

THE RITUAL OF THE ANTIENTS LODGES

(Address given by Clive Moore at the Egyptian Lodge No.27 on 3rd April 2019)

- Brethren, the question I am asked most frequently by Atholl Lodges is ‘was there an Antients’ ritual? The answer is I believe no, neither the Antients nor Moderns had a comprehensive definitive ritual. However, I do hope that today’s event will throw some light on the origins of our present ritual practices, be they Antients or Modern; but let me first say a few words about the Antients and their origins.
- The Atholl Grand Lodge took their name from the Dukes of Atholl, who ruled them for over 32 years; but they were also known as the Antients, as they claimed to be adhering to the ‘old Institutions’, the rival Premier Grand Lodge being known as the Moderns.
- The Antients Grand Lodge’s stated aim was to revive the ‘Ancient Craft’; and we do indeed owe much of our ritual’s rich diversity to the Antients Brethren and their lodges. However, we must be careful not to assume that every old practice has a specifically Antients origin; as all old lodges, be they Antients or Modern, have unique aspects to their workings. Also many of the Antients favoured practices had in fact originated in earlier Moderns Lodges; and the Antients also encouraged innovations, such as esoteric Installations and the Royal Arch.
- In many respects the story of the formation of the Antients begins in the second quarter of the 18th century; with the Moderns Grand Lodge’s growing concern that irregular Masons might be gaining admittance to their lodges. To prevent this happening that they made a number of changes to their procedures; including, it is believed, a reversal of the recognition words for the first two Degrees.
- Many Freemasons saw such changes as a departure from the ancient landmarks; and whilst some lodges just ignored them, in others they caused dissension and alienation. The situation was not helped by many leading Moderns Freemasons being aristocrats and intellectuals, who seeing their lodges as exclusive dining clubs were not averse to changing or omitting what they felt irrelevant or time consuming.
- In the 1740s the initial popular interest in Freemasonry began to wane; and with a Grand Lodge showing little leadership, Freemasonry went into a decline. However, in July 1751 came an event that would not only revitalise Freemasonry but also assure its future, the formation of the rival Antients Grand Lodge. It was founded at the Turk’s Head Tavern in London’s Soho by a group of about 80 predominantly unattached Masons; who formed themselves into six lodges. There is no evidence that any of these lodges had met prior to that year, or of them being a breakaway group of Moderns lodges.

- Its founders came from amongst the many itinerant workers who were seeking employment in a booming Georgian London. Most were artisans and tradesmen from Ireland; some of whom had been Initiated in Ireland, but found themselves unable to join or form Moderns lodges in London. Their low social and economic standing was certainly one reason for this; but they also wanted to continue practising the Irish ritual forms, which were akin to the English workings prior to those Moderns' changes I mentioned.
- Shortly afterwards, in February 1752, Laurence Dermott was appointed the Antients' Grand Secretary. His many talents and strong convictions would make him a major figure in 18th century Freemasonry; and during his 19 years as their Secretary he effectively led the Antients. Dermott did possess wit and charm; but was prone to verbosity, Brethren often complained about his long lectures and ritual demonstrations. He could also be tetchy and sarcastic, especially when troubled by gout; sometimes this was so painful he had to be carried into Grand Lodge, apparently without his britches on!
- Under Dermott's able leadership the Antients flourished, and they brought to Freemasonry many good men; the Irish proportion of their membership diminished, but they were still predominantly artisans, tradesmen, and minor professionals. These were practical men, who wanted not only to be part of a venerable institution, but also to have a say in its governance: and, unlike the generally more affluent Moderns, they also wanted a grand lodge that could provide financial assistance if they needed it.
- The Antients Grand Lodge were much better organised than the Moderns, and they instigated administrative controls we still use today; including the first English Grand Lodge certificates, and lodge warrants as such. The Antients' charitable activities were also much better organised; they collected regular contributions from every member, and helped many more Brethren than the Moderns. The Antients also started a funeral benefit scheme, and in 1764 they even appointed a Grand Undertaker!
- The Antients were also much more democratic in their governance than the Moderns; they elected all their Grand Officers, and at the Union they insisted that all Past Masters be members of Grand Lodge. In 1756 Dermott published the first Antients Book of Constitutions; borrowing heavily from the Moderns and Irish sources. As well as regulations it included dissertations, prayers, charges, and Masonic songs; but not a full legendary history for Freemasonry, Dermott claimed that he fell asleep whilst writing one and a pet dog ate his notes! At least seven further editions of these constitutions were published; becoming increasingly derogatory of the Moderns, the 1778 edition claimed that they were admitting women and eunuchs into their lodges!

- In terms of lodge numbers the Antients would closely rival the Moderns in London, where from the 1780s their numbers rose whilst their rival's fell. Away from London both were expanding, particularly in the burgeoning northern manufacturing towns; the Antients often doing well in counties with strong Irish connections, such as Lancashire and Cheshire.
- The Moderns were the first to appoint Provincial Grand Masters, but many were inactive; the Antients only warranted one home province, their lodges would take local disputes to a committee of Past Masters or the senior local lodge. Both grand lodges had successful overseas provinces, these often derived from their travelling military lodges; the Antients issued the first such English travelling warrants, and they would issue over twice as many as the Moderns.
- When in 1813 the two Grand Lodges united, the Antients had 260 active lodges, the Moderns 386. However, although fewer in number the Antients lodges, being less exclusive, did tend to have larger memberships; a recent study in Manchester has shown the overall Antients membership there to have been about thrice that of their rival.
- Freemasonry's rituals were continuing to evolve throughout the 18th century; and by the 1750s it was already a three Degree system. Some Moderns Brethren had also started working the Royal Arch, even though their Grand Lodge did not recognise it as part of Craft Freemasonry; in 1766 those Brethren would form their own independent Grand Chapter. However, the Antients Grand Lodge saw the Royal Arch as a 4th Degree, and their warrants entitled lodges to also work as Royal Arch chapters.
- The Antients Grand Lodge also encouraged the working of other Degrees, and the new Christian orders such as Knights Templar; the canny Dermott possibly saw them as a way of attracting more members. Some lodges would link the 3rd Degree to the Royal Arch with intermediate steps, such as Mark Master Mason and Excellent Mason; the first reference to candidates 'Passing the Veils' prior to Exaltation is also attributed to the Antients.
- Their Books of Constitutions and surviving minutes provide some clear evidence about how the two Grand Lodges operated; but there is no such clarity about the workings of their lodges. Indeed most late 18th century lodges, especially those away from London, seem to have worked a mixture of Antients and Moderns favoured ritual; often with regional variations as well. This mixing of working practices was aided by the many Brethren who, despite grand lodge disapproval, joined or visited lodges of both constitutions; a few lodge even held warrants from them both.

- The Antients Grand Lodge did try to unify their lodges' workings, Dermott gave demonstrations, and 'Nine Worthies' were appointed to report on lodges; but these efforts met with limited success. Even when one of the Grand Lodges did rule on a ritual matter they could not ensure that all their lodges complied, due to the lack of effective regulation and poor communications. These same difficulties would later also hinder the promulgation of the post-union ritual changes; with some lodges continuing old practices, or even creating new ones.
- So what do we know about late 18th century lodge workings? There were no ritual books as such; so the best contemporary accounts we have are the commercially produced Masonic Exposures; but even these are incomplete, unreliable, and not always sympathetic to Freemasonry. Dermott called them 'catch-penny exploitations', but they did have a core of truth, and well in the 19th century some lodges were using them for guidance.
- Dermott's favoured workings were heavily influenced by his Irish background; and we can infer something of their character from his many, albeit sometimes unfounded or exaggerated, complaints about the Moderns. Amongst other things he claimed that they neglected saint's days; omitted some prayers, lectures and charges; incorrectly communicated passgrips and passwords; did not install their Masters properly; and generally left out or made up what they could not remember.
- Most lodges rented rooms in inns or taverns for their meetings; and not having all our lodge furniture and equipment they drew a lodge on the floor with chalk, charcoal, or tacked down tape. Some lodges were beginning to purchase more lodge room equipment and to use painted floor cloths or boards; but the Antients generally favoured less expensive equipment, and simpler floor drawings.
- The first lodges had kept a box of simple white aprons for shared use, but by the 1750s many Brethren were keeping their own aprons, and adorning them with ribbons and symbols; the Antients Brethren also added Royal Arch emblems and the symbols of other Degrees & Orders to their aprons. These personalised aprons grew increasingly ornate; leading the Antients Grand Lodge to complain about them being inconsistent with the Ancient Craft.
- As to lodge officers the late 18th century records mention Masters, Wardens, Chaplains, Treasurers, Secretaries, Inner Guards, and Tylers; and most Antients lodges also had Deacons. Unlike their rivals the Antients lodges elected all their officers, and for only six months not twelve; the single clap given in some lodges today after the investment of each officer maybe in token of that voting.

- Most late 18th century lodges met fortnightly or monthly; multiple Degree ceremonies were quite common, with Initiates often Passed at the same meeting. On one night in April 1793 the Antients Lodge of Israel No.205 separately Initiated and Passed 5 candidates in just two hours!
- The 1760 Masonic Exposure 'Three Distinct Knocks' claims to portray the ritual workings of an Antients lodge. It describes just one opening and an equally simple closing ceremony, both conducted around a communal table. However, for the floor workings the Brethren gathered around the drawn lodge; the Master and Deacons carrying wands, and the Wardens their columns. Their floor workings were quite short; as much of the present Degree floor workings and charges was then in the catechismal lectures, delivered afterwards with the Brethren sat around a communal table.
- Whilst sat at the table the Brethren also sang songs, ate snacks, smoked, and drank; so calling them between labour and refreshment was essential for good order. More formal dinners were usually reserved for Installation meetings, but each Degree did have its own songs and firing customs. These involved signs, salutations, banging down glasses, and Brethren stamping or jumping; people sitting below meeting rooms were sometimes frightened that the ceiling might collapse!
- The Antients favoured longer more esoteric Installation ceremonies; but there is no evidence of a specifically Antients origin for the 'Extended Inner Workings' some lodges use today. The Installation ceremony described in 'Three Distinct Knocks' has obligations for the principal officers, and secrets 'belonging to the Chair'; which were probably communicated in open lodge behind a concealing circle of Past Masters.
- The early 19th century saw fraternisation between the two grand lodges increasing; with many senior Freemasons actively working for a union. The Antients remained reluctant to make concessions on ritual matters; but in 1809 the Moderns Grand Lodge did decide to 'revert to the ancient Land Marks'. As a consequence they dropped some of their earlier contentious changes, and adopted Antients favoured practices such as Deacons and longer Installations; some of which Moderns lodges were already working.
- In December 1813 the two rivals finally united; and a Lodge of Reconciliation was formed to unify the different lodge workings. We do not know the scope or detail of their recommendations, as no authorised written copies being issued; and less than 30% of lodges sent representatives to their London based demonstrations. However, they were a major influence on the soon to be formed Stability and Emulation Lodges of Instruction; whose workings were the basis of the many later published rituals that have largely unified our workings.

- The 19th century also saw the form of our lodges change significantly. The festive board moved away from the meeting room; pedestals were introduced; different openings and closings for each Degree were adopted; and much of the old Degree lectures moved into our longer floor workings, with new lectures being developed.
- The history of our united Grand Lodge encompasses not one but two Grand Lodges, both of whom played key roles in the development of Freemasonry; but the Antients particular legacy is too often overlooked. Freemasonry as we know it might never have come about if the Antients had not revitalised it; in the decade after their formation the overall number of English lodges rose by nearly 70%. The Antients spurred the Moderns to become more active and better organised; and we all still benefit from their influence on our charities and administration.
- The ritual forms adopted after the Union were largely those the Antients had championed: without them would our ritual have its rich diversity, or the Royal Arch its Craft status? Whilst outside of the Craft they helped popularise many of the other Degrees and Orders still worked today.
- Brethren, this was just a brief overview of the often troubled relationship between the Antients and Moderns, and their different ways of working. In the discussion paper for this meeting I have used the research of many distinguished Masonic historians to identify some of the various working practices that each Grand Lodge may have favoured. I will now throw the meeting open for your questions or comments, and for you to tell us about your own lodge's favoured workings.