



## Paper

# Origins of the Grand Lodge Certificate

### **Index**

Origins, purpose and development of the Grand Lodge Certificate.

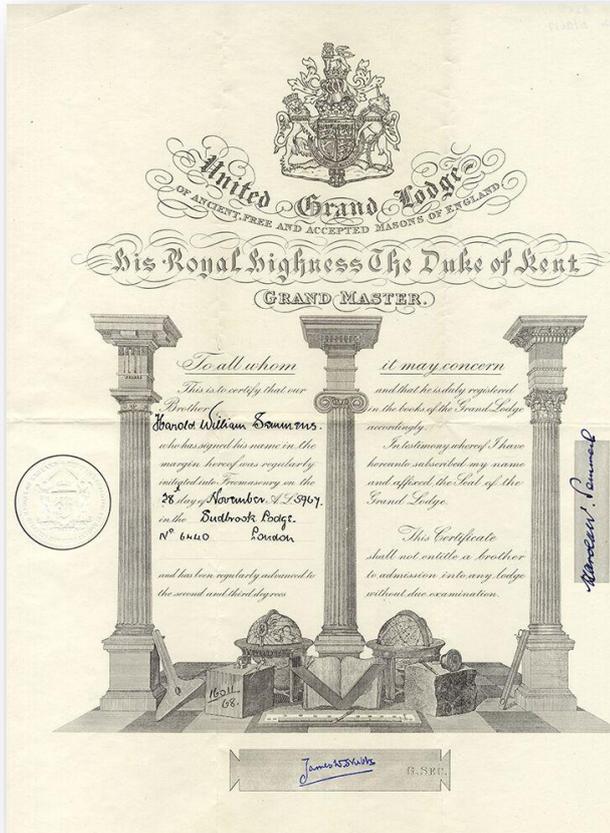
### **Summary**

The origins, purpose and development of the Grand Lodge Certificates, which have evolved from the Antients and Moderns up to the present-day 'Three Pillars' design.

### **Keywords**

Grand-Lodge, Certificate, Ionic, Doric, Corinthian

## Origins of the Grand Lodge Certificate



There is no formal ceremony for the presentation of the Grand Lodge Certificate, but some formality should be observed, and the recipient's attention should be drawn to the significance of the document and its design. Most presentations of the certificate describe the contents of the First-Degree Tracing Board in its representation of the Lodge and its furniture, ornaments and jewels. This presentation is intended to give some more detailed information about the history of the Grand Lodge Certificate, what lay behind its various designs, its granting and its purpose through time up to the present day.

The Grand Lodge Certificate has undergone radical change over the last three centuries. Its history was closely intertwined with the politics within early Freemasonry and Masons who held a certificate considered it as an invaluable insurance against uncertainties of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the possession of certified proof of identity might have made, on occasions, the difference between life and death.

### Grand Lodge Certificate circa 1967 - Courtesy of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry

Like so many of our Masonic customs and heritage, the exact origin of the Grand Lodge Certificate has been obscured through the passage of time. However, the first mention of a certificate was around 1650 in Grand Lodge No 2, which stated that no accepted, Free Mason could be admitted into any Lodge or assembly unless he could show his certificate. This was in the era before the foundation of the first Grand Lodge of England, so such certificates must have been issued by individual Lodges. No examples of such certificates have survived to the present day, as far as we know.

In 1717, four Lodges combined to form the Premier Grand Lodge, one of them being Lodge No. 4 with around 70 members, and the other three Lodges having an average complement of 15, making a total of some 115 Freemasons. By 1725, 52 Lodges were affiliated to the Grand Lodge, and, by 1739, this number had swollen to 175. As the number of Lodges grew and the membership increased, it became clear that some form of control and management was required, including branding and policing.

In 1722, five years after the creation of the Premier Grand Lodge, certificates were mentioned and communications stated that they must be produced by Members when visiting other Lodges. However, there is no hard evidence of certificates being issued at that time. This was probably due to the fact that Freemasonry was struggling to establish itself and did not have the funding or capacity to put in place the higher levels of administration needed.

Moving on, by 1751 Premier Grand Lodge was fed up with the continued heavy influx of itinerant Masons from Ireland and Scotland into its Lodges, and so it barred them by transposing the passwords in the First and Second Degrees. This prompted so much outrage that some Lodges broke away and set up the Antient Grand Lodge of England.

We now move to the era when Freemasonry was governed by two rival Grand Lodges: The Moderns (Premier Grand Lodge) using newly adopted Passwords and The Antient Grand Lodge of England, practising the ritual and Passwords as they were originally conceived.

So which of the two was the first to produce a certificate? The first evidence is the Minutes of the Moderns' Grand Lodge in July 1755, which state that all certificates must be sealed and signed by the General Secretary. The Antients were also reported to have used certificates in the same year, according to the secretarial records of the Antients' Grand Lodge. So we conclude that Grand Lodge Certificates have their origin some 250 years ago.

The first Moderns' certificate was known as the '*DePinna*' or '*Three Graces*' and it is a work of some beauty. It was obviously intended to emphasize the respectability of the brand of Freemasonry as an elevated form of social activity, stressing spiritual and philosophical values. It was very popular and its print run lasted for more than 50 years. It depicts the Three Graces (Faith, Hope and Charity). It also features a Flying Angel and three columns, representing each of the principal orders of architecture, the Ionic column on the left-hand side with the Doric column behind it. The Ionic column supports the figure of Faith, holding the Volume of the Sacred Law. The Corinthian column supports the figure of Hope, holding an Anchor. The garden scene at the bottom depicts the figure of Charity, open-handed, tending to three small children. The certificate also depicts the Compasses and the three movable jewels.

On the other hand, the Antients produced what is known as the '*Universis*' certificate, which was surprisingly plain and first issued in 1766. It was non-pictorial and written in both English and Latin and was probably based on the certificate issued by the Grand Lodge of Ireland at that time. It is likely that it was cheap to produce and therefore could be afforded by the Antient Masons who, at the time, were '*low in circumstances*'. The certificate cost one shilling written in English and two shillings written in Latin and English. We can only assume Latin was used to add prestige to the document and to make it understandable by educated people in those parts of the world where English was not in use in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Universis certificate was used for 25 years until it was replaced by the *'Angel'* pictorial design. There were two versions, the first from 1792 to 1810 and the second from 1810 to 1813. The differences were very minor. The first Angel design is similar in some respects to the Moderns' certificate. It depicts a flying female Angel with the Three Graces (Faith, Hope and Charity) with Faith and Hope on the Columns.

Reverting back to the Moderns, after 52 years, the Three Graces certificate was replaced in 1810 by something quite radical, the *'St Paul's Cathedral'* certificate. This was an iconic scene of London, representing its power, might and sheer scale, as well as personifying the achievement of Operative Masons in rebuilding London in such splendour after it was destroyed by the *'Great Fire'*.

It shows a view of St Paul's Cathedral and a host of other churches in the background built by Sir Christopher Wren and his team, including Nicholas Hawksmoor and many other famous Freemasons. The scene is viewed from the South bank of the Thames, with Blackfriars Bridge in the middle ground. The Doric column is in the foreground, surmounted by the figure of Faith holding a cross and chalice. The Ionic column is to the rear, surmounted by the figure of Hope holding an anchor, and the Corinthian column is surmounted by the figure of Charity. The figures of Faith, Hope and Charity have been rearranged to sit on different columns.

Quite why this unusual design was commissioned is not really understood. It was first printed in 1810 and lasted only 8 years before being replaced by the *'Three Pillars'* certificate. Perhaps the scene of St Paul's set behind Blackfriars Bridge was issued to commemorate the centenary of St Paul's Cathedral, the building of which spanned 35 years. Alternatively, it could have been a tribute to Robert Mylne, a Scottish Freemason with distinguished surveying and Masonic ancestors who had built Blackfriars Bridge forty years earlier and also looked after St Paul's for fifty years. Mylne died in 1811 and was buried in St Paul's Cathedral. The St Paul's Cathedral certificate was the first to bear the name of the Grand Master. The design survived the tricky negotiations between the Antients and Moderns which ultimately led to the unification of the two Grand Lodges in 1813, before being replaced in 1819.

The creation of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1813 saw the birth of the Three Pillars certificate as we know it today. It is a composition featuring three columns in the the principal orders of architecture (Ionic, Doric and Corinthian) and various Masonic emblems from the fifth section of the First Lecture. The influence of the Antients is apparent, as it is written in both Latin and English. What the certificate lacks in pictorial splendour and philosophical importance, compared to its predecessors, it makes up for in its portrayal of relevant Masonic allegory. The Ionic column is in the centre, representing the Worshipful Master, the Doric Column is on the left-hand side, representing the Senior Warden, and the Corinthian Column is on the right-hand side, representing the Junior Warden. The certificate also depicts the three movable and immovable Jewels, the globes, the ornaments, the mosaic pavement and the furniture of a Freemasons' Lodge. Changes have been made to the original design, including the removal of the text in Latin in 1965.

Some other Grand Lodges in England issued certificates during their comparatively brief existences, such as York Grand Lodge (1725 – 1791) and Wigan Grand Lodge (1823 to 1913).

Freemasons are told that their Grand Lodge Certificate may be regarded as a kind of Masonic passport, to help gain admission to a Lodge where they are not known. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a Grand Lodge Certificate would not only assist in gaining admission, but also gave invaluable insurance against immediate need and the grim vicissitudes of life. So what was and is the purpose of a Grand Lodge Certificate?

The issuing of Grand Lodge Certificates only became obligatory in 1818. Before then, it was usual for a Lodge to request some form of written identification from Freemasons travelling abroad, such as sailors attending a Lodge meeting in a foreign port. We know that certificates were an effective method of policing Lodges, but Secretaries and Wardens still had to be on the look-out for forgeries.

The second purpose was charity. Applications to Lodges for relief from Freemasons in distress were common, particularly at 'Antients' Lodges, which were routinely petitioned by itinerant Scottish and Irish Freemasons. Certification therefore acted as a safeguard for limited charitable funds. The Antients' Grand Lodge Minutes abound with innumerable applications for charity which was granted only if the petitioner could present proper documentation. Charity was claimed by a Freemason or his widow making a petition to the relevant Grand Lodge and presenting the necessary Lodge or Grand Lodge Certificate for inspection. Once charity was dispensed, a record was made. In the case of petitions from widows, the certificate was then destroyed, which may explain why so few have survived. Furthermore, Brethren who travelled around the country and abroad on business, or even to start a new life, often needed assistance from time to time. In the mid-eighteenth century, the burden placed on Lodges' charity funds from itinerant Masons was so great that the rules had to be tightened to prevent their financial reserves from being rapidly exhausted.

The third purpose was revenue. Though clearly not the chief reason for the issuing of Grand Lodge Certificates, the income from their sale was valuable.

The Grand Lodge Certificate that we receive today has similar importance and it is seen as a passport to regular Freemasonry and you may be asked to produce it when visiting a Lodge abroad recognised by Grand Lodge or even a Lodge in this country where you are not known. You are advised to keep it to hand with your regalia. However, the certificate states that its production alone does not entitle you to admission to a Lodge without proper examination.

Today's Grand Lodge Certificate depicts a simplified First-Degree Tracing Board. The Three Pillars are prominent, representing Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. The mosaic pavement represents light and darkness, and the joys and sorrows of our chequered existence on this Earth. The celestial and terrestrial globes do not appear on the First-Degree Tracing Board. The furniture of the Lodge, or three great lights, are prominently depicted, as are the three movable and immovable Jewels. The Seal of Grand Lodge is affixed to the certificate and it is signed by the Grand Secretary on behalf of the Grand Master, whose coat of arms appears at the top of the certificate.

Brethren, most of us don't refer to our certificates very often, even though their importance has not diminished. We should all check them from time to time, as obtaining a replacement copy is time-consuming and expensive.

---

##END##

### **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:**

UGLE gratefully acknowledges Noel Voice as the author of this document and for his permission to publish it in this form.

**Disclaimer:**

The views or interpretations contained in this document are those of the author. UGLE recognises there are many different interpretations of ritual, symbolism and history. It does not endorse the contents of this document or of any external websites linked to within the document.

**Copyright:**

All rights reserved. No part of this document 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.

---