

ANTIEN CHARGES AND THE BESWICK ROYD MANUSCRIPT

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As this, the Masonic Order of Athelstan, is based upon the Ancient Charges to a Mason, it may be useful to you, Brethren, to understand what the Ancient Charges are and their origins.

Firstly they can be found in the *Book of Constitutions* of the United Grand Lodge of England. But what are they? From where did they come, How old are they and are they really Ancient.

An Ancient Charge is often read in a Craft Lodge usually after the minutes as a reminder to Brethren to follow the Charges of a Freemason, but how many of us bother to actually read them. They can be found from page 147 in the B of C but they are different to the Ancient Charges and Regulations starting on page Vii. These are the Ancient Charges and Regulations read to and acknowledged by the Master Elect at his Craft Installation ceremony and are much shorter than the former. These are regulatory in nature and to which the ME must acknowledge his consent before he can be Installed into the Chair of King Solomon.

An Ancient Charge on the other hand concerns a Freemason's moral duties, of God and Religion, of the Civil Magistrate, supreme and subordinate, of Lodges, of Masters, Wardens, Fellows and Apprentices and of behaviour:

Those are the Ancient Charges used by many Lodges and it is likely that they were devised by the Rev James Anderson when he wrote the first *Book of Constitutions* in 1723.

However, he must have had some original material to have arrived at this moral code and this is where the Old Charges come in. In fact these are more ancient than the Ancient Charges and there are numerous originals still in existence ranging from the *Regius MS* of 1390, the *Cooke MS* of 1410 and *The Grand Lodge MS* of 1583, about 130 in all.. Most have three sections, a prayer, and historical part and the charges.

A famous local one is the *Beswick-Royd MS* which was discovered in 1915 in the effects of the late Bro. C.R.N. Beswick-Royd for many years the Deputy Provincial Grand Master of East Lancashire and is on display in the Museum at Freemason's Hall, Bridge Street, Manchester. It is believed to have been written in the early part of the 15th century. The Nine Charges for all Masons in our Ritual No 1 are identical to those in the Beswick-Royd MS. No other medieval body, craft, religious or otherwise is known to have possessed such documents

The two oldest are *The Regius and Cooke MS* of 1390 and 1410 and are both in the British Museum. *The Grand Lodge MS No1* in the possession of Grand Lodge

is dated 1583; several others are dated in the 17th century and still more were written in the eighteenth after the formation of the Grand Lodge.

Great attention has been paid to them during the last hundred years or so and they have been examined in great detail and in doing students have discovered that there are lines of descent. Differences occur between copy and copy. What is certain is that they are essentially English or of English origin and one learned scholar was of the opinion that there was little trace of any Masonic organisation in England before 1375 which brings us very close to earliest operative Craft system.

We know for instance that in 1356 twelve skilled master masons appeared before the Mayor and Aldermen at the Guildhall in London, to settle a demarcation dispute and to draw up a code of trade regulations because their trade had not until then *'been regulated in due manner, by the government of folks of their trade, in such form as other trades' were*. This later gave rise to 'The Hole Craft and Fellowship of Masons later the London Masons Company. By 1472 the London Masons Company was given a Grant of Arms which marked the highest form of official recognition of the Craft as one of the City Companies. From 1472 the Arms appeared regularly on Masonic documents and during the 16th century they were emblazoned on many of the Old Constitutions or Old Charges.

The *Beswick-Royds MS* consists of four pieces of parchment about six inches wide stitched together to form a continuous strip six feet ten inches in length.

It opens with an account of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences. These as we know are referred to in the second degree but in medieval times they formed the normal curriculum of the universities. The place of Geometry will be realised by the following passage:

The which seven liberal sciences be as it were all one science that is to say geometry for thus may a man prove that all the sciences in the world be found by geometry for it teacheth meat and measure pondracon and weight of all manner of kind and earth and there is no man that worketh by any craft be he worketh by some measure and no man buys or sells but by measure and weight and all is geometry. And Craftsmen and merchants find no other of the seven sciences especially ploughmen and tillers of grain both corn seeds, vine plants and sellers of other fruit, for grammar neither astronomy nor any of these can find a man one measure or meat without geometry wherefore I think that science most worthy that findeth all others.

So Brethren we can see that geometry was considered the primary science by our operative crafts men even in the days of long ago.

Then follows the story of the two pillars not those which we are familiar today but two others erected by the inhabitants of the ancient world to carry over the knowledge of mankind over a impending destruction which proved to be Noah's flood. This has the longest pedigree of all our traditions and it of course the main theme of one of our side degrees. It was taken by the compiler of the early version from the *Polychronicon*, a world history written by Ranulf Higden, a monk of Chester, who died about 1364. Higden copied from Josephus, who in turn took

it from the Greek historian Berostus, who wrote it about 300 BC and is believed to have copied it from a Summarian account of about 1500 BC.

The first Charge was given by the King of Babylon to a party of sixty masons sent to assist in the building of the city of Nineveh. We then pass to the removal of Abraham and Sarah to Egypt where the patriarchs taught the seven sciences to the Egyptians, a worthy scholar being Euclid.

Then there is the major episode of the building of the Temple followed by the story of St. Alban and the introduction of Masonry into England with an account of the fixing of the rate of pay. This is regarded by many authorities as confirmative of the theory that the original traditional history was devised shortly after the Black Death and all the economic upheaval it caused.

Briefly this relates to *St Albon who was a worthy knight and chief steward to the King of England. He had gone out into the country to make town walls and he favoured masons well. He ensured that they had good standing wages and got them a charter from the King.*

So what was the use for the Old Charges? We gather from the historical portion of our ritual that Prince Edwin half brother of King Athelstan, collected the writings and understandings of the Craft at his Assembly at York and being concerned about the poor practices of the masons he decided to lay down certain standards to be followed by the masons. Is it possible that something similar may have been in continuous use throughout the centuries since?

It is doubtful whether this history was ever read or recited in full at early meetings of speculative Masons but the possession of a copy of a charge was probably akin to the Lodge Warrant of today. This is borne out by the fact that a copy of the *Sloane MS* was written by Edward Sankey on the 16th October, 1646. This was the same day on which Elias Ashmole was initiated at Warrington and at which Richard Sankey, his father, was one of those present. It is almost certain that the document was prepared especially for that occasion and was probably on display in the meeting. We have the names of all those present and not one was an operative mason.

So Brethren there is no doubt that the Old Charges were very important to the newly emerging speculative Freemasonry and this is reflected when in 1719 George Payne who had been invested as the second Grand Master in June 1718, requested the Craft to bring in any old writings and records concerning Masons and Masonry to show the usages in ancient times. He produced and compiled the General Regulations which were later enshrined in Anderson's *Book of Constitutions* of 1723.

So there you have it Brethren, Ancient Charges, Old Charges and Ancient Charges and Regulations how they truly came into being we may never know but they have been passed down from generation to generation for a very long time and they have all led to the *Book of Constitutions* which we all receive in our Lodges when we enter Freemasonry and now are an essential part of our Ritual too.