

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE ORIGINS OF TRACING BOARDS.

An Address by Bro. Merv Gollan, MM, Associate Member.

Presented to the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No. 305 – 6 May 2002.

Worshipful Master – Fellow Brethren. I would like to touch briefly on the origin of Tracing Boards. The books I have used for reference are *Freemasons Guide and Compendium* by Bernard E. Jones and, *Tracing Boards and Other Selected Papers* delivered before the Research Lodge of Wellington No 194 by members of the Lodge.

From early days in the speculative lodges – so early probably that the custom is lost in the mists of antiquity, unless by chance it came from the French lodges quite early in the 1700's – brethren used to mark out on the floor the actual form of the lodge and at the end of their meetings they effaced the marks. With the passage of time the custom gave way to the use of painted cloths on the floor or wall, which in their turn were generally discontinued in favour of the Tracing Board.

For much of our information on the ancient methods of delineating the symbolic lodge, we have to fall back on the irregular prints published during the 18th century. One of them, dated 1766, says *the drawing is frequently made with chalk, stone-blue and charcoal intermixed .. and, at the time of making a mason, the room is grandly illuminated and, in some lodges, powdered resin mixed with shining sand is strewn on the floor which, together with the lighting, has a dramatic effect.*

The same publication tells that the candidate is also taught the step, or how to advance to the Master, upon the drawing on the floor which, in some lodges, resembles the Grand Building termed a Mosaic Palace and is described with the utmost exactness.

They also draw other figures, one of which is called the Laced Tuft and the other, the Throne Beset with Stars. There is also represented a perpendicular line in the form of a Mason's instrument commonly called the Plumb Line and another figure which represents the Tomb of Hiram Abiff, the first Grand Master, who has been dead almost 3000 years.

When the ceremony has been completed, the newly made member is obliged to take a mop out of a pail of water especially brought for the purpose and rub out the drawing on the floor if it is done with chalk and charcoal. The mop was still being used for erasing floor lines in the Dundee Lodge No 9 at Wapping in 1811.

The system of drawing the lodge on the floor of the inn room must have had many inconveniences and may have led, at times, to some differences of opinion between the lodge and its landlord. It was inevitable that the floor lines should be replaced sooner or later by a floor cloth of some sort. In reference to floor cloths we find that the Old Kings Arms Lodge No 28 was presented with a painted cloth representing *the several forms of Mason's lodges*. This was in the 1730's, further evidence that lodges of the three degrees were formed in different ways.

The floor cloth was apparently a painted canvas and in it we see an innovation which led eventually to the original purpose of the floor drawing being quite overlooked and forgotten, for, in the course of time, the painted cloth, which cost money and probably did not wear very well as a carpet, developed into a wall cloth, or possibly a cloth covering a table. The painted cloth developed into a composite picture of symbols and today, in every lodge, we find it in the form of the well known Tracing Board, or Lodge Board, in which we do not easily see the old Mason's draughting board, but from which, nevertheless, it has descended in a very roundabout way.

The floor cloth whether spread on the floor, covering a table or for display on a wall, kept its name until somewhere near the end of the 18th century, when the tracing board began to become generally into use. But more than one Lodge continued to work lectures *on the floor cloth*.

The Tracing Board is an emblem whose history goes back indirectly to the tracing or drawing boards of the medieval Mason, even though its name was re-acquired in speculative times.

We must not be misled by a modern application into supposing that the old time tracing board meant simply a piece of transparent paper, laid upon a drawing attached to a board, so that a copy could be made by tracing over the lines. *To trace* means more than *to copy* – fundamentally it means *to trace out*, or, in other words, *to scheme, to devise, to plan, to draw or to sketch*. The word comes down to us from the original Latin *tractus* through the Italian, Spanish and French languages and, in doing so, has acquired all these many meanings. The beautiful *tracery* of the Gothic windows is an application of the same word.

E. H. Dring believes that probably the earliest dated tracing boards in existence in Great Britain are the set belonging to the Lodge Faithful founded in 1753 at Norwich, now meeting at Harleston, Norfolk. The boards of this set are dated 1800. In the first degree board there are, in addition to the usual emblems, a beehive, a sundial, a trowel and a cornucopia. On the base of the third degree board is an arcade of columns representing the five orders of architecture.

The French lodges apparently had tracing boards long before the English lodges had them. The *Planche a' Tracer* is known as far back as 1745. Some French lodges refer to the board as *Trace* only, this meaning literally *outline*, what we should in modern language call *layout*. If we translate *Planche a' Tracer* we get *Tracing Board* and it is reasonably certain that our term came about in that way, so reintroducing a term common in English operative lodges hundreds of years before. It is probable that the French *Planche a' Tracer* was an actual drawing board – a plain board on which the Master of the Lodge drew certain outlines.

Not all lodges in other countries have Tracing Boards, even America does not find them necessary to interpret the ritual, but regards them merely as ornamental appendages.

I have said before about the differences of opinion as to the origin of Tracing Boards as now used, but there is however general agreement that three brethren, Bro's. Jacob, Bowring and Harris, all of whom were living between 1800 and 1845, were responsible for fixing the symbols which have been handed down to us and used up till about 30 years ago. According to one authority, the most important of them was Bro. Harris, a painter of illuminations and an architectural draughtsman, who was initiated in 1818.

In 1845 a prize was offered, by the Somerset Emulation Lodge of Improvement, for the best design of Tracing Boards and Bro Harris produced a set which was accepted and approved by a special lodge committee and which is in use at the present time. This success prompted Bro. Harris to do another set in 1849 which has since been generally adopted as a standard basis of all modern Tracing Boards.

I would like to thank the Worshipful Master for the opportunity to make this address and hope that the brethren have found something of interest in it.