

FREEMASONS' BOOK OF THE ROYAL ARCH

by Bernard E. Jones

Some of the old chapters had, and probably may still have, tracing-boards, the idea of which came straight from Craft usage. In the old Irish chapters were boards depicting the symbols not only of the Royal Arch, but of the Craft and a number of additional degrees.

It is thought that the oldest Irish floor-cloth (and the floor-cloth was in effect a tracing-board) is owned by Lurgan Lodge, then No. 394, Irish Constitution, and its chief feature is an arch. An engraved plate dated 1755 represents a very early instance of a tracing-board displaying a Royal Arch idea. It is a curious illustration showing an arch in three stages and an indented border on a tracing-board which is in course of use by the architect.

In the Chapter of Fortitude, Edgbaston, No. 43, is a painted floor-cloth, not thought to be older than 1840, showing the signs of the zodiac, while in the Chapter of Sincerity, Taunton, No. 261, is a tracing-board, originally a cloth, dating back to the early 1800's, and displaying as one of its emblems the mariner's compass. This last board, illustrated in a full-page plate in the author's earlier volume, is quite outstanding; within an indented border it includes a main arch supported by two great pillars, and inside that is seen a succession of three arches, with the Sojourners at work.

A Third-degree tracing-board belonging to the Britannia Lodge, No.139, Sheffield (started as an 'Antients' Lodge in 1761), presumably dating back to not earlier than the 1840's, displays the clearest possible evidence of association with the Royal Arch. Within an outline of a coffin (surmounted by a sprig of acacia) are a few bold Craft emblems and three pentalphas, those last probably an indication of the survival of the 'Antients' feeling originally in the lodge.

On old Craft tracing-boards, banners, jewels, etc., a hand holding a plumb-line is a symbol often indicating a Royal Arch connection. It comes from the 'Antients' ceremony of Installation, and dates back to the time when the Past Master's 'Degree' was considered an essential step to the Royal Arch. It is a matter for conjecture whether anything was contributed to this particular symbolism as a result of Galileo Galilee's investigation of the properties of the pendulum, but it is impossible to contemplate the well-known statue of the great physicist holding a line with pendulum bob without instantly calling to mind the hand-and-plumb-line symbol to be seen on numberless tracing-boards and jewels of other days. An excellent example of a design in which the same symbol occurs is on a Royal Arch banner (1780-1800) in the Masonic museum at Canterbury. The anchor, a device common on old tracing-boards and jewels, was (and still is) a Christian emblem of eternal life, particularly so when combined with the cross.

The group of seven stars so commonly seen on old tracing-boards, jewels, and the like is inspired by the texts in Revelations i, 16; ii, i; and iii, i, these speaking of the seven stars in the hand of Christ.

THE ROYAL ARCH FLOOR-CLOTH

Why no Royal Arch Tracing-Board? Taken from AQCQ.

What is the origin of the design of floor cloth used by English Royal Arch Chapters and why does a Tracing Board not feature in Chapter working?

A. It is suggested that the floor cloth used in English Royal Arch Chapters is a product of Masonic furnishers, dating in its present form from the latter part of last century and inspired, perhaps, by engravings by John Harris (1791 - 1873) the noted designer of Tracing Boards. It is intended to be a conventional representation in the Masonic idiom of the four walls of a vault, seen in perspective, obliquely from above, with the Pedestal in the centre - obliquely, in order to display the front of the Pedestal to view. It seems as if some sort of floor cloth must have been in use in the Grand Chapter in London from its early days, for by 1784 it was necessary to have a new one. The Grand Chapter Committee decided on 27 February, 1784: "That there be a new checkered painted cloth and a new Pedestal and Letters provided", but there is no means of knowing what form this "checkered cloth" took. The premier Grand Lodge on its part did not, apparently, look with favor on the type of painted cloth which was the forerunner of the modern Craft Tracing Board.

The Minutes of the Quarterly Communication of 23 November, 1796 record that: "An Hieroglyphically Banner or Painting of a Lodge was by direction of the Committee of Charity laid before the Grand Lodge for its inspection when the Grand Lodge disapproving thereof. It was ordered to be immediately removed out of the Hall."

Many early Tracing Board designs have a mosaic pavement drawn in perspective (several examples are illustrated in E. H. Dring's monumental paper on the subject in A.Q.C.Q. vol. xxix), and the design of the Royal Arch floor cloth commonly used today may be an extension or application of this treatment. Harris's Royal Arch engravings were first advertised by him in 1836 as: "New Designs, illustrative of the Royal Arch, on two boards for instruction in that degree . They were taken up by Robert Spencer who eventually acquired the copyright of Harris's Craft and Royal Arch designs, and advertised the latter, like the Craft designs, as "Tracing Boards". The set of two so-called Tracing Boards for the Royal Arch designed by Harris do not take the form of the present floor cloth but are pictorial representations of (1) the legend of the Degree, and (2) the layout of the Chapter. They were published as plain or colored engravings, approximately 9" x 5", often bound into a folder with a clasp. The engraving of later date reproduced on p. 285 of this Volume appears to have been based on this Harris set and it combines the two designs into one. Harris's Royal Arch (and Craft) Tracing Boards were, together with a Royal Arch floor cloth etc., listed in catalogues issued by "Spencer's Masonic Depot" from the 1870s on. The second "board" was illustrated - although not described as such - in the 1880 catalogue (Freemasonry: its Outward and Visible Signs, Revised Edition) which claimed that "The plate shows the arrangement of a Chapter approved by H.R.H. the Duke of Sussex whilst Grand Z." but this statement must be treated with reserve. Of the floor cloth advertised in the same catalogue it is said: "The site for a Pedestal is placed nearer to the Principal's throne than is shown in the plate and the checkered pavement points to it from all sides in diminishing perspective giving as idea of greater distance." Harris's Royal Arch Tracing Boards do not appear to have found acceptance in the way that did his Craft designs.

There was no place in the ritual for their use and, in any case, a Tracing Board in the Royal Arch would appear to be superfluous since the layout of an English Chapter in itself forms a three- dimensional Tracing Board illustrative of the traditional history and legend of the Degree. Examples of Royal Arch Tracing Boards do occur, but in isolated instances only and it is probably true to say that such Boards have never had any wide currency in the English Constitution.

The Grand Lodge Library and Museum possesses a large Royal Arch Tracing Cloth, once the property of the Royal Gallovidian chapter (an English Chapter which met in Kirkcudbright, Scotland, from 1810 to 1861) and one of the set of three Tracing Boards on loan to the Museum from the Mount Lebanon Lodge, No. 73, is undoubtedly a Royal Arch Board. A Royal Arch Board belonging to the Chapter of Sincerity, No. 261 Taunton, Somerset, is illustrated in the Transactions of the Somerset Masters Lodge, No. 3746, Vol. V,