

THE DEGREE of MARK MASTER

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Foreword

This paper is concerned with the history of the Mark Master Degree as it applies to English Mark and Royal Arch Masons. It is interesting that at the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England the Mark degree was not included as part of Pure Ancient Masonry while the UGLNSW & ACT does include the Mark.

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The Mark Degree forms one of the closest links in the chain which connects the speculative Craft Lodges of today with the old operative system of freemasonry. The present ritual has been founded upon ancient Craft legends of this operative system which give it the stamp of earlier Biblical history more than any of the other degrees. The ideas throughout are based upon incidents before or at the building of King Solomon's Temple. At that period of history it was found necessary to ensure completeness and perfect accuracy in all departments of the work, and to establish a system of grades amongst the immense number of workmen employed, under which each member of each grade marked his work with some peculiar mark or symbol, thereby enabling the overseers to know the hands from which each particular piece of work came.

In the old Guilds the ceremony of selecting and registering a Mark by a newly-admitted craftsman was second in importance only to that of his first admission into the Society.

The Masons' Marks on Ecclesiastical buildings are of great antiquity. We are told that the Cathedral Church of Aberdeen, founded in 1357, has upon it Masons' Marks from the foundation upwards.

This is, however, a distinct branch of study and altogether separate from Mark masonry as we now practise it.

The antiquity of Mark Masonry operatively considered cannot be doubted, and even speculatively it has enjoyed special prominence for centuries. In very ancient records referring to operative masonry mention is made of Masons' Marks and apparently of the Mark Degree. The records of Scottish brethren cover more than three centuries, and those of Lodge St. Mary's Chapel contain the Statutes of December, 1598, signed by William Schaw, the King's Master of Work, who died in 1602. The 13th item of these Statutes provides that no Master or Fellow Craft is to be received or admitted except in the presence of six Masters and two Entered Apprentices, the date thereof being duly recorded and his name and Mark inserted in the said book.

From other old Scottish records it is clear that speculative masons selected their Marks just as the operatives did in the seventeenth century. One of the most noteworthy instances is the Mark Book of the Lodge of Aberdeen, now No. 1 Ter, which was started in 1670, and is signed by 49 members and of whom all

but two have their Marks inserted opposite their names. Many such examples can be quoted from Scottish records.

The use of a Mark by every brother of a Scottish Lodge was essential. The Register of Marks was kept with the greatest regularity, probably because Scottish Lodges retained their operative character long after English Lodges had become wholly speculative. Speculative masons, however, selected a Mark in exactly the same way, as for example, in the Lodge of Aberdeen previously mentioned.

Although the degree was regularly worked in England under the authority of the Grand Lodge of the "Ancients", it is to Scotland I think we must look for the birthplace of the Mark Degree as a speculative working. There are now Lodges north of the border practising speculative Masonry whose records show them to be direct descendants of operative Lodges existing from ancient times. In 1865 a report prepared by a special committee was presented to the Grand Chapter of Scotland which stated:

"In this country from time immemorial and long before the institution of the Grand Lodge of Scotland (1736) what is now known as the Mark Masters' Degree was wrought by the operative Lodges of St. John's masonry."

So far as England is concerned, the earliest known reference to the Mark Degree is recorded in the minute book of the Royal Arch Chapter of Friendship at Portsmouth (now attached to the Phoenix Lodge, No. 257), under date 1st September, 1769, which reads

" The ' Pro G.M.' Thomas Dunckerley bro't the Warrant of the Chapter and having lately rec'd the ' Mark ' he made the bre'n 'Mark Masons' and 'Mark Masters ', and each chuse their ' Mark ' viz. . . . [six names] . . . He also told us of this mann'r of writing which is to be used in the degree w'ch we may give to others so they be FC for Mark Masons and Master M for Mark Masters." (Hist. of Phcenix Lodge C- Chapter of Friendship, No. 257, by Alexander Howell, pp. 211/2.)

The importance of this short passage cannot be exaggerated. It is of interest to note that Bro. Thomas Dunckerley was a staunch supporter of the "Moderns" Grand Lodge and had been appointed Provincial Grand Master of several provinces of that Body at the same period. This Grand Lodge was rigorously opposed to Royal Arch and Mark Masonry, while the rival Grand Lodge, the "Ancients", regarded these degrees as essential orders of freemasonry. They were conferred in "Ancient" Lodges under the authority of Craft warrants. It is a singular fact that, in spite of the hostility of the "Moderns" to these degrees. Bro. Dunckerley conferred them in the many provinces of that Grand Lodge over which he presided as Provincial Grand Master. It has been suggested that he received the Mark Degree in the north of England and introduced it into Lodges in the south.

From the early Portsmouth minute mentioned it is clear that Bro. Dunckerley, having communicated the Mark Degree to the brethren assembled under their new Royal Arch warrant (No.3 dated 11th August, 1769, of the Grand Chapter

constituted three years earlier by Lord Blayney Grand Master of the "Moderns"), considered they might properly work the Mark Degree under their Craft warrants. This is clearly what he meant by telling them they could confer it on Fellow Crafts and Master Masons.

There is little or nothing heard of the working of the Degree in England from 1813 (when the United Grand Lodge of England was formed) to 1851, when the Bon Accord Lodge came into existence. This Mark Lodge was founded as an offshoot from the Bon Accord Royal Arch Chapter, No.70 Aberdeen from which body it received its Charter. This aroused the displeasure of the Scottish Royal Arch authorities. They maintained that the action of the Bon Accord Chapter was illegal, and suspended the Chapter and its office bearers, never to meet again, but the Bon Accord Lodge, London, continued. (It received a Warrant of Confirmation from the English Mark Grand Lodge dated 10th December, 1856). Other Lodges formed at about that period saw the irregularity of the Chapter at Aberdeen granting a Charter, and requested the Grand Chapter of Scotland to give them a legitimate Warrant authorizing them to work the Degree in England. Warrants were, in consequence of this, continued to be issued to English Mark Masons by the Grand Chapter of Scotland for the next few years.

The second of the Articles of Union, ratified and confirmed at the Festival of Union of the two English Grand Lodges held on 27th December, 1813, reads :

"It is declared and pronounced, that pure Ancient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more; viz' those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch. But this Article is not intended to prevent any Lodge or Chapter from holding a meeting in any of the degrees of the Orders of Chivalry, according to the constitutions of the said Orders."

The second sentence does not now appear in the Book of Constitutions.

At the end of 1855 the Board of General Purposes of the United Grand Lodge deemed it advisable to appoint a committee to consider the subject in Conjunction with a committee of the Grand Chapter, with a view to communicating to the M.W. Grand Master their opinion as to "whether the said Mark Masons' Degree may be deemed part of Ancient Freemasonry".

They reported:

"That after obtaining all the information in its power, this committee is of opinion that the Mark Masons' Degree, so called, does not form a portion of the Royal Arch Degree, and that it is not essential to Craft Masonry; but they are of opinion that there is nothing objectionable in such Degree, nor anything which militates against the universality of Masonry, and that it might be considered as forming a graceful addition to the Fellow Craft degree".

On 5th March, 1856, this report was presented to the Grand Lodge and it was resolved unanimously:

" That the Degree of Mark Mason or Mark Master is not at variance with the ancient landmarks of the Order, and that the Degree be an addition to and form part of Craft Masonry; and consequently may be conferred by all regular Warranted Lodges, under such regulations as shall be prepared by the Board of General Purposes, approved and sanctioned by the Grand Master " .

In accordance with this resolution the Board of General Purposes drew up regulations for working the Degree. These, if adopted, would have left it optional for brethren to take it or not, an additional certificate being issued to those who did so.

At the next Quarterly Communication, Bro. John Henderson, Past President of the Board of General Purposes, moved the non-confirmation of that part of the minutes which referred to the Mark degree. He denied that Grand Lodge had the power to make so great a constitutional change as that of adding a new degree to the Order. The Masters and Past Masters were urged to remember the declaration they had made at their installation, that no man, or body of men, could make innovations in the body of Masonry. As very few of those present knew what the Mark degree really was, the non-confirmation of that part of the minutes was carried by a large majority.

This refusal of Grand Lodge to acknowledge the degree led the Mark Masters seriously to consider their position. The members of the London Bon Accord Lodge, and three other Lodges the Northumberland and Berwick, the Royal Cumberland, Bath, and the Old Kent, London met in June, 1856, when a general desire was expressed for a union of all Mark Master Masons under one head, and a resolution was passed in favour of a general Union of all Mark Lodges upon equal terms in a Mark Grand Lodge. It was arranged that representatives of all Mark Lodges in England should be asked to meet, and in the meantime a committee was formed to consider details of the scheme, and Lord Leigh, W.M. of the Bon Accord Lodge, was elected the first Grand Master. More Time Immemorial Lodges joined the movement and most of the lodges holding warrants from the Grand Chapter of Scotland gave their allegiance. So the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England and Wales and the Dominions and Dependencies of the British Crown became an established fact. The last of the Mark Lodges warranted by the Grand Chapter of Scotland to become affiliated to the Mark Grand Lodge was the Ashton District Time Immemorial Lodge at Dukinfield, which came into the fold in 1899.

To summarize the present position in Scotland and Ireland:

In Scotland the Royal Arch degree is conferred only on Mark Masons, but all Craft Lodges and all Chapters can confer the Mark degree. There is no Mark Grand Lodge in Scotland but there is dual control exercised by the Grand Lodge and the Grand Chapter, who work in amity.

The Mark degree was taken under the protection of the Grand Chapter of Ireland in 1845, but it was not until about 30 years later that the Mark became a necessary step to the Royal Arch. Nowadays, when a Companion is elected to the chair of King (or First Principal), the Chapter first of all holds a meeting in

the Mark Degree and installs him as Master of a Mark Lodge. An indispensable preliminary.

These regulations now in force in Scotland and Ireland were adopted from early English Mark Masonry, where it is clear that the Mark Degree and the Royal Arch were closely allied. In one of our early ceremonies going by the name of Mark Master no mention is made of the stone that was rejected, but the ceremony hinges on the Ineffable Name.

An authoritative writer has said that although the Mark Degree is not now recognized as part of the English Craft system of freemasonry it should be supported and practised for its antiquity, as well as for the beauty and teaching of its ritual.

The Grand Secretary has felt it appropriate to clarify the position of Scottish and Irish Masons in relation to the English Mark. In Scotland it is possible for a Master Mason to be advanced to the Mark either in a Craft Lodge or in a Royal Arch Chapter'. A Brother advanced in a Scottish Lodge is equivalent to our Mark Master Mason, but has no means of achieving the status of an Installed Mark Mason in the Scottish Lodge. In the Scottish Chapter a series of degrees is worked, of which the Mark is the first. A Scottish Royal Arch Mason can, therefore, be accepted as a Mark Master Mason. In the Chapter, the First Principal, if a Past Master in the Craft, is automatically given the Secrets of the Mark Chair, so a Scottish First Principal can 'be admitted to a Board of Installed Masters if he is proved to be qualified. In Ireland, the general position is similar to Scotland, except than any First Principal (or King) can be accepted in a Board of Installed Masters.