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- 5 FEB 2000

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5th February 2000

Dear P. G. H. Barrie,

You may recall the last time we met at the AGM of the Provinces Libraries and Museum, the subject of "Masonic Buttons" was discussed.

The enclosed paper is part of an article being prepared for possible publication, it awaits photographs of buttons and eminent Masons wearing them. I was at Grand Lodge this week to especially research their possible artefacts for inclusion.

You will be the very first to read my paper (warts and all) it may substantiate the possible usage in the future to raise revenue for the Provincial New Museum Building Fund.

A. You are aware the Worcestershire Brethren have made huge efforts these five years to raise funds for the Festival. New ideas and initiatives will be needed for the Library and Museum Building Fund. Masonic Buttons might just be one of them. I have seen Provincial Buttons for Dorset, Bristol and Monmouthshire so the precedence exists.

Yours sincerely and fraternally
Granville Angell. P. P. J. G. D.
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MASONIC BUTTONS

From time immemorial the button has been used for the relatively simple function of fastening articles of dress or clothing. The ancient Greeks or Etruscans fastened their tunics through loops, Knight Templars, the Orders of St. John of Jerusalem and Thomas of Acon also used this system until the invention of the buttonhole in the thirteenth century.

As dress styles changed through the centuries buttons quickly gained ground in popularity and became prominent as a decorative device. Wearing gold, silver and ivory buttons was an indication of wealth, rank or social position. Elaborate and expensive buttons were embellished with insets of ivory, tortoiseshell, semi and precious jewels.

The emergence of English Freemasonry and its integration within society coincided with the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain (1750 – 1830). Thus providing the opportunities for numerous button manufacturers to respond to the demands of changing fashion. Freemasons were no exception to the influences that might affect their dress codes. Indeed, clothing and regalia is drawn to the attention of the brethren in a Quarterly Communication of Grand Lodge of England, dated 24th June 1727. Followed a year later by it being found necessary to reprimand some brethren for appearing improperly dressed.

Even allowing for the fickleness of changes in fashion over the past three centuries, the use of buttons still lingers on in Masonic regalia and clothing. This may be attributed to a combination of individual tastes in fashion, art or design, extrovertness of characters amongst the brethren and a liberal acceptance by both Lodges and Provincial Grand Masters (e.g. Thomas Dunkerley 1724 – 95).

Rather like the two blades of a pair of scissors “Conformity” and “Uniformity” interact to cut the weft and warp on the rich Masonic tapestry of life. Yet the individuality and personality of Freemasons can still be expressed in subtle ways, the button, watch chain and fob, lapel pins, cuff links or symbolised black tie.

For many years a small silver button with the Masonic emblem of square and compasses and the letter "G" was used as the centre point of the three rosettes displayed on the Master Mason's apron. On the regalia collar is a "basket button" which has been modified over the years. The white gloves also continue to use buttons of various materials and design.

It is, however, within the changing fashion of men's clothing that the interest and evidence of Freemason brethren's participation remains. In the 17th Century the buttons on men's coats and long waistcoats or vests were usually small, very numerous and as much decorative as functional.

During the last half of the 1700's picture and portrait buttons showing the profiles of people and scenes were produced. This also provided an ideal method of displaying Masonic symbols or letters, Lodge names and numbers. Buttons could be made to complement a particular garment or person, ideal for displaying within a Lodge temple or festive board.

Very large buttons were the fashion from 1775 onwards which coincided with the emergence in the Midlands of Matthew Boulton and James Watt introducing the bright, costly, cut-steel button that was made by attaching polished steel facets to a steel blank. Pewter became the familiar metal of the age, also used to make moulded or stamped out buttons. For the Freemason cast brass buttons, particularly calamine brass that lent itself to distinguishing designs.

Famous button manufacturers included: Firmin and Sons, London; Gaunts of Birmingham, Clancy of Dublin and John Ward of York. Sadly, these companies appear to have left no records of their manufacturing capabilities. Therefore dating becomes a difficult art, but a useful rule of thumb is:

Flat Button	Prior to the year 1810
Slightly arched	In the period 1810 – 1820 button manufacturers develop the ability to round or arch the backs of their buttons.
Closed back	From 1820 they were able to make closed backs.

With Mr. Micawber-like optimism one can only hope that something may turn up to improve the research knowledge

The eighteenth century was the era when so many changes occurred in men's fashions. The 'Frock' coat became more fashionable and, until 1770, was worn for full dress. Until 1780 it was single breasted and then double breasted with collar and lapels. It was not until the Victorian era that the Morning coat started to outlast the Frock coat.

Waistcoats or vests finely embroidered with either single or double-breasted rows of buttons were always popular. It is only in the last 100 years that they were worn in black with dinner jackets as they are to the present time. Sticks or Canes should not be forgotten; some rare Masonic examples remain. Two hundred years ago there was a major change from the buckle to the laced shoe or boot with the advent of wearing trousers instead of stockings and knee breeches.

However, just a century ago the short ankle-boots were in vogue (sometimes with spats) these used a series of small buttons that may now have had Masonic distinguishing features. Also, rather comically, this period saw the growth of the mime or pantomime theatre productions. In one such production "Cinderella" the character "Buttons" epitomises the general usage.

One of the most interesting and beautiful of buttons is the one made by John Ward of York for the York Lodge No. 236. It is well known in English Masonic circles that the oldest minute in speculative Freemasonry is the March entry of Old York Lodge in 1712.

On the 17th January 1870 a memorial was sent to the Grand Master the Rt. Hon. The Earl of Zetland (who just happened to be a member of the Lodge) to change its name to York Lodge No. 236. In granting this wish on 7th February 1870, it permitted them to celebrate their centenary on 7th July 1877. To show the close association with the City of York they decided to have buttons made. They would be purchased and worn by the brethren themselves. The design is the arms of the City of York in the centre with the name, number and year (1777) around the edges.

Another interesting button is a Provincial one for the Province of Dorset. This is attributed to its then Provincial Grand master R W Bro. William Tucker whom,

together with other brethren in Dorset during the early 1800's, publicly wore them. Tucker was, to say the least, an extremely flamboyant P G M and after being warned by England's Grand Lodge to refrain from parading in Regalia in many different orders, he was dismissed from office in 1853. The button was manufactured by another well known firm of the time, Jennens of London. It displays the square and compass, the all Seeing Eye and the word Dorset interwoven through the compass. It was produced both in coat and cuff sizes.

We may look at the involvement of another Masonic constitution and its buttons. Ireland, unlike England and Scotland became heavily immersed in the Volunteer Movement of the 1780's period with the membership of a number of Lodges joining the local Volunteer Company enmass. Masonic links were strong and Masonic symbolism appears quite frequently in Volunteer records, the button being a classical example. The Volunteer uniform was common place for the brethren to wear at Lodge meetings. The Tyler, in particular, was singled out by the Lodge to be dressed in uniform, in many cases with a profusion of buttons displayed.

Irish Masonry, therefore, appears to have a wider appeal amongst its Lodges. Examples of their usage includes Lodges No's 1, 4, 5, 8, 18, 40, 68, 82, 95, 100, 116, 125, 134, 141, 272, 620, 790 initially formed between 1781 and 1783. These buttons would have been introduced at various times and for various occasions. This might be on formation or to commemorate a special anniversary (e.g. Centenary). Lodges would also wear them to give the members a distinctive presence.

Leinster Lodge No 141 minute for 19th March 1838 resolved the following. "That in future at each regular meeting each member would be attired in Dress Coat of Black Cloth with Black velvet collar – full skirt lining of crimson satin. The cuffs peaked. The opening at sides and slashed. Buttons the G M (Gilt Metal) Lodge Button. 12 on front, 4 on the skirts and 3 on each cuff". Later minutes of 29th November and 14th January 1842 required members to wear the uniform or pay a fine of 2s 6d each, which would have been a substantial sum at that time.

In addition to all the buttons mentioned are others of a more general nature, no indication of manufacturer, country of origin, design, quotation or year of introduction. The frustration factor of which a collector of Masonic artefacts will

instantly recognise. The general "wear and tear" these buttons have had in itself becomes a challenge, if only they could talk what a tale they would tell. The buttons usage has stood the test of time, it still has a long future, especially in the service of Freemasonry. Relatively cheap to produce, distinctive in appeal, flexible in its use, it provides the means by which both the individual brother, a Lodge or Province can emphasise its distinctive uniqueness without being ostentatious.

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