



UGLE Oration

History of Tracing-Boards

Summary: A history, charting the evolution of the Tracing-Boards we see today.

We are fortunate in the wealth of history that is contained within our ritual and customs, much of which is taken for granted. How many of us study or question the layout of our lodge rooms, how many of us understand why we have our Lodge furniture, in particular Tracing-Boards?

The Tracing-Board, or Trestle-Board, or Lodge-Board has a prominent place in each Lodge. Each is individual in its particular design, but each displaying the degree being worked. Their purpose in the Lodge is to illustrate the symbols and lessons of the particular degree, and to be used as teaching aids to explain the degree to candidates, much as originally the Tracing-Board was used by the architect or master builder to sketch out his designs and instruct the craftsmen in the execution of the work.

Speculative Freemasons build not of stone, but with character. We erect not Cathedrals, but the *'House not made with hands'*. Our trestle board, *'spiritual, moral and Masonic'* as the ritual has it, is as important in character building as the plans and designs laid down by the Master on the trestle board by which the operative workman builds his temporal building'.

Let us then consider the history of the Tracing-Board. In the years before the 18th century, before there were firm records of Masonic activity, Masonic meetings were generally held secretly in various secluded places, including barns, outbuildings or in the open; there were no Lodge meeting rooms or official meeting places. A reflection of this may be found in the practice of decorating the ceilings of many Lodge rooms with the sun and stars. The meeting places had to be moved around to maintain their secrecy and to avoid intrusion from the uninitiated. Lodge furniture as we know it today did not exist but the shape, size and content of the Lodge was marked out on the ground. This involved marking in the dirt or dust with a stick. The shape of the Lodge would be drawn and the Brethren would stand within the outline during the course of the meeting. The Lodge thus being not the room but the space, or area, within which ritual was conducted, the various Lodge symbols being also drawn on the ground.

Should an unwelcome intruder disturb the meeting, the Brethren would erase the Lodge by shuffling their feet and there would be no physical evidence of the existence of the Lodge. Reference to this is made in an ancient ritual which states *'our ancient Brethren usually met on a high hill or in a low vale, better to detect the approach of cowans or eavesdroppers either ascending or descending'*. This custom was known as *'drawing the Lodge'* and was undertaken by the Tyler as part of his duty of guarding the Lodge. This is probably the origin of the Tyler's task of setting out the Lodge furniture today. This is also the origin in some areas of calling the Tracing-Board the Lodge Board, as it is representative of *'drawing'* the Lodge.

As time progressed, and Freemasonry became more open, Lodges met in more permanent places, notably rooms within pubs or alehouses, halls or hotels, and the custom was to draw the Lodge on the floor of the room with chalk or charcoal. This was still the job of the Tyler. Normally, at the end of the meeting the outline could still be quite quickly erased when necessary, as the Lodge room was not permanent and all

furnishings had to be removable. As stated in an ancient Ritual *'Nothing further remains to be done, according to ancient custom, except to disarrange our emblems'* - a firm reference to erasing the Lodge. At this time, it was common for Lodge furniture to include a mop and bucket for the purpose of washing the floor after the meeting thus removing the markings. This was usually the job of the Entered Apprentice. There is reference in the *'Freemasons Guide and Compendium'* by Bernard Jones to the use of chalk, charcoal and clay in early lectures: -

- | | |
|---|--|
| Q. How long should an Entered Apprentice serve his Master? | A. Seven years |
| Q. How should he serve him? | A. With Freedom, Fervency and Zeal. |
| Q. Excellent qualities! What are their emblems? | A. Chalk, Charcoal and Clay. |



A later variation of drawing the Lodge in chalk or charcoal was the use of tapes, which were nailed or tacked to the floor setting out the Lodge. This did not widely catch on and was ridiculed by some as an *'indignity of the mop and pail'*. In the 1730s, there was a practice of painting the Lodge markings on cloths or skins, which could be rolled-up and stored. This led to a change in Lodge ritual. Whereas previously Brethren had stood within the floor markings of the Lodge, due to the expense and workmanship in providing floor-cloths, Brethren would now stand outside the cloth and look on. At this time further concerns were expressed over secrecy as floor-cloths began to be permanently displayed, one particular instance being the Lodge St Andrew which was ordered not to use a floor-cloth again - as the new cloth that they had ordered was seen hanging publicly in a painter's shop!

Third-Degree Floor-Cloth from the Lodge of Hope, No.433 c,1780
 Courtesy of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry

One of the most famous floor-cloths is the Kirkwall Scroll; this belongs to the Lodge Kirkwall Kilwinning No 38 in the Orkneys. The scroll is claimed to date from the mid-15th century, although this date is contentious, and is made of sailcloth in three pieces sewn together. It measures eighteen feet six inches by five feet six inches and contains over one hundred Masonic symbols and details which appear to be a map. It is preserved by the Lodge and can only be viewed by appointment.

As floor-cloths were not very hard-wearing it became the custom to hang them in frames or drape them over trestles, from the old word 'trest' meaning supporting frame; hence the term 'Trestle' Board. Many Lodge summonses are called Trestle-Boards, as they are the sheet on which the Master of the Lodge sets out the business of the meeting for the instruction of the Brethren.

Around the end of the 18th or early 19th century, cloths were substituted with painted wooden boards and these became known as 'Tracing-Boards', as we know them today. The word Tracing is used in the sense of 'devise' or 'sketch' and has nothing to do with tracing paper. Also, at this time the trestles which had held the floor-cloth were used to support a board on which were placed the working tools and the Volume of the Sacred Law.



Through the 1800s a number of designers of Tracing-Boards emerged of which John Harris, Josiah Bowring and Arthur Thiselton are prominent. Although each design was unique, the basic layout and contents were the same. By the end of the 19th century, individual boards began to decline and cheaper ready-made boards started to appear.

As we know, each Degree contains a lecture on the symbolism illustrated on the Tracing-Board and the Degree being worked is represented by the Board being displayed – so the next time you enter a Lodge take a good look at the Tracing-Board and not only marvel at its symbolism, but perhaps ponder on its history and its evolution.

First-Degree Tracing-Board by John Harris c,1825
Courtesy of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry

Recommended use of Papers

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

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
- Followed by ‘any questions’
- As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
- Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.
- They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (*in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand*).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling’s dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his ‘serving men’, as follows: *‘I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who’.*

Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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

Acknowledgement:

Acknowledgement is given to UGLE as this presentation originated from the Oration programme and permission has been given to publish it in this form. This item is recognized as an extract from the library of UGLE Orations and now included in the Solomon learning environment.

Disclaimer:

Every reasonable effort has been made to contact known copyright holders, but if there are any errors or omissions, The United Grand Lodge of England will be pleased to insert the appropriate acknowledgment. The views or interpretations contained in this article are those of the author. UGLE recognises there are many different interpretations of ritual, symbolism and history.

Copyright:

All rights reserved. No part of this paper may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from The United Grand Lodge of England in writing.