

THE MARK DEGREE IN SCOTLAND

A STUDY FOR THE ENQUIRING FREEMASON

"THE MARK DEGREE IN SCOTLAND"

A LECTURE.

A Little Background of the early days of the Mark Degree.

The marks of the operative masons have been found on stone buildings all over the world and they sometime date back a few hundred if not a few thousand years. Mason marks have been found in the buildings of all civilised countries and they are quite common in Scottish and English churches, abbeys, etc. However it is a fact that Mason's Marks were recorded and organised in only two countries: Scotland and Germany. The Scottish Schaw Statutes of 1598 show how they were registered in this country, and who was entitled to register his mark. Strange enough, not only operative masons were able to do it, but also non-operative "Accepted" members. Marks were common to many different trades.

However the ceremonies of Mark Masonry, as it is practised to day, probably date from the eighteenth century. There are some recorded dates when Brethren of the Craft were made Mark Masons in those days, but we have no evidence when it was introduced.

Mark Masonry was practised in Fellow Craft lodges, which worked many ceremonies during the eighteenth century. In those days Mark Masonry had two degrees, Mark Man and Mark Master; they now are combined into one degree in Scottish Masonry but this is not the case in other countries, even if they differ from the old ones. The Mark Man Degree was reserved to Fellow Crafts and the Mark Master was exclusively for Master Masons. More often than not, Brethren receiving the Royal Arch also received the Mark degree. Some Craft lodges worked also the Mark and Royal Arch Degrees as well as a chair degree.

So Brethren, this talk will feature the early days and the formation of Mark Masonry in Scotland.

Of all the English speaking Grand Lodges throughout the World, the Grand Lodge of Scotland is the only one which regards the Mark Degree as an integral part of Ancient Free and Accepted Masonry

The present "Constitution and Laws" of the Grand Lodge of Scotland states;
The Degrees of Freemasonry authorised and governed by Grand Lodge are those of Entered Apprentice, Fellow-of-Craft (including the Mark), and Master Mason, and no other."

The Grand Lodge of Scotland published its first book of Constitutions in 1836 under the title of, "The Laws and Constitutions of the Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons of Scotland." And in that edition the law on the subject of authorised degrees is to be found in Section IV of Chapter 1 and reads;

"The Grand Lodge of Scotland practises no degrees of Masonry, but those of Apprentice, Fellow-Craft and Master Mason" You will notice, that in 1836 there is no mention of the Mark Degree.

So when did Grand Lodge change that ruling regarding the Mark Degree being worked in Scotland, and why? Well the date of the change was 20th December 1860 (125 years after the formation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland) and why they changed the ruling it is the subject of this wee talk.

The earliest Official reference to the Mason's Mark is the Schaw Statutes dated 28 December 1598. They were written by William Schaw, Master of Work to the Crown of Scotland and Warden General of the Mason craft. From this code of twenty-two regulations, this is the thirteenth item, word for word, but in modern language.

Item: that no Master of Fellow of Craft be received nor admitted without the number of six Masters and two Entered Apprentices, the Warden of that lodge (i.e. the Master) being one of the said six, and that the day of the receiving of the said Fellow or Craft or Master be orderly booked and his name and Mark inserted in the said book with the names of his six admitters...Providing always that no man be admitted without an essay (test) and sufficient trial of his skill and worthiness in his vocation and craft.

The earliest record of the Mark being worked in a Scottish Lodge is to be found in the minutes of Lodge St. Operative at Banff, and the date was 7th July 1778. Although it must be said, the Thistle Lodge No. 62 in Dumfries would dispute that by saying they have the earliest written reference in their minute book to the year 1770. Although the old Mark Book of 1670 belonging to the Lodge of Aberdeen No. 1^{ter} has the oldest surviving record of Brethren recording their 'marks' in a Lodge.

This recording a Brother's mark was a throw back from the old Operative system. Our early Operatives would have been unlikely to read or write, and the choosing of a mark was the Masonic equivalent of their signature. It represented their name, character, integrity and their skills. When they applied their Mark to a document, letter, painting, or to a stone for the building of a cathedral, they stood up to be counted. And by the use of it were in effect saying, "This is where I stand, this is my work. I guarantee its quality, and am proud of the workmanship it shows." And this recording of a Brother's Masonic Mark in a Mark Book continued in a number of Lodges that had moved from Operative to Speculative, it was simply a form of identification. One source points out that the recording of a Mark was a common practice in Masonic Lodges in Scotland and does not necessarily mean they went through the Mark degree but are simply continuing an old tradition that all Masons had a distinctive Mark. Probably the best explanation of a Brother's mark being used in this way just might be the mark of Brother Robert Burns. In the Minute Book of Lodge St. James Tarbolton where Burns was the Depute Master, his signature along with his mark appears in a list of the members for the year 1785. He also recorded his Mark in the Bible he gave Mary Campbell in the summer of 1786, but nowhere in the Minute Books of Lodge Tarbolton during this period does it record the working of the Mark Degree. In fact, Burns did not receive the Royal Arch Degrees which would have included the Mark at St. Ebbe's Royal Arch Encampment until May 1787. The fact of the matter is, Robert Burns chose a Masonic Mark because he was following in the footsteps of his Operative brethren, even though he had not gone through the degree, as it was normal to do so then.

Prior to the year 1800, Grand Lodge did not put on any official restriction on its daughter Lodges as to what degrees they could work. Many Lodges not only conferred the three Craft degrees, but also the Royal Arch and Knight Templar degrees and any other degrees including the Mark which took their

fancy, and the Lodges believed they did not require any authority from anyone not to do so. In fact, there are no prohibitions whatsoever in the Minute Books of Grand Lodge, and they had never made any ruling on these Degrees, even though they knew it was going on and accepted that position, they had in fact turned a blind eye to what was happening. However, that position was soon to change radically when in July 1799 the first of the Acts against Secret Societies was passed into law. Simply put, all lodges had to give a record of their membership, and Grand Lodge would issue an annual certificate to all her lodges certifying that they were being conducted properly, “*within the meaning of the Act.*” (It’s a wee bitty more complicated than that involving, but that’s the gist of it) So, the Grand Lodge of Scotland thus found itself in the position of certifying to Officers of the Crown for the acts and behaviour of a number of its Lodges who were engaged in working Masonic Degrees of which Grand Lodge was totally ignorant—at least officially.

So, this state of affairs could not continue, and, in 1800, the Grand Lodge issued a letter of instruction to all her lodges prohibiting them from working any Degree other than Apprentice, Fellow-Craft and Master Mason. The Grand Lodge of Scotland had effectively banned the working of the Mark Degree in 1800, and any Lodge who sought permission to work the Mark Degree was refused. This was ratified when the first Laws and Constitutions were issued in 1836, (*100 years after Grand Lodge formation*) and any requests for permission to work a Mark were always refused with being in variance Section IV., Chapter 1 of the Laws and Constitutions. In fact, no meetings of any degrees above Master Mason were allowed under penalty of forfeiture of their Charter. However, the Mark, the Royal Arch Degrees and the Knights’ Templar’s degrees continued to be worked in Encampments which did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

The position of the Mark Degree in Craft Lodges between 1800, when it was abandoned by Grand Lodge, and 1817, when it was taken under the wing of the newly formed Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland is obscure. It was still probably being worked in some Lodges, “*but on the quiet.*” Then in 1817 an agreement was arranged between the Royal Grand Conclave of Scotland and the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland whereby the authority to work the Mark along with the Royal Arch was transferred from the Conclave to the Grand Chapter. The Supreme Grand Royal Arch

Chapter still exercises authority over the Mark, but divides that mandate harmoniously with the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

The problem of Scottish Lodges working the Mark Degree was not going away, and in 1838, Grand Lodge received a communication from the Provincial Grand Master of the West India Islands, requesting a dispensation to work the Mark Mason degree, the Grand Lodge, at the Quarterly Communication declined to sanction the issue of a dispensation of that kind, quoting the 1836 law; *"The Grand Lodge of Scotland practises no degrees of Masonry, but those of Apprenticce, Fellow-Craft and Master Mason, denominated St. John's Masonry"* and further re-iterated, *"All Lodges holding of the Grand Lodge of Scotland are strictly prohibited and discharged from holding any other Meeting than those of the three Orders of Apprenticce, Fellow-Craft and Master Masons, and from giving any countenance, as a body, to any other Order of Masonry,"*

However, despite the fact that Grand Lodge did not recognise the Mark and the ruling, a number of Craft Lodges continued to work it, and this, the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter regarded as infringement of its sovereignty. Accordingly, in 1842, Grand Chapter resolved to issue Charters for "Chair-Master and Mark" Lodges. A circular, in the following terms, was sent to all Royal Arch Chapters throughout Scotland.

"SIR AND BROTHER,

Royal Arch Chapters being already legally entitled to confer the three degrees of Mark-Master, Chair-Master, and Excellent-Mason, do not require to apply for a new Warrant. The object of the Supreme Grand Chapter in granting Warrants for the Chair-Master's degree, which empowers also to confer the Mark-Master, is to check the irregularity that exists of giving these degrees in Master Lodges. You are therefore required to make this decision of the Supreme Grand Chapter known to the regular Lodges in your neighbourhood.

In other words, if you know of any Craft Lodges in your area working the Mark Degree, tell them to stop and report them to us!

These new "Mark" Lodges did not take off and the decision was reversed in 1848, however, it was agreed, that if anyone had received the Mark Degree in a Craft Lodge from 1842, it would not be recognised by any Royal Arch

Chapter. The Chair-Masters Lodge didn't take off as well, and was abandoned, it just might have well become the precursor of the present Installed Mark Master's Degree in England.

However, the question of Scottish Craft Lodges working the Mark was not going to go away, and in 1851, it came up again within Grand Chapter when Bon Accord Chapter No. 70 in Aberdeen issued a Mark Charter to six Brethren in London to form a Mark Lodge. Seemingly six Brethren who had taken the Mark Degree in the Chapter and now living in London, applied for permission to make certain Brothers in London Mark Masters. They thought that the Mark could be given by one brother to another, and not necessarily in a Lodge at all. The Bon Accord Chapter replied saying that they could not give permission to confer the Degree, but if a proper petition was presented, then they would grant a Charter to the brethren to form a Mark Lodge and work the Degree in London. The petition was sent, and the Charter dated September 1851 was granted. Thus, this was the first record of chartering a Lodge in England with the sole object of conferring the Mark Degree, and Bon Accord Mark Lodge in London holds the highest position on the Roll of Lodges of the Grand Lodge of Mark Masonry, and in fact, it can be said, that all Mark Lodges in England, Australia, Canada and elsewhere were formulated from those six Aberdeen Brethren, for the Members of Bon Accord Chapter in London were also responsible for forming the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons in England. But this action by the Bon Accord Lodge in Scotland had set the cat amongst the pigeons with a vengeance.

When the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland heard what had happened, the issuing of a Charter without consulting that body, it was declared illegal and demanded the recovery of the Charter. At first the members of Bon Accord denied they had done anything wrong and said they could not recall the Charter, so Grand suspended the Aberdeen Bon Accord Chapter and all its members. The Brethren of Bon Accord Chapter did not take this lightly, and replied that they had done nothing wrong, and they were returning their Charter as they had been working the Royal Arch Degrees under the a Knight Templar Encampment in Aberdeen which had never gave up its right to work these degrees long before the formation of Supreme Chapter, there would therefore apply to St. George Aboyne Knights Templar Encampment for a Warrant or Charter.

But this action by Bon Accord Chapter gave Supreme Grand Chapter an idea; in 1856 they looked at the status of the Mark Degree in countries that did not

have a sovereign Masonic body with jurisdiction over it, so Grand Chapter decided to issue Charters for Mark Lodges. This time the Charters were confined to the working of the Mark Degree only, in effect they were setting up a Mark Lodge. From 1856 until 1900 some 42 Mark Charters were issued by the Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland, the majority issued to England. No Mark Lodge Charters were issued in Scotland, but this action of Grand Chapter caused repercussions in Scottish Craft Lodges.

One Lodge, Journeymen Masons, No. 8 who had been at loggerheads with Grand Lodge for a great number of years, laid a memorial before Grand Lodge stating that the Grand Chapter had assumed authority over a section of St John's Masonry by issuing Charters to work the Mark Degree. The matter was remitted to Grand Committee for consideration and report. In January 1858 Grand Committee stated, in its report to Grand Lodge:

1. That certain Lodges had worked the Mark Degree since their formation and prior to the institution of Grand Lodge in 1736.
2. That the assumption by any other authority of sole power to grant warrants for working the Mark Degree was an interference with the privileges of Lodges under Grand Lodge.
3. That a Special Committee be set up to discuss the Mark Degree with the Grand Lodge of England, Ireland and any independent authority claiming jurisdiction in Masonry in Scotland.

This report however is flawed; first as already stated there is no evidence that the Mark Degree was being worked before 1736. Second, a reference to the minutes of a mere twenty years earlier and to the first book of Laws and Constitutions would have shown Grand Committee that they had twice within twenty-two years formally denied that the Mark Degree had any connection with Scottish Craft Masonry. Third, a reference to the Book of Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England would have shown Grand Committee that England did not recognise the Mark as part of "pure and ancient freemasonry." However, from this report, we can see that Grand Lodge's attitude to Craft Lodges working the Mark Degree was softening. Unfortunately this Special Committee never met, and if it had, perhaps the position in England of the Mark Degree there might have been different from what it is to-day.

Although the special Committee never met to resolve the row between Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter, Grand Lodge's hand was forced by the action of

the Provincial Grand Master of Glasgow in February 1858. The P.G.M., quite correctly in terms of the Grand Lodge Law as it then stood, called upon Lodge Glasgow St. John, No. 3 bis, to stop working the Mark Degree. The law stated; *"The Grand Lodge of Scotland practises no degrees of Masonry, but those of Apprentices, Fellow-Craft and Master Mason"*

The Lodge appealed to Grand Lodge to overturn the ruling, much the same as when the Journeymen's Lodge instituted a debate on the subject in Grand Lodge. And by an almost unanimous vote, Grand Lodge reversed the decision of the Provincial Grand Master of Glasgow, probably a most unfair decision as the law then stood.

Grand Lodge's ruling stated; *"That The Grand Lodge of Scotland having on 1st February 1858 adopted resolutions that it had been proved to the satisfaction of Grand Lodge that certain Lodges have worked Mark Masonry since their foundation, and previous to the existence of Grand Lodge, and have continued to do so till the present time, and that any interference with the rights and privileges of Lodges so situated was an invasion of the privileges of these Lodges which the Grand Lodge were bound to protect, and having taken into consideration the complaint of The Provincial Grand Lodge of Glasgow, resolve that the Lodge of St John, Glasgow, were in order in continuing to practice a Degree to which their ancient privileges entitled them, and to dismiss accordingly the complaint of Provincial Grand Lodge, and as it is a novel case, to find no expenses due, till the Special Committee present their report, defer all questions involved in this matter till then."*

This was the ruling that certain Old Scottish Lodges had been fighting for since 1800, but they had to be amended and quick, and of course, this was done in due time, but not before Supreme Grand Chapter had lodged a complaint with Grand Lodge that **their** authority was now being usurped! And they were not about to take this lying down!

This re-assumption by the Grand Lodge of Scotland over the Mark Degree was felt very keenly by Supreme Grand Chapter and some of the more "lively" members tabled a motion that Grand Chapter authorise the Royal Arch Chapters to work the first three degrees. The motion was put and accepted with an amendment that no active steps be taken to put it into effect until all the Chapters had been consulted as to the propriety of such a move. A circular letter was sent to all Chapters and the replies revealed that very

few were prepared to agree with such an extreme step. Wiser heads prevailed and a Committee was appointed to consult with a Committee from Grand Lodge on the whole question of the status of the Mark Degree.

The two Committees met at intervals between January 1860 and November 1860, when a joint report was submitted to Grand Lodge. The report is rather lengthy, but an abridged version of it states, that very few the old St. John Lodge's worked the mark, and the degree was entirely abandoned by the Grand Lodge of Scotland daughter Lodges. Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter assumed the management of it as the Fourth Degree of Masonry in order to complete the instruction of their candidates in the preliminary degrees before admitting them to the Royal Arch. The degree, however, whether viewed as a second part of the Fellow Craft Degree or as a separate degree, had never been recognised or worked in England, Ireland or the Continent or in America, as a part of St John's Masonry. It, therefore, now being desirable that an arrangement may be made which would reconcile the differences between the Grand Lodge of Scotland and the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter and resolve to recommend the Grand Lodge of Scotland and the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland to enact and declare as follows, viz.:

1. That all Lodges holding of the Grand Lodge of Scotland shall be allowed to work this degree in virtue of the charters which they already possess.
2. That to prevent confusion with Brethren belonging to Lodges out of this kingdom, or with Sister Grand Lodges, this Degree, although held by the Grand Lodge to be a second part of the Fellow Craft Degree, shall only be conferred on Master Masons, and the secrets shall only be communicated in presence of those who have taken it either from a Lodge or Chapter entitled to grant it.
3. That the Grand Lodge of Scotland and the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland shall adopt the same Ritual in conferring the Degree.
4. That any candidate applying to be admitted to the Royal Arch Degree, if he has received the Mark Degree in a regular Lodge of St John's Masonry, shall not be required to take it a second time from the Chapter into which he seeks admission; but in the event of his not having received it, he shall be obliged to take it from that Chapter.
5. That as regards the Royal Arch Degrees, the Mark Degree shall be reckoned as the Fourth Degree in Masonry.

6. That nothing contained in these regulations shall interfere with the Superintendence which the Supreme Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Scotland claims over Mark Masonry out of Scotland.

The Report was adopted by Grand Lodge and on December 1860 a circular was sent by Grand Secretary to all Lodges notifying them of the position regarding the Mark Degree. Many Lodges did not work the degree for a long number of years after 1860, probably because they didn't know how, but soon all the Lodges in Scotland were working the ancient Mark Degree.

So there you have it, the reason why it took 125 years for the Grand Lodge of Scotland to officially recognise the Mark Degree, and why they finally had to accept it being worked in Scottish Craft Lodges. – Thank you. ∴

"THE MARK DEGREE IN SCOTLAND"

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Studies for the New Freemason.

This article was prepared using various sources for a talk on the March Degree and type-set for this booklet by Bro. J. Stewart Donaldson, Secretary of Hawick Lodge No.111 for the education of the enquiring Freemason. Where any typo errors occur, I apologise.

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