

Old Charges.¹

I have chosen to talk briefly about the Old Charges because they provide a continuous link illustrating the evolution of freemasonry from the 14th Century medieval operative Mason, through the early days of a non-operative form of freemasonry in the 17th century and eventually to modern Freemasonry.

It is most probable that a copy of the Old Charges was especially made and used when Elias Ashmole was made a Freemason back in 1646 and on which he probably took his obligation. Dr. Anderson used them when he wrote the Book of Constitution for the Premier Grand Lodge, which was published in 1723 and again in 1738. Your current Book of Constitution has at the beginning a section of 'The Charges of a Free-Mason' which is clearly based on the 'Antient' Charges' and is also quoted in the Constitution of many Grand Lodges overseas.

The term, 'Old Charges', refers to ancient documents dated from 1390 until the eighteenth century. They are called variously "Ancient Manuscripts", "Ancient Constitutions", "Legend of the Craft", "Gothic Manuscripts", "Old Records", etc. They were handwritten on paper or parchment rolls some of which have been sewn or pasted together. Some are in beautiful gothic script with the largest number of the Old Charges held by the British Museum.²

The Old Charges incorporate the traditional history, legends and regulations of [operative] Freemasons. Although some were destroyed by overly cautious brethren in 1720, the texts of 113 copies of these Old Charges, dated from 1390 up to 1700, have survived, and there are references to fourteen more that are now lost. All are so similar in form that they must have had a common origin. We are indebted to Bro. W. McLeod who, with others, has constructed a Standard Original of the Old Charges with its origins between 1470 and 1560.

These Old Charges had a practical purpose. They defined not only the way men were expected to behave on the building site but made it clear that they were members of no servile trade of recent devising but an ancient and honorable institution with roots in antiquity.

It is inevitable that changes occurred in the Old Charges over the years. In practical terms consider the scribe, sitting in a cold, damp, poorly lit room, copying text written in an unfamiliar hand, sometimes barely legible and using unfamiliar words, thinking mainly of his dinner time. No wonder mistakes were made. Other scribes 'translated' rather than copy a document and some 'modernized' or thought they should add to the text.

The earliest available Old Charge is the Regius or Halliwell Manuscript. It is uniquely, a poem, with a date of about 1390. Mr. Halliwell pointed out that the writer of the poem was evidently a priest, from the words, "*And when the gospel me rede schal,*" [line 629]. He also drew attention to line 143, "*By olde tyme wryten y fynde*" which suggests that a still older MS. must have existed when the poem was written.

Let us summarize the contents, with a few typical examples of the wording.³

- (1) They all begin with an Invocation: "The might of the Father of Heaven,...
- (2) Then comes an announcement of the purpose and contents, followed by a brief

description of the seven liberal sciences ...

- (3) Then there is an extended Traditional History of Geometry, Masonry, and Architecture, taking up over half of the text. It is based in the first instance on the Bible, the only book that most people ever saw or heard in the Middle Ages.
- (4) Then we have the manner of taking the oath; usually for some reason, given in Latin; a literal translation runs. 'Then let one of the elders hold the Book, so that he or they may place their hands upon the Book, and then the rules ought to be read' ...
- (5) Next comes the admonition: 'Every man that is a Mason take right good heed to these charges, if that you find yourselves guilty in any of these, that you may amend you against God...
- (6) Next come the regulations or Charges proper. Some are to administer the trade and regulate the work while others concern the morals and behaviour of the Mason.
- (7) Finally comes the Oath: 'These charges that we have rehearsed, and all other that belong to Masonry, ye shall keep, so help you God and Halidom⁴, and by this Book to your power. Amen' ...

But what is the origin of these Old charges? What was their purpose? How were they propagated throughout the land and even into Scotland, with a minimum change in content?

A paper "External Influences on the Evolution of English Freemasonry" by Bro. J. R. Clarke⁵ gives one possible and plausible explanation.

Speculation, without supporting evidence, would suggest the following explanation. In 1360, the construction of Windsor castle started using masons impressed from all over the country even from as far away as the northern counties. Nearly all of the Masons in England were employed on the project; probably the largest assembly of them there has ever been.

William of Wykehan was Clerk of the Works, John Sponlee, chief Mason and Robert of Gloucester, warden of the masons. With such a large work force, a code of practice and rules of behaviour would have been essential and would have had its basis in the West Country where these men originated. These Charges could be the origin for the Regius or its predecessor, and later the Cooke MS which are written in western and south-western dialects of the English of the period.

When these impressed masons returned to their home counties and towns, they could well have taken copies of the Old Charges with them or at least passed them on by word of mouth. That may be why the Regius MS is in poetry; so that it could be more easily remembered

The York No. 1 MS⁶ is worthy of a mention here. Probably written circa 1600, it contains the names of two men who are also referred to in the Register of the Freemen of the City of York for the year 1569.. If the same men are referred to in these two documents then a spurmaker and fishmonger or haberdasher being associated with the Old Charge may indicate a non-operative Masonic purpose.

It is also worth mentioning just a few excerpts from the Old Charges taken from the Standard Original.

“And also that every Mason shall receive and cherish strange Fellows when they come over the country, and set them to work, as the manner is; that is to say, if they have mould stones in place, he shall set him a fortnight at the least on work, and give him his pay; and if he have no stones for him, he shall refresh him with money to the next lodge.”

A surprising moral attitude toward fellow Masons at a time when ‘Caring’ for others was not as important or affordable as it is today.

“These charges that we have rehearsed, and all other that belong to Masonry, ye shall keep, so help you God and Halidom, and by this Book to your power. Amen.”

By the second half of the 17th Century this had been modified (Buchanan MS) to read.

"These Charges that you have Received you shall well and truly keepe, not disclosing the Secrecy of our lodge to man, woman, nor child, stick nor stone, thing moueable nor immoueable, so God you helpe and his holy Doome. Amen."

Secrecy was a part of the ‘ritual’ by 1650 for the Operative and Non-operative Masons as it is or us. From about the same date we have...

: "Then let the person that is to be made a Mason choose out of the lodge any one Mason who is to instruct him in those secrets which must never be committed to writing; which Mason he must call his tutor. Then let the tutor take him into another room and show him all the whole mystery, that at his return he may exercise with the rest of his fellow Masons."

The Mentoring Project currently being promoted by Grand Lodge is not as original as we may think

You may recall that a copy of the Old Charges was most probably used in the ceremony when Ashmole was made a mason and that the Old Charges were mentioned by Plot in his Natural History of Staffordshire.

As a final note, I shall mention that in 1720 Grand Master Payne, of the Premier Grand Lodge, instructed that copies of the Charges were to be gathered so that a History of the Craft could be produced. Unfortunately, zealous brethren burnt some copies fearing that they should fall into the wrong hands.

I hope this talk will have wetted the appetite and will persuade you to read more about this fascinating subject.

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Acknowledgement.

Article largely based on ‘The Old Charges’ by Bro. McLeod. Prestonian lecture. 1986.

¹ “The Old Charges” by Bro. Wallace McLeod. Prestonian Lecture of 1986.

Available at <http://www.philbrick2255.org.uk/pdf/oldcharges.pdf>

² http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/history/old_charges.html

⁴ Halidom = that which you regard as sacred.

⁵ AQC Volume 82 pp 263

⁶ York No.1 MS. Bro. G. Markham AQC Vol 102 pp 201