

Performance notes

The Lectures are a source of entertainment for innumerable lodge meetings but our ritual and its history also provide a rich vein. I had become fascinated by the various charges in Freemasonry. While we are all aware of the Charge after Initiation, one that always has to be given, there are many others, some virtually unknown to Masons. I decided to create an entertainment on this subject. It was written to be performed at Essex Masters Lodge No. 3256, with myself as Voice 1 and Bro. Ken Cownden as Voice 2. It had a pleasing reception and it was subsequently performed at many other lodges in and around London.

In keeping with our rules about involvement, this entertainment used W. Bro. Ken's ability to bring the brethren in and the usual sets of cards from which volunteers read aloud. There are two sets of cards - blue and green - which are handed out to selected brethren beforehand; a different set of brethren for each set of cards. At one point during the entertainment, the lodge SW and JW are required to speak up and at another the lodge Secretary is asked to read from the *Book of Constitutions*.

Voice 1 and Voice 2 stand at podiums to read. Voice 1 never leaves the podium but Voice 2 moves around to interact with the audience. We used radio microphones primarily to help Voice 2 move about but also to enable Voice 1 to read 'underneath' Voice 2 at one point. The entertainment might be given without the use of such technology, although the use of a bit of 'kit' does enliven things and raise expectations. At one point Voice 2 mentions the *Long Closing* and offers to give it at the end of the meeting.

Script

Voice 1 Brethren, our topic this afternoon is that of the *Charges in Craft Freemasonry*. We hope that you will agree with us that it is a fascinating subject, full of moral contemplation. In fact, one might argue that the Charges are the centrepiece of Freemasonry, the moral content of our Masonic lives.

Voice 2 The word *charge* has many meanings. In today's mercenary world, we are used to being charged for just about everything. This is not the Masonic meaning, although most Lodges remind candidates for initiation to bring their cheque books with them.

Voice 1 We can charge a firearm or a glass.

Voice 2 Brother Wardens, how do you report your respective columns?

SW Fully charged in the West, WM!

JW Fully charged in the South, WM!

Voice 1 In this sense, the word means to *fill* or *load*. We are all familiar with the charge of the light brigade, the most famous example of the meaning *to attack impetuously*.

Voice 2 I trust that no one here has been charged by the Old Bill lately? No? Good!

Voice 1 This is another meaning - *to accuse*. In Masonry to charge someone is *to lay a command or injunction upon them, to exhort authoritatively*.

Voice 2 So, brethren: how many charges do you think there are, in Craft Freemasonry? Would someone like to hazard a guess?

Voice 2 interacts with the audience to gather guesses.

Well, there are six obvious ones. Come on, you must remember. In the first degree, we have the charge beginning *It is customary at the erection of all stately edifices to lay the first, or foundation, stone, at the NE corner of the intended building*. Can anyone remember how the next sentence goes?

Voice 2 gets a Brother to quote the sentence that runs, 'You being newly admitted into Freemasonry, are placed in the NE part of the Lodge, figuratively to represent that stone.'

Well done! We are familiar with that charge but how about the charge after initiation, the one that begins *Now that you have passed through the ceremony of your initiation ...* Can anyone give us the next few lines?

Voice 2 gets a Brother to quote the sentence that runs, 'I congratulate you on being admitted a member of our Ancient and Honourable Institution.'

Well done again! We seem to be familiar with the first degree but can anyone remember how the charge in the second degree starts?

Voice 2 gets a Brother to quote the sentence that runs, 'Masonry being a progressive science, when you were made an EAF you were placed in the NE part of the Lodge to show that you were newly admitted.'

And how about the Charge after passing? Can anyone remember the start of that?

Voice 2 gets a Brother to quote the sentence that runs, 'Brother, now that you have advanced to your second degree, we congratulate you on your elevation.'

A bit tougher on the memory, isn't it? We do not hear it very often. OK, there are two more to go. What about the charge in the third degree? Can anyone tell us how that starts?

Voice 2 gets a Brother to quote the sentence that runs, 'I will now beg you to observe that the light of a MM is but darkness visible.'

And now a really tough one - what about the charge after raising?

Voice 2 gets a Brother to quote the sentence that runs, 'Brother ... your zeal for the Institution of Freemasonry, the progress you have made in the Art and your conformity to the general regulations have pointed you out as a proper object of our favour and esteem.'

Voice 2 Well done brethren!

Voice 1 So far we have six charges. A lot of moral exhortation! Actually, remembering one of the meanings of the word *charge* as *exhortation*, we could argue that there are more than these six. There is an exhortation in the third degree beginning ...

Voice 2 *Now that you have taken the SO of a MM, you are entitled to demand that last and greatest trial ...*

Voice 1 ... which reviews the moral instructions and charges previously laid on the Brother being raised. If we also remember the meaning of the word *charge* as *to lay a command or injunction upon*, you might argue that the three addresses following the installation of a new Master, could also be included in our list. They charge the Master, the Wardens and the brethren with specific duties.

Voice 2 So there are at least 10 Charges concerning moral conduct, within Craft Masonry - a *peculiar system of morality* after all. No wonder we are so good! I am reminded of a tale that our good friend and brother Leslie once told us at the festive board. Bro. Leslie was a policeman and he claims he once arrested a villain who, guessing that Leslie was on the square, tried to curry favour by asking if he could, *retire to restore his personal comforts*, to which Leslie replied, *By all means, and on your return, I shall direct your attention to an ancient Charge!* The old jokes are the best ones, brethren!

Voice 1 We often refer to these charges as *Antient*. Not all of them are very ancient, it turns out, but the charge after initiation does go back a long way. The late W. Bro. Harry Carr, one of the most eminent of Masonic historians, quotes a beautiful version of this charge from Smith's *Pocket Companion* published in 1735. It starts:

You are now admitted by the unanimous consent of our Lodge, a Fellow of our most Antient and Honourable Society ...

Voice 2 Let's read this charge together. Earlier, we handed out some **blue cards**, numbered 1 through 6. The idea is that our Master reads card number 1 and the other brethren with blue cards follow on, reading in turn card number 2, number 3 and so on until card number 6 which is the last one. Worshipful Master, will you start us off please?

Blue 1 You are now admitted by the unanimous consent of our lodge, a fellow of our most antient and honourable society: antient, as having subsisted from times immemorial, and honourable, as tending in every particular to render a man so, that will be but conformable to its glorious precepts. The greatest Monarchs in all ages, as well of Asia and Africa as of Europe, have been encouragers of the royal art and many of them have presided as Grand Masters over the Masons in their respective territories, not thinking it any lessening to their imperial dignities to level themselves with their brethren in Masonry, and to act as they did.

Voice 2 ensures that the next brother follows on.

Blue 2 The World's Great Architect is our supreme master, and the unerring rule he has given us is that by which we work. Religious disputes are never suffered in the Lodge; for as Masons, we only pursue the universal religion of the religion of nature. This is the cement which unites men of the most different principles in one sacred band, and brings together those who were the most distant from one another.

Blue 3 There are three general heads of duty which Masons ought always to inculcate: to God, our neighbours and ourselves.

Voice 2 interrupts here and says, 'To order brethren.'

To God, in never mentioning his name but with that reverential awe which becomes a creature to bear to his creator, and to look upon him always as the *summum bonum* which we came into the world to enjoy; and according to that view to regulate our pursuits.

Voice 2 interrupts here and says, 'Please be seated brethren.'

Blue 4 To our neighbours, in acting upon the square, or doing as we would be done by. To ourselves, in avoiding all intemperances and excesses whereby we may be rendered incapable of following our work, or led into behaviour unbecoming our laudable profession, and in always keeping within due bounds and free from all pollution. In the State, a Mason is to behave as a peaceable and dutiful subject, conforming cheerfully to the government under which he lives. He is to pay a due deference to his superiors, and from his inferiors, he is rather to receive honour with some reluctance, than to extort it. He is to be a man of benevolence and charity, not sitting down contented while his fellow creatures, but much more his brethren, are in want, when it is in his power (without prejudicing himself or family) to relieve them.

Blue 5 In the Lodge, he is to behave with all due decorum, lest the beauty and harmony thereof should be disturbed and broke. He is to be obedient to the Master and presiding officers, and to apply himself closely to the business of Masonry, that he may sooner become a proficient therein, both for his own credit and for that of the lodge. He is not to neglect his own necessary avocations for the sake of Masonry, nor to involve himself in quarrels with those who through ignorance may speak evil of, or ridicule, it.

Blue 6 He is to be a lover of the arts and sciences, and to take all opportunities of improving himself therein. If he recommends a friend to be made a Mason, he must vouch him to be such as he really believes will conform to the aforesaid duties, lest by his misconduct at any time, the lodge should pass under some evil imputations. Nothing can prove more shocking to all faithful Masons, than to see any of the brethren profane or break through the sacred rules of their order, and such as can do it, they wish had never been admitted.

Voice 2 Thank you brethren. That was beautifully done.

Voice 1 This version of the very important charge after initiation was published more than 250 years ago but most of it is familiar to us today. However, it does not appear in any of the early exposures and may not have formed part of 18th century ritual.

Voice 2 None of the other charges appear either. There is no charge, in any of the exposures - in or after - the first, second degree or third degree.

- Voice 1 After Smith's 1735 *Pocket Companion*, we wait for William Preston's 1772 *Illustrations of Masonry*, for another mention of the first degree charge. Even here, the charge is only described, not given in full, and there is nothing in Preston's writings to indicate a second or third degree charge. These charges must be 19th century accretions to the body of the ritual. Nevertheless, what we do find in Preston is the beginning of what we might consider an eleventh charge, the *Long Closing*.
- Voice 2 (*Pause and look around.*) Some brethren have not heard of the *Long Closing*? I am not surprised. As I understand it, it is not common outside Taylor's working. With the Worshipful Master's permission, I shall give it at the end of the meeting. So the charges as we know them are not very ancient at all?
- Voice 1 It seems not but there is something which is really ancient. The 1762 exposure *Shibboleth* mentions some *most important charges* which existed in *olden times*, one of which runs:
- Voice 2 *That no Mason shall be a common Gamester, to the disgrace of his Craft, or a Sycophant, Parasite or Pimp.*
- Voice 1 The author of *Shibboleth* goes on to say that in the reign of King Edward III,- these charges were revised. The first of the revised charges reads, he says:
- Voice 2 *That hereafter, at the admission of a brother, the constitutions, charges and monitions should be read by the master or warden.*
- Voice 1 The author is not referring to the ancient charges that we use but to what today are known as the *Old Charges*.
- Voice 2 Another set of charges? We are up to a dozen then.
- Voice 1 Yes, indeed. The *Old Charges* or *Ancient Constitutions*, as they are often known, are the oldest element in Masonry and the strongest link that we have to our operative brethren. In his 1986 Prestonian Lecture,- Bro. Wallace McLeod, who has studied the *Old Charges* in great detail, says that:
- Voice 2 *Texts of 113 copies of the Old Charges have come down to us, and there are references to fourteen more that are now lost.* What were they used for?
- Voice 1 In the early days of speculative Masonry, copies were made for initiates and given to them after the ceremony. One copy, known as the *Sloane Manuscript*, was written on 16 October 1646 at Warrington in Lancashire, for the initiation of Elias Ashmole, after whom the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford is named. It also seems that copies of the *Old Charges* acted like warrants of constitution; as if the Lodge was not considered regular unless a copy was to hand.
- Voice 2 So, they were really important,?
- Voice 1 Yes, certainly up to the middle of the 18th century.
- Voice 2 What was in them?
- Voice 1 They begin with an invocation to the *Father of Heaven* and describe the seven liberal sciences, one of which is Geometry which they treat as synonymous with Masonry. They give a history of the art, from Noah's Flood, through Tubal-cain, Nimrod,- Abraham and his student Euclid.
- Voice 2 Accuracy in history does seem to be their strong point!
- Voice 1 From Euclid the history proceeds to David, Solomon, St Alban in England and then to King Athelstan and his son Edwin, who is said to have called a great assembly of Masons in 930 AD. They give a list of regulations: some on how a Master Mason must administer the trade, *the charges singular*, and others on general behaviour, *the charges general*.
- Voice 2 It may come as some surprise to the brethren that King Athelstan plays such a major part. I doubt that many Masons would have heard of him.

Voice 1 He was certainly famous in the middle ages. Athelstan was the grandson of King Alfred the Great; born in 895, he ruled from 924 to 939 and was the first genuine King of England. He managed to bring together the English of Wessex and Mercia, the Britons of Cornwall, the Danes of York, the Anglo-Danes of the Danelaw and the Norsemen to form England for the first time. If that were not enough, the Welsh and Scottish Kings acknowledged his authority and he used family marriages to create alliances with France and Germany.

Voice 2 But most of all, he was celebrated as a Godly King:

Voice 1 *Rex pius Aethelstan, patulo famosus in orbe
cuius ubique uiget gloria lausque manet*

(Voice 1 continues reading quietly while Voice 2 begins to read normally to give the effect of 'simultaneous translation'.)

Voice 2 (audibly)

Holy King Athelstan, renowned throughout the wide world whose esteem flourishes and whose honour endures everywhere, whom God set as king over the English, sustained by the foundation of the throne, and as leader of his earthly forces. Whosoever you are who look into this book abounding in love, shining with light, read its excellent divine doctrines which the king, filled with the holy spirit adorned with golden headings and places set with jewels and which, in his manner, he gladly dedicated to Christ Church and joyously made it accessible to sacred learning. He also embellished it by adorning its covers with patterned jewels resplendent as if with various flowers. Whosoever thirsts to drink from streams of learning, let him come. Let him, bearing sweet honey, discover these waters.

Voice 1 (quietly)

quem Deus Angligensis solii fundamine nixum
quisquis amore fluens rutilans hoc luce volumen
perspicis, eximia dogmata sacra lege -
quod rex aureolis sacro spiramine fusus
ornauit titulis gemmigerisque locis
quodque libens Christi ecclesiae de more dicauit
atque agiae sophiae nobilitauit ouans
hoc quoque scematicis ornarier ora lapillis
auxit ubique micans floribus ut uariis
quisque sitit ueniat cupiens haurire flunta
dulcia mella gerens inueniat latices.-

Voice 1 Historical accuracy is not the strong point of the *Old Charges*. Athelstan did not have a son called Edwin and it is most unlikely that there was a gathering of Masons in York in his time. Nevertheless, Athelstan was clearly a mighty king.

Voice 2 Wasn't he credited with building churches and cathedrals? He must have been very popular with our operative brethren if so.

Voice 1 Athelstan was more a warrior and administrator than a builder. His greatest achievements were the unification of England, the establishment of legal codes and the regulation of coinage.-

Voice 2 But back to the *Old Charges*. Do we have a version from Athelstan's time?

Voice 1 No, the oldest version we have is the *Regius Poem* from 1390, 450 years after Athelstan.

Voice 2 Perhaps you might read some of this.

Voice 1 Of course,

A good wif was there of biside Bathe

But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe

Voice 2 (*interrupts*) Pardon!

Voice 1 Oh! I am sorry! That was not the *Regius Poem* but the *Wife of Bath's Tale* from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written at much the same time. Both are products of the great flowering of the English language, which included John Wycliffe's bible.-

Voice 2 So brethren, listen to the *Regius Poem*. It is in English but does not sound like it.-

Voice 1 Whose wol bothe well rede and loke
He may find write in olde boke
Of grete Lordys and eke ladysse
That hade mony children y-fere y-wysse.-

Voice 2 What does that mean?

Voice 1 It starts by saying that those who are willing to look will find stories in old books of great lords and ladies who had many children and no way of supporting them. It goes on to say that they sought a career for their children that *they might get their living thereby, both well and honestly in full security*.

Voice 2 In 1390, they sent them off to be trained as masons? It's a nice thought. The poem goes on to talk about Euclid does it not?

Voice 1 This grete clerkys name wes clept Euclyde
His name hyt spradde ful wondur wide.

Voice 2 According to the *Regius Poem*, Euclid created the science of masonry and also set out the rules of the trade - in a way that sounds familiar to us today.

Voice 1 Bet this grete clerke more ordent he,
To him that was herre in this degre,
That he shulde teche the symplyst of wytte,
In that onest craft to be parfytte,
And so vchon schulle techyn othur,
And love togedur as systur and brothur.

This great writer ordered that the skilled Mason should enable others to become perfect in the honest craft; each should teach another and so live lovingly together as sister and brother.

Voice 2 So, according to the poem, Euclid- laid that foundation stone of Masonry which forms the very strength of our order today - that no one should be called anything other than Brother and all Brothers should be equal:

Voice 1 *For cause they come of ladies burthe.*

Voice 2 It is strangely moving that the very basis of Freemasonry, Brotherly Love, was so beautifully presented in this poem, written over 600 years ago.

Voice 1 The format of the later versions of the Old Charges is different from the *Regius Poem*. The later versions stem from a version known as *the lost original* which was written about 1550. This lost original was recreated by Bro. Wallace McLeod.

Voice 2 So let's read it together. Earlier we handed out some green cards with numbers on them. As before, our Worshipful Master will commence with card number one, then the Brother with card number two and so on until we reach the last card, number nine. Green cards only please. Good? Off we go!

Green 1 The first charge is that ye shall be true men to God and the Holy Church; and that ye use no error or heresy, by your understanding or by discreet or wise men's teaching.

Green 2 And also that ye shall be true liege men to the King without treason or falsehood; and that ye know no treason or treachery, but that ye amend it if ye may, or else warn the King or his council thereof.

Green 3 And also that ye shall be true each to one another; that is to say, to every Master and

Fellow of the Craft of Masonry that be Masons allowed, ye shall do to them as ye would they should do to you.

Green 4 And also that every Mason keep true counsel of lodge and of chamber, and all other counsel that ought to be kept by the way of Masonry.

Green 5 And also that no Mason shall be a thief or a thief's fere,- as far forth as he may know.

Green 6 And also that ye shall be true to the lord and master that you serve, and truly to see to his profit and advantage.

Green 7 And also that you call Masons your Fellows or Brethren, and no other foul name; nor you shall take not your Fellow's wife in villainy, nor desire ungodly his daughter nor his servant.

Green 8 And also that ye pay truly for your meat and drink where you go to board.

Green 9 And also ye shall do no villainy in that house whereby the Craft be slandered.

Voice 2 Thankyou brethren. So what happened to the *Old Charges*?

Voice 1 Once Grand Lodge appeared, a copy was no longer necessary to prove regularity. Because so much of them was fantastical and so much of them concerned trade regulations no longer relevant, the essence of the Old Charges was re-written to become what we call the *Ancient Charges* today.

Voice 2 The 12 sets of charges that we have mentioned. The ones that are not really ancient at all.

Voice 1 Right. However, if you delve into the current *Book of Constitutions*, around page 143 you will find something never used in modern ritual:

Voice 2 *The Charges of a Free-Mason extracted from the antient records of lodges beyond (the) sea and those in England, Scotland and Ireland, for the use of lodges to be read at the making of new brethren or when the Master shall order it.*

Voice 1 These are the very old *Charges General* and are well worth reading. Perhaps, Bro. Secretary, you would be good enough to read an extract from Section Five?

Sec. *The most expert of the fellow craftsmen- shall be chosen or appointed the master or overseer of the lord's work; who is to be called Master by those that work under him. The Craftsmen are to avoid all ill language, and to call each other by no disobliging name, but brother or fellow, and to behave courteously within and without the lodge.*

Voice 1 Thank you Bro. Secretary. So, the message of Masonry is the same, whether the words are from the *Regius Poem* of 1390, the 1550 lost original or the *Book of Constitutions* of today. Saving your presence WM and Grand Officers, in the words of the Long Working Tools in the second degree:

... *yet ought no eminence of situation cause us to forget that we are Brothers and that he who is on the lowest spoke of fortune's wheel is equally entitled to our regard.*

Voice 2 Those words are still the moral basis of our Fraternity. After all, brethren: *(moves centre of Lodge and speaks from memory)*

Our order, being founded on the purest principles of piety and virtue, should teach us to measure our actions by the rules of rectitude, square our conduct by the principles of morality and guide our conversations, aye, even our very thoughts within the compass of propriety. Hence we learn to be meek, humble and resigned; to moderate those passions, the excess of which deforms and disorders the very soul; to be faithful to our God, our country and our laws.

Voice 1 Come brethren, speak the words with us. Let us say them all together in a chorus of Masonry. *(Voice 1 & 2 read leading all those brethren who can speak from memory.)*

All In like manner, our Order should create within our hearts, the amiable sentiments of

honour, truth and virtue; it should lead us to shed a tear of sympathy o'er the failings of a Brother and to pour the healing balm of consolation into the wounds of the afflicted. Then the Brother who has thus far discharged his duties as a Freemason may patiently await his dying throb, that awful change which we must all experience when the soul takes wing through that boundless and unexplored expanse, and may the GAOTU then say, 'It is well finished,' and admit us to the Grand Lodge above where the divisions of time shall cease, and a glorious eternity burst open to our view. Such, my brethren, are the true principles of Freemasonry, such, the beautiful tenets of the Craft, and may they be transmitted, pure and unsullied, through our respective Lodges, from generation to generation.

Voice 1 Thank you brethren. Beautiful words - but perhaps they lack the immediacy of the old charges:

Voice 2 *That no Mason shall be a common Gamester, a Sycophant, Parasite or Pimp.*

Voice 1 We thank you for your attention.