



# Durham City Freemen



## The Masons' Guild



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## Foreword

A question often asked by the public, “Is a Mason freeman the same as a Freemason?” As both can be called Freemasons, it may be a confusing.

My answer to that is, one actually works with stone (Mason Freeman), whilst the other belongs to a Lodge re-enacting moral ceremonies based on mason’s tools and arts and mysteries (Freemason).

Freemasons are a relatively new organisation. The first Freemasons Grand Lodge in London was inaugurated in 1717. Any linkage to early mason’s lodges prior to this date is purely speculative and the modern freemasons themselves were/are speculative masons and not actual masons.

However, there is no doubt that mason’s lodges must have been used to house a migrant workforce to build the likes of Durham cathedral first started in 1093. One of many monasteries, cathedrals and churches built around Europe and the U.K.

The Durham mason's guild has been in existence much longer than Freemason lodges. A Gild Merchant was granted to Durham by Henry IV (1399 – 1413) to which all of the town’s traders and craftsmen belonged. At one time, as many as 20 guilds existed in Durham. The Society of Rough Masons, Wallers and Slaters, was established in 1411 and it received a charter from the Bishop Hutton of Durham in 1594.

The Guild of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Paviours, Plasterers and Bricklayers was established in the City of Durham in 1594. A rough Mason indicated the person did not necessarily work with dressed stone, whereas as Free Mason would be capable of this form of more precise construction.

One of the oldest forms of masonry was mud and straw bricks as referred to in the Old Testament, chapter Exodus. These bricks were laid in a mud mortar. Cob construction still exists in the UK today derived from a technology devised 5400 years ago. The Mason was in effect a material scientist, choosing the correct type of mud and straw to manufacture a durable product. He also had to have an understanding of structural design, Pythagoras and Euclid to ensure slenderness ratios were not exceeded.

The Mason had to get it right as the building code of Hamurabbi (1755 to 1750 BC) dictated that if the builder constructed a structure that was unsafe and caused a death. The Mason would forfeit his life as a penalty for lack of due diligence.

Between 4000 and 5000 years ago the Egyptians laid stone blocks in Gypsum mortar to construct the pyramids. They knew Gypsum would work well in the dry climate. Not so for more northerly masons. They had to create a lime mortar to construct to withstand the damper colder climate.

The Romans made huge strides in structural design, material science using pozzolanic mortars, that exist to this day. Vitruvius documented the technics devised at that time. The Pantheon is a structural wonder and by adding volcanic ash from Vesuvius, the masons made strong and durable mortar and concrete. We treasure the work of the masons worldwide as they have left their mark, literally with a mason's mark on each stone they made and laid leaving a rich heritage within all developed societies. Durham Cathedral is a perfect example of displaying the geometric, structural and material science derived from the arts and mysteries of the Mason.

Today the value of a country is often assessed by the value of its buildings and infrastructure, which would not be possible without the skill of the modern-day Mason. Thankfully the modern Mason does not need the structural design or material knowledge of their forebears. The Durham guild of masons is a beacon to, the past in our present times.

This work does not purport to be an academic study, but has been created for the general public, with the aim of shedding light on the history of the guilds/companies and sustaining the heritage of Durham City Freeman for future generations. The trade guilds/companies and Freeman held power and influence and did much to shape the city and its heritage for over 300 years.

I hope you find the Mason's Guild booklet both interesting and informative. It may inspire the reader to research further into this fascinating subject area.

*Dr Alan Elliott Richardson. Deputy Warden Mason's Guild.*

## **Acknowledgements**

Grateful thanks to the members of the Freeman for providing the background historical information, in particular Robert Elliott (Mason's Guild). The background research and creation of this booklet could not have been achieved without the support of Francis Gotto from the Palace Green Library and the library staff.

A special thanks to Gary Holliday (Head of Works, Durham Cathedral) and his team of stone masons for their hospitality and conviviality in welcoming our party of freemen to visit the mason's workshop at Durham Cathedral.

Freeman Geoff Kitson provided high quality photographic plates which are used throughout this booklet.

## Introduction

The guilds or companies of Durham City stretch back over 500 years. There were historically 3 main types of guilds in the Middle Ages, Merchant guilds, Craft guilds and Religious guilds, but only the craft guilds have survived. In medieval times groups of skilled craftsmen in the same trade formed themselves into guilds.

A guild would ensure anything made by its members was up to an agreed standard and sold for a fair price.

The first Charter was granted to the citizens in 1179 by Bishop Hugh Pudsey, it granted the citizens to be “free from” in-tolls and out-tolls for their merchandise, hence the term “freemen”. The first recorded Charter granted to a guild was the Weavers and Websters in 1450 and by the late 15th century there were 16 guilds in Durham.

The two primary concerns for the guilds were with the trades, where they endeavoured to maintain standards of workmanship (now known as quality control) and keep a local monopoly of the trade for their own members, by control of the admission of apprentices. An apprentice to a guild was trained by a guild member, who would expect to be paid for this by the boy's parents. An apprentice could live with his master for up to 14 years, but seven years was more common. The ultimate certification as a “master of their craft” was the production of a “masterpiece” at the end of his apprenticeship. Once an apprenticeship was over, the young person became a “journeyman”. A journeyman continued to learn his craft but from different masters and was now paid.

All charters stipulated certain rules known as “Ordinaries”.

Common to all guilds was that, “they must take part in the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi” (1st Thursday after Trinity Sunday). In the City of Durham, the guilds; with their banners displayed, went in procession from the Market Place to Palace Green, where they enacted religious plays.

Historically another Ordinary stated that, “no guild would permit a Scotsman to be an apprentice”.

This is no doubt a reaction to the continuing conflict with Scotland in defined periods in history. Battles between the English and the Scottish people were common place at the time of writing the charters. (Battles: Dunbar 1296, Nevilles Cross 1364, Flodden Field 1513, Culloden 1745)

This ordinary rule regarding Scottish heritage no longer applies.

### **Original 16 Guilds**

The object of Guilds was to maintain high standards of workmanship through apprenticeships, and to engender good fellowship in society and religion. The following 16 Guilds were established in Durham:

Weavers & Websters (1450)

Cordwainers (1458)

Barber Surgeons, Waxmakers, Ropers and Stringers (1468)

Skinners and Glovers (1507)

Butchers (1520)

Goldsmiths, Plumbers, Pewterers, Potters, Painters, Glaziers  
and Tin Plate Workers (1532)

Barkers and Tanners (1547)

Drapers and Tailors (1549)

Merchants incorporating Grocers (1345), Mercers (1393), Salters (1394),  
Ironmongers (1464) and Haberdashers (1467) (1561)

Fullers and Feltmakers (1565)

Curriers and Tallow Chandlers (1570)

Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviours,  
Plasterers and Bricklayers (1594)

Blacksmiths, Lorimers, Locksmiths, Cutlers, Bladesmiths and Girdlers (1610)

Saddlers and Upholsterers (1659)

Carpenters, Joiners, Wheelwrights, Sawyers and Coopers (1661)

Dyers and Listers (1667)

Of the guilds listed above only the Barbers, Butchers, Cordwainers, Curriers, Drapers, Joiners, Masons and Plumbers survive (2024).

## Early Admission as a Freeman

Initially freedom to become a Freeman could only be obtained in two ways either by Servitude or Patrimony.

### Servitude

Servitude was achieved by serving a seven-year apprenticeship (now only three years) under the supervision of a Freeman.

This was usually confirmed in a deed (written contract) by which an apprentice was bound by indenture to a master. Once he had completed his apprenticeship he was admitted to the Company/Guild of his craft.

Example of an admittance record to become a Freeman is shown in Figure 1.

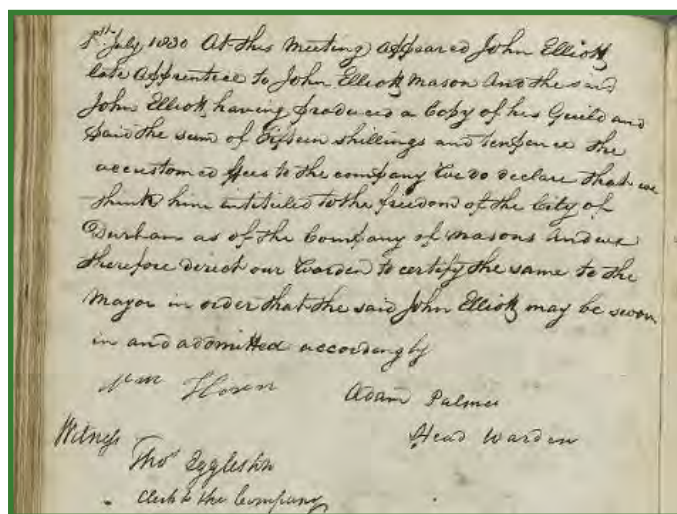


Figure 1 – John Elliott dated 8.07.1830. A record of him being admitted to the Mason's Guild, source Palace Green library online records, "Durham City Guild of Masons record of admissions and Freemen 1829 – 1844 and 1766 1868 – DCG/10/5"

### Patrimony

Patrimony was conferred on the eldest son of a Freeman. Today all sons and since 2010, daughters may also be admitted and their family.



### **Customary Freedom**

Occasionally individuals are invited to become Freeman whose influence on behalf of the guilds is considered having. The servitude and patrimony routes to membership do not apply in this case.

During medieval times and until 1835, the Freeman had authority and power. They were the only citizens that could vote for or be elected as Mayor. The Great Reform Act (1832) and the Municipal Corporation Act (1835) extended electoral franchise, removing the power of the Freeman overnight.

Although stripped of their authority, the Freeman have retained three historical privileges;

- To erect a stall in the marketplace free of charge.
- To graze their livestock on the Sands.
- The use of the Guildhall free of charge.

Today the functions of the Freeman and guilds today are largely ceremonial, notwithstanding their continuing support for the community and charitable causes.

## The Initial Charter

The Masons' Company was formerly the Company of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviers, Plasterers and Bricklayers.

A charter was granted to the Masons' Company by Bishop Hutton in 1594 although it is thought that an earlier charter was granted by Bishop Tunstall. This was confirmed in 1609 by Bishop James and a new charter was granted by Bishop Thomas Morton in 1638.

The rules of the Company were derived therefrom and were particularly concerned with trade protection. Included were the rules of apprenticeship, in that no one could not set up a business, if he had not served a seven year apprenticeship. Wardens were commissioned to inspect all new building in the City to ensure good quality. In 1728 the use of prepared stone by Freemen was restricted to that worked by Freemen.



*Figure 2 – Bishop Thomas Morton's Mason's Charter (1638). Source Palace Green library DCG10/1*

## The History and Influence of the Freemen Masons in Durham and the Surrounding Area

Masons have created stone structures throughout history. The earliest known stone wall is in Theopetra's cave in Greece. This wall dates back around 23,000 years ago.

The Egyptians constructed pyramids from dressed stone from around 2670 BC and Roman structures are still in use today such as the Pont du Gard aqueduct (first century AD) Parthenon 447BC. It is apparent the mason's guild is a relatively modern concept in terms of the overall historical scheme of stone construction.

### **Durham Cathedral**

Edgar Aetheling (Great nephew of Edward the Confessor and claimant to the throne in 1066) fomented an ultimately failed rebellion against William the Conqueror in 1069, this included the attempted takeover of the City of Durham.

William's revenge was to plunder the lands and massacre the peasants, known as the "Harrying of the North". Local men who were William supporters, were killed in the streets of Durham, Earl Robert Cummin was a well-known high-profile victim.

As a result of the Norman Conquest international commerce and movement of skilled labour were stimulated. This demanded regulations of transactions and protection of trade. Henry 1 (1100- 1135) and this saw the introduction of the 'Gild Merchant'. This was an association with judicial powers, initiated by means of a Royal Charter. Durham was granted this power during the reign of Henry 11 (Henry was also known as Henry of Anjou - born March 5, 1133 and King of England 1154).

In order to control the city, in 1072 the Normans set to work building a castle, followed closely by the start of the construction of Durham Cathedral in 1093 AD, all constructed by highly skilled and knowledgeable masons. The structures were sited imposingly on a peninsula in the centre of the town. The impressive dominant structures sent a clear message to the local community and visiting usurpers, that the power was with the Normans.

As the town began to expand during the 12th and 14th centuries, the areas or Boroughs called St Giles, the Bishops Borough and Elvet were developed. The current Bishop, who was given the title Prince Bishop, had been endowed with limited special powers to control the town.

In 1538 Henry VIII destroyed the shrine of St Cuthbert and with it the attraction of a site of pilgrimage. Henry also removed some of the Bishop's powers, however the Bishop in 1565 created a corporation of Mayor and Aldermen of Durham who were drawn from the freemen of the city.

Gilesgate (Gillygate) is one of the oldest streets in Durham. The oldest building is St Giles Church built by Bishop Flambard in 1112 with a hospital alongside. The hospital was burnt down in the 1140s and relocated to Kepier on the banks of the Wear to the north of Gilesgate in 1154 by Bishop Pudsey. Another historic building is the Chapel of St Mary Magdelene the ruins of which are alongside the A690.

Other notable buildings are Bede College 1839, St Hilds College 1845, Gilesgate Manor House owned by Hild and Bede College and the Barracks HQ of the 2nd Durham Militia now known as Vane Tempest Hall.

The governing body of Durham was based upon freemen and the built environment structures that survive to this day are the work of Freemen Masons that also survive as a guild (2024).

## Families of Freemen within the Guild Company

### 19/20th Century Masons - "The Elliotts"

The extensive Elliott family of Gilesgate provide an example of Freemen in the Masons' Company in the 1800 and 1900s.

**John Elliott 1785-1830.** He had seven children including sons John (Freeman 01.07.1830), William, Thomas and Robert. He left a number of properties to his sons. He was responsible for the construction of the vestry of St Mary the Less Church in the South Bailey, Durham.

**John Elliott 1807- 1869.** Apprenticed to John Elliott 1830. He had ten children including sons John, Robert (apprenticed to John Elliott 1855), Joseph (apprenticed to John Elliott 1855)

**John Elliott 1837-1878.** In 1869 he purchased a house and stable yard at 147 Gilesgate (formerly owned by the Ovington family) and replaced it with a Victorian style house.

The auction sale took place at the Britannia Inn Gilligate and the amount paid was £130.

Today the house is still owned and occupied by the Elliott family.

**Edward Dixon Elliott born 1845** had nine children who successively took charge of the building company. Edward was the founder of Dixon Elliott construction company. The main builder's yard and workshops were situated behind the Duff Heap in Gilesgate, and the office was based in Glugarth, (telephone number 174). The final partnership comprising of George Elliott (guild chairman), Ralph Elliott (Warden mason), Madge Elliott (secretary) survived from the 1800s to the 1960s and was finally wound up on March 31, 1967, leaving his mark with the construction of Edward Street, Gilesgate that exists to this day (2024).

**Ralph Elliott born 1890.** Warden of the Mason's guild and partner in the building company, Dixon Elliott. Figure 4 mentions four Elliotts and Thomas Dixon who was Ralph Elliott's (Warden) brother in law by his second marriage to Elizabeth Dixon. Ralph Elliott and Henry Elliott were brothers and the sons of Dixon Elliott. Robert Elliott (Figure 3) was the brother of Dixon Elliott, and their father was John Elliott. It is clear the Elliott family played a significant role as masons in the wider community and masons within the Freemen of Durham City.

(I remember Ralph Elliott being on duty at Easter in a temporary sentry box, taking a few pence off each visitor wishing to access the fairground on the The Sands – Freemen's land).

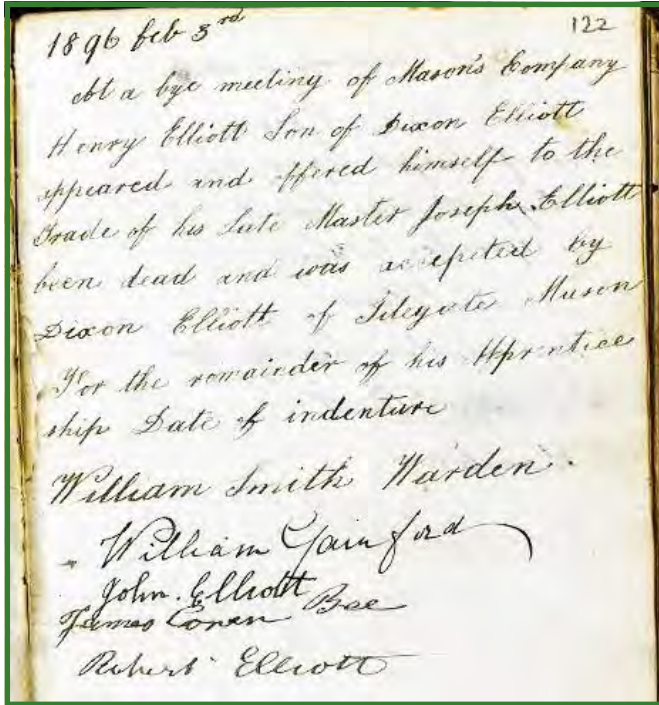


Figure 3 – Henry Elliott dated 3.02.1896. A record of Henry Elliott being taken as an apprentice by Dixon Elliott following the death of his original mason, Joseph Elliott. Source Palace Green library online records, "Durham City Guild of Masons Apprentice register 1682 - 1961 – DCG/10/4"

In the year 2024 there are 27 current members of the mason's guild, of which 12 of these can be traced back to John Elliott (1780 – 1815). Figure 6 displays the Elliott lineage of the family tree linking to current members. Historically there were many more Elliotts who were members of the Durham Guilds, however the family tree only depicts the lineage leading to current day membership.

Figure 4 mentions R Wesencraft (1934). There are two Wesencraft descendants who are current members of the guild in 2024, showing a clear continuation of the organisation.

# MASONS' GUILD

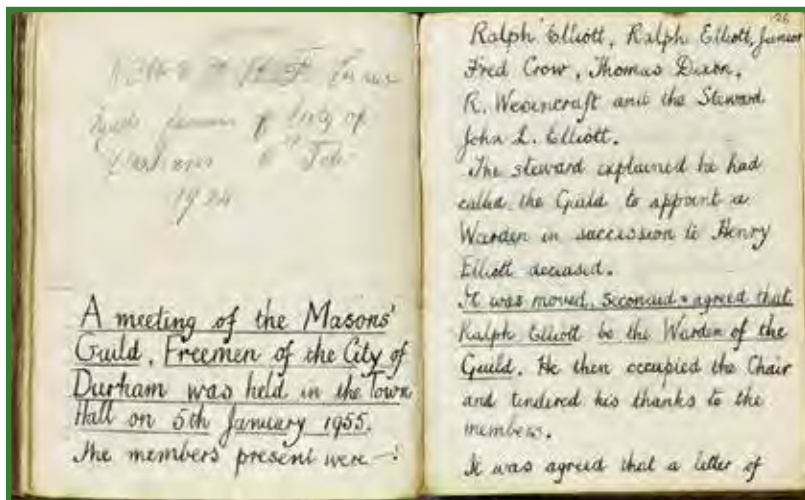


Figure 4 – Ralph Elliott dated 6.02.1934. A record of him being admitted to the role of warden of the Mason's Guild, source Palace Green library online records, "Durham City Guild of Masons Apprentice register 1682 - 1961 – DCG/10/4"

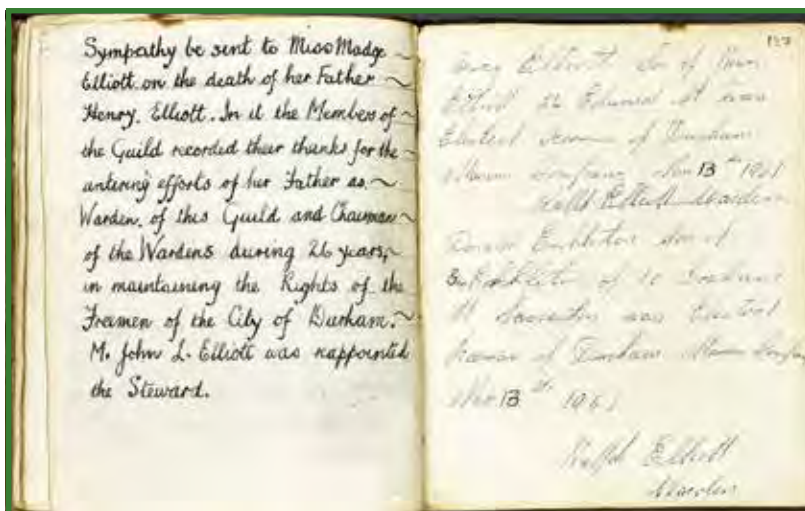


Figure 5 – Ralph Elliott dated 6.02.1934. A record of him being admitted to the role of warden of the Mason's Guild and the death of Henry Elliott, known to his family as Harry. Source Palace Green library online records, "Durham City Guild of Masons Apprentice register 1682 - 1961 – DCG/10/4"

# DURHAM CITY FREEMEN

Mason Freeman “Elliotts” 1776 – 2024

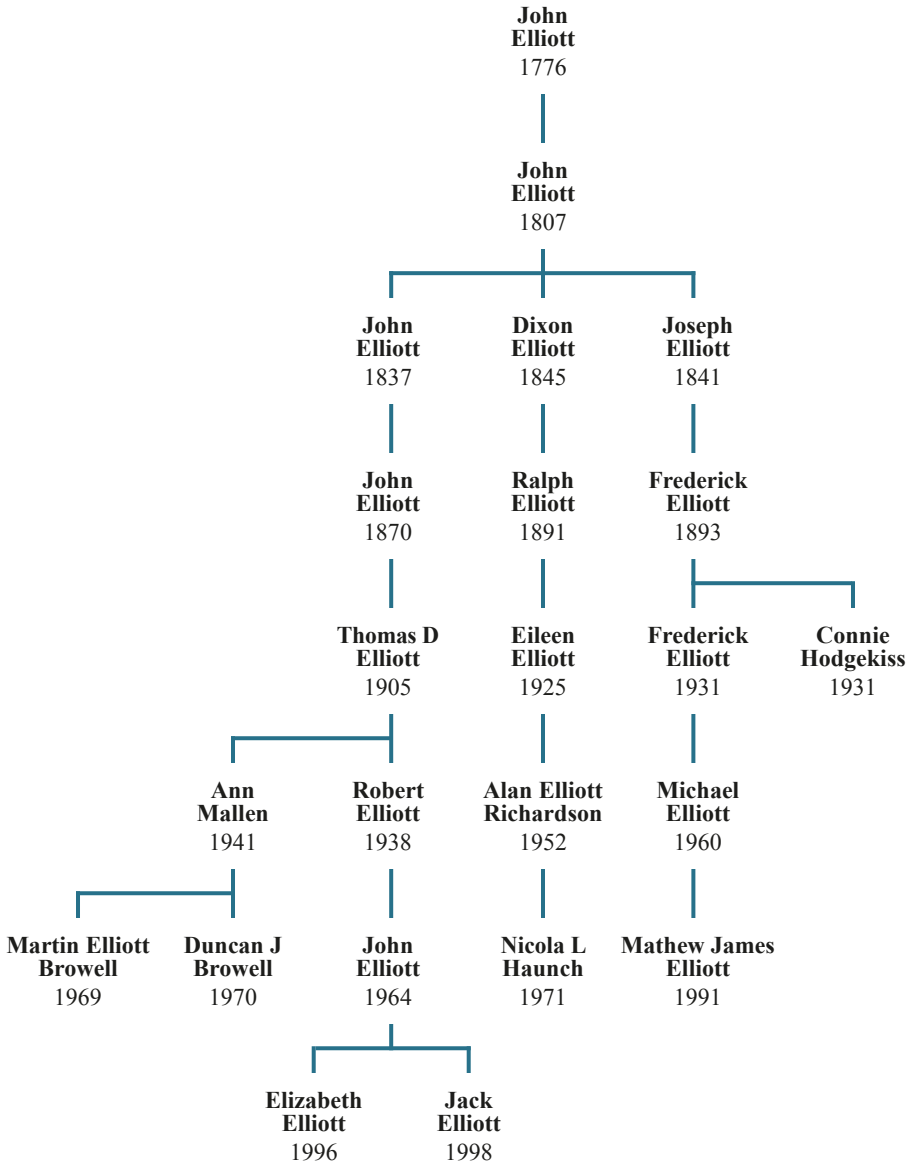


Figure 6 – Elliott Freemason family tree



### Tools and Equipment Used Within the Craft

Where better than to explore the current day craft of the stone mason, than the mason's workshop at Durham Cathedral?

The mason's workshop was the original monk's brew house and steps leading up to the brew pot are original. The surrounding stonework is as old as the cathedral. Beer not only played a significant role in the monk's life but also in the construction process, as topping out ceremonies were a "beer celebration" by making the roof watertight.

Apart from the materials used to make the mason's tools, the tools are in essence the same as used during the construction of the cathedral which started in 1093. The tools are mainly chisels and mallets of varying size and weights. Using tools combined with a straight edge the masons can precisely size and shape stone blocks for use in coursed stonework. It is said their allowable tolerance was 0.5mm over a 300mm length rule. The need for accuracy is paramount given the lime mortar bed is only 4mm thick. This can cause problems in itself as the mortar is an amalgam of three parts sharp sand (maximum particle size 4mm), two parts yellow sand and 1.5 parts of Calbux quick lime.

Figure 7 displays a leather mason's chisel wallet/roll as used throughout the ages of stone masonry. The use of chisels was the only option available at the time of the building of the cathedral. Discussions regarding hand crafting of coursed stone show it remains the favourite process, especially for irregular shapes and decorative masonry. The chisels as displayed from left to right vary in width. The pointed chisel (punch) would be used for rough shaping. The reason for this is that when a force is applied through a chisel, a pointed chisel has a very small contact area and therefore creates more stress at the point of contact and therefore greater carving capacity. Using this same principle the wider chisels create less stress for an equal force application and tend to be used for finer work. An exception to this is the larger pitcher chisel that has a clawed wide blade as displayed on the front cover.



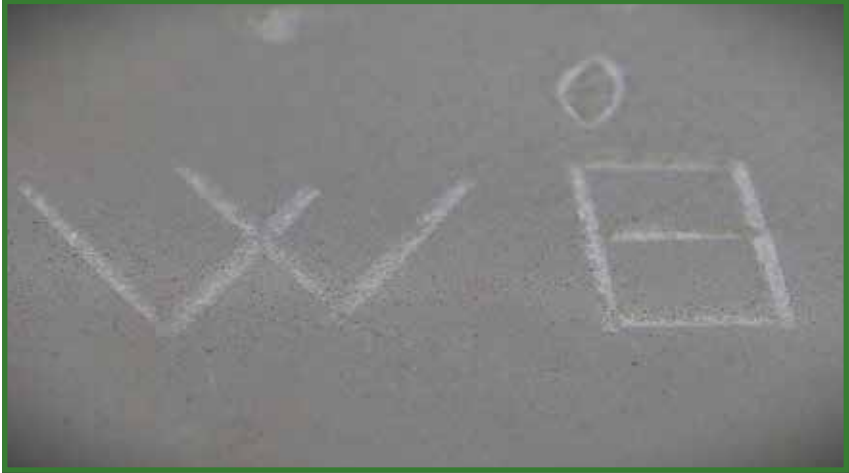
*Figure 7 – Mason's chisels*



Figure 8 displays a replacement stone for renovation work. The stone has random indents (Keys) cut into the surface to assist the lime mortar lock the stones together when laid in a mortar bed, as do the edge cuts. The mason's marks carry vital information needed for bedding the stone correctly. The Figure 8 as carved into the stone is made up of straight chisel cuts rather like 2 small squares on top of one another. T8 informs the mason laying the block that this is the top face of the stone. W8 informs the mason as to the exact location of the stone in the wall. The final piece of information is the banker's mark to record who made this particular stone. As with many historical work processes such as coal mining, making and laying bricks, the workers only got paid for what they successfully achieved.



*Figure 8 – Coursed stone displaying chisel carving*



*Figure 9 – Chiselled mark (W8) indicating the stone location in a structure*

Figure 9 displays historical mason's marks as recorded from observations taken from in-situ stonework within Durham Cathedral. The mason's marks on stonework depict many facets of information as shown in Figures 8 and 9 that allow for construction details to be relayed throughout the assembly team, thus ensuring a degree of control within the construction process. The marks were of particular significance due to the fact, reading was not generally a skill that the normal workman possessed and an understandable mark aligned with verbal instructions would permit a controlled construction process.



*Figure 10 – More Masons tools*

A large pitcher chisel has a clawed wide blade and is used to form a rough outline in stone. The mallet is used to strike the chisels.



Figure 9 – Historical mason's marks – Durham Cathedral

Today the banker's mark or mason's mark is a record of the skill of the craftsman. The term bankers mark originates from the mason working at a bench. This ties in neatly with the wording on a guild admission document whereby guild members swear to use the art and mystery of a mason to trade for the benefit of His Majesty's subjects as well as for their own profit and gain. It is an ancient quality control process/system. Traceability and accountability are central to the final quality of a structure. The guilds have played a key role in this process.

### King Charles III Sandstone Cipher

Durham City Freeman mason, Steven Mann is a current stone mason working on the maintenance and restoration of Durham Cathedral. He has crafted a Royal Cipher from sandstone of the highest quality. Freeman Eric Bulmer commented that, “In this ever-changing world of new technology and artificial intelligence, it is encouraging and refreshing to witness craftsmanship of the very highest level.”



*Figure 11 – Mr S Mann with his carving of the Royal Cipher*

I would suggest the future of stone masons craft is in good hands when observing the Cipher above. The craft has a very long history and today's quality is no less than that of our forebears.

Opposite: Decorative stonework from Durham Cathedrals masons' yard 2024

