



PAPER

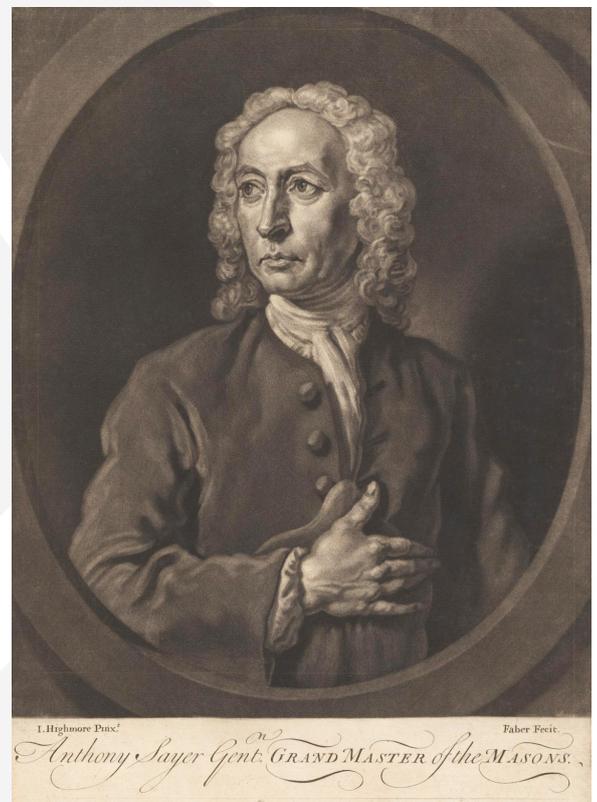
The First Grand Lodge: Anthony Sayer - First Grand Master

Summary: The leader of the first Grand Lodge in England.

It has often been remarked how casually; or maybe accidentally; so many great movements seem to have started. They appear to spring up by themselves at the bidding of impulses of which men may only be vaguely aware. In the Alps, a shout or the report of a gun can start an avalanche of such incredible energy and power.

So, in history we often discover that what appears to be a simple and innocent act releases the most unpredictable and far reaching consequences. Such is the example of what is described as a 'revival' of Masonry in 1717. It not only gave us an important date for the annals of the fraternity, but a new structure for the organisation of the Craft which launched it to the ends of the earth on its benign mission.

How many Lodges of Masons existed in London at that time is a matter of conjecture, but there must have been a number. What actual tie, if any united them for a common action and fellowship we do not know, other than they *'thought fit to cement together under a Grand Master as the centre of union and harmony'*.¹ Some seem to have been purely speculative, made up of Accepted Masons boasting amongst their numbers men of high social rank, including members of the nobility. It was from these Lodges, although in the minority, that the real leadership of the movement developed. However, the majority of the Lodges consisted of Operative Masons, who were actual artisans and tradesmen. A few Lodges enjoyed a balanced membership of operative and speculative Brethren. However, our Brethren of those formative days practised the Masonic virtues of silence and circumspection to an extraordinary degree. No proper minutes of the formation of the First Grand Lodge were ever found. Anderson, who eventually wrote them after six years had elapsed, had none too good a reputation for either truth or accuracy.



Anthony Sayer by John Faber Jr, after Joseph Highmore early-mid 18th century, © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reproduced under Creative Commons, CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

London from about 1700 developed 'The Gentleman's Club'. Referred to in a copy of *The Spectator* at the time, as:

'Little nocturnal assemblies ... founded upon eating and drinking'

'when men are thus knit together, by love of Society, not a spirit of faction, and do not meet to censure or annoy those that are absent, but to enjoy one another ... there may be something very useful in these little Institutions and Establishments'.²

It is obvious then, that The First Grand Lodge was formed at a time when club life was moving into great popularity. It is easy to imagine that many a Lodge of that day, was in a way a kind of club, with the Masonic gatherings that could certainly be described as 'convivial affairs'. The requirement to make a proper and accurate record of what business actually took place could well have been furthest from their minds. There appears to be little doubt that at this stage the Craft was in a state of neglect, if not disintegration. It had enjoyed a period of prosperity in the rebuilding of London after The Great fire in 1666. However, the only record we have giving a reason for forming a Grand Lodge was:

'On the accession of George I, the Masons in London and its environs, finding themselves deprived of Sir Christopher Wren, and their annual meetings discontinued, resolved to cement themselves under a new Grand Master ... and having voted the oldest Master-mason then present into the chair, constituted themselves a Grand Lodge, pro tempore, in due form'.³

For this purpose, the Lodges actually met at:

- The Goose and Gridiron Ale-house in St. Paul's Churchyard.
- The Crown Ale-house in Parker's lane near Drury Lane.
- The Apple Tree Tavern in Charles Street, Covent Garden.
- The Rummer and Grapes Tavern in Channel Row, Westminster.

In those days in London Lodges met in taverns and ale-houses; the hotels of the time. Their meetings were festive and often very convivial, as was the custom of the day.

A rare old book dated 1763 called *The Complete Freemason or Multa Paucis for Lovers of Secrets*, asserts that six Lodges not four were represented, but there is no record of the fact. No doubt members of other Lodges were present as guests. Indeed, we have a hint to that effect in the meagre record of the proceedings as follows:

The four Lodges "met at the Apple-Tree Tavern; and having put into the chair the oldest Master Mason (being the Master of a Lodge) they constituted themselves a Grand Lodge pro tempore, in due form, and forthwith revived the quarterly communication of the officers of Lodges (called the Grand Lodge) resolved to hold the annual assembly and feast, and then to choose a Grand Master from among themselves, till they should have the honour of a noble brother at their head'.⁴

Such is the record of the preliminary meeting. Diligent search has been made amongst the records, diaries, and papers of the time; but few facts have ever been added to this remarkable statement of events. Even the date and time of the meeting was omitted. Historians believe that the meeting took place in the spring or early summer of 1717. The reason is because the meeting at which Grand Lodge was actually organised took place shortly afterwards in the month of June of that year. The meeting took place at The Goose and Gridiron Ale-house in St. Paul's Churchyard near the west end of the Cathedral.

An amusing story about the old ale-house describes that originally it was the meeting place of a 'Company of Musicians' its sign being the 'Swan and Lyre'. After the fire of London, the tavern was re-built on the same site. However, the sign writer made such an appalling job of the new pub-sign that the local wits of the town called it 'The Goose and Gridiron' and from then onwards the tavern was stuck with it. Accordingly, on St. John the Baptist's day, in the third year of the reign of King George I (1717), the assembly and feast of the Free and Accepted Masons was held at the aforesaid Goose and Gridiron Ale-house.

'Before dinner, the oldest Master Mason (now the Master of a Lodge) in the Chair, proposed a list of proper candidates; and the Brethren by a majority of hands elected:

*Mr Anthony Sayer, Gentleman, Grand Master of Masons,
Captain Joseph Elliot,
Mr Jacob Lambell, Carpenter* } *Grand Wardens*

Who being forthwith invested with the Badge of Office and Power by the said oldest Master, and install'd, was duly congratulated by the Assembly who pay'd him the Homage. Sayer, Grand Master, commanded the Masters and Wardens of Lodges to meet the Grand Officers every Quarter in Communication at the Place that he should appoint in his Summons sent by the Tyler.⁵

Unfortunately, the Minutes of Grand Lodge only commence on 24th July 1723, six years after the event. The story of the progress of Grand Lodge over these six years remains a matter of conjecture, or at least unwritten and not published until the second edition of the Constitutions of 1738; an unbelievable twenty-one years after the event. This situation remains one of the true mysteries of the Craft.

Surely no other movement of equal importance ever left such a scanty and un-business-like record of what actually took place when it was founded; one made so long after the event. Why no minutes were kept, or if kept, were lost, we do not know. Who was present besides the three Brethren named, we do not know. Still less do we know why the First Grand Lodge was formed without a Constitution, and without a set of Regulations; which did not appear until 1721, four years later. The only conclusion that has been reached is an unmistakable impression that the whole thing was nothing more than an experiment. Maybe in response to the growing need to create 'a centre of union and harmony' amongst the few Lodges situated within the boundaries of the City of London. What is quite amusing is the fact that in those days the City of London was restricted to an area of about three square-miles. What is clear, is the fact that those who took part in it had no idea that they were launching a movement destined to cover the earth with millions of members of a great Fraternity.

Not much is known either, of The First Grand Master, Anthony Sayer. His life appears to have been uneventful, if not unimportant except for his appointment to such high-office. As with the lack of information regarding the founding of the First Grand Lodge, very little information about him is on record; we do not even know his date of birth. All that we do know is that he was a 'Gentleman' in the old English meaning of the word; meaning that he did not work for a living, and was not 'in Trade'. From the information available he was a member of the Lodge which met at the Apple Tree Tavern. There is no record that he ever served as Master, but he was a Warden in 1723, six years after he was appointed as Grand Master.

The system really does sound as if it needed something of an 'overhaul'. Anthony Sayer served as Grand Master for one year only. In June 1718, George Payne succeeded him. Twelve months later, in 1719. Anthony Sayer was appointed Grand Senior Warden; moving backwards so to speak. Later we find a record that he fell upon hard times and became Tyler of Old Kings Arms Lodge No. 28 meeting at Charing Cross; where it was reported that he was assisted out of the Charity Box. He also understood that he received some financial aid from Grand Lodge. Sadly, no further record of him has been found until his death in 1742 when it was announced in The Evening Post that:

'His corpse was followed by a great number of Gentlemen of that Honorable Society of the best Quality, ... and decently interr'd in Covent-Garden church' - where his widow was buried a few months later in the same year.

References

1. Anderson, J., (1738), *The History and Constitutions of the Most ancient and honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons*, p. 109, J. Robinson, London.
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3. Preston, W., (1855), *Illustrations of Masonry*, pp.149–150, JNO. W. Leonard & Co., New York.
4. Mackey, A.G.,(1894), *An Encyclopædia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences*, p. 252, L.H. Everts & Co., Philadelphia.
5. Anderson, J., (1738), *The History and Constitutions of the Most ancient and honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons*, pp. 109-110, J. Robinson, London.
6. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - A Prologue, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>

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Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

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 - Followed by 'any questions'
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*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

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