



## Nugget

### Keeping our Secrets

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The origins of 'Cowan' and 'Hele' explained

#### **Summary**

This nugget deconstructs two phrases much used in our ceremonies, 'Cowans and intruders' and 'Hele and conceal', returning them in their original time and context to explain their meaning.

#### **Keywords**

First Degree, Cowan, Hele, Stonemasons, Secrets



## Keeping our secrets safe

Masonic language can appear perplexing to newcomers because the words used have either dropped out of current parlance or acquired new meanings over the years.

Two examples are *'keeping off all Cowans and Intruders to Masonry'* and *'promising to hele and conceal our secrets'*.

With this in mind, let's consider the original meanings and contexts of these two phrases.

### 'Cowans and Intruders'

As Freemasons we have secrets which we are careful to hide, not because we are a secret society, but because we value loyalty and honour. One way of maintaining those secrets within our Lodges is by us all promising not to disclose to outsiders the signs of recognition that we use between ourselves. This is an important way to build trust and friendship between fellow Masons and to ensure that the privacy of Lodge activities and those of individuals is maintained.

In the phrase *'keeping off Cowans and Intruders to Masonry'*, we all understand the meaning of 'Intruders', which implies not only physical intruders, but also untrustworthy interlopers and eavesdroppers, who might wish to gain access to a Lodge and its members for their own ends.

By contrast, 'Cowans' is not a word we encounter nowadays. It originated back in the days of mediaeval stonemasons. Building in stone required training and long and patient study, to understand how a building's structure and stability depended on geometry. This understanding was known as a 'secret art and hidden mystery', not to be shared by the stonemasons with their untrained and unskilled fellow-workers, known as Cowans. The word was also used to refer to dry stone wallers, who built walls by piling up field stones, a technique that is still used today in many parts of the UK. These workers did not use mortar and shaped stones ('ashlars') that were used by stonemasons to build churches, castles and cathedrals. Hence, among stonemasons, a Cowan was an outsider who must be kept at a distance. In Scotland, the word was used to refer to stonemasons who had never completed their apprenticeships, but who worked alongside qualified stonemasons. They were the 'cowboy builders' of their time.

### 'Hele and conceal'

As above, the meaning of the second word has not changed: it still means to hide. The confusion over 'hele' is increased by its two acceptable pronunciations: 'hale', and 'heel'. For medieval stonemasons, a 'hale' was a type of enclosure, a safe and secure place, and 'hale' became corrupted into 'hele' meaning 'to keep safe'. Thus, when we promise to 'hele and conceal' our secrets, we mean we are promising to keep them secret, safe and secure, which takes us back to our starting point of loyalty and trust.

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##END##



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## Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

- Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; *though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.*
- Themed with the meeting or activity.
- Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.
- Read at home and shared as a topic for a future discussion.
- Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

**For further nuggets and other learning materials visit “Solomon” at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>**

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