



MEDIEVAL TIMES

All most every one has wondered how and when Masonry started. There are many ideas, some with no evidence to support them. However, in recent times there have been several careful and reasoned approaches. While we shall probably never know all the answers it is generally accepted that Freemasonry started in Europe during the dark or Middle Ages between the 1000's and 1700's

In order to understand our origins it is necessary to understand life in those times. We begin with an over view of those times in Europe.

All most no one was able to read or write. This included high church officials and royalty The printing press was not invented until the mid 1400's. This probably accounts for why much of our work is by word of mouth.

It was a very dangerous and frightening world, as epidemics of diseases such as Black Death or bubonic plague, small pox, cholera, typhoid fever, and tuberculoses raged for many years. At one time back death killed a third of all the people in the world. As people had no idea as to the cause of these terrible epidemics they reacted with understandable hysteria and fear, particularly of strangers. Compare this to the fear in our own times of epidemics of influenza in 1918, polio in the 1940's and now AIDS and SARS worldwide

Disease along with famine due to crop failures resulted in starvation for many. Caloric and protein intake was marginal at best for many and sub-marginal for many more. As it was an agriculture based economy crop failures resulted in

massive unemployment. Run away inflation was also a significant problem.

Wars were constantly being waged. This in itself caused the death of many and indirectly of many more because of all the resources that were directed to the war effort instead of being used to help the populous. Taxes were raised to higher and higher levels. Men who had been free were placed back into bondage and serfdom by the government.

Cruelty by the government, church and individuals was unbelievable and the norm. Heresy, which was any disagreement with the church, was said by the Pope to be the most heinous crime under heaven and that the heretic deserved the most painful death imaginable. People lived in terror because any one accused of aiding a heretic would also lose their property and be tortured. There was no defense against heresy.

Government standardized torture to three degrees. If you passed through these degrees you were innocent. Loss of the tongue was for the third offense of blasphemy. Royal executioners were instructed to make openings in the abdomen and draw out the bowels into the fire. Then the heads were cut off, the body quartered and cut into five pieces. The most minor offenses against the government resulted in imprisonment, mutilation and hanging. Even starving children were imprisoned and hung for stealing scraps of food. Many of our ancient brethren were victims of this type of torture by the government and church. Our craft has been criticized because of the penalties in our obligations, which of course are only symbolic.

Our ancient brethren, some of whom may have been cathedral builders found it necessary to safeguard their architectural and construction methods.

While numbers came from India, algebra and trigonometry from Arabia in the 1200's engineering, physical sciences and mathematics were not taught in major universities such as Oxford, until the mid 1600's. The only place this information was available was in the lodges of the cathedral builders. Compare this with all of the military, governmental and industrial secrecy and espionage that takes place today.

In addition to the terror of disease, starvation, torture and the loss of personal and religious freedom the ideas of self government and citizen control of education were beginning to emerge during the period of Enlightenment. It is not hard to see how this explosive mix could result in the milieu from which Freemasonry could emerge.

Now we turn our attention to London and England. London of 1717 was a city without sewers, streets were filled with the manure of thousands of horses and houses were black with soot blowing out of chimneys. Criminality was rampant, punishment brutal, and prison for debts was common. Witchcraft was still believed.

The industrial revolution would not come until the 18th and 19th centuries but a class of have-nots existed -- homeless, beggars and criminals of every kind.

This brings us to the marked class differences. The aristocracy and landowners were on top. Below came the bourgeoisie, merchants, lawyers, doctors, educators, shippers and men of arms. All of these constituted a small minority. Then there was the vast mass who would eventually be called the proletariat. These were the workers, servants, farm workers, fisherman,

gardeners and housemaids. All of them were completely separated from the upper class by their lack of education, language, and customs and with no possibility to move up the social scale.

There was a parliament, and there were elections, but the vast majority of Englishmen had no right to vote and wouldn't for another hundred years for men and two hundred for women. Common law allowed marriage at 14 for boys and 12 for girls.

The Christian religion which had dominated the life of the people during the middle ages, codifying to the least detail the way of life, the practice of trades, the separation of classes, was only beginning to recover from the war caused by internal divisions. The various reformers were different, but no more tolerant.

Inside this stratified society, voices began to be heard proposing changes, making appeal to reason instead of subservience to dogma. These thinkers were aware of societies defects and wanted to find solutions to improve it.

Science and philosophy, which were almost indistinguishable, were tools in the hands of intellectuals to implement their aspirations. The Rosicrucion manifests of 1613 made a strong impact on the intelligentsia and started the political and social revolution to come. In 1690 John Locke published his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, maintaining that all knowledge is derived through our senses, that our will is determined by our mind, guided by the desire for happiness, and defending the possibility to study the world rationally, without being shackled by dogma or preconceived ideas.

Rationalism and science of the 17th century marked a turning point in the

interests of scholars, who now began to focus their attention on the natural sciences and started to research nature. Astrology gave way to astronomy, alchemy to chemistry; the study of anatomy and physiology revolutionized medicine

This is reflected in the creation of numerous scientific academies and societies. In 1662 the Royal Society started operating in London and provided a platform for researchers and scholars. Some of the most prominent founders the premier Grand Lodge were active in it.

The study of nature was still based on the treatises of the Greek philosophers, which began to be translated. The evolution to more scientific studies was driven by the structure of the country. The beginnings of the Industrial Revolution are linked to the mechanization of the textile industry. The steam engine was patented in 1711 by Newcomen.

The principle discoveries and inventions of science and technology were unknown in 1717. Only in the course of the next century were developments made which set the foundations for modern science

In like fashion music, literature and painting underwent significant changes in the late 1600's and early 1700's.

The political developments in England resulted in a time of endless struggles and tragedies. London had suffered the scourges of the Black Death, which reached its peak in 1665; a year later the great fire devastated the city, but exterminated most of the rats that had spread the plague. Reconstruction of London gave great impetus to the building trades, and was perhaps one of the causes for the development of Masons' lodges.

The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants which devastated Europe for a century resulted in a civil war in England, the execution of Charles I and a commonwealth presided over by Oliver Cromwell who lasted eleven years. Then Charles II returned to power followed by his brother James II until Parliament, fearing that the Catholicism of the king would result in renewed warfare, deposed him in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

James II plotted his return, gaining the support of Catholic Spain which ended with defeat in the battle of Boyne in Ireland in 1690. He fled back to France.

The Stuart king in exile and his son continued to dream of returning to power. In fact the Stuarts landed in Scotland with a Spanish force in 1719 but the invaders were defeated in the battle of Glenshiel.

Some Stuart supporters, mainly Scots, followed him in exile and were involved in the creation of the first Masonic Lodges in the continent. There they received the influence of the mystic trends current in Europe, and they created the additional degrees which were called "Scottish". After a long evolution the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite was born.

In 1714 a radical change came when George I ascended the throne. He never learned to speak English and continued to live in Hanover. The British government was run by ministers like Robert Walpole.

In 1727 George II succeeded him. These were years when Freemasonry flourished in England and the European continent. A second Grand Lodge was formed in London, known as the Ancients, founded mostly by Irish immigrants.

who disliked the innovations introduced by the older Grand Lodge, which they designated disrespectfully as the “Moderns”. Possibly, another factor leading to the formation of a competing Grand Lodge was the poor reception given by the British to Irish masons.

In France king Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes leading to the emigration of many Huguenots some of whom became active in the creation of the Grand Lodge of London, and formulating its principles of tolerance.

Britain became the most highly taxed nation; between 1688 and 1815 taxes rose sixteen fold and borrowing two hundred and forty fold.

The first English newspapers were weekly, and weren't widely read. The first daily started in 1769. Mass journalism came about in 1811 when the rotary press was invented.

The public meeting places were in pubs where people met to eat, drink and exchange ideas. It was a hostel, restaurant and pub. The first London Lodges met in pubs in a separate room or a second floor where they conducted their ceremonies between courses or after dinner.

We can infer that the ceremonial part of the meeting was very brief, symbolism was limited to the lodge panel, and the brethren wore gloves and were armed with swords.

The lodge room had no special furniture. The symbols of our tools and other lodge implements were drawn on a panel or board, the Tracing Board,

or else were drawn on the floor with chalk and coal, to be erased afterwards, using a mop and bucket.

Masonic meetings were marked by conviviality. A stated dinner was an integral part of the ceremony. Music and singing were important. Sixteen of the ninety pages of Anderson's *CONSTITUTION'S* are dedicated songs of the master, wardens, the Fellowcraft and apprentice. Preston's *ILLUSTRATIONS of MASONRY* had forty-four pages of odes, hymns and songs.

The Masonic Lodge was a refuge of peace and tranquility at a time of political uncertainty, when the memory of religious warfare was fresh in the memory of men, when the first discoveries and inventions were transforming the economy, and opening a new prospective of progress, with the hope that rationality and humanism would banish from the hearts of men the evils of fanaticism and intolerance. This was fertile ground on which speculative Freemasonry germinated and grew, spreading its branches though the western world.

SOURCE.

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