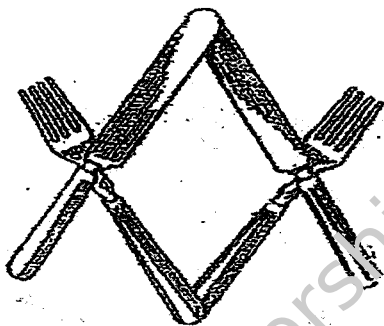


*'... and so to refreshment'*



**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FESTIVE BOARD**

by

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## **‘... and so to refreshment’**

- Brethren this lecture is entitled ‘...and so to refreshment’ and is about the origins of the customs observed at our festive boards. In preparing it I consulted many sources to all of whom I am most grateful. In particular I would mention the works of W. Brothers Bernard Jones, Harry Carr, John Hamill and Yoshino Washizu, also the published transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge of Research. However, any errors, omissions or flawed assumptions are entirely my own work.
- A board in the context of a ‘festive board’ is a table laden with food, as in the phrase ‘tied and board’. The first recorded Masonic festive boards were held by operative masons in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, usually to celebrate religious festivals but may also have been arranged for the purely Masonic gatherings referred to in the old charges. On these special days operative masons would gather in the building under construction or in temporary shelters called lodges and feast on roast meat washed down with spiced ale.
- The 14<sup>th</sup> century Regius manuscript laid down how masons should behave at these first festive boards; that they should come to the table with clean hands, not speak with their mouths full and refrain from using the napkins to blow their noses. All still good advice!

- In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the early Speculative Masons held their meetings in taverns and inns or sometimes coffee houses, so refreshments were readily available to them. Many lodges were named after these first meeting places, such as the Globe Lodge No.23 which first met at the Globe Tavern. The first Grand Lodge met in an alehouse called the Goose & Gridiron near St. Paul's Cathedral, possibly attracted there by the much acclaimed charms of Hannah the barmaid.
- The smallness of the rooms in many of these establishments did restrict lodge membership, so later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century hotels became increasingly popular as they could provide bigger rooms as well as better facilities.
- The early Speculative Masons met more often than we do today and for them the festive board was not a separate event to the Masonic meeting itself, some lodges even initiated 'serving brothers' solely to be waiters or musicians. During meetings the brethren eat snacks, drank and smoked; so not surprisingly aprons were often stained or damaged and lodge accounts record their regular replacement.
- They also sang songs and drank toasts, often accompanied by very noisy Masonic Fire and the stamping of feet. The 1760 exposure 'Three Distinct Knocks' records that people sitting below a meeting room were sometimes frightened that the building would be shaken down about them.

- The Junior Warden calling the brethren to or from labour and refreshment had a vital role in managing these proceedings. Then as now the discussion of politics and religion was not allowed during either period, creating a spirit of tolerance that set Freemasonry apart from most other fraternities. Once the Masonic business was completed the lodge would be formally closed but the brethren often stayed on to take supper and continue making merry.
- The degree rituals they worked were much shorter than ours today. Instead for most of the meeting the brethren would sit around a candlelit table listening to lectures and taking part in the catechisms, question and answer rituals to test brethren on their Masonic knowledge.
- The lectures were not solely Masonic but could cover many learned and scientific topics. The Old Kings Arms Lodge held a series of such lectures in the 1730s, including one by Bro. Graeme on the fermentation of intoxicating liquors. The minutes record that the brethren were 'greatly delighted' with this particular lecture and asked Bro. Graeme to speak again on the same subject, which he did on no less than 3 occasions!

- Heavy drinking was commonplace in those days and Lodge accounts record the purchase of ale, wine and spirits; as well as sugar, lemons and nutmeg to make punch. Although in some lodges the candidate had to pay for all the food and drink on their Initiation night.
- Some Masons said that the bonds of friendship would only tighten when 'wet' and a popular Masonic song of 1778 ran:
 

'Let every man take a glass in hand,  
 Drain bumpers to our Master Grand,  
 As long as he can sit or stand.'
- Although Masons were probably one of the better behaved elements of society, as they did have strict rules to govern behaviour and limit drinking at their meetings. Still today the Ancient Charges & Regulations read to a Master Elect require him to guard against intemperance and excess in his lodge.
- Typical of the early lodge rules were the 1760 Bylaws of the Lodge of Antiquity which stipulated that any brother who discussed religion or politics, bet, cursed, was 'disguised in liquor' or hissed at a speaker would be fined.
- In 1736 a lodge meeting in the Rummer Tavern Bristol fined their Master a 1/- for being drunk, even visitors could be fined. In 1783 the Albion Lodge No.9 fined a visitor a 1/- for swearing, whereupon he challenged the Master to a duel. The lodge was then closed so the outcome was not recorded.

- Such bylaws and fines were not always sufficient to control excess. The Mariners' Lodge No. 576 founded in 1799 had a side table laden with wine and spirits in their meeting room and for 6 pence members could take drinks as they wished. It was a very merry Lodge so soon ran into financial difficulties and in 1822 it was erased with some refreshment bills several months in arrears; but they left us a fascinating record of their history plus a unique Masonic jug that apart from bearing the usual Craft symbols also advertised the good ale available at the 'Rose & Crown'.
- Most 18<sup>th</sup> century lodges arranged formal dinners to celebrate their installation meetings. In 1753 at the annual feast of the Old Dundee Lodge No.18 it is recorded that 33 brethren dined on 2 quarters of lamb with beef gravy, 12 fowls, a 23lb ham and 2 plum puddings all washed down by an assortment of alcoholic beverages. After these dinners female relations and lady friends were sometimes invited into the lodge room or an adjoining gallery. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century special ladies dinners and Masonic Balls became very popular, and our present day Ladies Festivals developed from such events.
- In the early days less respectable ladies may sometimes have been invited in to meetings. In 1757 Bro. Storey of the Grenadiers Lodge No.66 was fined 2 pence for bringing a woman into the lodge during lodge hours; their Junior Warden was also fined 2 pence but in his case for kissing her.

- After the unification of the two Grand Lodges in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Masonic meetings started to change significantly. The rituals grew longer so the meetings became much more formal and there was less opportunity for conviviality in the meeting room itself. The communal tables in lodge rooms started to be replaced by pedestals and eventually food, drink and smoking were all banned from lodge rooms, although in some provincial lodges the old customs were much slower to disappear.
- Around this time dedicated Masonic Halls started to open in many towns and cities to accommodate the growing number of lodges and brethren. Although taverns and hotels were often still used for dining, as formal festive boards after every meeting was becoming the custom.
- Sometimes Masonic regalia was still worn at these separate festive boards but this practice soon died out; although a few lodges such as the Mount Moriah Lodge No.34 still do dine in full regalia and in others all or some of the officers wear their collars at the festive board.
- Dining customs such as the clapping in of the Master and loving cups also started to appear around this time; often being copied from the dining customs of the Craft Guilds and Livery Companies.

- Although increasingly formal 19<sup>th</sup> century festive boards could still be lively events. In 1806 the Premier Grand Lodge asked their stewards to ensure that the dining fees would cover the cost of broken glasses and a carpenter for repairs. Then in 1815 to control over exuberance they banned soda water and nuts from their festive boards, what brethren had been doing with them is not recorded!
- Music and singing at the festive board has always been popular. In 1737 several lodges contributed towards the costs of no less than 3 separate bands to play in the procession to that year's Grand Festival Feast.
- Many Masonic songbooks were published and songs were included in the first Books of Constitutions, the only one of these early songs still regularly sung today is the Entered Apprentice's Song. First published in the early 1700s, the lyrics were probably written by Matthew Birkhead an actor comedian at the Drury Lane Theatre, as well as a Freemason.
- These songs often had wine taking and toasts built in between the verses, but the first formal reference to Masonic toasts is in Anderson's 1738 Book of Constitutions. This refers to the Grand Master reviving in 1719 the old and peculiar toasts of the Freemasons but does not elaborate on the form they took. However, we know from the early exposures that Masonic Fire was taken with these toasts.



- The custom of Firing is not exclusively Masonic and is believed to derive from an old tradition at military or public events of firing cannons or muskets to mark a toast, Shakespeare referred to this practice in Hamlet.
- We do know of Masonic instances of such real Firing. In 1741 the Vernon Lodge in Dublin held an open-air celebration where each toast was marked by musket fire and at a Masonic Annual Feast held near Sunderland in 1775 it was reported that the toasts were 'drunk with the discharge of a cannon', hopefully not a full size one!
- The use of actual cannons and muskets was exceptional but it did become the practice for diners to mark a toast by banging their glasses down in imitation of their fire; although some writers suggest that the enthusiastic banging down of glasses came first and the similarity to musket or cannon fire was only noted subsequently.
- The earliest written accounts of Masonic Fire are French, but this does not necessarily mean that it originated in France. The first detailed description was given in the 1737 French exposure 'Reception d'un Frey-Macon', which used information obtained by Mademoiselle Carton of the French Opera in return for her favours.

- It called the wine powder and the glasses firearms, and said that to drink an Initiate's health the brethren rose and the Master would tell them to 'charge' their glasses. Then on the command 'lay your hands to your weapons' the glass was lifted to the lips in 3 movements and they drank. The empty glass was then moved to the left breast, the right breast and held out to the front 3 times; before again in 3 movements it was set down hard on the table. After which the brethren clapped their hands and shouted 'VIVAT' 3 times.
- Later exposures expanded the gunfire analogy, calling the bottles 'barrels' and the goblets 'cannon', the instruction for a toast being to 'Charge Cannons - Present Arms - Take Aim - Fire - Grand Fire!'. Our present day Wardens reporting their columns 'Fully Charged' recalls this old instruction.
- In England the 1724 minutes of the Old King's Arms Lodge No. 28 do record the health of the Master Elect being drunk with 'three time three' but the first detailed English descriptions of Masonic Fire do not appear until the exposures of the 1760s. Which describe it in this way.

- The Deacons first ensure that the glasses are fully charged, the Master then lifts his glass and proposes a toast with three times three in the apprentice way, the brethren repeat the toast and drink. Then copying the Master they hold their empty glasses to the fore before drawing them 3 times across the throat and setting them back down on the table in 3 motions 'Firing' on the last with a loud report. After which the brethren raise their hands breast high and clap 9 times in 3 groups of 3, stamping their feet in unison and finishing with a final 'HUZZA' before sitting down.
- Glasses often shattered during such firing and brethren could be fined when this happened, in 1767 the Old Lodge at Wakefield fined two brothers one shilling each for glasses 'burst in a Fire'. Special firing glasses or goblets were made with strengthened bottoms to reduce breakages, but over time most lodges gave up signing with glasses. Moving instead to the type of Fire we know today, which we can now consider in more detail.
- Various origins have been suggested for the 3 P. L. R. gestures that commence the Fire; that they represent the sign of the Cross, the Hammer of Thor or even a trowel spreading cement. However, the evidence clearly indicates that they are in fact the vestiges of the apprentice signs alluded to in the first descriptions of Firing, which explains why the festive board should be tyled.

- They have now degenerated to just token pointing gestures, although the Emulation Lodge of Improvement do still use the recognised Entered Apprentice sign in the Fire given during their 1<sup>st</sup> Degree lecture. The early exposures record different toasting rituals for each degree and each has similarities to the different degree signs and salutations we know today, the Lodge of Loyalty in Bermuda still give a Fire similar to the Fellowcraft's salutation.
- Next in the Firing sequence is a '1 - 2' count. This is reminiscent of the 2 motions previously made prior to banging a glass down but it now heralds an extra clap added to the original 9, or sometimes the Master gavelling.
- Our Fire is usually completed by 9 claps given in 3 groups of 3. Audible salutes given by clapping, stamping the feet or striking the apron are frequently mentioned in the early records. The number in this instance may derive from the Entered Apprentice knocks or be in token of the 9 signs for a true Freemason referred to in some early Masonic exposures.
- There is no evidence to suggest that our Firing is in anyway connected to the 21 gun naval salute. The actions in the most commonly used Fire do total 21 but each element is clearly of a separate origin.

- Masonic Fire is not universal in Freemasonry and has always varied widely in form and speed. Some lodges still use firing glasses and others have small gavels to give Fire. A few give 'Running Fire', where each brother bangs his glass down in turn, or a variation called 'Roll Fire' where the glass is also ground on the table in a circular motion.
- In another variation the Lodge of Regularity No.91 give 'Secretary Fire' where the brethren whisper messages around the table before banging their firing glasses down. The Fitzroy Lodge No.560 give 'Regimental Fire', where the actions are said to represent the swinging of a fusee or taper to keep it glowing before a grenade is symbolically lit and thrown.
- The silent Fire sometimes used for the Absent Brethren and Tylers' toasts may derive from the quiet Fire once used to honour departed brethren; although the Tyler's Fire may be silent as when directing it he cannot be outside the door to prevent eavesdroppers.
- But let's leave Masonic Fire there and return to the development of the festive board as a whole.
- As the 19<sup>th</sup> century closed the festive board reached its zenith as an elaborate dining event, having become formal dinner-suited affairs with up to 10 course meals, many wine takings and long toast lists; accompanied by music and singing, often from professional entertainers.

- These customs and practices continued into the early 20th century and many can still be found at our festive boards today; but social change and modern tastes, coupled with rising costs have progressively led to less formality, shorter menus and fewer toasts.
- Although 20<sup>th</sup> century festive boards could still be extraordinary events. In 1925 possibly the largest ever Masonic festive board was held at London Olympia to raise funds for the new Freemasons' Hall in London, over 7000 brethren were seated at 5 miles of tables and served by 1250 waitresses.
- More bizarrely in 1946 a Masonic journal advertised the 'sawing of a woman in half' as a festive board entertainment, hopefully this was the time-honoured conjurer's illusion rather than an enactment of one of our traditional penalties!
- Finally brethren, if in the festive board tradition I could close with a toast it would be to 'our Masonic forebears who left us such a rich legacy of good fellowship, good manners and

**Good Fire!'**