# Province of East Lancashire

## "**Getting your Bearings**"

3 short lectures

Education and Training Committee

We're here to guide

# Getting your bearings (1): EWSN

Freemasonry can seem very strange to the newcomer. And even very experienced brethren from time to time are bound to recognise that Freemasonry can take many forms, some of which are surprisingly dissimilar to what they are used to.

Looking around any lodge meeting, for instance, you will see a variety of aprons being worn. Each apron is a badge saying something about the wearer. Similarly the different 'jewels' worn on the breasts of many brethren make a statement about their individual background and loyalties. Some knowledge is necessary to 'read' them.

For masons who are able, through experience, to take such things for granted, they in their turn become aware of many particular areas of Freemasonry offering different experiences and teachings, under such names as 'Mark Masonry' or 'Royal Arch Masonry', and many, many others.

And then, across the globe, now so easy to connect with through the world-wide web and emails, there exist many indigenous forms of Freemasonry, each with their own customs and colours and languages of ritual. It is a confusing world out there! For those brethren possessing extensive knowledge it indeed becomes difficult to speak of 'Freemasonry', in the singular, when it really is often more sensible and helpful to speak of 'Freemasonries' in the plural.

So, how does a newcomer, a searcher, get his bearings?

Well, among all the variations of the Freemasonries in this country and around the world there exists one obvious common strand: they are oriented by reference to the points of the compass. Whether your Lodge is in Manchester, England, or Manchester, New Hampshire; whether it is in Paris, France, or Paris, Ontario; whether you are in Ireland or Hong Kong (both being very active in masonic matters), your bearings are the same. The Master sits in the East, the Senior Warden sits somewhere in the West, and the Junior Warden sits somewhere towards the South and West. So, when you walk into a Lodge room (which may properly be called 'the Temple') the highest chair, the one invariably occupied by the Master of the meeting, will always designate the East.

Our earliest Masonic ritual writings agree on this matter. All of them, drawn from different parts of the British Isles and written down during the period 1696-1726, ask the same question and receive the same response:

*Q. How stands your Lodge?*

*A. East and West as the Temple of Jerusalem.*

Though apparently simple, this question and answer is most profound. By considering it, you may begin properly to understand the serious nature of Freemasonry, and the ground from which it takes its root. Freemasonries of whatsoever sort and colour, across the globe, follow the pointer and context this provides. They are united by the symbolic bearing of east and west, which is not north and south as leads

the secular world outside. Aligned in parallel to the Temple of Jerusalem, and thus guided, new masons should be ready for the intriguing quest, or quests, towards all that this special compass bearing, when well considered, may imply.

## Getting your bearings (2): 'The primacy of the East `

Why are all Masonic Lodges throughout the world metaphorically aligned east and west?

Our first ritual manuscripts provide a variety of answers. There is uniformity among the first batch, relating this compass bearing to that of the Temple of Jerusalem. The Dumfries No 4 manuscript, written down about 1710, but quite possibly composed a decade or two earlier, expands on this:

*Q.* *Which way stands your Lodge?*

*A.* *East and west because all holy churches and temples stand that way and particularly the Temple of Jerusalem.*

*Q.* *Might not Hiram have laid the foundation of the Temple south and north rather than east and west?*

*A.* *No, he could not.*

*Q.* *Give a reason for it.*

*A.* *David appointed the foundation of the Temple to be laid on a barn floor, as you may read in the Holy Bible, where it is called the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Likewise you may read in holy writ that the Ark of the Lord, wherein was the covenant betwixt God and men and the two marble tables with the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God, [that] the said Ark was detained by misfortune a considerable [time] on the foresaid threshing floor of Araunah, which obliged him to lay the foundation of the Temple east and west [as] conformed to the posture of the two Tables.*

This explanation is exceptional in its detail but, as is typical in the Dumfries manuscript, provides a striking religious depth in its Masonic interpretations. Most answers elsewhere are brief and to the point, like the one in the most famous early ritual, *Masonry Dissected*, published in 1730:

*Q.* *How is it [the Lodge] situated?*

*A.* *Due east and west.*

*Q.* *Why so?*

*A.* *Because all churches and chapels are or ought to be so.*

Perhaps that explanation is good enough for the ordinary person. But it may not answer the underlying spiritual reason, which we have seen attempted by the Dumfries interpretation.

Another very important early manuscript opens up other foundation ideas. We should hear the gospel according to the Graham manuscript, written down in October 1726 but almost certainly composed

several decades earlier:

*Q.* *How stood your Lodge at your entering?*

*A.* *East, west and south.*

*Q.* *Why not north also?*

*A.* *In regard we dwell at the north part of the world; we bury no dead at the north side of our churches so we carry a vacancy at the north side of our Lodges.*

*Q.* *Why east and west?*

*A.* *Because churches stand east and west, and porches to the south.*

*Q.* *Why doth churches stand east and west?*

*A.* *In four references.*

*Q.* *What are they?*

*A.* *First, our first parents were placed eastward in Eden; secondly, the east wind dried up the sea before the children of Israel so was the Temple of the Lord to be builded; thirdly, those who dwell near the equinox, the sun riseth east and setteth west on them; fourthly, the star appeared in the east that advertised both the shepherds and wise men that our Saviour was come in the flesh.*

Well, you pays your money and you takes your choice! Or, indeed, you may not wish to subscribe to any of these attempts at significance. You may prefer to adopt the more generalised tradition, as expressed by Ben Jonson in the early 17th century, of 'that divine secret that doth fly from east to west'. This refers to the enlightenment of western Europe by learning and religion from the east. This tradition was indeed carried into Freemasonry within our very earliest documents, the Traditional History of the Craft handed down from the Middle Ages in our Old Charges. These tell of the origins of Masonry from patriarchs in the Book of Genesis who began the craft of building. The Tower of Babel was not a towering success! The learning was refined by Euclid working on geometry in Egypt and, just as importantly, providing the right guidance for self-regulation of the workmen.

*When the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt they learnt the craft of Masonry. And after they were driven out of Egypt they came into the land of behest that is now called Jerusalem.*

(Cooke MS, c. 1430)

Hence was built the special Temple, ordained by God through king David, but according to the biblical account actually started and completed by David's son Solomon. From here, according to the Old Charges, the knowledge was spread westward to France, and afterwards to England. There is much in the Traditional History of the Craft which is fabulous, but it has served its purpose in conserving the special claims and nature of Masonry, and linking them with the Divine. It is true that our civilisation in the west has been enlightened from the east, and that we should be reminded of this, and express our gratitude in that direction. Can it really be only a co-incidence that we look to the rising of the sun in the east for

welcome warmth and light? Can it really just be a happy co-incidence that our leaders, all around the world, are placed in the east, and that we therefore take our cue from them, and look in their direction for inspiration? Or may we reasonably conclude that the orientation of all our Masonic meetings towards the east, through whatever source it may have evolved, reflects, in its symbolism, a strange, happy, harmonious mystery under divine providence?!

## Getting your bearings(3): Sacred space

Your Lodge room will almost certainly have as its central feature a floor made up of black and white squares. It is a very prominent feature and tells you at once that this room, and this space in the middle of it, is 'special'. Just from this central marking alone you can tell if the room is 'masonic'.

Why is it there, and what does it mean?

As is often the case in Masonry, if you ask you will probably get the answer that it is 'traditional'. In a sense, it is, for in England, Scotland and Wales, and in many places abroad, that black and white chequer pattern is always to be found. But it was not always so. When Lodges met in inns and other hired rooms (before private Masonic halls were built) the floor was often merely one of bare planks for carpets were items of luxury and very expensive.

In those days, say before 1760, the room was made 'special' by a design being drawn on the floorboards with chalk or charcoal. The drawing was not one simply of black and white squares. Drawing this would have been rather boring and would have used up a lot of charcoal and chalk. Moreover, what is so special Masonically about creating a chess-board? No; in those days different designs were drawn, and they varied according to the type of meeting to be held, and according to the whims and artistry of the drawer. We have a few descriptions but it is largely a lost world which we are unable to recover. The custom was for the design to be scrubbed out at the end of the meeting, often using a mop and pail of water, so that the secrets of our 'hidden art' would not be discovered by others.

Indeed, it seems to have been quite common for the new entered apprentice, or at least the junior brethren, to have to learn to draw the appropriate design. By this means he had to be taught to understand his symbols, and to remember them: in other words it was a teaching aid, and one which required memory, followed by active 'doing', which is a very powerful way of reinforcing lessons.

So, when we read in the Dumfries No 4 manuscript, which was written down around 1710, that before a mason could be given 'the Royal secret' he had to " learn his questions by heart, then his symbols", we can begin to imagine just what that process of learning might be like.

So, when we gaze at that plain black and white floor before us, we can, equipped with this knowledge, recognise that the 'traditional' square design is not at all original but is a later convention which has gradually become accepted round the world as one of the defining features of a Masonic meeting.

There is an important lesson to be learnt. It is simply this: Freemasonry does evolve, and what we see and

hear nowadays does not necessarily reflect what was shown and said in the past. People may say a great deal about what this means, and how that is to be understood, and how marvellously clever the designers of Masonry have been (you can read masses of this stuff on the 'web'), but often such things are quite misleading. Such have been the changes over the years, and in different places, by all sorts of people, that to seek the 'truth' behind any particular convention has to be a quest, and probably, in the end, an article of personal belief.

Now that is not a bad thing. Freemasonry, at its fullest, should be a quest, and a matter of personal understanding and meaningfulness. The purveyors of certainty and system may be seductive, but theirs is itself a personal construct, necessarily created using the knowledge and mindset of the late 20th and early 21st century. The period of the mop and pail saw things differently.

Yes, they also interpreted their everyday experiences in Masonic terms.

Q. How long do you serve your Master?

A. From Monday morning to Saturday night.

Q. How do you serve him?

A. With chalk, charcoal and earthen pan.

Q. What do they denote?

A. Freedom, fervency and zeal.

This is taken from the Wilkinson manuscript whose date of composition is debateable but certainly before 1760 and probably around 1730. You hear the reference to chalk and charcoal. Can you imagine what the 'earthen pan' might have been for? [Carrying the water, as in a chamber-pot or 'necessary'.] And of course in those days the working week was from Monday morning until Saturday night, because 'half-days' on Saturday, let alone a full 'weekend', had not been remotely thought of.

Chalk, charcoal and earthen pan represented three basic elements of living in the late 17th and early 18th century. Pencils had not yet been invented, charcoal was the most effective form of fuel (at the blacksmith's and for other smelting), and glazed clay pots were still standard, for 'china' had only just begun to be imported, still being a luxury of the very rich. Yet these homely everyday items, chalk, charcoal and baked clay vessels were linked symbolically to the highest Masonic virtues topical to the age: freedom, fervency and zeal. Freedom was a rarity, which England deemed itself to possess more than any other nation. Fervency related to religion, a strong desire to understand and practise the scriptures. And zeal, a word now sadly in danger of becoming extinct, refers to intense enthusiasm for doing your task thoroughly. How could such an astonishing leap of symbolism, from the lowest to the highest, be justified (one of the exciting surprises within Freemasonry)? From another, fuller, catechism:

Q. How did you serve?

A. With Freedom, fervency and zeal.

Q. What are the emblems of freedom, fervency and zeal?

A. Chalk, charcoal and clay.

Q. Why so?

A. Nothing is more free for the use of man than chalk, which seldom touches but leaves its trace behind; nothing is more fervent than charcoal, for when well lighted no metal is able to resist its force; nothing more zealous than clay, our mother earth, who will kindly open her arms to receive us, when all our friends forsake us.

This ingenious explanation has its own beauty and force. Unless we use some knowledge and empathy such gems of ritual remain lost to us. We become trapped in our 'traditional' suit of clothes.

So, back to the black and white floor. Why is it there, and what does it mean? The most common explanation of its meaning is that it alludes to the joys and sorrows of life through which we are all destined to pass. That is a pretty and powerful image. There is no point in trying to count how many squares there may be or to wonder how many would be 'correct'. There is no 'correctness' except that of beauty in context.

When, towards 1800, oiled cloths and carpets began to be manufactured and affordable, the smart thing for a Lodge was to have a floor cloth or a carpet, the former continuing to have designs and the latter bearing the chequered black and white pattern. For durability the floorcloth in England was ultimately replaced by the invention of the neat wooden tracing board. The use of the black and white carpet became universal, or in the richer Masonic halls an inlaid chequered floor. The pattern was grandly referred to as the 'mosaic pavement'. The word 'mosaic' simply is the technical term for a design made up of small pieces, but of course also happily for Freemasonry carries the suggestion that it might have something to do with Moses—which it doesn't!

Why is the black and white floor there? Historically, you now know. But really? Surely because that patterning creates a strong impression on our eyes and senses. It speaks of order, and of absolutes; indeed, of ultimate authority. It tells us we are in a temple, a dedicated space, one inviting respect. That's why palaces and cathedrals have employed such strong designs in their flooring over the centuries. We have, through the accident of chalk and charcoal, and through simple technological design, evolved our own Masonic sacred space.

I think that it is better than the freehand of the past. But what do you think?

Prepared by:

## THE EDUCATION & TRAINING COMMITTEE

**Freemasons' Hall**
**Bridge Street**
**M3 3BT**

**Reproduced with the**
**kind permission of:**

**WBro John Acaster**

**Who has given permission for this paper**
**to be used in Craft Lodges throughout**
**the Province of East Lancashire.**

**For further copies please contact your**

**DISTRICT MENTOR**