

MASONIC MUSINGS

The Masonic Education Newsletter

of Lodge Epicurean No 906 and Lodge Amalthea No 914

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Welcome to *Issue Nine*. On this occasion we deal with the ‘Antient Charges of a Freemason’ (also called the ‘Old Charges’) – one of the earliest *building blocks* of the Craft as we know it today. The following brief article, to which I have annotated and added extra information, is by WBro. H. R. Hill, and was presented in the Research Lodge of Wellington No 194 (NZ) on 12 July 2012. A *Question and Answer* follows...

Fraternal regards,
Kent Henderson.

The Ancient Charges of a Freemason

Operative Masons at work



A short time after the new Freemason enters the lodge he is asked, if he will ‘always act and abide by the Antient usages and established customs of the Craft’. A strange thing to ask of the Candidate? What are these ‘Antient usages and established customs’?

Early in the Installation ceremony, the new Master is read a ‘Summary of the Antient Charges’ to which he shows his assent clause by clause. Later in the Installation ceremony he will be advised that one of the qualifications required for his position is to be skilled in the Ancient Charges.

Thus, we have three references to the ‘Antient Charges of a Freemason’, but where can we find a copy of these Ancient Charges?

The ‘Ancient Charges of a Freemason’, together with the ‘Summary of the Antient Charges of a Freemason’ are printed in the *Book of*

Constitutions of Grand Lodge. The ‘Summary of the Antient Charges’ that are read at every Installation are derived from the older ‘Antient Charges of a Freemason’ and preserve many of their important traditions and customs.

Freemasonry possesses many old manuscript writings, some dating back to at least the fourteenth century, which throw much light upon the traditions and customs of the medieval masons.

The early speculative masons cherished the ‘Ancient Charges’ and considered them a link between the operatives and themselves. They may still be regarded in this manner; however they have more to offer than just tradition. They do not contain the ritual we know today, but they do reflect many of the ideas, and the words and phrases, we use today.

Operative masons was not able to read or write. A Priest or a skilled Master wrote the charges for the instruction of the masons in a lodge. On suitable occasions, when the masons met together in the Lodges, the charges were read to them to impress upon them the dignity of their calling, and their duty to God, their Masters, and to each other. We know today of approximately one hundred similar documents, all with similar but slightly different versions of these charges.

Just as the *Old Charges* had been read in operative lodges, they continued to be read in the speculative lodges as they evolved. After the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge of England in 1717 copies of the *Old Charges* were made for each new Lodge. The *Old Charges* continued to be read in the rapidly growing craft.

In 1721 Rev. Dr. James Anderson was asked to prepare 'a new and better method' from these old manuscripts. The operative lodge, the 'London Company of Masons', had titled their copies of the equivalent document as *The Constitutions*.

Anderson used the same description for his book that was published in 1723. A copy of the 'Antient Charges' was included in this *foundation* book of Freemasonry. This Constitution included a section entitled:

THE
C H A R G E S
 OF A
F R E E - M A S O N
 EXTRACTED FROM
 The ancient **RECORDS** of Lodges
 beyond Sea, and of thofe in *England, Scotland,*
 and *Ireland*, for the Ufe of the *Lodges* in London:
 TO BE READ
 At the making of NEW BRETHREN, or when the
MASTER fhall order it.

A manuscript of the 'Old Charges'



The 'Antient Charges of a Freemason' included in our Book of Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of Victoria, and those of many other Grand Lodges in the world (particularly those of direct English descent post 1813) are from *Anderson's Constitutions*.

Anderson's version of the charges published in 1723 still has relevance today. All our modern constitutions, statutes, laws, rules, by-laws and regulations to some extent or other hark back to the Antient Charges in *Anderson's Constitutions*. These charges cover our duties to God, to the Civil Authorities, the Lodges and to each other. It describes the management of the craft, and our

behaviour to our brethren in the lodge and those outside.

As all new masons receive of copy of the Book of Constitutions, they can readily read the Summary and the full version published near the front of that book.



As noted above, there are various versions 'Old Charges' of the operative masons, many dating back several centuries. Copied below is a version of the *Charge to the Apprentice*. Today, it would seem to us quite anachronistic, or even silly. However, it must be viewed in the context of its time. Clearly, the Charge was designed to impart a moral standard.

CHARGE TO THE APPRENTICE (dated 1663)

1. You shall truly honour God, His Holy Church, the King, your Master and his Wardens. You shall not absent yourself but with the licence of one or both of them from their service by day or night.

2. You shall not purloyn or steal or be privy or accessory to the purloining or stealing of the value of sixpence from them or either of them.
3. You shall not commit adultery or fornication in the house of your Master, with his wife, daughter or maid.
4. You shall not disclose your Master's or Warden's secrets or counsels which they have reported unto you, or what is to be concealed, spoken or done within the privities of their house, by either of them, or by any Free Mason.
5. You shall not maintain any disobedient argument with your Master, Wardens or any Free Mason.
6. You shall reverently behave yourself towards all Free Masons, using either cards, dice or any other unlawful games, Christmas time excepted.
7. You shall not haunt, or frequent any Taverns or Ale Houses, or so much as go inside any of them, except it be upon your Master's or your Wardens', their or any of their affairs, or with their, or one of their consents.
8. You shall not commit adultery or fornication in any man's house where you shall be at table or at work.
9. You shall not marry, or contract yourself to any woman during your apprenticeship.
10. You shall not steal any man's goods but especially your Master's or any of his fellow Masons, nor suffer any to steal their goods, but shall hinder the felon if you can, and, if you cannot, then you shall acquaint the said Master and his Fellows presently.

QUESTION & ANSWER

Is there any particular significance in White Gloves as part of Masonic Dress?

The use of gloves as part of Masonic Dress can be traced to two probable sources. First, they were used by Operative Masons to protect their hands. The gauntlets worn by some Officers now are the sole remnants of these. When early Speculative Lodges still had numbers of Operative Brethren as members, their hands would naturally bear some signs of the hard manual labour they performed. It is easy to see the adaptation of the 'working gloves' as a refinement to cover up these signs of honest toil – probably quite unnecessarily, but understandably.

Gloves were also part of formal attire, and when the custom of wearing something more than everyday dress to Lodge was introduced, they were naturally retained. There is no doubt that some significance was once attached to the wearing of gloves, as it is known that it was the custom in some places to present an Initiate with a pair of gloves for himself and a pair for 'the lady of his choice'. This is still done in many European lodges to this day. Gloves were regarded as symbols of the honesty and rectitude of action possessed by those deemed worthy of admission to the Craft. That said, care should be taken not to strain to discover a deeper symbolism, which was never intended, in any things in Masonry that were originally used with a purely utilitarian purpose.

Two points regarding the wearing of gloves in Lodge may well be mentioned here: (1) They should be removed by anyone administering an Obligation or communicating secrets. (2) A visiting Master admitted to a Lodge should not

stand before his host frantically struggling to remove his Glove before being greeted and welcomed. The glove is part of his Masonic Dress.

Gloves are not mentioned in the Victorian *Book of Constitutions* and there are no specific rules covering their use. In lodges in many Constitutions directly descended from England post 1813 (such as our own) it is the custom is that Masters, Past Masters and Lodge Officers wear gloves but that glove wearing is optional for other members. It is worth noting that this applies to Craft lodges, and not necessarily to other Masonic Degrees and Orders. For example, gloves are not worn in a Mark Lodge.

