

What is Scottish Freemasonry?

ROSSLYN
CHAPEL 1446

It is not clear exactly when Freemasonry began but it is widely accepted to have originated from the stonemason trade guilds of the Middle Ages, referred to as Incorporated Trades or Crafts. The term incorporated comes from the fact that these various craft organisations held Royal charters, or 'Seals of Cause' which allowed them to work exclusively within the Royal Burghs in the Middle Ages. The language and symbols used in Freemasonic rituals today come from these older craft bodies.

The earliest use of the term Freemason dates from around 1390 but referred purely to operative members. The earliest Freemasonic Grand Lodge which was totally symbolic in its practices and not operative at all was formed in 1717 on St John's Day, 24th June in London.

Prior to the formalisation of Freemasonry as we know it however, Scotland was already beginning to see a shift during the 17th century where more and more non-operative members were joining the old trade institutions. Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries in particular the fraternity expanded across Europe, the Americas and today you will find lodges globally.

The Grand Lodge of Scotland describes their organisation in this way:

'Freemasonry is a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms, and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides.'

The essential qualification for admission into and continuing membership is a belief in a Supreme Being.

Membership is open to men of any race or religion who can fulfil this essential qualification and who are of good repute.



A stone mason at work from a drawing of 1457.

Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. The one essential qualification means that Freemasonry is open to men of many religions and it expects and encourages them to continue to follow their own faith. It is not permitted for Freemasons to debate these subjects at Masonic meetings, as it is not expected that an individual should have to justify their own personal religious beliefs.'



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The link between Masonic guilds and Modern Freemasons?

The original Masonic guilds were 'operative', in other words, concerned with the operating of the craft of stonemasonry. Modern Masons are 'allegorical' in that the rituals and ceremonies are symbolic. The Masonic lodges today are about mutual fellowship, support and charitable work.

Medieval Craft Guilds

In the Middle Ages, craft guilds were an important part of society. The word 'guild' comes from the Saxon word gilden, meaning to pay. A group of craftsmen would form a guild and charge a membership fee to join. Membership was restricted, and the various guilds worked together to set prices and ensure that the secrets of the trades were not spread outside the guild. There were two stages, or degrees, required to become a full member of a trade guild. Firstly, the Apprentice stage where a young boy would train under a Journeyman for many years, usually seven and often for board and lodgings only. To become qualified, he would present a Master Piece to the Incorporated Trade, in order to prove that he had reached a suitably high standard. On their approval he would only then become a Journeyman and be able to earn a good salary.

The term Master Mason was given to Journeymen who were the overseers of the building work but this was not a separate degree. A third degree title and ceremony was invented by the Freemasons around 1725 to convey more symbolic teachings to its membership. This was followed by many, many more under different Freemasonic organisations such as the Royal Arch, the Knights Templar and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (to name but a few).

Over time, the demise of the exclusive rights and privileges of the old operative craft system came about because business people became angry with the Guilds, as they kept prices high and restricted any competition. It had become a closed shop and it was felt that they were restricting trade. Elizabeth I of England began to suppress the guilds.



The Royal Order of Scotland, Edinburgh

Sir William St Clair who became the first Grand Master Mason of the Freemasons of Scotland in 1736.

In Scotland the exclusive rights and privileges of the Trade Incorporations were taken away as a result of a municipal review of such bodies in the 1830s. After this many of the Incorporations across the country went into decline, whilst Freemasonry as a fraternal organisation went from strength to strength, attracting the good and the great across the land.

Following the model of the English Grand Lodge of Freemasons, The Grand Lodge of Scotland was established in 1736. Sir William St Clair became the first Grand Master Mason of Scotland. He may have been selected because his family owned two letters, now called the St Clair Charters, dated 1601 and 1628. These 'charters' acknowledged the St Clair family as the hereditary 'Patrons and Protectors' of the craft of operative masons in Scotland. In an act that blurred the lines between this new movement and its operative counterparts from the past he suggested that the post of Grand Master should be elected rather than hereditary. The term Grand Master was never applied in the past.



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Some have referred to the 18th century as the age of Freemasonry. It was certainly the age of Fraternalism with many new organisations promoting mutual aid and encouragement. The 18th century was very much a time of change, the age of 'Enlightenment'. With this change however came revolution. Some Freemasons on the continent became even more secretive than previously to escape the effects of persecution from the authorities. Handshakes and other modes of recognition which had been used by the trade crafts to identify each other became even more important as did the ideals of equality and fraternity. Many historical Enlightenment figures were Freemasons who became involved on both sides of the Jacobite uprisings and on both sides of the French and American revolutions.

Robert Burns became a freemason in 1781, age 23. Marie Roberts, in *Burns and the Masonic Enlightenment* states that Freemasonry not only spoke out for the ideals of 'liberty, fraternity, equality', but also was responsible for the creation of nationalistic feelings and fervour, as a number of Freemasons played prominent roles in the American and French Revolutions.

The connection between Rosslyn Chapel and Freemasonry?

Rosslyn Chapel was built by the Operative stonemasons but has nothing to do with modern Freemasonry in terms of any explicit symbolism. Rosslyn would have been a hive of activity during the period of construction, with many craft guilds on site. There are many symbols in the chapel, particularly the 'masons' marks'. Each stonemason had his own symbol, and this was used to mark his work, to ensure that he was properly paid for his labour.

Some Freemasons today see Masonic symbols in the carvings of Rosslyn Chapel. In particular, some believe that some of the angels are carved in poses that are used in Masonic rituals. Since the chapel pre-dates the establishment of the Masonic lodges in Scotland, this is seen as proof that Freemasonry is much older. The only problem with this is that the particular angels which are seen as Masonic are from the 19th Century, and probably commissioned by the Fourth Earl of Rosslyn, himself a Mason.

www.rosslynchapel.com



One of the many masons' marks in Rosslyn Chapel.

Masonic groups interested in hearing the local lodge's interpretation of carvings at Rosslyn Chapel can arrange to walk round with a member in return for a donation to the lodge funds. Local lodges familiar with Rosslyn may have used some of its carvings to illustrate allegorical stories within their own ritual dramas. These meanings are personal to the lodges, and do not represent an authoritative interpretation that would be recognised by the stonemasons who carved the image. Here at Rosslyn Chapel, we hear many different claims as to the meanings of particular carvings, no two the same! We ask only that you bear that in mind when listening to individual interpretations.

Acknowledgements

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Robert Cooper – Grand Lodge of Scotland

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Useful Reading

Robert Cooper, *Cracking the Freemason's Code*, Rider 2006

Christopher Hodapp, *Freemasons for Dummies*, Wiley Publishing Inc 2005

Marie Roberts, 'Burns and the Masonic Enlightenment', in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, Aberdeen University Press 1987

For further information on Scottish Freemasonry, the website link is www.grandlodgescotland.com