Medieval Guilds of the City of London and their Later Influence on Freemasonry
Yasha Beresiner

DISCLAIMER

This presentation looks at the origins of the organisational structure of Freemasonry at the time of its foundation in London 1717.

There are two subjects which this paper is not intended to cover:

a) It is not to be confused with the ongoing arguments as to the relationship of the Craft with medieval trade guilds and

b) It avoids the question of the supposed foundation of organised freemasonry on 22 June 1717 as reported - for the first time - by James Anderson 21 years later, in his 2nd Constitutions published in 1738.

GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND

The Grand Lodge of England, as the Governing Body of Craft Freemasonry controlling subordinate Lodges, was set up sometime prior to June 1717. It consisted then, as it does now, of a Grand Master at its head, his Grand Wardens and Grand Officers, inter alia, ruling over a number of Lodges, each with its own accountable Worshipful Master, Lodge Officers and members. The activities of the Lodge, following the ritual, revolve around convivial dining and charity.

ADOPTED & NOT PROGRESSIVE

The contention in this paper is that the format of this initial structure of Freemasonry did not develop or progress in stages, but was 'lifted' in toto from the structure that comprised the medieval City of London in the previous century.

CITY GUILDS

The 17th Century saw the culmination of the City Guilds system that had previously been in total control of social, commercial and administrative aspects of City Life. The Liverymen elected the Lord Mayor from amongst their own membership. The Lord Mayor and his Sheriffs (a much older institution as will be shown), ruled over the City Livery Companies, each of which had an independent Master and Officers presiding over their trade membership and intent on work - practice, festivities and charity.
ANALOGY

The analogy is obvious and the time frame is as clear: organised Freemasonry began in 1717, the City structure as described, is discernible at the start of Norman England in the 11th Century. How, then, did the City structure, adopted so comprehensively by Freemasonry, originate?

PREMIER GRAND LODGE

Considering first, the foundation of the Premier Grand Lodge on 22nd June 1717, there are no contemporary sources of any kind available on the supposed events that took place at the time. The first and only source for these events is James Anderson (1680-1739), in his second Constitutions published more than two decades later in 1738, on whose account all historians have had to rely. As mentioned at the start of this paper, this is an argument not to be pursued now.

CONSTITUTIONS & REGULATIONS

The first Constitutions of 1723 have a fictitious, at best legendary, history of Freemasonry which mentions Prince Edwin as Grand Master of the Masons assembled in York in 926 AD. Although most the Old Charges also mention Edwin, son of King Athelstan, none make a reference to a 'Grand Master'. The General Regulations incorporated into the first Constitutions, were the creation of George Payne (d. 1757) in 1720, as evidenced by the entry on page 58 of the Constitutions themselves.

UNDEFINED STRUCTURE

In the thirty-nine Regulations that follow, there are no references to the structure of the newly formed Institutions, outside of Regulation XII, which states:

The Grand Lodge consist of, and is form’d by the Masters and Wardens of all the regular particular Lodges upon Record, with the Grand-Master at their Head, and his Deputy on his Left-hand, and the Grand-Wardens in their proper Places; […]

The paragraph continues with the now familiar composition of Grand Lodge, the appointment of a Secretary and Treasurer, Tyler etc. It is worth noting that the term 'Grand Master' is here used for the first time and, as mentioned above, none of the documentation, the ancient charges and regulations, including the Scottish William Schaw (c1550-1602) Statutes of 1599, speak of a 'Grand Master' prior to these Constitutions of 1723.

CITY STRUCTURE

The structure of the City of London, meanwhile, which culminated with the election of the first Mayor, Henry Fitz-Ailwin de Londonestone in 1189, traces its origins to the Anglo-Saxon period of King Alfred the Great (849-899). Governance of Saxon Society revolved around the King, elected by the Witan, the Council of wise-men selected from the nobility. As the Kingdom grew, the King
could only rule and collect taxes due to him by the appointment of ‘ealdorman’, a concept very familiar today.

**NORMAN LONDON**

With the advent of the Norman conquest of England - but not of the walled City of London - special privileges were granted to the citizens, which in time included the election of their own Mayor. The City of London, its boundaries still identified by the Roman wall, was the only region in England that enjoyed such a privilege, granted because the commercial power of the City was recognised by the King. Throughout the rest of the Kingdom, in the Shires or Counties of England, the Monarch’s appointed Shire Reeves, the familiar Sheriffs of today, who played their part in communicating the King’s wishes, collecting taxes and enforcing the King’s law.

**EARLY GUILDS**

By the mid-12th century, the Guild system, which had began as friendly and fraternal societies in Saxon times, had reached levels of sophistication and power that allowed them to control the City. The division of the City of London into 25 wards allowed for the administration to be divided into 25 Aldermen and a number of Councilmen for each ward. Concepts that eventually led to the establishment of the House of Lords and House of Commons respectively.

**GUILD INFLUENCE**

Meanwhile the Guilds or Livery Companies ruled in the City by legislation that allowed them to elect their own Lord Mayor, supported by his own two Sheriffs and given the responsibility of heading the City Guilds, each of which had its own Master, independently responsible with elected members of the Livery.

**DECLINE OF THE GUILDS**

This system was in place for the best part of six centuries and came to an end with the expansion of trade to nations beyond the seas, the final blow coming in the form of the devastating fire of London of 1666, which put an end to the trade monopoly of many of the guilds.

**HAPPY ENDING**

The subsequent history of the City guilds, their survival to this day as charitable if somewhat sophisticated organisations, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the possibility, even likelihood, that George Payne adopted the well established City Guild structure, to give the newly born organised body an acceptable and guaranteed format, must be realistically feasible.