

COMPANY OF FREEMASONS IN LONDON
Reprinted 21st July 2004 - CANMAS

Editor's Note: This article by Brother Harry M. Furniss, of Prince of Wales Lodge No. 100, is the sixth that has appeared in the Bulletin. The last was in June 1974.

About the middle of the fourteenth century, the haphazard group of tradesmen in England which had been known as guilds began to be reconstituted under the name Livery Companies.

Parliament decreed in 1355 that all artificers and "people of mysteries" should choose a trade and stick with it. A list dated 1364 shows 32 companies, such as Tailors, Glovers, Armourers, and Goldsmiths. Sixteen years later there were 48 companies listed, the seventeenth of which was the Company of Freemasons and the thirty-fourth the Company of Masons.

The Freemasons Company was apparently a small group, sending only two members to the common council; the Masons Company sent four members. The constitutions and government of these companies was closely framed after the earlier guilds.

Many of these companies had their own distinctive dress, or livery. The word livery is thought to have originally meant the clothing delivered by the tradesman to his master. In time, however, the companies adopted distinctive dress which they called livery. To be admitted to membership in a company was "to have the clothing."

Livery of these early Masons was black dress, white gloves and apron, the style to which we still adhere. (Dress of course, means "suit" in our terms.) Even today Freemasons may not enter the lodge or join in its labors unless "properly clothed" which means white gloves, white apron and the jewel of rank. The gloves, the Historian Mackey noted regretfully, are now often dispensed with, except on public occasion.

On the Continent, at this time, the historian Lenning recorded that the clothing of a Freemason consisted of apron, gloves, sword and hat. At one point, in England, the symbolic clothing of a Master Mason was said to be a skull cap and jacket of yellow, the trousers of blue, apparently an allusion of the brass top and steel legs of a pair of compasses. This was later changed to "the old colors" of purple, crimson and blue which were connected with royalty.

Mackey, in his "Encyclopedia" stuck to simplicity, however, and said blindly that "the actual dress of a Master Mason was a full suit of black, with white neck-cloth, apron, gloves and stockings; the buckles being of silver and the jewels being suspended from a white ribbon by way of the collar."

The fact that medieval Masons wore a particular dress when at work, which was the same in all countries, is evident from manuscripts from the tenth century onwards. The French

Statute of Ex-communication of 1326 tried to outlaw groups wearing similar dress, but achieved little.

The writer Chiswell, in *New View of London*, printed in 1708, said that "the Masons Company was incorporated about 1410 having been called the Free Masons, a fraternity of great account, who have been honored by several Kings, and very many of the Nobility and Gentry being of their Society. They are governed by a Master, two Wardens, 25 assistants and there are 65 on Livery."

In spite of this popularity among the "Gentry", the Masons were never one of the 12 great Livery Companies like the Mercers, Grocers, Fishmongers, Skinners or Vintners, but remained a "minor company."

However, Masons had armorial arms, said to have been confirmed by Henry VIII in 1521. These can be seen in the British Museum and they show a silver or white scalloped chevron, between three white castles with black doors and windows on a black field, and on the chevron a pair of compasses of a black color. These arms are said to have been adopted by the first English Grand Lodge in 1717.

The two original London groups of Masons eventually merged under the name Company of Masons. Mackey advanced the opinion in his "History of Freemasonry" that the Company of Freemasons must have been the English branch of the travelling Freemasons who spread over the whole of Europe. The Company of Masons, he therefore felt, would have been a group of local Masons formed into a simple guild such as the grocers, tailors and the painters.

The fact there were two groups at one time explains divergences in early manuscripts. Unfortunately these early records are all copies; no originals have been found. A poem written by Halliwell between 1350 and 1400, and judged authentic by experts, leaves no doubt that Masons met in those days on specified occasions and under certain rules and regulations, in a body which they called the congregation or assembly.

Other manuscripts confirm this, adding that Masters and Fellows within 50 miles must attend or have a very good excuse, especially those who had acted so as to deserve reproof.

The fact that due notice was required to be given suggests that the meetings were held at irregular periods, and that there was some overall authority with power to call these meetings. The object of the assemblies was to pass judgment on members who had broken the rules of the craft. About the middle of the seventeenth century, these assemblies became annual.

From various sources we can gain a small insight into the life of a Mason in those days. There is a record of a contract made in 1439 between the Abbot of St. Edmundsbury and John Wood for repairs to the "great tower". The instructions were to give Wood, a Master

Mason, "board for himself as a gentleman and his servant as a yeoman, and two robes, one for himself after a gentleman's livery."

One hundred years later, in 1550, the historian Froude recorded that English journeyman Masons earned sixpence a day. Beef then sold at halfpence a pound and strong ale, as potent as wine, was only a penny a gallon. Thus daily take-home pay would either buy 12 pounds of beef or six gallons of the best, sufficient for quite a grand lifestyle!

Published in MASONIC BULLETIN, B.C.R.; February, 1975.

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