

# The Tracing Board

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## Origin of the Tracing Boards

Once Speculative Masonry was established, a Lodge generally met at some well-known Inn or Tavern. The furnishings of such a place were very bare and plain. There was no electric light or gas. Only candles provided the necessary light. Down the middle of the Lodge room tables were set on trestles. On these tables were set out the bowls of steaming punch, bottles of wine, rum, brandy, sugar, lemons, glasses, and also screws of tobacco for the smokers. It must be remembered that smoking and drinking were allowed in the Lodge room during the ceremonies in those days. Toasts were drunk and songs sung between different portions of the ceremonies, the Brethren sitting at the tables, and the candidate passing round behind them.

At least from 1724 to 1782 the drawings needed to carry out a degree were laid down by the Tyler. This duty was called Framing and Forming the Lodge. On an area in front of the Master, it was the Tyler's duty to draw, with chalk and charcoal, various Masonic Emblems. The chief items were the two Columns, Seven Steps, Tessellated Pavement, a Flaming Star with the Letter "G," the Square, Plumb Rule, and Level. These were all carefully drawn in black and white, the floor being previously whitened, in that area, to form a suitable background. The Tyler would be paid a fee for drawing the Lodge, as well as his normal fee for performing the usual duties of Tying. So that the drawings on the floor would not be disturbed the Brethren would square the lodge, a practice still carried out today. At the end of the night's proceedings the candidate was given, a broom, a mop and a pail of water. With this he washed away all of the design's and symbols. This was done as a lesson in labour and humility, and of course to remove all secrets. As time went on, Lodge rooms were made more comfortable and the bare floors were covered with carpets on which it would be impossible to draw with chalk or charcoal.

By 1733 a floor sheet was used. When the lodge was closed, the sheet was rolled up and stored away. With time the floor sheets cracked and faded. Around 1760, the old floor symbols appeared on the wall and were the forerunners of the suspended tracing boards. Many lodges today place the tracing board on a trestle, hence the old term of "trestle board".

By the early 1800's Freemasonry, had become prosperous and Lodge's soon acquired their own buildings. The interior of the lodge rooms became more elegant with well crafted furniture, a permanent altar and the tessellated Mosaic Pavement with the Star in its centre. At this time attempts were made to standardize the "wall boards". These wallboards are what we now call the tracing boards.

In 1846 the Emulation Lodge of Improvement called for new Tracing Board designs and those sent in by John Harris were accepted. This set has since been used as the standard design for the Craft.

## THE LECTURE OF THE FIRST DEGREE TRACING BOARD

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### History

How did the Tracing Boards displayed in our Lodges originate? In one of its "A Daily Advancement in Masonic Knowledge" the Ruapehu Lodge of Research[ii] writes:

*"While the Tracing Board today, is looked upon as an ornament in the Lodgeroom, which has various designs for the Brethren to moralise upon, the main aim of a Tracing Board as used by operatives was to lay out the plan and design for the building to be constructed. We find they were in use in the old Middle East countries long before King Solomon's Temple was planned and constructed. For example, when called upon to erect a building, Persian craftsmen worked out their scheme for the building, on a sectional lined tracing board, divided into squares by horizontal and vertical lines, each square representing either one of four bricks. The Persians used to construct their bricks in a square shape, not in oblongs as we know bricks today. Their Tracing Board was laid on the floor of their workroom so that it was possible to erect a workable model before construction on the main building commenced. If the plans were sufficiently valuable to preserve them, they were copied on a stiff paper or parchment and done up into a roll which sometimes extended out as far as 20 feet. The roll was then finished off with a piece of leather with a thong attached, this thong being long enough to bind round the roll several times and then to be tied. This type of roll seems to have been used for both the ease of carrying or for the ease of hiding should the occasion arise."*

*"Parchments do not appear to have been made into books until Roman times."*

*"A system of squared boards appears to have been passed on to the Egyptians, who were great builders in stone, particularly in the construction of pyramids, and that great wonder of the world, the Sphinx. Not only did the Egyptians use the Boards for sculpture and*

*stonecutting, but also for their form of painting. There is also evidence that a similar method of recording plans was used in India.”*

Laurence Gardner describes a “Portable Lodge” in Chapter 11 of his book “The Shadow of Solomon”[iii] indicating that the Masonic tradition of the Sinclairs of Rosslyn embraces the connected cultures of both stonemasonry and Freemasonry. He writes:

*“The structural workmanship of Rosslyn Chapel, is the epitome of the former, while its decorative features are wholly emblematic of the latter. The 15th-century Chapel abounds with carved images of so many tools and symbols that became icons of the Masonic lodge tradition, and these are now artistically depicted on Tracing Boards to aid the instructional process of the Craft.”*

It is often thought that the precursors of Tracing Boards were cloths that were unrolled on the floor of a lodge. Gardner writes that it is not strictly true to say that boards took the place of Floor Cloths since boards were also laid on the floor and each may be used for different ritual purposes. Gardner suggests the history of the Cloths and Boards are parallel and evolutionary.

Masonic meetings are often held in rooms that were not specifically designed for the purpose – this being particularly true for the early speculative Lodges of the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, taverns were often the preferred places for meetings and the four Lodges which got together on 24 June 1717 to found the Grand Lodge of England met in The Goose and Gridiron, St. Paul’s Churchyard, The Crown, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, The Rummer and Grapes, Channel Row, and The Apple Tree, Covent Garden. Any room chosen for a meeting had to be prepared and fitted with the appropriate trappings and furniture, and it had to be restored to normality after the meeting. [You might like to note that we still use the words “prepare” and “restore” when we have to change our Lodges around during degree ceremonies.] Everything related to creating the proper environment for a Lodge had to be portable.

One of the Tyler’s functions was to mark out the form of a lodge on the floor, using chalk or what other removable markers were available. The shape was called an “oblong square” – which is somewhat ambiguous. Curiously we also use the term *parallelepipedon* a word which means a prism whose bases are parallelograms and which WBro Jim Anderson refers to as “pompous”[iv]. To the basic shape may be added various Masonic symbols. As the practice became better organised instead of having to mark out and later clean up the markings and symbols, the information was marked out on a cloth which could be simply unrolled before the meeting and rolled up at its conclusion. Gardner writes:

*“As the concept became more popular, Masonic symbols were added to the designs, followed by individual cloths that were attributed to the different degrees of working. .... Artists became more ambitious and, instead of bearing mere basic outlines, they transformed the cloths into artworks in their own right. This led to a situation where some Floor Cloths were so heavily worked and expensive that no one wanted to walk on them. Instead, they were hung on display like conventional paintings, which gave rise to a practical dilemma. Where was the lodge? It was on the wall!”*

There may be another antecedent for this. According to W.Bro. Anderson:

*“We are told (Bro R J Meekren in his The Lodge, an Essay in Method, AQC 61) that the primitive operative lodge was held out of doors. Echoes of this tradition are to be found in early speculative documents, and some still persist in the Lectures. To the student of folklore, says Meekren, the marking out of a ritual enclosure on the ground is a familiar and explainable practice. When lodges came to meet indoors, it would be natural for them to continue the customs they were used to out of doors. The ‘enclosure had, therefore, to be formed on the floor of the meeting room’.”*

The problem of damaging the lodge by walking on the markings or the Floor Cloths is discussed by Harry Carr in “The Freemason at Work”[v] in which he says it gave rise to the practice of “squaring the Lodge”. He points out that it was not of the ‘heel-clicking’ type of precise squaring but simply a natural caution to avoid disturbing or spoiling the design. We need to remember that we are not a military order or organisation and Carr comments “The practice of squaring is wholly admirable, because it adds much to the dignity of the ceremonies, so long as it is not carried to extremes.”

It became the practice to deem a lodge operatively formed so long as its cloth was displayed but since different cloths related to different degrees they could not be hung permanently. But the matter of portability was still of concern, despite, according to Gardner, many lodges acquiring their own meeting halls. Above all there was the question of size. Floor Cloths were necessarily large! Gardner writes:

*“The most common practice, therefore, was to get them off the floor, but not hang them. Instead, they were draped over planks that were raised on trestles, giving rise to the term Trestle Board.”*

The size was still inconvenient in the smaller lodges, and caused problems with transportation. These were solved by creating smaller panels which were easier to handle than the cloth drapes and were often supported on easels – leading to the form of support for Tracing Boards common today.

Gardner says that set rules were never established for the design of Floor Cloths or Tracing Boards. They merely had to fulfil their respective functions as required for the degrees. Many and various designs have been developed. Sometimes they are complete as they stand while in other instances they allow for lines and additions to be drawn during lectures. This is, of course, a throw-back to the waxed or sand panels used by operative master masons to mark out the days plans for their workman.

## First Degree Tracing board

The First Degree Tracing Board is a collection of symbols. Robert Cooper writes in "Cracking the Freemason's Code"[vi]:

*"Each degree and branch of Freemasonry has its own special history, which is designed to impart its particular moral lessons. The first three degrees are centred on King Solomon's Temple, how it was built, by whom and for what purpose. ... the temple has always had a special resonance for stonemasons and ... it takes pride of place in the Masonic 'system', having been included in the first and, for a considerable time, the only Masonic ceremonies in existence ... in them the Lodge is equated with the temple (specifically with the entrance to it, although many forget this). The Traditional History is ... allegorical, designed to convey particular messages, moral lessons and Masonic lore."*

The Lecture introduces the new Entered Apprentice to:

1. Symbolism and its importance in Freemasonry
2. The form and size of the Lodge
3. The placement of the Lodge
4. The orientation of the Lodge and its relationship to Tabernacle and Temple
5. The physical and metaphysical structure of the Lodge
6. The ornaments, furniture and jewels to be found in the Lodge
7. The virtues important to Freemasonry

## Lecture of the First Degree Tracing Board

By the time the Lecture of the First Degree Tracing Board is presented to the newly initiated Entered Apprentice he has already been introduced to some of the important symbols of Freemasonry:

- The three Great Lights
- The three Lesser Lights
- The Working Tools

He has also been advised of the principal virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity and, indeed, tested on his view of them. If he has been observant he will have noticed some, maybe all, of the jewels which are apparent around the Lodge. Of course, if he was anything like me, he won't have noticed much because he will have been awestruck by what has taken place around him. It will come to him later and in this respect, the Lecture of the Tracing Board is intended to help him recognize and understand them. However, the Tracing Board itself raises something of a conundrum. The newly Entered Apprentice is told that the Tracing Board is *"for the Master to lay lines and draw designs on"* and yet it is covered in permanent designs. How can this be? Because we would expect that such a board would be plain – and in keeping with those referred to in the introduction to this lecture. WBro Anderson explains the reason as being simple:

*"... two separate boards are referred to in the Charge. The first, the real Tracing Board is a plain drawing board depicted on the first de-gree Board in front of the pedestal. The second, the Lodge Board, is what is usually known to us as the Tracing Board, with various symbols and emblems*

*"It is with the second of these boards - the Lodge Board or, as it used to be called, "The Lodge" - that we are presently concerned.*

*"The Tracing Boards of the three degrees, although not used in some workings, and indeed unknown in certain jurisdictions, are a significant survival from our masonic past. In a sense they epitomise a stage in the development of speculative Freemasonry, by way of accepted masonry, from the operative craft."*

Let us now look at some of the symbols and meanings embodied in the Lecture of the Tracing Board of the First Degree. The lecture commences with a commentary on symbols drawing parallels with ancient civilisations and indicating that signs and symbols were methods of communication in those civilisations. It mentions particularly the Mysteries of Ancient Egypt and the System of Pythagoras. That these two in particular are singled out probably stems from the history written in the Constitutions of Rev Dr James Anderson in 1723 the first paragraph of which reads:

*"ADAM, our first Parent, created after the Image of God, the great Architect of the Universe, must have had the Liberal Sciences, particularly Geometry, written on his Heart; for even since the Fall, we find the Principles of it in the Hearts of his Offspring, and which, in process of time, have been drawn forth into a convenient Method of Propositions, by observing the Laws of Proportion taken Year of the World 4003 before Christ from Mechanism : So that as the Mechanical Arts gave Occasion to the Learned to reduce the Elements of Geometry into Method, his noble Science thus reduc'd, is the Foundation of all those Arts, (particularly of Masonry and Architecture) and the Rule by which they are conducted and perform'd.*

*"No doubt Adam taught his Sons Geometry, and the use of it, in the several Arts and Crafts convenient, at least for those early Times ..."*

Later he wrote:

*"And, no doubt, the Royal Art was brought down to Egypt by MITZRAIM, the second Son of Ham, about six Years after the Confusion at Babel, and after the Flood 160 Years, when he led thither his Colony; (for Egypt is Mitzraim in Hebrew) because we*

*find the River Nile 's overflowing its Banks, soon caus'd an Improvement in Geometry, which consequently brought Masonry much in request: For the ancient noble Cities, with the other magnificent Edifices of that Country, and particularly the famous PYRAMIDS, demonstrate the early Taste and Genius of that ancient Kingdom. Nay, one of those Egyptian PYRAMIDS is reckon'd the First of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Account of which, by Historians and Travellers, is almost incredible."*

There is no doubt that Masonic symbolism was used prior to the early 18th century, but as far as I can determine this is the first reference to place it in the context of modern, speculative Masonry. This, incidentally, is an example of the romantic school of Masonic History. Geometry is, of course, extremely important. Knowledge of the 47th Proposition of Euclid regarding the properties of a triangle containing a right angle (also know as Pythagoras' Theorem) and the properties of a circle enabled ancient builders and architects to establish levels and perpendiculars with high accuracy. The description of the form of a Lodge is metaphorical as the Lecture endeavours to explain, encompassing the breadth of Masonic philosophy and, particularly, charity. However the description of the oblong block or square, that is to say a prism, is perhaps more suitable for a flat earth definition and probably circles, arcs and/or radii would be more accurate.

The orientation of the Lodge is of interest apart from the obvious connection with the orientation of early temples and churches. WBro W. Kirk MacNulty mentions a catechism[vii]:

*"A Mason is sometimes called 'a traveling man', and one of the Masonic catechisms gives us a little insight into this seldom-used epithet. 'Q. - Did you ever Travel? A. - My forefathers did. Q. - Where did they travel? A. - Due East and West. Q. - What was the object of their travels? A. - They traveled East in search of instruction, and West to propagate the knowledge they had gained.'"*

The Lecture says that a Lodge should be patterned on King Solomon's Temple which itself followed the form of Moses' Tabernacle. MacNulty also points out that where a Tracing Board exhibits the cardinal points of a compass (N, S, E and W) the way they define the East-West direction should be understood in terms of Masonic symbolism:

*"... in doing so they make some comment about the nature of the journey, which the new Mason apprentices himself to undertake. That journey from West to East is represented, symbolically, by the progress through the Masonic Degrees; and it is, in fact, the ascent up Jacob's Ladder - one of the 'Principal Rounds' for each Degree."*

The next paragraph of the Lecture introduces the pillars and the first indication of the importance of the number three. The Lecture refers to the import of the pillars in a number of ways based on Wisdom, Strength and Beauty:

- Symbolic – the three attributes representing the three historic Grand Masters.
- Metaphysical – referring to the Great Architect.
- Physical – referring to architecture.

MacNulty writes that the columns represent a duality which he says is indicated on the Board: in the juxtaposition of the black and white squares of the pavement and the sun and moon (which are ancient symbols of masculinity and femininity).

*"In the central area of the Board, duality is represented by two of the three columns; but here, as we rise from the fixity of the elemental existence of the physical world, the third column introduces a new idea. The striking thing about these columns is that each is of a different Order of Architecture. In Masonic symbolism, they are assigned names: Wisdom to the Ionic Column in the middle, Strength to the Doric Column on the left, and Beauty to the Corinthian Column on the right."*

Drawing an analogy with the Tree of Life from the Sephardic Kabala he writes:

*"The three columns all terminate in (depend on) Divinity at the top of the central column. ... The Corinthian Pillar of Beauty is on the right, and in the classical world the Corinthian Order was thought to be suitable for buildings dedicated to vigorous, expansive activities. The Doric Pillar of Strength is on the left, and the Doric Order was used for buildings housing activities in which discipline, restraint and stability were important. The Ionic Pillar of Wisdom is in the middle. The Ionic Order is recognized as an intermediate between the other two and was used for Temples to the rulers of the gods who coordinated the activities of the pantheon. The Three Pillars, like the Tree of Life, speak of a universe in which expansive and constraining forces are held in balance by a coordinating agency."*

The Lecture delineates and gives meanings for the ornaments of the Lodge:

- The mosaic pavement which is said to represent the diversity of creation.
- The Blazing Star which refers to the sun.
- The Indented or Tesselated Border which, surrounding the Blazing Star draws an analogy with the planets rotating around the sun.

MacNulty, however, takes a much more metaphysical view suggesting that the Ornaments represent the Renaissance concept of the unity of the system. He writes:

*"The fact that the Masons who formulated our symbolism gathered these three objects into a single group seems to require that we consider them together and in relationship to each other. The Ornaments of the Lodge are the Blazing Star or Glory, the Chequered Pavement, and the Indented, Tesselated Border, and I will suggest that they are all intended to refer to the Deity. The Blazing Star or Glory is found in the center of the picture. We can be sure it is not a representation of what astronomers today would call a 'stellar object'. Stellar objects (stars) are to be found with the Moon in the upper left of the picture. In fact, the Blazing*

*Star or Glory is a straightforward heraldic representation of the Deity. ... [and as], shown on the First Degree board in the Heavens, represents the Deity as It is, in all Its Glory, as It projects Itself into existence. The Chequered Pavement represents the Deity as It is perceived to be at the opposite pole of consciousness, here on Earth in ordinary life. The light and dark squares represent paired opposites, a mixture of mercy and justice, reward and punishment, passion and analysis, vengeance and loving kindness. They also represent the human experience of life, light and dark, good and evil, easy and difficulty. But that is only how it is perceived. The squares are not the symbol; the Pavement is the symbol. The light and dark squares fit together with exact nicety to form the Pavement, a single thing, a unity. The whole is surrounded by the Tessellated Border, which binds it into a single symbol. In this representation on the Tracing Board, the Border binds not simply the squares, but the entire picture, into a unity. The Tassels can be thought of as representing Divine agency, which operates throughout the whole."*

The Lecture well describes the Jewels, both movable and immovable and in particular the Ashlars and needs little amplification on these matters. There are earlier references to other symbols such as Jacob's Ladder and a Point within a Circle. It is worth quoting MacNulty on these:

*"...one of the principal features of the Board, [is] the Ladder. It extends from the Scripture open on the Pedestal to the Glory, which represents the Deity; and in the Masonic symbolism, it is said to be Jacob's Ladder. We consider the ladder together with another symbol, the Point-within-a-Circle-Bounded-by-Two-Parallel-Lines which is shown on the face of the Pedestal or Altar. Why should we consider these two symbols together? Because in many early Masonic drawings they appear together as if they have some connection. Consider the Two Parallel Lines first. They, like the Doric and Corinthian columns, represent paired opposites, active and passive qualities. Why? Because in Masonic symbolism they are associated with the Saints John, and the Baptist's Day is Mid-summer, and the Evangelist's Day is Mid-Winter. In the English constitution which has de-Christianized its symbolic structure, the lines are said to represent Moses (the Prophet) and Solomon (the Lawgiver), which is substantially the same idea. The ladder with its 'three principal rounds', Faith, Hope, and Charity, rises to the Heavens between the two parallels.*

*"Now, when you look at this Point-within-a-Circle- Bounded-by-Two-Parallel-Lines together with the Ladder and its three levels you see a pattern very similar to the three columns. There are three verticals, two of which (the Lines) relate to active and passive functions while the third, the Ladder, reaches to the heavens and provides the means '...by which we hope to arrive there'. The ladder, which I think is a representation of individual consciousness, has 'three principal rounds' or levels, represented by Faith, Hope and Charity, which correspond to the three lower levels of the four-level Universe we observed earlier. Both the Macrocosmic 'Landscape' and the Microcosmic 'Man' share the fourth level of Divinity, represented by the Blazing Star, or Glory. Taken together the Ladder and the Point within a Circle bounded by Two Parallel Lines represent the human individual, made '...in the image of God', according to the same principles on which the Universe is based."*

The Circle can also be linked with another very important symbol, namely the Compasses. The Lecture tells us that the Centre, being circumscribed by the Circle, represents a point from which a Freemason who allows himself to be so circumscribed cannot err. As the new Entered Apprentice will eventually discover this is part of the catechism associated with the opening of Lodge in higher Degrees. He has already been informed that the Compasses are "to keep us within due bounds with all mankind". He will probably already know that one of the purposes of Compasses is to inscribe a circle. Therefore we can relate "keeping us within due bounds" to inscribing the circle, from the centre of which we cannot err. Another way of thinking of this is to think of ourselves sitting on a plane which extends to the horizon in all directions. What shape does that horizon take? We could simulate this by imagining we are sitting on a boat out of sight of land. In this sense perhaps the Point at the Centre of A Circle also tells us that our vision and aspirations should be as extensive as the horizon at our limit of sight.

Because the symbols portrayed on the Tracing Board are nearly all evident in a Lodge, the Tracing Board can truly be said to be a model of a Lodge, and if you remember in the introduction I described how floor cloths developed and were then hung on a wall, then the Tracing Board is the historical development of the Lodge "on the wall". But the Tracing Board also conveys one further great lesson. It shows us the bases of the moral philosophy which is characteristic of and epitomises Freemasonry.

We have seen that the symbols represent concepts of the Three Great Lights, the Three Lesser Lights, the principal virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, and the cardinal virtues of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice. The Lecture tells us that the distinguishing characteristics of a good Freemason are Virtue, Honour, and Mercy. These layout the moral code of behaviour which every Freemason is expected to observe. They are our moral philosophy. And the symbolism of the three columns – Wisdom, Strength and Beauty – offers us the structure by which we will ensure that we adhere to the code.

## Notes

[i] It should be noted that all references to ritual are to that of the Grand Lodge of New Zealand.

[ii] "A Daily Advancement in Masonic Knowledge No 26", The Ruapehu Lodge of Research No 444, August 1995

[iii] Laurence Gardner "The Shadow of Solomon" Harper Element 2005 ISBN 13 978 0 00 720761 9, ISBN 10 0 00 720761 1, p 193.

[iv] "The Tracing Boards of Freemasonry", W.Bro. J.D. Anderson, 12th Verrall Lecture, Waikato Lodge of Research No 445, 16 November 1999, Transactions Volume 9 No 6 p64, March 2000.

[v] Harry Carr, "The Freemason at Work", Lewis Masonic, 6th edition, 1981, p35

[vi] Robert LD Cooper, "Cracking the Freemason's Code", Random House, 2006, ISBN 10 1 8460 4049 3, ISBN 13 978 1 8460 4049 8, p93

[vii] Masonic Tracing Boards, by W Kirk MacNulty, PM, Presented April 30, 1996