

The Operatives

By

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The Operatives, whose formal name is “The Worshipful Society of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviers, Plaisterers and Bricklayers,” is a Masonic Society which exists to perpetuate a memorial of the practices of operative Free Masons existing prior to modern speculative Freemasonry.

It does not claim to be the successor to or connected with any former society of the same or neither any like name, nor that the ceremonies in fact represent precisely the practice of stonemasons, although some elements certainly reflect former practices. For instance, anyone wishing to learn the craft of stonemasonry in days gone by would do so in two ways; by either watching and practicing next to an experienced workman (i.e. 'Sitting by Nellie', as it was known), or by entering into a formal apprenticeship deed with a master. This latter method is reflected in our Society today and, on joining, a candidate does not promptly become a 'mason' but is known as an Indentured Apprentice until through time and experience he is able to progress through the seven degrees of the Society, which are:

- Grade I.....Indentured Apprentice
- Grade II.....Fellow of the Craft
- Grade III.....Fitter and Marker
- Grade IV.....Setter Erector
- Grade V.....Intendent, Overseer, Super Intendent and Warden
- Grade VIPassed Master (Note for Masons: Not Past Master)
- Grade VII.....Master Mason, of whom three are Grand Master Masons

The Society is governed by three Grand Master Masons who traditionally hold their offices ad vitam, but waive that right. The First Grand

Master Mason retires after a tenure of five years and the Second Grand Master Mason after a period of three years (although both are eligible for reappointment), whilst the office of Third Grand Master Mason terminates annually with the enactment of the Ancient Drama one year after his appointment.

The three Grand Masters are the sole members of the seventh degree Lodge, all others being said to be members of the seventh degree *honoris causa*. The minimum qualification for the sixth degree is to be an Installed Master in good standing in both the Craft and Mark degrees of speculative Freemasonry. The candidate also has to have attended at least seventy percent of his Assemblage meetings. The Senior Passed Master of a Region confers this degree in a Lodge of Passed Masters, usually held once per year. In his capacity as head of a region the "SPM" is known as a Deputy Grand Master Mason.

The first four degrees are conferred in an Assemblage of Lodges IV^o to I^o, each degree beyond the first being conferred when the Assemblage is appropriately opened as a Lodge of that degree. The fifth, sixth and seventh degrees are conferred in separate Lodges of those degrees.

The Society has about two thousand members scattered throughout the world in England & Wales, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, France, Belgium, India, Malaysia, Canada and America, with more planned in Hong Kong and South Africa, although Assemblage membership is not restricted to those countries alone.

Apart from the Grand Master Masons and the Grand Clerk, regalia is minimal and consists simply of a blue collaret or cord from which is

suspended the badge of one's grade. Badges are exchanged as progression is made. Each Assemblage, however, has considerable furniture and equipment, all of which has its basis in antiquity and is related to the craft of stonemasonry.

All ceremonies are distinctly English in character. No matter where they are being worked, they are always conducted in English and the first toast at the luncheon or dinner which follows the meeting is, whenever possible, always to the Monarch of the United Kingdom.

Early Days

If any one man can be said to have been the founder of today's Operatives that man was Clement Edwin Stretton, who was born in 1850 and lived in Leicester. His family was clearly affluent because in 1866 he was articled to a Civil Engineering firm for £300, no small sum in those days, and from 1878-9 he was Lord Mayor of Leicester at the tender age of 28. In any event, in 1866, as part of his training, he was sent for a month to a quarry at Cromford, Derbyshire, in order to learn something of the masons' trade. Although nothing to do with him personally, he appears to have made an indifferent start, for the workmen at the site — who were Guild Masons — simply refused to work with him. Within days, however, he applied to become a Guild Mason himself, whereupon their attitude changed completely and, with their total support and assistance, he began a course of study which lasted for the rest of his life. Thereafter, he returned to the quarry at regular intervals, becoming a Fellow of the Craft (II°) in 1874, a Super Fellow Fitter and Marker (III°) in 1875, Erector (IV°) in 1876, Intendent and Super-Intendent of the Work (V°) in 1877, and passed an examination as Master (VI°) in 1878. In fact, so enthusiastic did he remain for the old-style Guild Masonry, with its mysteries and traditions, that he also joined a local lodge in Leicester, and eventually became Senior Passed Master in 1901

and third Grand Master Mason of the York Division in 1908.

Unsurprisingly, Stretton's activities were not confined to Guild Masonry alone and, in 1871; he joined speculative freemasonry, being initiated — as was his father — into St. John Lodge No. 279 in Leicester. He twice went through the chair as Master and ultimately became Provincial Senior Grand Warden, as well as a member of Mark, Royal Arch and the Red Cross of Constantine. Even so, his over-riding enthusiasm always remained Guild Masonry which he considered superior and more complete than that which we nowadays refer to as Craft masonry.

Superior though he might have considered it, it has to be admitted that over the next quarter of a century Guild masonry experienced a prolonged period of decline and by 1908, when he visited the Derby lodge where he had been first apprenticed in 1866, Stretton found only seven in attendance, as distinct from the hundreds who had been there when he had been indentured. The reasons for this are firstly, the Trade Union Act of 1871, which had given the unions legal status and thereby allowed them to take over the training and social functions which the Guild had previously enjoyed and, secondly, the new technologies, methods and materials which had rendered the skilled mason, with his mallet and chisel, not merely redundant, but obsolete. In short, their time was over!

This disturbed Stretton considerably who, thereafter, set about doing two things: Firstly, resuscitating Guild masonry before all the secret methods, traditions and practices were lost forever, for he genuinely believed that there were strong links between medieval operative masonry and today's Craft masonry which should be preserved, and it is worth noting that in the process of doing this — one way or another — he revived three Guild lodges, namely Lodge No. 70 in Derbyshire, Lodge No. 91 in Leicester, and Lodge No. 110 at Bardon Hill. Secondly, and

with equal determination, Stretton set about drawing attention to certain inconsistencies and inaccuracies in some of the Craft rituals for which he vehemently laid the blame on the Rev Dr. James Anderson who in 1717, he claimed, had virtually hijacked the four mainly Operative lodges linked to the re-building of St. Paul's Cathedral, namely the Goose and Gridiron in St. Paul's Churchyard, the Crown in Parkers Lane, The Appletree in Charles Street, and the Rummer and Grapes in Channel Row, the members of which, as has been well documented, then combined to create the first Grand Lodge and Craft masonry as we know it today.

A ceremony he particularly disliked was the third (Master Mason's) degree, which he claimed had been invented and simply added on by Dr. Anderson and his friends but which, in reality, was based upon Anderson's inadequate knowledge of the Operatives' Annual Festival commemorating the slaying of Hiram Abif. Stretton did this by writing articles which were published in Masonic publications such as the *Transactions of the Leicester Lodge of Research*, and in newspapers such as *The Melton Mowbray Times*, by giving lectures to professional bodies, and by a voluminous correspondence (through 'Correspondence Circles' in London, Ireland and the United States) with notable luminaries of his time, such as John Yarker (author of *The Arcane Schools*), M Ill Bro J A Bothwell-Gosse of Paris, and Dr. Thomas Carr of Blackpool (author of *The Ritual of the Operative Free Masons*), all of whom ultimately became members of Stretton's revived Guild lodges. Interestingly, Stretton corresponded for years with Bro Bothwell-Gosse, who published some of his papers, but it was not until 1910 that he discovered that this knowledgeable and erudite mason was in fact a lady by the name of J Aimée Bothwell-Gosse who was Founder of the Order of Ancient Free and Accepted Masonry for Men and Women, a member of the 33°, and founder and editor of *The Speculative Mason* magazine. Notwithstanding this discovery she, too, was welcomed into Guild masonry and from 1910 until the time of her

death on 29th December 1954, she proudly declared herself to be a Grand Master VII° of the Guild of Operative Freemasons. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that as a consequence of his attacks on Craft masonry, Stretton should eventually attract a number of critics, and it has been suggested that this is just one of the reasons why, despite all he did to popularize and preserve the historical origins of freemasonry, he never attained Grand rank.

As far as today's Operatives are concerned, the single most important thing that Stretton ever did was to authorize, in his capacity as Secretary, the re-opening of the London Section of the York Division of the Guild Operatives, for which purpose he deputed another important figure in the history of this Society, Dr. Thomas Carr, to open in London a Master Masons' Lodge in the VII°, to enthrone three Master Masons, and "to carry out all other work in accordance with the ancient usages and established customs as Enthroned Master Masons have done in all ages." This Carr did at the Bijou Theatre, Bedford House, 3 Bedford Street, Strand, and London on Wednesday 21st May 1913, and the Lodge continued to meet thereafter.

On 14th April 1915, Stretton having died two months earlier, the three Master Masons (as they then were) and members, unanimously passed a resolution that "Having learned with great sorrow of the death of our Worshipful Brother Clement E. Stretton, Secretary of the York Division No. 8, and knowing that it was his wish that we should revive the Westminster Division No. 2 and being well satisfied that the Westminster Division has ceased to exist and being anxious to continue our research work as to Free Masonry prior to 1717 and having the approval of all the brethren of the London Section and the consent of Lodges Leicester and Mount Bardou, hereby constitute our London Section "The Channel Row Assemblage" of the Worshipful Society of Free Masons etc. (title in full) Westminster Division, so called after the Operative Lodge which held its meeting prior to

1717 at the ‘Rummer of Grapes’ Inn which was one of the four Operatives Lodges which formed the Grand Lodge of England in 1717.” Thus was formalized and finalized the birth of today’s Worshipful Society of Free Masons — the Operatives — which had been gestating for two years.

Growth of the Society

It would be wrong to claim that, following the renaming of Channel Row Assemblage, the Society as a whole was an overnight success. Two world wars, combined with resentment and opposition from various Masonic theorists and their supporters, mainly resulting from the vehemence of Stretton’s criticism of Dr. Anderson, his unsupported theories, and his biased view of the relative importance of Guild masonry vis-à-vis Craft masonry, made sure of that. Given that, and the decimating effect of the first World War, it was not until 1932 that a second Assemblage (Friars Walk) was Constituted, this time in Essex. Even so, local opposition and other difficulties proved too strong, and in due course Friars Walk Assemblage was forced into suspension until 1973, when it was re-Constituted, and has thrived ever since.

Before that second Assemblage was constituted, however, and despite the fact that there was, as yet, only one Assemblage, support for the Society was undoubtedly strong in certain quarters and its membership both enthusiastic and influential. So much so, in fact, that on 19th October 1931, Channel Row Assemblage felt sufficiently confident to pass the following resolution:

“That we, the Channel Row Assemblage of the Westminster Division of the Worshipful Society of Free Masons etc. (name in full) do by these presents constitute and form into a Grand Assemblage of Operative Free Masons our brothers as follows (and here followed 21 names, the first eight all being VII°).” The Society thus

became a sovereign body with one active Assemblage.

The third Assemblage (Abbey), strangely, was constituted in 1943 during the Second World War ‘Strangely’ because according to its Grand Clerk at the time, the Rev R R à-Ababelton, “The present war has made it extremely difficult for meetings to be held. Meetings already arranged have had to be cancelled owing to enemy action and the black-out has been a serious handicap. Consequently our Lodges are only able to meet in the summer months.” Nevertheless meetings did continue, although it was not for another twenty years that a fourth Assemblage (Kirkstall Abbey) was constituted.

It took nearly fifty years to get the first three Assemblages firmly established, but only forty to get the next sixty Assemblages; and during that period, 1989 in particular stands out, when six Assemblages were constituted within a matter of days. Somewhat uniquely, the relative ‘seniority’ of those six, now depends only on whether they were constituted in the morning or afternoon!

The Future of the Society

The future of the Operatives today is brighter than it has ever been. We have a world-wide membership of some two thousand members in several different countries, with new Assemblages planned for the U.K., India, Hong Kong and South East Asia, America and South Africa, all within the next twelve months. to August 2010. With our building fund (the Footing Corner Stone Fund) which was set up in 1990, we have recently acquired a headquarters building of our own. We have even started planning for our centenary, which we intend to celebrate in 2013. We have our own website (<http://www.operatives.org.uk>) which attracts international interest, and correspondence is regularly received from masons throughout the world, sometimes out of curiosity but occasionally wishing to have Assemblages in their own areas and countries. Ceremonies

closely resembling those worked by the old Guild masons are worked by today's Operatives, without the use of ritual books, and at Grand Assemblage each year we perform what is now the 'Antient Drama' commemorating the slaying of Hiram Abif. We even have an 'unattached' Assemblage (King Solomon's Quarries) the primary aim of which is to provide exemplar workings of ceremonies and, without disclosing any of the 'secrets' of our Society, we have recently taken to providing demonstrations of our workings for other Orders, just to illustrate how much that which is practiced daily throughout freemasonry owes to our Guild predecessors. Clement Edwin Stretton, enthusiast, champion and preserver of the "Tectonic Art", could well be excused for feeling that his legacy has been fulfilled!

From information on their website

<http://www.operatives.org.uk> and a history by GMM

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