



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

‘exchange the sceptre
for the trowel’

The Sceptre and the Trowel

A phrase famously emerges in the Charge after Initiation that *'Monarchs themselves...have not thought it derogatory to their dignity to exchange the Sceptre for the Trowel'*. As the Trowel is not one of our speculative Working Tools – nor is it likely that even George III would have been tempted to do a little moonlighting as a 'brickie' – we might be justified in enquiring quietly what it is all about. I suggest there are possibly three elements to any answer.

Firstly, have reigning monarchs been members of the Craft? Most certainly they have. Queen Elizabeth II's father, King George VI, was an enthusiastic Mason from the time of his Initiation in 1919 (The Naval Lodge No 2612) until his death in 1952. He became Grand Master in Scotland in the same year (1936) that his brother Edward VIII abdicated the throne and, as a Past GM installed three Grand Masters of the UGLE between 1939 and 1948. During the past century Edward VII, George V and Edward VIII all had strong Masonic connections. The Dukes of Kent and of Gloucester continue the custom that Princes of the Royal Blood should offer leadership in Freemasonry.

Secondly for the significance of the Trowel we need to explore our Masonic history pre-1813 and pre-unification of the Antient and Modern Grand Lodges. Before this date there was no formal office of Inner Guard (nor of Deacon for that matter). As the Second Tracing Board suggests *'...the five who (can) hold a Lodge are the Master, two Wardens and two Fellowcraft; the seven who make it perfect are two Entered Apprentices added to the former five...'*. (A 'Master Mason' was not then an operative grade.) While the Temple door was protected on the outside by the Tyler, on the inside the duty was given to the youngest Apprentice – known as 'the Inner Tyler'. He was armed with a Sword and a Trowel.

Why were a trowel and sword chosen? In Masonic legend it was the practise of the builders of the Second Temple to be equipped at their work with both trowel and sword to hand; the former to lay the stones, the latter to keep off all neighbouring Samaritans and other hostile tribes – the intruders and Cowans to Masonry of those Biblical days.

Use of the Trowel had another symbolic significance. It was a recognition that just as the stones in a Temple were bound together by mortar from the Trowel, so the masons building it were bound together into a Lodge by the even stronger cement of their mutual love and charity. (The Trowel was adopted much later as the Almoner's emblem – for very similar reasons.)

At the door into the Temple our young Apprentice 'Inner Tyler' placed the point of his trowel (not his sword) against the naked breast of the Initiate directly over his heart, symbolically the source of love and charity. It was therefore a recognition that although the Initiate was penniless more significantly he could still offer his love, flowing from its source via the trowel towards his new Brethren – which was all they sought!

[By 1738 or so the Hiramic legend had been introduced in the new Third Degree. In the 1816 coalescing of the Ancient and Modern rituals the Poniard was selected to replace the Sword and Trowel as weapon of choice for the Inner Guard. It was perhaps considered that physical protection of a Lodge and its secrets was no longer in keeping with the emotional significance of the love and charity of the human heart.]

So... when our Monarch exchanged his Sceptre for a Trowel he was publicly admitting that in order to enter Freemasonry he was prepared to take on the humblest office a Lodge had to offer – that of the Inner Tyler with his Trowel. It was a reminder that - however lowly - to live in the love and charity of his fellow man was to be preferred to the vanity of wealth and rank without them.

There is perhaps a lesson here for the world today.