

St. Edmunds, Falinge

30p

A Freemasonic Church

A short paper prepared in September 1933 by
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From whatever point of view a Freemason observes this church, his attention is immediately attracted by the gilt vane surmounting the NE bell turret of the central lantern tower. This feature, so unusual, if not absolutely unique, consisting as it does of a device known to our Jewish friends as the Seal of Solomon or as the pentalfa to the popular world, is used in our fraternity to symbolise the F.P.O.F.

Such a symbol or emblem cannot fail to arouse our curiosity and to lead us to enquire why it should have been adopted for an ordinary parish church, erected only sixty years ago, long after the period when our brotherhood had ceased to be a body of operative craftsmen and had become an institution of speculative masons engaged only in the erection of spiritual temples and carrying on the traditions of a bygone organisation.

After having noted the remarkable vane, we perhaps next observe a general squareness about the design: aisles have been entirely omitted, even the windows, whenever possible, are squareheaded, and when this is not the case they have been generally grouped in threes or have five lights.

And when we find the foundation stone laid with true Freemasonic exactness in the NE corner of the building, we begin to realise that we must be on the alert for further indications. (The lewis bolt with which this stone was suspended, and the working tools with which it was proved, are still in the possession of St. Chad's Lodge, No. 1129, Rochdale).

It is true that in the matter of orientation the temple and this church – as well as all other Christian churches – have their main entrances at opposite ends. The front, and only entrance, to the temple was at the East end. Here the principle entrance is in the West although another door has been provided in the South, it has only been so arranged as a matter of convenience.

It is a mistake to suppose that there are three entrances to the temple itself, although of course there were gateways in the N, S and E walls of the surrounding courts.

King Solomon's Temple was situated on the top of the holy Mount Moriah, on an elevated platform or plateau supported by retaining walls. It thus dominated the City of Jerusalem, just as St. Edmund's does to the town of Rochdale. The peculiar retaining walls, which support the platform on which the church stands, are then a deliberate attempt to copy the example of the temple. Incidentally, I would like to call your attention to a curious specimen of winding in masonry on the west wall of the South transept.

The proportions of the temple, as described in the V.S.L., have been carefully preserved in the plan, and I think an attempt has been made to make the chancel, transepts and other accessories resemble the chambers, which were grouped around three sides of that structure. The stair to the gallery on the North side is undoubtedly a representation of the winding stair which led to the middle chamber. It has been suggested to me that the sturdy pillars which carry the lantern tower are reminders of the famous pillars Jachin and Boaz which stood either in, or in front, of the porchway. But I do not think that this can be the case, for apart from the annulets or bands half way up the shafts, which undoubtedly spoil the symbolism, there are four of them, capable of course of always being grouped in twos from any direction. But I hope I shall be able to convince you later on that another pair of pillars in this church serve our purpose much better.

Leaving now these resemblances to King Solomon's Temple, which some of you may not be quite able to follow as, after all, it has to be admitted the Biblical descriptions are rather meagre, and even scholarly and practised architects have failed to agree on many of the details, an examination of the exterior will soon assure you of the genuineness of the other Freemasonic symbols.

Just glance at the stone finials on all the gables. Here you will find the five pointed emblem of the Craft, the six pointed star of the Royal Arch, the square crosses of the Christian degrees and the three armed cross of what may be regarded as the highest degree of all. All of which the donor of the building was connected. Then notice the Latin motto, *semper paratus*, (always prepared) on the gable end of the Royds Chapel (Freemasons will appreciate the hidden meaning of this motto). And glance at the tracery in the windows. The best example of all is undoubtedly the three light window of this chapel and the ingenious way in which the five pointed star has been worked in, cannot possibly fail to impress you.

You may remember that at a certain stage in your Freemasonic career you were enjoined to study such of the liberal arts and sciences as might lie within the compass of your attainments, especially the science of geometry, which is established as the basis of our art. If, then, you have adhered to this recommendation, I venture to suggest you can find some Freemasonic significance in the tracery of every window in the building.

So far I have been dealing almost entirely with the exterior of the structure and just before completing this view I would draw your attention to the square and compass and the Seal of Solomon or Shield of David worked into the design of the wrought iron gables of the Royds Chapel.

Commencing now a visit to the interior of the church and entering by the West porch, you will first of all notice the prominence given to the symbol generally known as the *vesica piscis*. This is of course, a Christian as well as a Freemasonic symbol and so doubly appropriate. Some of you will doubtless know that remarkable paper, *Magister Mathesios*, by Bro. Sydney T. Klein, in A.Q.C., vol. xxiii. The author suggests that this figure is derived from the first proposition in the first book of *Euclid's Elements* it was regarded by the mediaeval masons as the basis of geometry and was adopted by them as the unit of design. In earlier days a right angled triangle was formed with sides in the proportions 3, 4, 5. Here the same objective is achieved by the proportions 1, 2 and root of 3.

In Christian symbolism it represents the logos or word, and amongst Freemasons it is a reminder of that lost word of which we are all in search, and which we are only supposed to find when we have reached a certain Supreme Degree.

I particularly draw your attention to the remarkable windows on each side of the porch. Externally they are so inconspicuous as to be hardly noticeable, but internally they are developed in the most ingenious way. So far as the actual lights are concerned, I do not know of a more refined and beautiful example of plate tracery.

And next, please observe the artistic carving of the tympanum over the doorway in the main West wall. This tympanum, in itself a triangle, cleverly sub-divided into a pentagon with smaller triangles at the sides, all of course, with curved lines, is appropriate. But it is to the actual carving that I especially wish to call your attention and for this purpose I think I had better first of all remind you of a very remarkable picture by William Hogarth, the artist, who acted as a Grand Steward in 1738. This particular picture is the last of a series, "The Four Times of the Day", and is called "Night". It depicts a street scene in London on the 29th of May (Restoration Day). The principle figures are two Freemasons in a state of inebriety, one of them possibly the Master of his Lodge, as he is wearing a square appended to his collar, and the other probably the Tyler conveying him home, as he is armed with a drawn sword.

They are passing a barbers shop (and it should be pointed out that barbers were also surgeons in those days), the sign of which is appropriately adorned in honour of the day, with oak leaves. Now, remembering that the fruit of the oak is called an acorn and that we have a hand emptying a bedroom utensil (to put the matter as politely as possible) out of an upper window over the two unfortunate figures and past the sign, we have a hidden allusion to a password which we are accustomed to say means an ear of corn near to a fall of water. As the picture is full of other gibes at Freemasonry, there can be no doubt that this interpretation is correct.

But to return now to our tympanum, please note how the central panel is carved with water lilies and the side panels with oak leaves and acorns. Thus, our architect has succeeded in conveying, in a far more delicate way than Hogarth, that it is necessary to give a certain password before approaching the winding stair on the North side of the building, leading to the middle chamber, here represented by a gallery. And, please note, the peculiar label to the doorway of this staircase, which, I think, is meant to suggest a cable tow with fringed ends.

Royal Arch Companions may be interested to note the Ox, the Man, the Lion and the Eagle carved on the font, but these are the symbols of the Evangelists, they may not have any Freemasonic significance. The inscription on the font makes it clear that it was the gift of Edmund, a son of the donor of the church, but this does not necessarily mean that Freemasonic symbolism has been abandoned, for the warrens' slaves, quite a recent gift from a gentleman who was not associated with our craft, have been deliberately decorated with the acacia.

And whilst we are on the subject of furnishings, it is not possible to overlook the wonderful lectern or faldstool on the chancel steps. Here, beyond any shadow of a doubt, we have as true an example of Freemasonic application of design as could possibly be devised. It bears the simple inscription, "From Clement", who was of course, the son of Albert Hudson Royds and the Clement Robert Nuttall Beswick-Royds, Deputy Provincial Grand Master and Provincial Second Principal of East Lancashire, still well remembered by the older brethren of our own day.

The base of black marble is surmounted by a perfect ashlar in the form of a cube of pure white marble, upon which rest the pillars of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, here typified by the Ionic, Doric and Corinthian orders and having the jewels of the Master and the Senior and Junior Wardens respectively on the pedestals or plinths. In the process of repair some of these emblems have been misplaced and in one case the plumb-rule has actually been inverted.* These pillars support a brass plate, the middle of which represents the blazing star or glory in the centre surrounded by a frame which is enriched with pomegranates and other Freemasonic symbols which you will have no difficulty in recognising. The actual sloping rests for V.C.L. are composed of the square and compasses and so the significance of the whole thing is complete.

(*At a recent relacquering and reassembling of the parts, these errors have been corrected).

Clever and interesting though this may be, I do not think it was designed by the original architect of the building for it is not quite in keeping with the rest of the church, nor is it equal to it in beauty.

The memorial brass on the North wall of the chancel is also interesting. It was designed by Bro. The Rev. E. W. Gilbert, who was the first incumbent of the parish and it illustrates some of the important offices the donor of the church held in the various branches of Freemasonry. He was evidently Deputy Provincial Grand Master for both East Lancashire and Worcestershire, later becoming Provincial Grand Master and Grand Superintendent of the latter county.

He also appears to have been Provincial Prior of the Knights Templar and Sovereign Grand Inspector General of the Ancient and Accepted Rite. The chain possibly represents the highest office he held in the Craft, Whilst the V.S.L. and the square and compasses probably imply that it is on such a solid basis that our Craft is established. The gloriously rich roof of the chancel reminds us of the woodwork of King Solomon's Temple which was carved with knoops and open flowers, and I would particularly draw your attention to the variety of geometrical designs forming the panels of the ceiling. If money were available, it would probably be appropriate to overlay all this with gold.

The lantern tower at the crossing has unfortunately been boarded over and so its use and purpose, as well as its Freemasonic significance, have been lost. I understand that a cold down-draught necessitated this alteration. It is a pity some other method, which did not interfere with the amenities of the building, was not adopted. The apertures were, of course, meant to represent the windows of narrow lights over the roofs of the chambers which surrounded the temple.

So far as Freemasons are concerned, the private chapel in the South East corner of the building for the use of the Royds family is as important as anything in the whole structure. There is a peculiar appropriateness in the position of this feature. You will all remember where the finished craftsman is placed after his Passing! I have already called your attention to the entrance gates of this part of the church.

Now please observe the windows, not only in regard to the architectural details, but even in regard to the subjects illustrated in the stained glass. After ascending the stairs, you are faced with the Tyler and his sword. In the upper part of this window you will find a sword and quill pen in saltire, both of course, jewels of lodge officers, but of whose special significance in combination I am personally unaware. They may possibly have some connection with what are known as higher degrees. The next two windows on the South side show the Scribes, Ezra and Nehemiah, of special interest to P.A. Companions because of their association with the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

The East window, in itself a marvellous example of Freemasonic symbolism in its architectural design, is appropriately filled with pictorial representation of the designing, building and dedication of the temple.

In the centre light you will see the three Grand Masters with the plan, or at all events what purports to be the plan of the temple, and the figure of H. A. B. wearing a Master Mason's cap, preserves the lineaments of Bro. Albert Hudson Royds. The right hand light shows the workmen busy with the masonry and the left hand light, the priests and populace celebrating the completion of the building. At the foot of each panel the donor's monogram is worked in, whilst in the central pentagon of each pentagon are the emblems of the Craft, the Knights Templar and the Ancient and Accepted Rite.

On one of the roof corbels there is carved an emblem which has been pointed out to me as a *shack-bolt*, but I am not inclined to accept this statement. I have ascertained from the College of Arms that it is a heraldic device known as a shack-bolt, and it is only one of these devices from the donor's coat of arms, which are reproduced on the other corbels.

And now I wish to call your attention to a feature, the two pillars between the chancel and the chapel, which are the very first objects we should have searched for in a building having any supposed resemblance to King Solomon's Temple. You may think, on first consideration, that if these pillars are really meant to remind us of Boaz and Jachin, they are placed in an unusual position. But on serious reflection, I believe you will be satisfied this is not really so. Bear in mind that the temple was not a place of worship as we now understand the term. The

congregation did not assemble in its interior. The High Priest had certain duties to perform which necessitated his entrance, and in looking outwards toward the congregation his vision had always to pass between the pillars.

Just exactly in the same way the donor of this church, who could quite rightly be regarded as the High Priest of Freemasonry in this district, had to look out from his sanctuary between these pillars to contemplate the people in the observance of their religious rites.

The shafts of the pillars are not inconsistent with Phoenician origin and the richly ornamented capitals, although Gothic in detail, certainly recall the descriptions given in Kings and Chronicles.

The glass in the windows in the South side of the church depicts for the most part buildings and buildings, such as the Ark and the Tower of Babel, whilst those on the North show the creation, fall, and redemption of man. Thus, it may fairly be claimed the useful lessons of both operative and speculative building are applied just, indeed, as we are intended to apply them by the teachings of our Craft.

The vine tree carved out of the solid masonry of the East wall, and this point should be emphasised, forms an unusual reredos. In amongst the foliage and fruit are carved the words "I AM THE". Here, surely, we have a message of special importance.

The calumniators of our Brotherhood are never tired of asserting that Freemasonry is an anti-Christian organisation. This, of course, is simply not true. Whilst the three symbolic degrees, of which the Royal Arch forms the completion, as well as some of the side degrees, are open to all who express a belief in a supreme being - denominated amongst us T.G.A.O.T.U. - and a restoration to a future life, the higher degrees, of which the Ancient and Accepted Rite (consisting of 33) is the most important, only admit Christians.

The donor of this church then, who, as I have already told you, was a Sovereign Grand Inspector General (and from the nature of that appointment admitted to the 33) has taken the opportunity of proving to the worshippers in this House of God, and especially to those amongst them who from their membership of our Craft are capable of learning the lesson, that not only was his own Christian faith firm and unshaken, but that it was in no ways incompatible with his honorable position in Freemasonry.

I must draw my remarks to an end, but would just like to say that there are many other points of Freemasonic interest in this church to which I have not called your attention. I prefer to leave to each man the joy of finding something for himself rather than of wearying you with too long a description.

But in gratitude to our Fr. W. Bro. Albert Hudson Royds for this fine tribute to the Glory of God and to Freemasonry, it is perhaps fitting to suggest that his epitaph might be modelled on the lines of Sir Christopher Wren's in Saint Paul's Cathedral -

SI MONUMENTUM REQUIRIS CIRCUMSPICE.