

MASONIC MUSINGS

The Masonic Education Newsletter

of Lodge Epicurean No 906 and Lodge Amalthea No 914

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Brethren, welcome to **Issue One** our new *Masonic Education Newsletter*. It is my hope to publish it six times a year and distribute it electronically to Epicurean and Amalthea members, and wider a field. Issue one features a very interesting article on *Tracing Boards* by noted English Masonic educationalist Bro. Clive Moore, which I have adapted slightly to add

comments from a local perspective. We will hear more from Bro. Moore in future issues...

If any member wishes to request a Masonic topic or topics they would like covered in future issues, or even contribute an article (!) – please don't hesitate – let me know!

Fraternal regards,
Kent Henderson

THE ORIGINS & HISTORY OF THE TRACING BOARD

I will start by observing that this talk focuses on the historical development of Tracing Boards, not on the symbolism and allegorical imagery they now depict. The tracing boards are called *immovable jewels* in our lodges, but they are also a fascinating reminder of an operative past and the early days of Speculative Freemasonry. Their story ranges from mops and buckets to atomic science; from a magnificent biblical temple to a retirement home in Croydon, England; and touches on much more in between.

Much of the story is uncertain and their development was not consistent geographically or chronologically, as even the earliest forms of boards and cloths can still be discovered in use today. That said we will attempt to follow their history through the last 300 years but first let us briefly look back to the medieval operative masons. They met and worked together in temporary shelters called *lodges* and their duties and behaviour were regulated by written charges. We know from site records such as those at Vale Royal Abbey in 1278 that they would trace out on the ground the form and dimensions of the building being constructed – plaster tracing floors used for a similar purpose have survived at Wells Cathedral and York Minster. So if these early operative masons had needed diagrams or enclosures for rituals they would probably have marked them out in the same manner.

Speculative Freemasonry would later embrace and adopt such operative traditions as well as the surviving manuscript charges; but did Speculative Freemasonry actually spring from much older operative lodges still working into the 17th century? We really need to leave that much-debated question to another time, as the story of tracing boards starts in the Speculative Lodges of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Usually meeting in taverns or inns they drew their ritual enclosures on the meeting room floor with chalk and charcoal. Sometimes molded clay was used or lines traced in sand sprinkled over the floor, with a broom kept ready to sweep them away; the use of



A Harris Tracing Board – 1st Degree

sand in this way continued in some Cornish Lodges into the 1860s.

So what sources of information do we have for the early Speculative Lodges? There are 'exposures', such as *Three Distinct Knocks* in 1760. These unauthorized works set out to expose the secrets of Freemasonry. They were usually aimed at a non-Masonic audience and they did tend to sensationalize but there was a core of truth in them. As a result, many Masons at the time referred to them for guidance (or effectively as their 'ritual book'). We also have the *catechisms* (question and answer rituals) used for both instruction and examination; these developed into elaborate lectures that were later incorporated into our present ceremonies. Finally, but not least, there are the surviving minutes and records of the early lodges themselves.



Another 1st Degree Tracing Board
– similar to Harris, but different...

So what evidence is there about these early floor drawings? We know that chalk, charcoal and clay were kept in the meeting rooms, as they were also used as emblems for freedom, fervency and zeal. An article in the *Westminster Journal* of 1742 entitled the 'Freemason's Downfall' describes masons

making a lodge with chalk on the floor. Similarly, a Masonic print of 1766 records that drawings were made with 'chalk, stone-blue and charcoal intermixed', also that 'powdered rosin mixed with shining sand was strewn on the floor'.

As you will hear these floor drawings were to develop into the pictorial tracing boards we know today. They were certainly not immovable jewels at that time, as after the ceremony it was the Entered Apprentices' task to wash them away; a practice ridiculed in the popular press as the 'great indignity of the mop and pail'. The patterns drawn on the floor were called the lodge – hence the 18th century *catechisms* speaking of the Tyler drawing the lodge before each meeting. In 1738 the Lodge of Felicity paid their Tyler 2/-6d for doing so and many lodges have similar records. It is interesting to note that at this time squaring was necessary to move around the drawn lodge, and candidates when called upon to advance would have physically stepped into it.

So what did the first Speculative Masons actually draw on the floor? Early exposures and prints show various geometrical shapes including cruciforms and rectangles. The designs usually accommodated the three candlesticks referred to in the ritual as 'lights', and were often further embellished with drawings of operative tools and other symbols. In the early 18th century the most common pattern drawn was the so-called oblong square, a rectangle usually with a triangle on its 'eastern' side and lines to the 'west' to indicate steps. Initially this probably just represented the ground plan of a simple building, but it soon became identified with King Solomon's Temple – an image and allegorical model much used by artists and writers. In 1688 John Bunyan described the Temple as representing the 'figures, patterns and shadows of things in the Heavens'.

Soon drawings were also being made with tape tacked to the floor, which would leave no trace afterwards. Various emblems were made in silver or tin to lie upon them or to use as templates to assist in drawing the increasingly complex designs. Despite such enhancements, one suspects that growingly-sophisticated brethren would have become dissatisfied with sometimes crude or inaccurate lodge drawings – we know that in 1772 the Jerusalem Lodge No.197 cancelled a meeting as their Tyler had made mistakes in the drawing. Many lodges would have been unhappy about just the cost of having to prepare new drawings for each meeting; also around this time some of the

meeting rooms they used were being carpeted, making drawing on the floor difficult.

So it was an obvious development for the lodge to be painted or drawn on to linen or canvas cloths. These could be rolled out on the floor just before a meeting and would leave no trace afterwards. Such cloths are mentioned in the 1733 minutes of The Old King's Arms Lodge No. 28 which instructed that to save unnecessary trouble 'a proper delineation should be made on canvas', and the 1737 minutes of the Medina Lodge No. 35 noted the gift to the Lodge of a *pinted cloath representing the several forms of Masons' lodges*.

There was opposition to these changes. A French exposure of 1745 said that to be 'proper' a lodge must not be painted on a cloth but 'crayoned' directly on the floor, and the Antients Grand Lodge formed in England in 1751 mocked the rival Premier Grand Lodge for their increasing use of ornamentation. In Scotland floor cloths were specifically prohibited, after an incident in 1759 when a painter hung a newly painted cloth out to dry in public view! However, as the 18th century progressed painted cloths did become increasingly popular – the Pilgrim Lodge No. 238, founded in 1779, still today uses a woven floor cloth – although in some lodges the Tyler would continue drawing chalk lodges well into the early 19th century. Some French Lodges still do so today, such as the Lodge Anglaise founded in Bordeaux by English merchant sailors in 1732. In more recent times the Essetesforde Lodge, founded in East Kent in 2001, have opted to draw their tracing boards with chalk.

Instead of cloths some lodges purchased boards to lie on the floor. In 1763 the Mourning Bush Lodge No. 19 passed a motion that 'a proper board be made for the Tyler to draw his Lodge on' and in 1771 a Lodge in Bath asked Nicholas Tucker, a former Senior Warden, to paint a lodge board. These first lodge boards were generally smaller than the cloths but much larger than our modern tracing boards. The Palladian Lodge No. 120 in Hereford still has a board measuring 10ft x 5ft and there are other surviving examples of such large boards.

As with the original floor drawings, candlesticks and other emblems were placed on or around the first cloths and boards. Some lodges today still display ashlar with tripods for lifting them and other working tools in the centre of their meeting rooms – a not-uncommon occurrence in

many Lodge Rooms in Victoria, usually for a 1st Degree ceremony. Many English Royal Arch Chapters still use floor cloths with emblems placed upon them – Royal Arch tracing boards were produced in the 19th century but were never widely adopted.

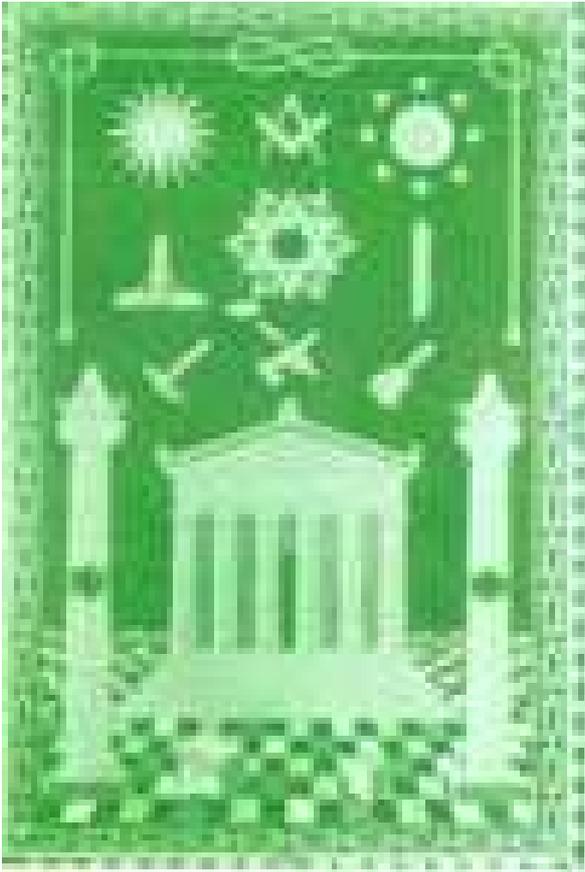
Around this time some much smaller boards called Masters' Boards or Tracing Tablets also started to appear. Depicting Masonic symbols and allegorical scenes, often in fine parquetry or mosaics, they were impressive items and of a convenient size to use when lecturing around a table. The Grand Lodge Museum in London has a fine example dated 1777 bearing a parquetry picture of King Solomon's Temple.



Figure 4. Detail from frontispiece to Anderson's Constitutions, 1784.

A 'Trestle Board' – from the frontispiece of *Anderson's Constitutions* 1784.

As Masonry expanded in the 18th century many meetings moved from the original inns and taverns to larger more private rooms. As a result space was available to have more actual Masonic furniture and equipment, rather than just drawing many of the items. For example, in 1763 the Old Dundee Lodge No. 18 in London purchased many such items when they moved to new premises. This period also saw the development of a more philosophical and intellectual style of Speculative Freemasonry, with longer rituals and lectures that added significantly to Masonry's moral symbolism and allegorical imagery. So the function of the boards and cloths became less about a simple representation of the lodge with its basic equipment and more about depicting this growing body of symbolism and imagery. Consequently, although becoming smaller, the boards and cloths became increasingly ornate and therefore expensive to produce. So there was a growing reluctance to lay them on the floor, where they were less easily seen and might be damaged. Many lodges decided to place them on to tables or trestles (the most common practice today in England), although a few chose instead to hang them on the wall and still do so, usually with curtains to cover the boards not in use (almost universally the case in Australian lodge rooms).



The Tracing Board of Lodge
Zur Einigkeit No 388 (Germany) – 1742.

Masonic meetings in the 18th century were not as we know them today. The festive board was usually not a separate event so during the meeting toasts were made, songs sung and snacks eaten; their floor workings were much shorter and the proceedings were interspersed with catechisms and table lectures. Brethren sat around tables or trestles for much of the meeting and these could be used to support the boards or cloths taken up from the floor. An 18th century inventory for the Old Dundee Lodge No. 18 lists six table boards with 'tressels' and the Moira Lodge of Honour in Bristol still uses a long centre table to this day.

The table lectures were not solely Masonic but encompassed many subjects; scientific experiments and even medical dissections are recorded. It has been suggested that modern Freemasonry in part derived from leading figures of the 18th century enlightenment discussing the new Newtonian sciences in the early Speculative Lodges. Indeed the third Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge, Dr John Desaguliers, was a leading Professor of Experimental Philosophy; in 1744 he wrote about the possibility of splitting the atom 174 years before it was actually achieved.

As our story moves out of the 18th century

many lodge boards and cloths were mounted and framed to stiffen and protect them; frequent rolling and unrolling must have damaged the cloths, especially those painted on both sides. These framed boards or cloths were still of varying sizes but smaller commercially printed or painted boards became increasingly popular in the early 19th century. The original floor drawings had been easily adjusted for each degree and the emblems placed upon them changed, but we cannot say for certain when separate boards or cloths for each degree first appeared. Some early examples have all three degrees depicted on one side, often with Royal Arch symbols as well. Others were painted on both sides; the Royal Sussex Lodge still has a cloth with the 1st and 2nd Degrees on one side and the 3rd Degree on the other. However, as their symbolic content and instructional role grew it became increasingly necessary to have individual boards or cloths for each degree.

As the 19th century advanced membership grew and the floor workings became longer, so the table lectures started to disappear and the festive board moved entirely away from the meeting room. Many dedicated Masonic Halls started to open; these would have black and white chequered carpets or floor tiles in the lodge rooms, whereas in the public rooms rented for meetings that symbolic flooring was often only pictured on the lodge cloth or board. It now made sense to open up the centre of the room by removing the table or trestles; introducing pedestals for the principal officers and laying the lodge cloth or board, now called a tracing board, on the floor in the centre of the room (as became widespread English Lodge practice). Some lodges used low cabinets to both store and display them; a few were fitted with ingenious board changing mechanisms involving slides and rollers. Many lodges today still use cabinets, but others had leaned the boards not in use against the Junior Warden's pedestal and this also became the position where they displayed them, when not required for the instruction of brethren.

It will be noted at this that point that I have called them lodge boards or cloths, not tracing boards. That name does not appear in the early Masonic records, although variants such as tressell and trassle do. So why during the 19th century did they become known as tracing boards? One explanation is that as they had rested on trestles or trestle tables they were known as trestle boards and over time this corrupted to tracing boards. The inventories of the Newstead Lodge No. 47 used both names in the mid 19th century and in 1789 the St. John Lodge No. 167

ordered a new 'Trestling' board. Many American lodges still use the term trestle board.

Alternatively, the name may jointly or wholly derive from the wooden drawing boards used by early operative masons. Such *tracyng boards* are listed in a 1399 inventory of stonemasons' tools at York Minster; and many building sites had tracing houses, where such boards were used to prepare templates for the masons cutting the stone. E. H. Dring in his classic essay on tracing boards suggested that the name derived from the French term for such drawing boards 'planche a tracer', which is used in the 18th century French Masonic exposures.

Some early lodges possibly had both a board for the Master to lecture with or draw designs upon and a lodge board or cloth, that were later combined into a single tracing board. Some lodge inventories listed both and our modern 1st Degree tracing boards do show a drawing board lying on the lodge floor.

The 1733 accounts for the Old Kings Arms Lodge record their purchase of a drawing board and a 'T', probably a draughtsman's T-square. Lodges using the Masonic Hall in Taunton still display at their meetings a Euclid or Proposition board, that bears a realistic depiction of scattered drawings and draughtsmen's instruments.

However, whatever the origin of their name it is clear that our tracing boards did primarily evolve from the early lodge drawings; even though their role has since changed significantly. So what point have we reached in our story? We have moved from crude floor drawings marking out a pattern termed the lodge, around which Masons gathered to conduct rituals; to smaller painted or printed tracing boards with much more symbolical content and whose primary purpose is to instruct Speculative Masons.

Let's now briefly look at their design and painting. The earliest boards and cloths were painted by local artists or gifted Brethren, so the designs were very individualistic. The surviving early examples are very chart-like in their simple arrangements of symbols and imagery; like the original floor drawings the 1st Degree imagery usually incorporated a representation of the lodge itself. As the 18th century progressed writers and ritualists, such as William Preston, recorded and added to Masonry's moral and traditional symbolism. This movement towards a more formalized Masonic ideology was

reflected in the lodge boards and cloths. Although still chart-like they began to depict many more items; some of which, such as the beehive, have since disappeared from English rituals (but are still used in American ritual).

At the start of the 19th century a number of professional designers such as John Cole and Josiah Bowring published tracing board designs; Bowring was also a portrait painter and his designs are particularly artistic. These new more vivid designs quickly became popular and were widely copied; usually in a smaller size than the earlier boards to facilitate their use and storage.

The designer whose work was to be most widely copied was John Harris, a skilled artist and architectural draughtsman as well as a Freemason. Colin Dyer, in his book about the Emulation Lodge of Improvement, says that Harris produced his first designs after seeing Peter Gilkes, the celebrated Preceptor of that lodge, using crude woodcut prints as tracing boards.

Harris published his first tracing board designs in 1820 and in 1845 he won a design competition sponsored by the Lodge of Emulation. Sadly the nature of his work led to blindness and he died in 1873 in the *Asylum for Aged & Decayed Freemasons* at Croydon. Most Tracing Boards seen in Australian Lodge rooms are either 'Harris Tracing Boards', or similar.

The United Grand Lodge of England has never officially approved any tracing board designs, but in 1873 they did borrow the Harris boards from the Emulation Lodge of Improvement to copy them for the new Freemasons' Hall; the predecessor to the present Great Queen Street building. When in the 1930s new boards were required for the present building the designs were simplified to match its art deco style.

The use of tracing boards is not universal in Freemasonry; many French lodges still draw the lodge and other countries still use floor cloths. In the USA only a few lodges still use tracing boards as we know them – in the 19th century some American lodges started using slides to project tracing board images.

That brings us to the present day in this history of the tracing board. Most new boards are now commercially printed to standard patterns, as the cost of producing new boards to unique designs has become prohibitive.