



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

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

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

The Working Tools.....

'The Working Tools'

Part One – The Mediaeval Masons

The 'Working Tools' tend to be the first pieces of ritual that we are encouraged to perform on the floor of our 'Temple' or meeting room. At the time we perhaps focus merely on remembering the words (and possibly on being heard) rather than on the symbolism and moral values of each tool.

It is only in later years that questions tend to be asked in the Lodge of Instruction about these values. Did the operative masons associate moral values with each tool? If not, who did and why and when? Why were some tools selected as symbols in preference to others? Why were some Masonic values excluded?

Let's turn to our early Masonic history.

Tools used by the 'Operative' Masons

We can learn much about a mediaeval building site from the early paintings and embroideries that still survive. Information can also be gathered from the gargoyles that surround our early cathedrals, abbeys and churches: they often feature masons at work with the tools of their trade.

Another useful source, when accessible, is in early church records. The York Fabric Rolls ('Cathedral records') of 1399 for example list the following tools stored in their masons' lodge: *'69 stone-axes, 96 iron chisels, 24 mallets, 1 hatchet, 1 big gavel, 1 compass, 2 tracing boards...etc.'* [The smallness of the inventory for work in a large cathedral is worthy of note. The high ratio of chisels to mallets arises from the need for frequent chisel sharpening – every 10 minutes (hard stone) to 20 (soft)]

Academic research by L.F. Salzman of Oxford and D. Knoop and G.P. Jones of Manchester revealed that in mediaeval times the principal wooden tools might include: *'squares, levels, rules and plumb-rules, lines ('skirret') of pack-thread'*. (These tools were often made from cask-staves; there is no mention of wooden gavels)

An extensive range of specialist tools was also available: *'setting hammers with hollow heads for hard-hewers, scappling-hammers for rough layers, hammers with one and/or two vertical steeled edges for fine dressing the stone'*.

Stone preparation in the quarry or in the adjoining site around the building might require the following: *'brick-axes, pick-axes, trowels, chisels, hatchets, mattocks, crow-bars, levers, wedges, puncheons and augers, mallets and mauls.'*

In a book written in 1688, not long before the 'Modern' Grand Lodge was formed, its author noted that working tools – *'e.g. shovel, hammer, chisel, pick and punch'* - were featured in the Coat of Arms of an aristocratic Lodge member although it was not suggested that they had been selected for their moral relevance or use in any form of ritual.

Of interest, despite the introduction of the *'Common Gavel'* into the Speculative's 'First Degree Working Tools' there is no reference to a gavel, common or otherwise, in any of the wide variation of inventories listed above apart from that isolated *'one Big Gavel'* in 1399.

Surprisingly, too, no use is made of any working tool in the 'operatives' ceremonies or in their catechisms until early in the C18. We might reasonably assume therefore that in 1717 our Founders started with a clean sheet finding the operatives' working tools devoid of any 'moralisation' or inherited symbolism.

Indeed all evidence suggests that, for a hundred years or so after the formation of the 'Modern' Grand Lodge in 1717, the introduction of any symbolic significance to a mason's working tools was undertaken very cautiously indeed.

Postscript

Roy Spring, that eminent Clerk of Works at Salisbury Cathedral and also a Freemason, commented that a working mason was likely to be far more interested in whether or not a tool had the right 'feel' in the hand or if its edge was sharp than in any esoteric moral values. Such ideas were left for the churchmen and academics. A mason needed all his mental energy to stay safe, to feed and house his family - and keep a look out for the next profitable employment after this one!

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