



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

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

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

Why White Gloves?



White Gloves

One distinctive item of regalia worn by Freemasons in most lodges (and always in Grand Lodge) is a pair of white gloves. In some Lodges the ceremony of Initiation is completed by the pleasingly formal presentation to the new Entered Apprentice of his first pair of white gloves. In the early days of Speculative Freemasonry it was the Entered Apprentice who had to provide gloves for all his new Brethren as part of his admission fee, known as 'Clothing the Lodge'. Indeed in the Grand Lodge's 1723 'Book of Constitutions' Article VII formally stipulates that *'Every Brother at his making is decently to cloath the Lodge, that is all the Brethren present...'*

One question that has been frequently asked in our Lodge of Instruction is when – and why – do we have to wear white gloves? Today they are rarely seen outside, say, the catering profession... so why are they worn in Freemasonry?

When?

Let us start with the question of 'when'. The Deputy Grand Secretary and reliable guide on Masonic style, Graham Redman, writes in his book on 'Masonic Etiquette' (p.28) that *'in Grand Lodge white gloves are an essential part of a Brother's regalia and are regarded as such in the majority of private Lodges - but [in the latter] gloves do not have to be worn...'*

A Report by the Board of General Purposes dated 10th June 1964 sets out the Grand Lodge guidelines:

'It is left to the discretion of the Master of each Lodge to decide, after considering the interests of the members generally, whether to request that they be worn.'

When such a request is made it should include all present and not only the officers.

If gloves are worn they should be worn at all times except:

By Candidates for the three Degrees - throughout the ceremony.

By the Master Elect - when actually taking his Obligation on the Volume of The Sacred Law.

There is no objection to Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts wearing gloves when not actually being Passed or Raised.'

Several points arise for a Master's consideration. While the default position of Grand Lodge is 'gloves are to worn', as they can be optional in a Provincial Lodge the onus is on the Master/Secretary out of courtesy to visitors to include this requirement on the Lodge Summons: e.g. *'Dark Suit and White Gloves.'* Apprentices and Fellowcrafts are not *obliged* to wear gloves until after they are Raised although if it is the Lodge tradition then they should comply.

Is there ever a circumstance where white gloves can be removed?

It has often been customary on warm days for the Master to indicate that Brethren *may* remove their gloves. This is not a helpful practice; either all or none should remove their gloves. A happier phrasing might well be: *'The Temple is very warm, Brethren, let us all remove our gloves.'*

And why?

It would be tempting to say that 'white tie, white gloves and tails' for a Gentleman's evening dress are simply a continuation of the Edwardian age of elegance. The reality is that white gloves have been a Masonic requirement – both operative and speculative - for well over 600 years.

Of the two principal groups of operative Masons – the *lathomus* or stone carving and the *cementarius* or stone laying – the latter were at severe risk from the fresh lime mortar that was used to bed in the stone courses. Employers – both in Scotland and England – were required by their Guilds to provide protective gloves.

For example, in 1322 at Ely Cathedral the clergy were required to supply gloves for Masons on all 'new work'; in 1423 at York Minster ten pairs of gloves were supplied to the Mason 'stone setters' at a total cost of 18 pence [6 pence today]; and in 1456 at Eton College five pairs of gloves were supplied *'for layers of the walls as custom required'*.

One suspects that, on rough hewn stone, gloves had a busy but brief life. In addition to the employers rather 'economical' contribution an additional source of gloves was to be found in the Lodges themselves. The Shaw Statutes of 1599 required all on admission to the grade of Fellowcraft to pay a fee of £10 [!] with ten shillings-worth of gloves.

Sometimes the new Mason had to provide gloves (and aprons) for the entire company as part of his entrance fees. The practice was known as 'clothing the Lodge'. Anderson's Constitutions of 1723, in article VII, stipulates that *'Every new Brother at his making is decently to cloath [sic] the Lodge, that is all the brethren present'*

With the arrival of Speculative Freemasonry in the C18 the presentation of gloves took on a more symbolic or ceremonial gesture. In 1724 at Dunblane the (now affluent) members themselves presented a new entrant with his 'gloves and apron'.

In the same year at another Lodge a source noted: *'When a Free Mason is enter'd after having given to all present of the Fraternity a Pair of Men's and a Pair of Women's gloves and a Leather apron...'* This is the earliest known reference to the presentation of women's gloves but the idea clearly caught the imagination. A French commentary of 1737 records that an Apprentice would receive an apron of white skin, a pair of gloves for himself and a pair *'for her whom he esteems the most'*. Gallic gallantry had taken hold.

In Count Tolstoy's novel "War and Peace" it states that: *"the newly-obligated brother was then invested with a white apron, and received a trowel and three pairs of white gloves, two pairs for himself and one pair for the lady he most esteemed, after which the Master explained their symbolic meaning to him."*

By the early C19 the presentation of gloves to the candidate gradually faded from many Minute Books – and Treasurers merely adjusted 'glove-money' within the normal entrance fees. The Emulation Ritual of 1823 ignored the practice entirely.

In the late twentieth century it is interesting to note that in several Lodges, those working 'Perfect' or 'Staffordshire' for example, the tradition of awarding gloves remains in force to this day. The Presentation of the Gloves comes at the end of the ceremony and, using a pleasing piece of formal ritual, the Master explains the symbolism of purity and adds some words to the effect that that the gloved hands of a newly made Mason, purified by his Initiation, must never be sullied again. He adds that the second pair is intended to stress the high respect in which Masons hold women in general and in particular the one closest to his heart.

The glove's protection had been of material nature for the operative Mason but symbolic and spiritual for the speculative Mason. For this reason when touching the VSL in the Obligation the hand should not be covered. Likewise when forming the 'fraternal chain' customary in certain rituals, the hands must not wear gloves. This is to allow 'the subtle energies of friendship' to move freely around that circle.

After-thoughts

It is of interest that even William Shakespeare, as the son of a glove-maker, used gloves as symbols of the bonds between one man and another, perhaps as in Freemasonry. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, the clown proclaims: *"If I were not in love with Mopsa, thou shouldst take no money of me; but being enthralled as I am, it will also be the bondage of certain ribbons and gloves"* (Act IV, Scene 4), and in *King Henry V*, (Act IV, Scene 1). The King exchanges gloves with the soldier Williams, as a pledge to meet again after the battle

Perhaps our white gloves deserve a greater respect than is sometimes given to them?