

WHY THE BLACK AND WHITE CLOTHING?

**An Address by Bro Frank Bottrill, MM, to the
Hawke's Bay Research Lodge in May 2003.**

Whilst recently cruising through the Internet I came across this question: Why do freemasons wear black and white clothing?

An answer was supplied by Bro Richard Num of Adelaide, Australia, on the Internet in 1999, in response to just such a question from a Prince Hall Brother.

The wearing of black and white has been the custom for over a hundred years. In the 1700's freemasons were more colourful and did not wear black and white.

In an old Masonic catechism of that time there is a question asking about the Master's clothing - *yellow jacket and blue breeches* forms part of the answer. Was this an allusion to the colours of a pair of compasses and a square, perhaps?

There is a painting by Bro Stewart Watson, which was produced in 1846, showing the Scottish poet and freemason, Robert Burns, in Lodge Canongate Kilwinning, Edinburgh, on his appointment as the lodge poet laureate. Members of the lodge wore variously coloured coats, breeches and stockings - not black and white. This event was dated as being on 1st March 1787.

Blue and gold were certainly recognised as the official colours of freemasonry in the 1720's - nowadays these colours are used as the edging on aprons of Grand Lodge Officers and on their collars. Lodge officers use light blue collars and have light blue trimmings on their aprons.

A quick Internet search on the history of men's formal wear yielded two useful sites: -

From site (1) it seems that black formal wear was invented by an English writer. The idea of wearing black for eveningwear was, according to the English clothing historian James Laver, first introduced by the nineteenth-century British writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who utilized it as *a romantic gesture to show that he was a 'blighted being' and very, very melancholy*. And it was Bulwer-Lytton who gave further impetus to this notion of black as the colour for formal wear by writing, in 1828, that *people must be very distinguished to look well in black*.

Naturally, the moment this statement was noted by would-be dandies, the style became decidedly *de rigueur*...or *cool*, in modern day parlance. This was probably a reaction to the sartorial excesses of men during the time of the English Prince Regent (later Brother, King George IV) when dandies such as Beau Brummell wore more splendid apparel than females.

The original dinner jacket was *invented* by Brother, King Edward VII, when Prince of Wales. He was also the Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England in the last quarter of the 19th Century. He certainly made the dinner jacket fashionable, and no doubt this is why the vast majority of freemasons in Australia, and some other countries, wear dinner jackets (some WM's and Grand Lodge officers wear white tie and tails).

From site (2) - the tuxedo was *invented* by Pierre Lorillard IV, a wealthy man of Tuxedo Park in New York State, in 1896. His son and friends wore the first tuxedos to a white tie and tails ball. The cummerbund and bow tie (popular with many freemasons in Australia) were later additions to the *tux* outfit.

In the more tropical parts of Australia, masons wear white mess jackets rather than the sombre dinner jacket or tuxedo or tailcoat. Members of daylight lodges wear day clothes such as a business suit or, perhaps, a formal sports jacket.

Frequent attendees at lodge meetings take their freemasonry fairly seriously and the wearing of formal clothes perhaps helps to set the mood. Furthermore, *the uniform* of black-and-white might mean that we pay more attention to the man than his clothes - the reverse might occur if we wore *catwalk gear* to lodge!

In many parts of the world, at least a portion of the lodge floor is black and white. As to how long these chequered, or black-and-white, mosaic pavements have existed in lodge, maybe someone else can answer that question. I would suspect that these pavements became fashionable in permanent lodge rooms, when chalk marks on the floor or floor coverings were no longer required to be laid out by the tyler in temporary accommodation, such as taverns and hostelryes.

As an aside, there is a vogue in Australia for some new lodges to meet in temporary accommodation, such as clubs, so the rolled up Masonic carpet (afghan) is making a comeback. Such carpets are mainly comprised of black and white squares arranged in a mosaic pattern.

This brings us to another subject altogether which, perhaps, should be left for another time.

Editor's Note:

Bro Richard Num is currently the President of the ANZ Masonic Research Council (the grouping of Australasian Research Lodges).