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Operative Masonry

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When we think of operative masons we usually conjure up cathedral builders although, in fact, while some masons may have been employed on the building of a Cathedral for building for a lengthy period, in general, masons could he engaged on the building of smaller churches or colleges, or building castles, stately homes, town walls or bridges. The King could order the impressment of masons including those working on churches, although, ifthe Bishop had the Monarch's car, an exemption might be arranged for particular workers.

Guilds, established to control trade within a Borough, had grown both from organisations with a purely benevolent or religious basis and from associations formed to ensure that men practising any particular craft never grew too numerous, that standards of quality and skill were maintained, that tools of trade might be shared, raw materials be readily available and that charitable assistance be made available to those who could no longer work. Guilds which concerned themselves with the moral and spiritual, as well as the social, welfare of their members, laid down rules for regular Church attendance. Punishments for breaches of the rules were often severe and carried out in public, the offender being, fined, beaten or placed in the pillory.

It is unlikely that there was, outside London, any ancient craft or trade guild of masons in England, as in the medieval period no town could find work to support sufficient masons to form a guild. In London, however, there were two guild-like Livery Companies, one of freemasons returning two members to the common Council ofthe City of London and one of Masons returning four members. Around 1380 these were amalgamated into one which, in 1481, was granted a Livery. Livery Companies, in general, were governed by a Master, Wardens, a Court of Assistants (usually Freemen). The Livery had jurisdiction over its members - unruly apprentices could be whipped, journeymen on strike imprisoned and Masters offending against regulations fined. Members were forbidden to carry trade disputes to another court unless the Company' s Court had been appealed to in vain

The Freemasons Livery prescribed that once in every three years members be clad in "one clothing convenient to their powers and degrees to be ordained by the Wardens of the Craft for the time being." If anyone refused to wear it he would "forfeit as often as he does so six shillings and eight pence." Members officially attended Mass once every two years and afterwards held a dinner to which their wives could be invited The price of the meal was 12 pence, which was two or three days' wages, and red and white wines were served. Sons and daughters of Freemen could claim the freedom of the Company whether or not they were engaged in the trade of their fathers and the freedom could also be bought or had as a gift. The door was open for persons unconnected with the trade to enter into the freedom of a Livery Company which, among other things, was a passport to civic honours. The active people in the Company were the merchants, who contracted to undertake building work, owned quarries, or imported stone or bricks from France. It was not the working masons who prepared and laid the stones.

The London Company of Freemasons went into a decline in the 17th Century. In 1607 the Company was in difficulties and its Wardens had been found to be very remiss in their offices. Later in the century one could achieve the freedom of the City of London without being members of any Livery Company. These developments suggest that the London Freemasons Company was not a clear or logical successor to the groups of active masons who worked in lodges while building the Cathedrals of England.

In the 15th century Guilds had expressed themselves culturally with elaborate plays and pageants, held on special feast days. Miracle plays, which earlier had been performed at Church festivals passed from the clergy to the laity and their presentation became a great urban occasion. While we have no record of a Masons Guild being associated a play, the Shipwrights presented "Noah's Ark" and the Fishery and Mariners "The Flood". It was at this time a great deal of drama was produced including the allegory "Everyman". It seems that the use of allegory had become an important characteristic of English expression, being maintained in future writings and great use of allegory was made in early Masonic rituals. Operative masons, however, did not appear to have been involved in the presentation of miracle plays.

A major change took place in working conditions in the 17th century. Following the Plague in 1665, when thousands died, and the Fire of London in 1668, when labour was disorganised and the amount of building required was so great that it became lawful for members of the building trade, not Freemen of London, to work there. In fact, the shortages were so severe that workers who had not come into the building industry by the accepted route - apprenticeship - now were welcome and the trade was flooded with "illegal" tradesmen. All the economic forces of the day were pulling against the old forms of industrial regulation.

Going back to the 15th century, operative masons probably would have still lived at their workplace. While little research seems to have been done on the subject, it is probable that masons in London working on public works and buildings that had been destroyed by the Great Fire could have lived nearby and gone home each night. This change in domestic habits may have contributed towards the breakdown of the practice of operative masons continuing to live in a close-knit group The place of recreation of these and other manual workers was the local ale house.