



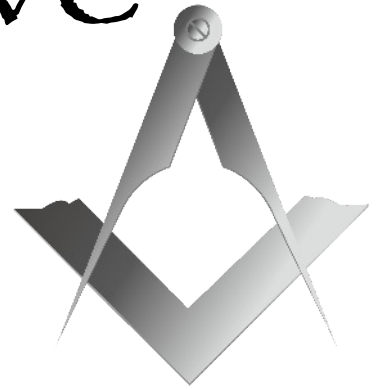
# Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

## A Preceptor:

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

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

# Operative Masons



Part Two



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## The Operative Mason at large - Part two

When referring to the mediaeval mason it is tempting to consider the title of 'mason' as describing a tradesman who not only hews the stone but shapes and carves it and then goes on to build the cathedral, the castle, the stately home and whatever. The reality was very different. There were many subdivisions in working stone and their jealously guarded demarcation lines would have a Peter Sellars-style shop steward green with envy at the havoc he could create.

### Subdivisions of the craft

Early categorisation of masons was simply into '*mason* [worker] or *magister* [master] *lathomus*' (a man who shaped the stones in a quarry or lodge yard) and '*mason* or *magister cementarius*' the mason who built the edifice with the stones produced elsewhere. [The use of Latin in the title was inevitable. The majority were employed by either the Crown or the Church and Latin was the written language of the official records.] The term 'cowan' was used for the semi-skilled labourer who used naturally occurring pieces of stone to construct dry stone walls. Unskilled in fashioning stone and fearing he might learn constructional secrets he was not welcomed within the apprentice-trained community of masonry.

As building work expanded throughout England and Wales in the C13 and as the numbers employed increased in keeping it became necessary to specialise and recognise several more grades of skill.

The '*lathomus*' branch of the family of stone workers included the quarrymen, 'monumental masons' (or stone carvers) and stonecutters. English usage had differentiated between those who simply *cut* stone into blocks for later use on the building site ('stonecutters' or 'hard-hewers') and those who *carved* blocks for artistic or decorative purposes ('monumental masons' or 'freestone masons'). The distinction was based on the quality of the stone. The former group focussed on the hard-wearing stone to be shaped into blocks for construction; the latter worked the softer or 'free stone' into delicate sculptures. The term 'freestone mason' was certainly in use in 1351 and would be contracted later into 'freemason'. Jean Gimpel (*The Cathedral Builders*) says that word's origin was due entirely to the quality of the stone worked, not to any singular moral, social or employment category recognised by cathedral authorities.

The quarrymen worked in groups of eight under a head quarryman (whose daily pay was 50% higher). As the expense of transport could exceed the cost of dressed stone considerable savings could be made by having the stones dressed in the quarry – the wastage was of the order of 50%. Stonecutters would therefore be sent from the Cathedral to the quarry to square off the stones. Some attempts were made to standardise the size at 8x 6x 8 inches – but as can be seen in the layering of any Cathedral wall there were frequent deviations.

The second '*cementarius*' branch of stone workers embraced the plasterers, mortar makers and constructional masons. This entire group were involved in erecting the building but only the masons within it, of necessity, had access to the 'masonic word' or the secrets of construction. In mediaeval times the term 'mason' was therefore only used to describe this stone setter or builder. Within Speculative Freemasonry we tend to interchange 'mason' and 'freemason' rather freely but mistakenly because only the former was given the masonic secrets, not the 'freestone mason'. Nonetheless across northern Europe *all categories on site belonged to the same masonic lodge.*

In Scotland masons and their lodges were normally static and permanent hence the abundance there of early mediaeval masonic records. Stonecutters, stone setters and other skilled masons working in England and elsewhere in NW Europe were basically itinerant and their lodges were merely temporary structures. Men travelled frequently to broaden experience, to seek new and innovative or long term projects, to earn increased pay etc. Long catechisms had to be learned to serve as a 'passport' when arriving at a new site. Often, especially during the reign of King John, masons were conscripted by the King for work on military fortifications with temporary lodges ranging from Hadrian's Wall to the French/Spanish border. (A Mason's mark to be seen in Salisbury can also be found in both Chartres and Ely cathedrals.)

### **Masonic Marks.**

Personal symbols were often creative chisel marks inscribed on a stone to permit quality control and justify a man's pay. In Salisbury there is evidence of geometrical signs and initials being used in this way. A mason's son often had a dash over his father's symbol. Masons were still using their own personal marks during the 1986 renovation of the tower and spire.

*Masons lathomus* also made guidance marks (on the 'blind' or unseen side) to assist erection of a more complex structure: e.g. N(*orth*)W(*est*)1, SW1, SE1, NE1 on the base level of a pinnacle:

NWII, SWII etc. on the next level, then NWIII, SWIII and so on.

*Masons cementarius* when building a wall might place a visible mark at the end of a length or course of stones for which they required payment. (Many such marks can still be seen in castles and cathedrals today)

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