

History of the Apron

from an article by Bro. F.R. Worts, M.A., P.A.G.D.C.
(On website of Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon)

There can be no doubt that the Masonic apron has been developed from the apron worn by operative masons in the middle ages. The few examples surviving show that the operative apron was fashioned from the skin of an animal, most probably a sheep. It was large enough to cover the wearer from chest to ankles, and its fall was held by a leather thong which passed round the neck. From each side a thong, firmly stitched, enabled the mason to tie the apron round his waist, and the tied bow tended to fall as end-strings. The use of this rough apron continued for many centuries; the woven apron used by modern masons is comparatively late; it came into use in the eighteenth century.

From what illustrations we have it is clear that the early Masons continued to wear the long apron in style with their early operative counterparts. Some Masons experimented with linen aprons while still maintaining the longer form of a apron adding a button hole in the flap in order to attach the apron flap to their waistcoat.

Later the aprons became shorter in length but many men still experimented with various materials from velvet, to silk, satin, linen and even some chamois-leather. And the shape of the aprons varied with the flap being cut as a circular design and some lower sections also cut to form circular borders.

Next these plain aprons began to appear with painted and embroidered symbols on them. Ryland¹ notes:-

"By 1784 the apron was greatly reduced in size . . . for a long time there had been considerable laxity . . . and no definition laid down as to uniformity. So long as the material was white the face might be decorated with any number of Masonic symbols or other symbols without infringing the law, provided always that it did not interfere with the privileges of the Grand Officers, who used a purple edging to their aprons . . . The size had grown smaller and smaller."

Among the "Antients" - Masons from York - it became a common practice to draw or paint on their aprons the coat of arms of their own Grand Lodge, in the main that those Masons adopted the fashions of the "Moderns" - Masons from London; indeed they indulged their fancy even more freely than their rivals in the choice and use of embellishments. On 2nd September, 1772, the Grand Lodge of All England passed the following resolution: -

"It having been represented to the G.L. that several Brethren have lately appeared in public, with gold lace and fringe, together with many devices on their aprons, &c., which was thought inconsistent with the dignity, propriety and ancient custom of the Craft. Resolved and Ordered That for the future, no Brethren, Grand Officers excepted, shall appear with gold lace, gold fringe, gold embroidery, or anything resembling gold, on their Masonic clothing or ornaments." (Ahiman Rezon, 1807, pp. 90-91.)

This was simply a ban on gold decoration; there was still no attempt to prescribe uniformity of design.

Originally the blue was assigned to Grand Lodge Officers only. Later Grand Lodge officers were lining their aprons with purple and the light blue fell out of vogue. So Masons not Grand Lodge

Officers began to use the blue for their aprons instead of the plain white aprons they were wearing.

By 1814 after the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England, a uniform design was created.

Entered Apprentice:- A plain white lamb skin 14 to 16 inches wide, 12 to 14 inches deep, square at bottom, and without ornament; white strings.

Fellow Craft:- A plain white lamb skin, similar to the, entered apprentice with the addition only of two sky-blue rosettes at the bottom.

(Ancient Ritual Lodges wear the plain white apron in two styles to identify Entered Apprentice and Fellow Crafts.

Master Mason:- The same, with sky-blue lining and edging, 1 1/2 inch deep, and an additional rosette on the fall or flap. The only other ornament permitted on aprons of Master Masons is a patch identifying the lodge from which the Mason comes.

The tassels were probably a stylized form of the tassels from the waist ties of the earlier Masons' aprons. These were originally tied in a bow and fell down the front of the apron. Rosettes were ornamental only as were the perpendicular and horizontal lines of the two right angles on the Master or Past Master aprons.

Blue has become the symbol of knowledge. (Some universities use blue as the prominent colour of academic hoods of those receiving a Bachelor of Education degree. Deeper blue is used to identify a Past Grand Lodge officer with again a patch identifying the position they held. Grand Lodge Officers all wear dark blue aprons with gold braid.

1. In 1892 Bro. W. H. Rylands wrote his paper on the Masonic Apron (*Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* vol. v) . An important essay with no less than 83 plates or drawings illustrating the history of the Masonic apron, it has been largely used as the basis of the historical portion of this paper.