the old Fraternity of Masons, which flourished in the days of Gothic architecture. He maintains that the old traditions and moral teachings of the ancient

fellowship which existed in Britain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were preserved by the Masons' Company of London until the middle of the seventeenth century, culminating in 1717 in the establishment of a Grand Lodge of England.

All this it is somewhat difficult to prove, as the existing documents of the Company are few, and the earliest book that has been preserved only dates back to 1620. The earlier records and documents have been unfortunately lost, and were probably destroyed in the Great Fire of London, which played tremendous havoc with the halls and treasures of the City Gilds of London. However, it is possible from other sources to trace the history of the Company, and to discover some connection between it and the fraternity to which we all have the honour and privilege to belong.

Stow wrote in his history of London: " The Company of Masons, being otherwise called freemasons, of ancient standing and good reconing, by means of affable and kind meetings at divers times, and as a loving brotherhood should use to do, did frequent this mutual assembly in the time of King Henry the Fourth, in the twelfth year of his most gracious reign (1410-22)." In the same year it was incorporated by royal order, and received a grant of arms in the twelfth year of Edward IV. (1472-1473) from William Hawkeslowe, Clarenceux King of Arms, which is now preserved amongst the additional manuscripts in the British Museum.* The shield is as follows : Sable, on a chevron engrailed between three square castles triple-towered argent, masoned of the first, a pair of compasses extended silver. Crest, on a wreath a castle. This grant of arms was made to the " Hole Crafte and Felawship of Masons," and was confirmed by Thomas Benolt, Clarenceux, in the twelfth year of Henry VIII. (1520-1521). Later on, the engrailed chevron was changed for a plain one, and the old ornamental towers in the arms and crest became single towers. I shall have occasion later on to refer to these arms.

The Company did not begin its career in 1410, and the Records of the Corporation of London show that it was in existence in 1356, when rules for its guidance were framed. It was evidently then a Company by prescription. In 1376 it sent representatives to the Common Council of the City in the time of Edward III. Mention is made in the Letter-Book of the Corporation (II. fo. 46 b.) of both freemasons and masons, but the representatives of the former are struck out and added to those of the latter in later times. However, in 1530 their Gild is styled the Company of Freemasons.

The original charter was renewed in 1677 by Charles II., the earlier one having probably been destroyed in the Great Fire. It contained a curious clause. The City Companies exercised great authority over the trades they regulated, and no one could follow his craft without being a freeman of his particular Gild. " Foreigners," i.e., those who were not connected with the Company, were not allowed to work in the City, or within a radius of seven miles, without the permission of the Company that presided over their trade. The Company had also power of search, and appointed certain members to examine work done and to exclude " foreigners." Hence in the renewed charter a saving clause was inserted, which provided that the privileges of the Masons' Company were not to interfere with the rebuilding of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul.

The present code of By-Laws was apparently granted in 1356, and shows that the workmen were divided into two classes, hewers and light masons or setters. The special articles are two: 1, That no one should take work in gross without tendering proper security for its completion ; 2, That all apprentices should work in the presence of their masters, till they perfectly learned their calling. In the Returns Of 1376, where the number of members returnable by the Gilds to the Common Council is set forth, the masons are said to be entitled to four representatives, and the freemasons to two, as if they were independent societies ; but as I have already stated, in later times the freemasons are not mentioned, and apparently there must have been a fusion of the two Companies.

.In the list of Craft-Gilds in 1421, recorded in the books of the Brewers' Company, the masons occupy the thirty-eighth place among the zit Gilds, preceding the carpenters. In 1469 they mustered twenty men-at-arms for the City Watch, a number equal to that supplied by one of the Twelve Worshipful Companies – the Salters.

The hall of the Company was situate in Masons' Alley, Basinghall Street, and the Masons' Hall Tavern still stands to mark its site. They have property in Bishopsgate Street, where there is a Masons' Court, which probably points to the site of an earlier hall. The hall was the scene of an important gathering to which I shall presently refer, showing the connection between the Company and the fraternity to which we belong.

The influence of the Company was by its constitution confined to London and its environs, but it seems to have been recognised in some way by the numerous lodges and chapters scattered over the whole

country. There are about seventy manuscript copies of the constitutions of masonry in existence, dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the present time, and on several of these the arms of the Company is emblazoned, sometimes also in association with arms of the City of London. An inventory of the possessions of the Gild, taken in 1665, contained a manuscript copy of old charges or gothic contributions, a book of the contributions of Accepted Masons, and of the Masons' Company, given in the mayoralty of John Brown, D.D., 1481 ; but this document has disappeared.

It is well known that apart from the London Company, or associated with it, there was a very old institution of a brotherhood amongst members of the craft extending both in England and abroad, for the government of its members, who were operative masons and their kindred. They had lodges and chapters, and enjoined secrecy in all matters concerning what was done in these gatherings. Learned freemasons have written much about the history of these lodges of operative masons, and an excellent lecture was recently given before the Authors Lodge on this subject, and I need not recapitulate what has been said or written. But what is the connection between our London Company and these country lodges and our own brotherhood ? Were all these early associations concerned only with operative masonry, or is there any evidence that they associated themselves with speculative masonry ? The world owes a great debt to the keepers of diaries, and we owe much to .the distinguished antiquary, Elias Ashmole, for that which he kept. He tells us that on October 16th, 1646, at 4.30, he " was made a freemason at Warrington, in Lancashire, with Coll. Henry Mainwaring, of Karincham, in Cheshire." That is very important and interesting. But that is not all. Other names are mentioned of persons present on that occasion, and Mr. W. H. Rylands, with patient research,, has discovered that not a single member of the lodge was an operative mason. They were gentlemen of good family, or yeomen ; and had nothing to do with the ordinary craft. So without doubt there existed in this Lancashire town in 1646 a lodge that concerned itself with speculative masonry, perhaps somewhat similar to that which we practise to-day. And if that was so in the small town of Warrington, it must have been true of many others.

.Some years later, in 1682, Ashmole wrote in his diary under the date March 10th :- -

" About 5 p.m. I received a summons to appear at a lodge to be held the next day at Masons' Hall, London."

He duly attended, and was admitted into the fellowship of freemasons. There were present Sir William Wilson, a builder and distinguished architect, Captain Rich, Mr. W. Borthwick, &c., and several members of the Masons' Company. Ashmole adds: " We all dined at the Halfe Moone Taverne in Cheapeside, at a noble dinner prepared at the charge of the new-accepted masons." Now we may gather from this that there were two divisions of members, one speculative and the other operative, and that the hall of the Company was their place of meeting.

In the earliest book of the Company of 1620, to which I have referred, there is a record of gratuities received from new members being accepted, while others were only admitted by patrimony, apprenticeship or redemption, according to the ordinary rules of all the City Companies. May we assume that the former were initiated into a lodge of speculative masonry held in the Company's hall ? Ashmole's account of the " noble dinner " prepared by the " new-accepted masons " seems to support this theory. Again, there was an inventory in the hall which mentions " an old list in the hall, enclosed in a faire frame with lock and key, of accepted masons."

Moreover, Bro. Robert Freke Gould, in his History of Freemasonry, referring to the earliest book of the Company (that of 1620, already mentioned), tells of an important discovery which he made. A certain Robert Padgett is recorded as " Clarke to the Worshippfull Society of the Freemasons of the City of London " in 1686. Now the names of the clerks of the Company are on record, and Padgett was never clerk of the Masons' Company, of which at that date a Mr. Stampe was clerk. Hence it is undoubtedly true that the Society of the Freemasons and the Company were distinct bodies, although they both met at Masons' Hall.

The close connection of the Company with the lodge continued until 1682, when the free and accepted, or speculative, masons for some reason deserted the hall, and most probably our oldest lodge, " The Lodge of Antiquity," was a continuance of that which had previously been held in Masons' Hall. As a proof of this we may notice that in a MS. roll, dated 1586, the arms of the Lodge of Antiquity very closely resemble those of the Masons' Company. Both have the three castles, the chevron and extended compasses, and this helps to show the close connection between the two.**

We may conclude that until the end of the seventeenth century this close association continued, when for some reason the connection

ended, and speculative masonry had no place in the records or transactions of the Masons' Company. But all members of our fraternity will retain a warm place in their hearts for the Company which proved herself a nursing mother of speculative masonry in the days of its infancy, and will join in the time honoured toast of the Guild – " Prosperity to the Masons' Company root and branch, and may it flourish for ever." In this short paper it is impossible to dwell upon all the inviting themes which the subject suggests, or to record the names of the distinguished brethren who laid the foundations of masonry as we know it, of " the kings that have been of this sodalitie " ; and lest I wander into too wide a field, I will recall the homely injunction frequently inscribed upon the sign of the compasses :

Keep within compass.
And then you'll be sure
To avoid many troubles
That others endure."

* This grant was long lost by the Company and was found in private hands in 1871, when it was purchased by the Company and presented to the British Museum: cf. paper by Mr. H. H. BURNELL, F.S.A., Master in 1872, read before the Society of Antiquaries.

** The Lodge of Antiquity met at "The Goose and Gridiron" (1717-1729), whither it must have migrated from Masons' Hall, and was the " first old Lodge," though it did not assume its present name until 1770. In 1813, at the Act of Union, the premier place was by lot assigned to No. 1 of the " Atholl " Lodges, and the Lodge of Antiquity obtained its present numerical distinction No. 2.

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