

# BUILDING FOR ETERNITY

Some years ago the "Reader's Digest", in an article on Gothic art, proclaimed this form as the fulfilment of "Man's age old desire to create the perfect House of God." This desire has bloomed in many ages and succeeding cultures are commemorated in the ancient ruins left by peoples long since gone from living memory.

King Solomon erected his great temple to the one true God. For years it served its purpose, pure and radiant, until the people lost their faith and enemies destroyed the "light of Israel and removed its sacred vessels to a pagan land. Our so called "Ancient Brethren" of those days have often been acclaimed as modern Masonry's progenitors, but this cannot be proved historically.

The Greeks believed in "Art for Art's sake" and constructed temples of such exquisite perfection that aesthetics made use of their geometrical proportions to educe its principles. The builders of the Grecian temples and the Roman ones which followed, banded into close fraternities, but similarly, these have no direct attachment to our modern craft. The classic columns and the arch, however, have become accepted as enduring symbols in Freemasonry.

The Middle Ages were an era of intense religious fervour which required the building of large churches in the towns and cities. Builders everywhere turned to the models of the Graeco-Roman "Classic" age for inspiration, but results fell short of what was sought. Lintels sometimes cracked and walls supporting Roman arches and the heavy barrel vaults would crumble unless thickened to the detriment of inner space and window light.

It is not known which nameless genius gave the pointed or the "Gothic" arch to those who built the great cathedrals. Romantics have declared it to be representative of praying hands or of the massive vaulted treeways in the German forests. Less fanciful is the contention that its prototype was seen in Moslem lands and brought to Europe by Crusaders with a multitude of other benefits.

It first appeared when Abbé Suger redesigned the Abbey of St. Denis, Paris, in 1137. The glory of its structure captured France and spread to neighbouring England. "More space, more light, more height" was now the aim. The pointed arch and its concomitant, the ribbed vault, rose to soaring heights and spanned vast spaces lit by jewelled windows where thick walls were once required. Restraints of roof weight were removed by "flying buttresses" which channelled all these stresses through outside supports directly to the ground. The inside walls could now be thinned to lacy membranes and the spaces filled with glorious multi-coloured pictures in stained glass. They and the statues at the western entrance were the Bible of illiterate worshippers. They were the promise of a lasting place in heaven for the faithful.

In England, Gothic architecture flourished in three stages, "Early English" , "Decorated" and the "Perpendicular". The Speculative Masons in the first Grand Lodge of 1717 were the spiritual descendants of the operative masons who constructed these vast living edifices, which, despite the mocking title "Gothic" (or barbarian) had made an engineering breakthrough coupled with a triumph of creative artistry. Art was no longer for Art's sake alone, but, in the words of Anne Fremantle "to express in the created the glory of the Creator". This our genuine "Ancient Brethren" really did.

The medieval masons built for **all eternity and** this is fitting, for the current cost of structures such as Notre Dame or Chartres would be in excess of \$200,000,000. Today we build in concrete, steel and glass and can achieve the same advantages of space and light and height. It is incumbent on us to ensure that wisdom, strength and beauty are observed not only in our massive buildings but also in the way we live our lives.