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MASONS' MARKS

BY

F. W. BROOKS

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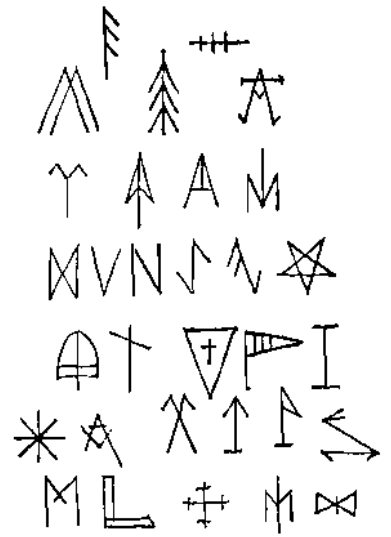
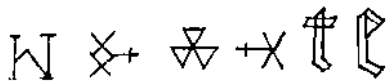
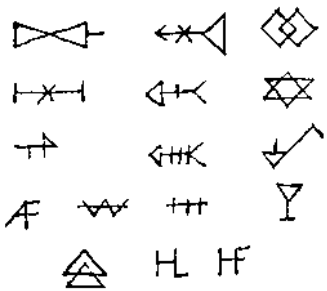


From the North Transept and the East Aisle
13th Century



From St. Stephen's Chapel, the Lady Chapel
and the North Aisle, early 15th Century



Marks used by masons employed by the
Dean and Chapter of York, 1936-37

Masons' Marks in York Minster

(by kind permission of W. J. Green, Esq.)

MASONS' MARKS

If anyone goes into an old village church and carefully examines the stonework of walls, piers and arches, it is almost certain that, before long, he will find some stones bearing curious marks. It may be a simple cross X, it may be a sort of W, it may take one of scores of forms, but it will almost certainly be some fairly straightforward geometric combination of straight lines. Curves are seldom used. Some of these marks appear to be scratched with a knife, others are quite obviously made with a chisel. These marks are masons' marks, and it is highly desirable that we should know more about them.

There has been, in the past, much discussion about the significance of these marks. Various theories have been put forward, that they were the marks of that mythical body the Comacini, Lombardic masons from Lake Como, or that they are in some way connected with the esoteric mysteries of institutional Freemasonry. But most modern scholars are now agreed that the masons' mark, like the not dissimilar merchants' mark, was used as a sign of ownership, or responsibility for work done. The mason who put his mark on a stone admitted or claimed that he had worked the stone.

To understand why this was necessary, we must glance, for a moment, at the organisation of the building industry in the Middle Ages. It is often said, and thought, that monks and priests in those days built their own monasteries and churches. This idea has long been exploded. It is true that a body of monks, or a hermit, might build the first simple building which served as a monastery or church, as happened, for example, at Fountains and Selby Abbey; but such buildings were usually flimsy structures of wattle and mud. When a more permanent stone building was needed, trained and skilled masons had to be called in to build it. A gang of skilled and semi-skilled workers was got together, often, for royal buildings, by a rigorous use of impressment. When the building was finished, the gang broke up, and its members went elsewhere, some here and some there, in search of other work.

For the stonemason's craft was like no other mediæval craft in that it was nomadic and was always, to some extent, organised on capitalistic lines. Let us consider how most industries were organised in the Middle Ages. We know it well enough, for the rules of dozens of craft guilds in scores of towns have survived. Assume a boy wanted to be a saddler. He would be apprenticed to a master saddler and serve his time, learning his trade for seven years or longer. When his time was up, he made his

masterpiece, the saddle which he submitted to the officials of the guild as proof that he had mastered his craft. Then, if he could afford the entrance fee, he applied for membership of the guild, was duly admitted, opened a workshop, bought some leather and began to make saddles which he sold himself at his shop window or in the neighbouring markets. The whole process was in his own hands; he provided the tools, the raw materials and the technical skill, he was his own buyer and salesman. Even if our apprentice could not at once afford to join the guild, he could work for a few years as a journeyman until he had sufficient money to pay his guild fees either in the town in which he had been apprenticed, or in some other town. The former was more probable. He was more likely to get admission to a guild where he was already known to most of the members. The whole process was very intimate and static. More often than not a man was born, apprenticed, became a guild brother, worked at his craft and died within the walls of the same town.

The interesting thing is that it apparently could not apply to the stonemason. The assumption behind the guild system was that there would be sufficient work in a town to keep a certain number of craftsmen employed. Now this is just what did not happen in the freemasons' craft. Even a town like York, near good stone quarries, with its cathedral, many churches, monasteries and the like, to say nothing of guild halls and the Ouse bridge, seems only to have provided regular work for a dozen or so masons. Of course, there were often times when many more masons were employed in York, but this would only last for a year or two whilst some particular building was in hand. Once that was done the gang would break up. Perhaps one or two of the masons would stay in York, but the rest would soon be scattered far and wide. There would, however, be no absolute necessity to travel very far, for if no one town could support many masons, an area could. Consider the amount of building that was going on near York between say 1300 and 1320;—the Minster nave, Beverley nave, the east end of Selby, much of Howden and the nave of St. Mary's Abbey at York, to say nothing of dozens of village churches. Nor was this activity abnormal. Almost any period of twenty years in the Middle Ages would have seen as much.

The problem was how to fit this building activity into the framework of the guild system, the only method of industrial organisation known to the Middle Ages. The mason was on a different footing from the weaver or saddler. His finished product could not be sold at fairs or markets. Nor could it be made in his own shop. It had to be made, and left, where it was wanted. Again, unlike other craftsmen, the mason did not

provide his raw materials, nor for that matter, all his tools. He expected his employer to provide stone and such things as barrows, hods, lifting tackle and perhaps a smith to sharpen scappling axes and chisels. Yet in spite of these difficulties, the masons were organised in guilds. If a boy wished to become a mason, he would be apprenticed to a qualified mason. Even as an apprentice he would probably have to travel a fair amount, going with his master from one job to another. Part of his time he would probably spend at the quarries, for the mason had to learn how to select good stone, and anyhow, stone was often dressed before it left the quarries. In due course, he qualifies as a skilled mason, and here the peculiarities of his craft begin to show themselves. Not for him the solemn ritual of election, guild feast and setting up shop. Ritual there will be, probably solemn admission in the lodge of the building where he is at work, and we may be sure there will be a feast and the drinks will be "on" the new brother; but there will be no setting up a shop. The new mason will be taught various secret signs and pass words by which he can be recognised as a duly qualified mason and it is probable that at this moment he will choose his mark. Armed with this knowledge he will set off in search of work.

Now let us turn to look at the craft from another angle, that of the employer. A parish has decided that the church needs a new aisle, and sufficient funds are in hand to begin work. The first thing to do is to find a master mason, who will set out the foundations, design the building and prepare templates of the various mouldings required for plinths, windows, piers and so forth. How did the churchwardens find their man? Probably by going to the nearest place where building was being done, perhaps a cathedral or abbey, perhaps a castle or another parish church. Judicious enquiry would reveal that William le Masoun was a good man. He would, of course, not be working as a master-mason; it was most unlikely that the churchwardens would be allowed to take away the key man from another building. But there would probably be some mason working at the bench with enough theoretical knowledge to take charge of the new building. A cathedral or abbey would have a permanent master mason chosen with considerable care and well paid, but an ordinary parish could not afford such luxuries.

The first thing the newly appointed master does is to supervise the building of a lodge. This is not mason's work; any sort of rough open shed will suffice. He then goes off to the quarries, probably accompanied by the churchwardens, to see about getting a supply of stone. This will, in due course, be delivered to the lodge where most of the work will be done,

though one or two masons may be sent, from time to time, to the quarry, to dress stone there and thereby save the cost of transporting waste material. If, as often happened, the stone was transported by water, a supplementary lodge might be set up where it was landed.

The next problem that faced the master-mason was recruitment of labour. He needed a few skilled and unskilled workers. The latter he could probably get in the village, but the former would be more difficult to find, though possibly sometimes the master-mason might bring one or two skilled men with him from his last job. How the news that building was being done in some remote village got round is one of the minor mysteries of the Middle Ages, but perhaps more explicable to this generation with its war-time experience of the circulation of rumour, than it was to our fathers. Let us grant, however, that in some fashion our newly admitted apprentice hears that the church at Bainton is building. He packs up his tools, his scappling axe, chisels, square, plumb-line and compasses, and presents himself at the lodge at Bainton, where he asks for work. Now, how is the master-mason to know that the man is a mason and not an impostor? The tools are some guarantee, but the man may have stolen them. Or a genuine mason may have to sell his tools during a spell of unemployment and may come, without tools, to seek work.

It is here that the peculiar organisation of the masons' craft becomes obvious. The mason seeking work will knock at the lodge door in a prescribed way and will know the correct responses to the ritual questions that the master puts to him. If there is no work for him he will get a meal and a bed of sorts in the lodge, and probably some advice as to where there may be a chance of work in the district. So next morning he sets off to the next lodge hoping for better luck there. If there is work the new man is taken on, but the master-mason has still to size up his capacity. He may or may not be competent to tackle the more difficult jobs, to cut an elaborate moulding or still less to carve a grotesque or a gargoyle or corbel. So, at any rate for a time, he will probably be set to do plain walling with perhaps a few simple mouldings and he will be expected to mark his stones so that the master-mason can check his workmanship. That, in brief, is the reason for the masons' mark.

There are certain questions which obviously arise, and the first is whether there was any sort of register of marks. If so, none has survived, and it seems, in any case, unlikely. It is true that the elaborate paraphs or marks of notaries-public were registered but notaries were less nomadic and more important than masons. A forged notarial certificate could cause a lot more trouble than a forged masons' mark. The difficulty about

imagining a central or regional registers of masons' marks is that it would have served no particular purpose. The criterion of a man's right to call himself a mason was his knowledge of the secret ritual of the craft, and no master-mason was likely to want to go miles to find out if the mark claimed by some applicant were genuine or not. After all, masons travelled very extensively. We hear of French masons in England, Hungary, Germany, Italy and Spain, of English masons in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Under these circumstances no register of marks would have served a useful purpose. There is, therefore, a possibility that two masons might use the same mark. But this is remoter than one might think.

Many borough archives contain mediæval documents signed by large numbers of burgesses at a time when most men signed by making a mark. Although out of some fifty marks several may be similar, it is very rare, even in documents like guild rules, which were often signed by many generations of newly admitted brethren, to find two which are absolutely identical. So it is a reasonable assumption that if we find an identical mason's mark in two churches, we are looking at work done by the same man, unless some very obvious discrepancy in date makes it certain that this is impossible.

Another question that arises is why, if every mason marked his stones, we do not find more marks in mediæval buildings. Here, there are two points to be considered. The first is that it is unlikely that all stones were marked. The mark does not seem to have borne any relation to piece work, for the mason was usually paid by the day. Piece work does occur occasionally, but when it does it is more in the nature of a sub-contract to a master-mason who agrees to build a certain part of the building for a given sum. He would probably pay his men by the day. The mark, as we have suggested, was a check of workmanship rather than work done, and it is quite likely that once a man's capacity was recognised, he ceased to mark his stones, except perhaps for very elaborate mouldings on which he would make his mark with a certain pride of craftsmanship. When there are only a few regular masons on a building, we find far fewer marks than we do in places like Eton College, which we know was built by a large number of impressed workmen. Another reason for the absence of marks is that stones may have been checked before they were built in. It was not necessary to mark the face of a stone which was exposed, and as every stone has six faces, the odds are six to one against the mark being visible even when the stone is marked. Often, too, the original face of the stone has weathered away, or been refaced in cleaning or restoring the stonework. So, for a variety of

reasons, the number of masons' marks to be found in a building is less than one might suppose.

Of the value of a study of masons' marks there can be no doubt. They enable us to trace the movements of individual masons, to estimate the influence of the greater buildings of the district on the smaller, when we see how the gang of masons employed on a building campaign in a cathedral or an abbey scatter over half a county. Often, too, they help to fix the date of a small village church by relating its building to that of some larger and better documented edifice. They give a certain degree of presumptive evidence for the designers of windows and piers. Those who are curious to know how masons' marks can be used to add preciseness and vividness to our knowledge of mediæval life should read the fascinating chapters in the late Dr. G. G. Coulton's "Art and the Reformation," in which he traces the migration of a group of masons who had worked together at King's Lynn. There is no doubt that a complete repertory of masons' marks for a county or even a score of neighbouring churches would be a working tool of immense value to the county historian and archæologist.

The collection of marks is one of the ways in which members of archæological or local history societies can do most useful work. It requires no special knowledge or equipment other than a pair of sharp eyes and possibly a pair of field glasses for the higher parts of the building. But it does involve almost a stone-by-stone inspection, and takes up more time than a visiting archæologist can usually afford. Also, it involves going into parts of the church, such as tower stairs, ringers' chambers and bell chambers which are not usually open to the casual visitor. Thus, whilst an experienced antiquarian can generally find a few masons' marks in a visit to a church, he would be the last to claim that he had found more than a few of the more obvious ones. If a local history society wishes to make a collection of masons' marks it is highly desirable that the scheme should be carefully worked out in advance. It is useful to file sheets of masons' marks under parishes, but the system should go further than this, to enable the sheets bearing a particular mark to be extracted. A set of punched cards is therefore desirable.

Is it possible to work out a system on which cards should be filled in? The most one can suggest is that cards should not only show what marks are in particular buildings, but also exactly where in the building they are to be found. This is important because the marks can then be correlated with the date of the various parts of the building. A village church may well have been built part by part from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century, and a mark in one part may be two hundred

years earlier than one in another. The scheme should therefore show where a mark is to be found.

If all churches had the same plan, it would be possible to issue a stock plan which workers could mark, but the variations of plan are too numerous for this to be workable, though a sketch plan is most useful to the collector of marks in a given church. It is, however, fairly easy to work out a scheme which lends itself to abbreviation. All churches can be divided into a few main parts—tower, aisles, nave, chancel, with the addition of porches and transepts where they occur. The nave, aisles and chancel can be further divided into bays. If the bays are counted from west to east, it becomes a fairly easy matter to fix the position of the mark. Buttresses and piers can also be numbered thus, S B1 would be the westermost buttress on the south side, S P1 the respond pier on the west side of the south arcade, and so on. This is merely a suggestion which I have found useful in noting the position of masons' marks; it could be varied by any society to suit its own convenience. Provided the scheme fixes the position of a mark within reasonably narrow limits, and provides a means of reference to both places and marks, there is no need to lay down hard and fast rules. But it is essential that if a society is making a collection of marks, it should work out some standard scheme and issue the cards to its field workers. Otherwise the information will come in the wildest assortment of scraps of paper.

A few hints to those who collect marks may not be out of place. It is always advisable to look at a building in a definite order. What order is immaterial, so long as one is consistent. One can do the exterior first, beginning at the SW angle of the tower if there is one in the usual position, and work round the building, going east along the south side. This is my own method, but there are sound archæologists who begin with the interior. On the whole, one is less likely to find masons' marks on the weathered stone of the exterior but one may well find mass dials and sometimes compass tests, where a mason has made a series of circles to try out his compasses. These should be noted.

In the interior, marks will be more numerous, in fact, they may be so numerous as to cause trouble. Unfortunately masons were not the only people who made marks in churches. Many a village lad was not content, like Sir Roger de Coverley's truant, "to kick his heels by way of diversion" but whiled away the tedium of a long sermon by marking anything within reach. Fortunately wood is easier to mark than stone, and most people from the Sixteenth Century onwards even if unable to write, seem to have been able to scrawl their initials and usually preferred to do so. It has been said that masons always used a

chisel to make their marks, but this is doubtful. Any mark obviously made with a chisel is, however, likely to be genuine, as chisels are not usually part of the miscellanea in a boy's pocket. It is, however, a good rule to be highly sceptical of any mark within hand reach of a choir boy.

Sometimes one finds genuine mediæval scratched inscriptions, and these can usually be distinguished by the lettering and language. Needless to say, they should always be noted.

Generally speaking, rough walling is not likely to produce masons' marks, and particular attention should be given to more elaborate work. Piers, capitals, window jambs and mullions, and door mouldings are more likely places. If a scaffolding offers a chance of close inspection of the higher parts of the church, the chance should not be neglected; it may enable one to get a really close view of label stops on outer walls or arcades. Incidentally, it is possible that label stops may have a sequence number, usually a Roman numeral. These are not masons' marks, they are position marks, to indicate to the setter where to put the label stop. One sees them more frequently on the timber framing of half timbered houses.

It is possible, by an elaborate notation system to indicate exactly where a particular mark occurs, but it is doubtful how far it is really worth while to try to indicate more than the bay in which a mark is found. Some indication of the height of a mark above ground level is useful, and this, up to fifteen or sixteen feet can be done with a light measuring rod. An old fishing rod is light and portable and can be chalk-marked in feet. Naturally, if a collector of masons' marks is working as one of a team making a collection for a particular area, he will have to follow the scheme for listing the information which has been agreed upon, but even if he is collecting for his own interest or edification, he will find it useful to work to a system. There are few more annoying experiences than to be perfectly certain one has seen a particular mark in a church and to be quite unable to find it.

If time is short, it is a good idea to draw a rough plan of the church, and put any marks found in the appropriate place on the plan. Lacking an elaborate filing system, the solitary collector will be well advised to jot down the marks he finds in a note-book, followed by a list of the places where he has found them.

There are few archæological hobbies more simple and rewarding than collecting masons' marks. It is, as we have already said, one which demands neither special training nor special equipment, yet he who makes a good collection is adding good worked stones to the temple of historical knowledge.

Hints on Further Reading

The best general account is in G. G. Coulton, "Art and the Reformation" (1928) recently (1959) reprinted as a paper-back. For the general organisation see D. Knoop and G. P. Jones, "The Mediæval Mason" (1933), and L. F. Salzman, "Building in England down to 1540" (1952). This also contains a facsimile of a building contract signed by a mason with his mark.

A number of articles on marks and illustrations of marks have appeared in various local archæological societies' journals, e.g. W. H. Rylands, in "Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire", Vols. VII and VIII (1891-2). For the north of England many marks are given in T. H. Myers "Masons' Marks, ancient and modern, historically considered" (1906).

But the most useful general article is R. H. C. Davis, "Catalogue of Masons' Marks as an aid to architectural history", in Journal of the British Archæological Association, Series III, Vol. 17 (1954).