

THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRACING BOARD

SLIDE

The Tracing Boards of the Three Degrees, although not used in some workings, and indeed unknown in certain jurisdictions, are a significant survival from our masonic past. Quite often, however, the Entered Apprentice remains little more than aware of the existence of the Tracing Board; the Fellowcraft may be more fortunate and have the opportunity to make a closer acquaintance with that of the Second Degree, whilst the Master Mason will have his attention briefly drawn to the Tracing Board of his degree. 'Brethren', it may perhaps be advisable for me to remind you of what some of the Masonic Lectures say of the Tracing Board. We are asked in the Lectures to name the Immovable Jewels of the Lodge.

The Tracing Board, and the rough and perfect Ashlars.

Their uses:-

The T.B. is for the M. to lay lines and draw designs on.

Why are they called immovable Jewels.

Because they lie open and immovable in the Lodge for the Brethren to moralise on.

There is a beautiful comparison between the immovable jewels and the furniture of the Lodge which I will thank you for:-

As the Tracing Board is for the Master to lay Lines and draw designs on, the better to enable the Brethren to carry on the intended structure with regularity and propriety, so the V. of the S.L. may justly be deemed the Spiritual T.B. of the G.A.O.T.U.

Brethren there is a suggestion here that the Tracing Board had at some time an individual separate existence as a drawing board for the Master to lay lines on. But I hope to demonstrate that in English Freemasonry it has an emblematical existence as an item on a piece of furniture which is called the 'Tracing Board', but which is also called the 'Lodge Board'.

Let us go back into the past, and look where we may find

the origin of the Tracing Board;- It can be traced back to the Modern, Oriental and Medieval Operative Masonry. So well concealed were the methods used by the Oriental Craftsmen to produce work, which often puzzles us by its complexity, that travellers have been deceived into believing that by some intuitive faculty the Eastern Master Builders were able to dispense with plans, elevations and sections, and start the foundation of various parts of the structure without a precise predetermination of the bulk and requirements of its several parts. To all appearance Brethren the Builder was independent of the aid of Plans. Actually Brethren he had first worked out the general scheme, not as architects do today on plain paper, but on a sectional lined tracing board, every square representing one or a number of bricks or stones. These Tracing Boards are the key to the whole Craft, and Masons will understand the significance of the discovery that they represent in a miniature scale the floor of the Masters Builders work room. The board was protected by a coat of varnish which allowed the drawing to be washed off when done.

From the Tracing Board one proceeded to the floor of the work room, which could be in the centre of the building in progress, here full sized details were worked out, either by enlarging by squares or geometrical methods most empirical.

Though there is no evidence to hand that our Tracing boards are connected with these medieval Boards, it is known that in Egypt, Roman times and in Persia, tracing boards of squares were used. In the latter country the Tracing Board is actually, in one form or another, the floor of the Architects workshop itself, a reduction of this floor serving as portable Tracing Board. This Brethren is the exact position of our Masonic Tracing Boards at the present time.

I may promise that the true Tracing Board is that

drawing board, which, in the 'Harris Lodge Boards' is generally depicted lying on the ground before the pedestal in the Lodge Board of the 'First Degree'. In the early Harris Boards it is quite plain, but as the design of the 'Lodge Board' became more elaborate, a ground plan was added, which is popularly supposed to represent the ground plane of K.S. Temple.

Now Grand Lodge was formed in 1717, and Anderson's Book of Constitutions appeared in 1723. Within a few years of the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge, there appeared:-

- 1724 "The Grand Mysteries of Freemasonry Discovered."
- 1730 "Pritchards Masonry Dessected". (Premier Grand Lodge)
- 1760 "Three Distinct Knocks" (Antients)
- 1762 "Jachin and Boaz" (Premier and Antients)

Through these exposures, we find from this early period, the Ritual, Catechism and the forms of both Grand Lodges. Now Brethren in none of these early exposures under the English Constitution, do we find mention of the 'Tracing Board', or Trestle Board, but what do we find. We find the drawing of the form of the Lodge. In a classic essay on 'The Lodge', Bro. R.J. Meekren developed a theory that at some remote time in Masonic History, the primitive operative Lodge was held out of doors. Echoes of this tradition are to be found in early speculative documents, and some still persist in the Lectures. To the student of Folk-Lore, says Meekren, the marking out of a ritual enclosure on the Ground is a familiar and explainable practise.

No. 1 The drawing of the form of the Lodge took several forms:-

The Carmick M.S. of 1727

This Lodge was drawn in the form of a triangle, and is the earliest form of a Masonic Lodge known. The Wardens (or Master) is seated in the East, but other Officers are not shown, although this form of Lodge is perpetuated, in another degree, the Master sits at the apex of the triangle, and the Wardens in the West.

Brethren in Pritchards Masonry Desected 1730, there is the question: where stands the Wardens; the answer is in the West. There are only two steps at the end of the Lodge instead of three in the later designs. The position of the E.A. and the F.C. are not shown (but in each instance the singular case is used). Seats for the brethren are shown along the side of the triangle. On the floor of the Lodge are shown the Square, Compasses, Plumb Rule, Gavel, Trowel, two only of the (Lesser Lights), and what Bro. Hughan described as a compass, it was intended to serve as a pointer and not necessarily, as a symbol. It also took the form in some cases of a Cruciform, and rectangular as shown on the screen. There is no doubt that in the main tradition of the form, "The Lodge" was that of an oblong square. This is borne out by illustrations given in many of the contemporary printed exposures of the Craft System.

The Rectangular shape has a triangle extension at its head, (i.e. in the East). At the west are the three steps, crudely perspective and labelled appropriately for each degree. Whilst the Antients Grand Lodge preferred to retain a simple basic outline for the form of their Lodge, the Moderns (Premere Grand Lodge) were already embellishing theirs. As far back as we can go, these forms of Lodges were figured in Chalk, Charcoal, and even with sand or sawdust on the floor of the Lodge room and washed out or cleaned up when the ceremonies ended, and references to the 'Drawing of the Lodge' and the Tyler's duty in connection with this, are a familiar feature of all eighteenth century minutes, also that of the entered Apprentice or initiate assisting him in the mopping up of the drawing on the floor. We find later that Metal emblems appear to have been used for 'Ormenting' the Lodge, in order, perhaps, not to place too great a strain on the artistic skill of the Tyler, whose duty it was to draw the Lodge, and also the emblems. In a newspaper cutting of 1726 we find the following announced.

"There will be several Lectures on Ancient Masonry, particular

on the sigification of the Letter 'G' and how after what Manner the Antediluvian Masons forme'd their Lodges, shewing what Innovations have lately been introduced by some of the Moderns (i.e., the new speculative masons), with their tape, Jacks, Moveable Letters, Blazing Stars etc.

We find in the early exposures details of the form of a Lodge and the procedure for part of the ceremonial: This plan is drawn on the Floor, Eaft and Weft; The Master Etands in the Eaft, with the Square about his Neck, and the Bible before him, which he takes up and walks forward to the Weft near the Firft ftep of an oblong square; where he kneels down, in order to give the folem Obligation to him that has already knelt down, with his left knee bare bent upon the Firft Step; his right foot forms a square, with his naked right hand upon the Bible. After the ceremony, the figure is washed out with a Mop, as aforefaid, as soon as he has received his obligation. Then a table is put in the Place where the figure was, and they all fit round it; but every man fitteth in the same place as he stood before the Figure was washed out. We find entries in Lodge expenses dating back to 1738, 'Tyler for drawing ye Lodge 2s. 6d. In one case we find the ceremony being pofponed because the Tyler drew the wrong Lodge. In Jerusalem Lodge No. 197, we find February, 20th 1771, Tyler paid 2s 6d for forming either a F.C.'s or Masters Lodge. Sept. 16th 1772. The Tyler having made a mistake in forming the entered apprentices Lodge, the raising was defferred till the Lodge Night after next.

This tracing or drawing Brethren represented the Lodge, not, it is true, as an architect would draw it, but somewhat modified by the exigencies of symbolism. This enclosure, 'The Lodge', the oblong square or in some cases the tiangle of the eighteenth century catechisms, in becoming a drawing on the floor of the 'Lodge' entered on a stage of development and rivivication which was

ultimately to give us our pictorial boards of today.

It must be understood however, that this process of development didn't follow any clear cut, chronological sequence of events. There would be considerable local variation, and the process overlapped to a large extent and here and there was even anticipated. We cannot look, for instance, for a type arrangement which could be pointed to as 'The Original Form of a Lodge', any more than we can today instance any one ritual working as 'The Ritual'.

It is inevitable, as a matter of convenience, and because of the increasing elaboration of the floor diagram, that some sort of ready made or permanent representation of the form of a Lodge should eventually come to be used. So we find that in later times the drawing on the floor of the Lodge room was transferred to a cloth which was laid on the floor, thus saving repeated drafting and subsequent sponging out. The Lodge of Emulation No.21 found a way round the difficulty of drawing the form of a Lodge on the floor of the room, when on 11th March, 1763, a motion was made that a proper board be made for the Tyler to draw the Lodge on. In this particular case, the form of the Lodge was still being drawn by the Tyler. To be contained on a manageable board. Brethren the physical dimensions of the symbolic Lodge, even at this date were contracting.

Even at the early date of 1733, in a minute of the Old Kings Arms Lodge No. 28 recording on the 3rd, December of that year, that a proper deliniation should be made on canvas and be deposited in the Repository read for the occasion. We also find in 1772 'The Lodge of Union No.129 at Kendal, possessing a set of floor cloths. These show not only the first simple development in the embellishing of the Lodge, but a seperate cloth for each degree, the three steps being built up cumulatively from one to three on the cloths of the respective degrees, as also are the

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working tools and other embellishments.

No. 8 In 1759, Scottish Grand Lodge prohibited floor cloths, yet prohibited or not, Lodge Cloths, floor sheets or floorings were coming increasingly into use in the latter half of the eighteenth century, in Scotland, as they were in England. It would seem therefore a natural thing to drape the cloth over a table, to support it on a board or trestles, or hang it on a wall. There could be no objection to this, the primitive significance of the drawing as the form of the Lodge, a representation of that symbolic enclosure within which certain ritual practices must take place - this was by then only a vague tradition, not properly understood, if remembered at all. The developing symbolism of the Speculative Craft System was assigning a new purpose and meaning to 'The Lodge'. From this step it was but a short step to mounting the Lodge Cloth in a frame to protect it further. We find that 'Old Kilwinning St. Johns Lodge No.6.' S.C. recording on 4th February, 1783. 'The Master proposed having the flooring of the Fellow Crafts and Master Masons painted and framed.

No. 9. Later still, this drawing was transferred to small boards of a more portable nature, and the carpet or cloth retained nothing but the square pattern. We thus have an exact reproduction of the Persian Workshop Floor and its portable reproduction, but without the squares entirely covering the latter, they being no longer needed, although they are still represented over a portion of the Tracing Board. The tracing boards in a sense epitomized a stage in the development of Speculative Masonry, by way of Accepted Masonry, from the Operative Craft.

The practice of laying the board on the floor would doubtless soon give way to the more convenient arrangement as with (Cloths) of laying the board on a table or of simply supporting on a pair of trestles. Remember Brethren the ceremonial and convivial functions of Lodge Meetings had not yet separated out as two clearly defined

activities. An important part of the Meeting was still the working of catechetical Lectures, interspersed with charges and toasts with Brethren seated round a table (arrangement as described, in fact in Jachin and Boaz). A table was therefore ready to hand for the Lodge Board, working tools etc.

No. 10 It is in the Ceremony of Consecrating a New Lodge Lodge that the Tracing Board (or Lodge Board) proclaims its ancestry. We find in Preston's Illustrations, 1772 edition, under the Ceremony of Consecration, 'The Grand Master, attended by his Officers, and some dignified Clergymen, formed themselves round the Lodge, which is placed in the centre covered with white satin'. It is also interesting to note that in the 1792 edition (the so called eighth Edition) that this is the first time we have mention of corn, wine and oil as elements of consecration.

The central feature of Preston's consecratory rite is 'The Lodge', covered with white satin. In other words the 'Oblong Square', the form of the Lodge or diagram drawn on the floor which, as I have said by process of development and elaboration, became transmuted into the Tracing Board - this was the Lodge (either directly upon it or as a separate painted cloth or board) it could be carried in procession "Covered in white satin", set down within a Lodge Room - probably upon a pair of trestles - as the centre piece for certain rites, and serve as a table to receive the ceremonial paraphernalia involved in those rites.

The practise of laying the board on the floor of the Lodge soon gave way to the more convenient arrangement (as in the case of the Cloths) of laying the board on a table, or supporting it on a pair of trestles. It has been suggested that the Lodge Board laid on a trestle table, or itself supported on trestles, gave rise to the term 'Trestle Board'. It is a name which, in the eighteenth century appeared in a variety of spellings such as Tressell; Trassle; Tarsel Board etc.

Whether or not the Tracing Board as a name was derived from the Trestle Board, it seems that the Tracing Board as an article of Lodge furniture almost certainly was. The 'Form of the Lodge' had as we have seen, gradually evolved into a symbolic painting on a cloth or board. Placed on a table in the centre of the room it became characterised as the 'Trestle Board' or 'Tracing Board' - at first perhaps in a loose and metaphorical sense, but later as a recognised term, which may even have been adopted to differentiate it from the confusion of meanings, by that time attaching to the word Lodge, and so the last lingering connection with 'The Lodge', THE ESSENTIAL, PRIMATIVE RITUAL ENCLOSURE, FINALLY DISAPPEARED. The Transformation of the traditional oblong square - 'The Lodge' - into the Tracing Board was almost complete.

Few floor cloths from the eighteenth century have survived. Those that have reveal a simplicity and directness of approval, as they are more in the nature of Masonic Charts. But the way was open to development.

The earliest dated Lodge Cloth is 1810 and Lodge Board 1790. Although the above are the earliest dated cloths etc., rapid strides were actually made in the use of these items between 1760 and 1800.

In theory the Tracing Board has not been used in Ireland, except for a short period between 1839 and 1850 when they were introduced by Archdeacon Mant, who was considerably influenced by the English Practices. In fact, however, Ireland has always been prolific of floor cloths, wall charts etc.

Although the Grand Lodge of England tacitly countenanced the use of Tracing Boards, in as much as they are appointed at the Consecration of all new Lodges, Grand Lodge has never authorised any particular pattern nor defined the nature of them.

Tracing Boards and Clothes take many different designs,

each dependent on the local artists impression. A set shown in John Coles engraved Design (1801) are of the Masonic Chart pattern, although the beginnings of a more pictorial treatment are seen in the second degree board. The Third shows the simple coffin shape as a frame for certain emblems, and this arrangement was to remain essential the basic design for this degree.

The development of the Lodge Boards has now been followed to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Josiah Bowring was the originator of the present style, and whose boards being considered to be the most correct. Bowring was followed by John Harris who, so far as is known, designed his first boards in 1820

The difference between the Bowring and the Harris Boards is of considerable significance in respect of the Pillars and Ladder. Bowring places the Pillars on a triangular plain; and the ladder sloping towards the N. E., with Faith on the first rung, Hope on the ninth rung, the Key on the twelfth rung, Charity on the fifteenth rung.

Harris set his pillars in the East, West and South (allowing for slight deviation so as not to mask the East); and the Ladder slopes towards the East, with the Cross over the first three rungs, the Key across the 4th and 6th, and an Anchor 7th to 9th, and the cup 13th to 15th rungs, the 10th and 12th rungs are empty.

In the Bowring Board, the Ladder rests on the Three Great Lights, which are on the floor.

Harris rests his ladder on the Great Lights placed on the Alter formed by a circle between two parallels.

The Triangular plan of the Pillars used by Bowring suggests that he was influenced by the French Type of Craft, in which the Wardens sit in the West. Harris was the first to place the Pillars in the more usual English position.

Individual artistry was on the wane, and it was probably no longer an economic proposition for Lodges to commission specially painted boards, and the standard products of firms of Masonic Furnishers found favour as cheap and ready to hand alternatives. Purpose made boards continue to be produced here and there, and indeed original designs still make their appearance today, but these are isolated examples.

Today's boards are based on the Harris design, due to a great extent that they became associated with the Emulation Lodge of Improvement at a time when the assiduous propagation of Emulation Working began. In 1845 the Committee of this Lodge approved designs submitted by Harris. He published a set in 1849 which found general acceptance, and which seem to have become the pattern upon which future commercial designs were based.

Brethren, a period of some ten to fifteen years covers the development between the introduction of Lodge Cloths in English Freemasonry, and the use of Lodge Boards.

The Lodge of Sincerity No.3677, Wigan, continued to use a table for the Lodge Cloth up to 1913, during the period when it was working as an independent, self styled Grand Lodge, and indeed, at Bristol a table still serves a similar function today.

Those brethren who are interested in the subject of the early Lodges Tracing Boards and Cloths may care to trace for themselves the development and significance of features which it has been possible in this talk to touch on briefly or not at all.

- (a) The various items and emblems featured on the early boards which disappeared in England at or soon after the Union in 1813 (some of which are still retained in America) the sundial, hour glass, scythe, the Beehive. Also other devices and emblems belonging more properly to Royal Arch.
- (b) The occurrence of the 'True' tracing board for the 'Master to

- lay lines and draw designs on 'depicted on the first Tracing Boards.
- (c) The orientation of the temple on the second Tracing Board, and the resulting positions of the winding staircase and of the two great pillars.
- (d) The variety of tools etc. shown on the board of the 'Third Degree the heavy beetle, setting level, plotting pin, as well as others familiar to us today.

Various designs:

John Brown in 1800 they measured $9\frac{1}{2}$ " x $6\frac{1}{2}$ "

Jacobs Design.

Josiah Bowring 1821

John Harris 1791 - 1877.

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