

## **THE ORIGIN OF THE TRACING BOARD**

**An Address given by VWBro Bruce Hastie, PDistGM, to the Hawke's Bay Research  
Lodge No 305 on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2011**

The explanation of the Tracing Board to a candidate is often delivered as a standalone on the night and sometimes immediately following the ceremony, where the candidate sees a beautifully printed design and it also helps to make the ceremony more interesting as the lecturer explains in detail its meaning.

Tonight it is my pleasure to present to you **THE ORIGIN OF THE TRACING BOARD!**

What is the origin of the Tracing Boards? The Masonic Tracing Board was evolved out of the square pavement. The latter represented, in miniature scale, the floor of the Master Builder's workroom.

In Persia it became the custom to draw these Tracing Boards on the floor of the workroom to see them. The squares are laid out on the floor and the plan of the building to be erected is marked out, and each square represents either one of the four bricks.

In the days of early speculative Masonry in England, a considerable portion of the ceremony was connected with a drawing on the floor of the lodge room. In those days lodges usually met in some well known Inn or Tavern. The furnishings would be very plain, and the floor would consist of boards sprinkled with sand or rushes. When a degree was being worked a space in front of the Master's pedestal was swept clean. On this clear space it was the Tyler's duty to draw with chalk and charcoal a design in the form of an oblong square, representing a building, with various Masonic symbols and emblems such as the Square, the Level and the Plumb Rule, and possibly other designs representing King Solomon's Temple and the Tomb of Hiram.

After the symbols and emblems had been carefully explained to the Candidate, he was given a mop and pail of water and ordered to wash out the drawing on the floor.

It was the Tyler's duty to make this drawing with chalk and charcoal, for which he was paid a special fee, often two shillings and sixpence. The drawing was an important part of the ceremony and a lodge could not be held to initiate a Candidate without it.

One ritual says some lodges use tape and nails to form the same thing and so keep the world ignorant of the matter. This method was used first on the account of the introduction of carpets. It was thus impossible to draw on the floor with charcoal or chalk. Also, Tylers, who were able to draw these designs with the necessary accuracy and with some regard to fidelity, were not easy to obtain.

Later the custom was gradually introduced of using templates that are usually pieces of metal cut to the required shapes, and placed on the required design. Later still floor cloths were introduced. The drawing was made on a large piece of cloth, which could be placed on the floor and rolled up and put away when not in use. For the sake of convenience these cloths were placed on boards held up by two trestles and known as Tracing Boards.

Gradually, as the custom seems to have arisen of the drawing of emblems on the board itself and as the drawing on the floor was known as *The Lodge*, the board was generally known as *The Lodge Board*, though sometimes still called *The Lodge*. For example, in the Book of Constitution of the year 1784, there is an account of the dedication of Freemasons Hall, London, in which it states - *About half past twelve the procession entered the Hall in the following order. Grand Tyler with drawn sword, four Tylers carrying "The Lodge " covered with Satin.*

No dates can be given for the various changes. There seems to be no uniformity. Some lodges seem to have had boards before they had cloths, and some have had both at once, and some have gone straight from the drawing on the floor to the lodge board. Although undoubtedly there were Lodge Boards in existence before the year 1800, they did not come into general use until about that time.

The Tracing Board will thus be seen to have passed through five stages: -

- 1 The drawing on the floor
- 2 Tape and nails
- 3 Tin plates, or templates, cut in the shape of an emblem
- 4 Painted floor cloth
- 5 Finally, the Tracing Board separated from the pavement altogether, the latter now remaining in the form of the square or chequered pavement as we have it today.

Finally Brethren, the Tracing Boards of the Three Degrees are a significant survival from our Masonic past.

Thank you WM for the opportunity for addressing the Brethren on this interesting part of our Masonic History.

**References:**

*Tracing Boards - Their Development and Their Designers.*

Questions and Answers, 2nd Edition, published by Master's & Past Master's Lodge No 130 (Christchurch, NZ)