

MASONIC MUSINGS

The Masonic Education Newsletter

of Lodge Epicurean No 906 and Lodge Amalthea No 914

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Welcome to *Issue Three*. On this occasion, I deal with the topic of the *Festive Board* – focusing on its history and development, as well as *Festive Board* practices. While *Festive Boards* are not part of our lodges' practices, we are the exception rather than the rule – so it is useful for our younger members, in particular, to have some insight into this area. As I foreshadowed in the last edition, I have concluded here with a 'Question and Answer'... Oh, and if any member has a question – let me know and I'll see what I can do in providing an answer (or at least, an 'opinion').

Fraternal regards,
Kent Henderson.

...AND SO TO REFRESHMENT

This talk is about the origins of the customs observed at our festive boards. It needs to be stated at the outset that Lodge Epicurean and Lodge Amalthea do not hold a traditional Festive Board after lodge meetings, but rather a private dinner at a selected restaurant. However, almost all English lodges, and those on Constitutions that derive from England post 1813. It was in this year that rival *Antients* and *Moderns* Grand Lodges amalgamated to form the *United Grand Lodge of England*.

A board (in this context of a *Festive Board*) a table laden with food, as in the phrase 'bed and board'. The first recorded Masonic festive boards were held by operative masons in the 14th century; usually to celebrate religious festivals, but they may also have been arranged for the purely Masonic gatherings referred to in the *Old Charges*. On these special days they would gather in the building under construction or in temporary shelters called 'lodges' to feast on roast meat washed down with spiced ale. The 14th century *Regius Manuscript* laid down how masons should behave at these first festive boards; 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 17th and early 18th centuries the early Speculative Masons held their meetings in taverns, inns, or sometimes coffee houses; so refreshments were readily available to them. Many lodges were later named after these first meeting places; such as the Globe Lodge No. 23

which 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 18th century hotels became increasingly popular meeting places as they could provide bigger rooms as well as better facilities.

The early Speculative Masons met more often than we do today (a habit still largely continued in Europe where many lodges meet weekly) 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 at their meetings. During meetings the brethren ate snacks, drank and smoked; so their aprons were soon stained or damaged and lodge accounts record their regular replacement. They also sang songs and drank toasts, often accompanied by very noisy 'Masonic Fires' and the stamping of feet. The 1760 exposure *Three Distinct Knocks* records that people sitting below meeting rooms 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 their Masonic knowledge.

The lectures were not just Masonic but included other learned topics such as architecture – even medical dissections are recorded; the Old Kings Arms Lodge held a series of such lectures in the 1730s. One given by Bro. Graeme about the *Fermentation of Intoxicating Liquors* probably had samples to taste, as the minutes record that the brethren were ‘greatly delighted’ and asked Bro. Graeme to speak again on the same subject on no less than three occasions!

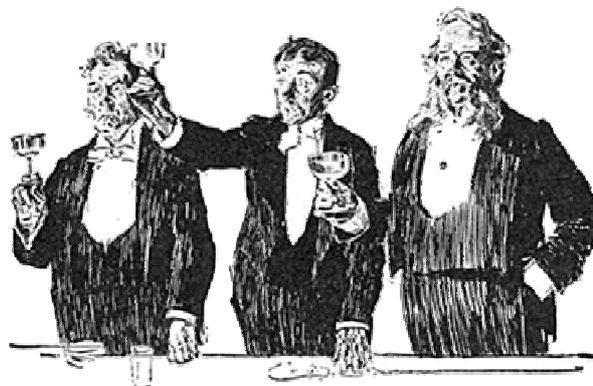
Heavy drinking was commonplace in those days and lodge accounts record the purchase of ale, wine and spirits; as well as sugar, lemons and nutmeg to make punch. Some lodges would require the candidate pay for all the food and drink at his initiation. Some Masons said that the bonds of friendship would 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.*

Nonetheless 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 1786 a Brother in the Mount Moriah Lodge No. 34 was fined six pence for falling asleep in the lodge. Even visitors could be fined. In 1783 the Albion Lodge No. 9 fined a visitor a shilling 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 six pence members could take drinks as they wished. It was

a very merry Lodge so it soon ran into financial difficulties and in 1822 it was erased – with some members’ refreshment bills well in arrears – but they left us a fascinating record of their history. There is an unusual Masonic jug that apart from various Craft symbols also bears an advertisement for the good ale available at the ‘Rose & Crown’.



Most 18th 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 23 pound 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 19th century special ladies dinners and Masonic balls became very popular. Virtually all English lodges still today hold an annual *Ladies Festival* – often a weekend away for brethren and ladies at an English ‘holiday location’. 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 two pence for bringing a woman into the lodge during lodge hours; their Junior Warden was also fined two pence, but in his case for kissing her!

After the unification of the two Grand Lodges in 1813 Masonic meetings started to change significantly. The rituals grew longer so the meetings became 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 slow to disappear.

Around this time dedicated Masonic Halls opened in many towns and cities to accommodate a growing number of lodges and

brethren. Although taverns and hotels were often still used for dining (and still are in England, particularly in London), formal festive boards after every meeting became the custom. Sometimes Masonic regalia was still worn at these separate festive boards, but the practice soon died out – although a few Lodges such as the Mount Moriah Lodge No. 34 still 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 customs of the Craft Guilds and Livery Companies.

Nonetheless increasingly formal 19th century festive boards could still be lively events. In 1806 the Premier (Moderns) 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, Grand Lodge 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 three separate bands to play in the procession to that year's Grand Festival Feast. Many Masonic song books were published and songs were included in the first *Books of Constitutions*; the only one of these early songs still regularly sung today (in England) 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.

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. While Masonic 'fires' are still common at English Festive Boards, and in some other countries, they are rarely used today in Craft Lodge Festive Boards in Australia – although the Tyler's Toast clearly has its origins as a 'Masonic Fire' (see below).

The earliest written accounts of 'Masonic Fire' are French, but this does not necessarily mean 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 three movements and they drank. The empty glass was then moved to the left breast, the right breast and held out to the front three times – before, again in three movements, it was set down hard on the table. After which the brethren clapped their hands and shouted 'VIVAT' three times.

Later exposures expanded the 'gunfire analogy', calling the bottles 'barrels' and the goblets 'cannon' – the instruction for a toast being '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 1734 minutes of the Old King's Arms Lodge No. 28 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. These say that the Deacons would first ensure that the glasses were fully charged, the Master then lifted his glass and proposed a toast with three times three in the apprentice way, the brethren repeated the toast and drank. Then copying the Master they held their empty glasses to the fore before drawing them three times across the throat and setting them back down on the table

in three motions – ‘Firing’ on the last with a loud report. After which the brethren raised their hands breast high and clapped nine times in three groups of three, stamping their feet in unison and finishing with a final ‘HUZZA’ before sitting down. Glasses often shattered during such firing and brethren were fined when this happened; in 1767 the Old Lodge at Wakefield fined two brothers a shilling each for glasses ‘burst in a Fire’. Special firing glasses 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 three Point–Left–Right gestures that commence the (English) ‘Fire’ – that they might represent the ‘Sign of the Cross’ or even a trowel spreading cement. However, the evidence clearly indicates that they are the vestiges of the Apprentice signs alluded to in the first descriptions of ‘Firing’; which also explains why (in England) the festive board is tyled. These signs have now degenerated to just token pointing gestures, although the Emulation Lodge of Improvement still uses the recognised Entered Apprentice sign in the ‘Fire’ given during their 1st Degree lecture. The early exposures do in fact record different toasting rituals for each degree, each one having similarities to the different degree signs and salutations in use today in England. A few lodges, such as the Lodge of Peace No. 149 in Yorkshire and the Lodge of Loyalty No. 358 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 two motions previously made prior to banging the glass down but it now heralds an extra clap added to the original nine, or sometimes the Master gavelling. Our ‘Fire’ is usually completed by nine claps given in three groups of three. 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 *nine 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’ in England do total 21 but each element is clearly of

a separate origin. ‘Masonic Firing’ is not universal in Freemasonry and varies widely in form and speed. Some lodges still use firing glasses and others use 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 gives the ‘Secretary Fire’, where the brethren whisper messages around the table before banging their firing glasses down. The Fitzroy Lodge No. 569 gives a ‘Regimental Fire’, where the actions are said to represent the swinging of a fuse 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. The only ‘fire’ hangover in Victoria that is regularly used in most Craft lodges is, in fact, the Tyler’s Toast – and is ‘second degree derivation’ is fairly obvious.

Let’s leave ‘Masonic Fires’ there and return to the development of the festive board as a whole. As the 19th century closed they reached their zenith as elaborate dining events. Having become formal dinner-suited affairs, with up to ten course meals, many wine takings and long toast lists; all 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 English festive boards today; but social change and modern tastes, coupled with rising costs, have progressively led to less formality, shorter menus and fewer toasts. In England, the dinner suit was replaced by the lounge suit with the advent of the Great War, with no revision thereafter.

Nonetheless, 20th 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 sat at over three miles of tables and were served by 1360 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 conjuror’s illusion rather an enactment of one of our traditional penalties!

Toasts at Festive Boards have long been a Masonic feature. In England, toasts do not usually begin until after the meal has finished and the dishes cleared away. This enables any non-Masonic personal to leave the room, which is effectively 'tyled' for the toasts. As noted above, this is because some fires contain 'esoteric elements'. In England, the toast list is often very extensive; but generally much shorter in Australia. On a normal night, many lodges will only toast the Queen and later the visitors, while at an Installation the list will include toasts to the Grand Lodge and the new Master. All Festive boards in Victoria (and largely in Australia generally) conclude with the Tyler's Toast.

At the private dinners following Lodge Epicurean and Lodge Amalthea, most toasts have been dispensed with, other than that to The Queen. The main reason is that in public places, as restaurants largely are (unless we have a private room), Masonic toasts are inappropriate, as are speeches.



A example of an American lodge's
Table Lodge shot glass.

As a final comment, it worth noting that Festive Boards as such, in the English tradition, are unknown in American Lodges. However, what is known in America, and has become increasing popular over the last twenty years at least, is the Table Lodge. Many American lodges will hold an annual Table Lodge, which has its own ritual, and is replete with 'fires', 'shot glasses', 'cannons', and the like. More on this in a future article, perhaps...

QUESTION & ANSWER:

What is the meaning of the word *Worshipful* as applied to the Master of the Lodge?

Few Masonic matters are less understood by the non-Masonic public than this. The word 'worshippe' or 'worchip' is old English, and means 'greatly respected'. In the Wycliffe Bible 'Honour thy father and thy mother appear as 'Wychip thy fadir and thy modir'. In some of the old *Constitutions* of Masonry is the phrase, 'Every Mason shall prefer his elders and put him to worship'. Worshipful, therefore, in modern Masonry, continues an ancient word meaning 'greatly respected'. The same derivation applies to local councils as in 'His Worship the Mayor', and to court magistrates who are addressed as 'Your Worship'.

...and finally for this Issue, a cute little ditty, but with a message....

THE DEACON'S LAMENT

Oh! I wish I'd looked after me ritual
I wish I had studied the book
I might have got through a few meetings
Without having to take a sly look
At the words printed all neat and tidy
With capital letters and dots
And inverted commas and rows of small hammers
To remind you about them there knocks.

If I'd just been to one Lodge rehearsal
And followed the DC's grand plan
My signs might look more like a Mason and
less like a old tic tac man
For a Past Master once said with sarcasm
As he doffed his apron of blue
You lay five to one, when the lodge is begun
And evens the field when it's through.

Time was, when I was a Deacon
I was proud of me wand and me Dove
Initiation was due, and I was in a right stew
So I wrote all me words on me glove.
Now some candidates are cool and collected
But mine he was nervous and hot
I don't mean to boast, but his hand was like toast
Left me palm an illegible blot.

As I thumped the warden's shoulder
The ink stained his coat a bright blue
He said "Whom have you there" I stood in despair
He could see I hadn't a clue
I gazed at me glove for an answer
At those five fickle fingers of fate
Then the blots rolled away, left the words plain as day

**ST MICHAEL... ALL COTTON
... SIZE EIGHT**