



Province of Yorkshire, West Riding. The 1723 Constitutions of Freemasonry

2023 marks the tercentenary of the publication in London of “The Constitutions of the Freemasons” – the ‘1723 Constitutions’ – which provides the philosophical foundations of modern Freemasonry.

The 1723 Constitutions divides into three principal sections:

- a traditional (if not accurate) history of freemasonry
- Charges to which all freemasons are expected to adhere, (unarguably the most significant component
- and the General Regulations governing the administration of Grand Lodge and Masonic Lodges

Masonic songs celebrate the Master of the Lodge, his Wardens, Fellowcraft, and Entered Apprentices; and an Approbation lists the Grand Officers and Masters and Wardens of twenty lodges. The book begins with a dedication to the 2nd Duke of Montagu, the first noble Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England, by Jean Theophilus Desaguliers, a former Grand Master.

The Constitutions is similar in structure to the Old Charges that governed medieval stonemasons’ lodges. This was intentional. It positioned the 1723 Constitutions and the Grand Lodge of England as a continuation of those Lodges, a technique that affords legitimacy in tradition-based societies. But the ideas promoted by the Grand Lodge of England were not medieval. They were new and materially different.

‘The Enlightenment’ refers in broad terms to a philosophy that emerged in northern Europe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Its defining characteristics include a belief in reason, personal liberty, and the search for knowledge through scientific method and rational observation. Enlightenment values embrace religious toleration, constitutional government, civic responsibility, meritocracy, and the promotion of the societal and personal advantages that flow from courtesy, charity, education and self-improvement.

The book was based on these Enlightenment values which lie at the core of modern Freemasonry in England and internationally. But the Constitutions and modern Freemasonry were not simply a product of the Enlightenment. They impacted upon it, not least as a vector for the transmission of Enlightenment principles globally.

The 1723 Constitutions is one of Freemasonry’s most important documents, and not only in England. In 1730 it was taken by the Grand Lodge of Ireland as the model for the Irish Constitutions. It was re-printed verbatim by Benjamin Franklin in 1734 for use in America. It was translated and circulated widely throughout Europe in the 1730s and 1740s. In the 1750s, it provided the basis for *Ahiman Rezon*, the Constitutions of the Antients Grand Lodge, and, after Independence, the Constitutions of State Grand Lodges in America.

The 1723 Constitutions set a pattern for Freemasonry throughout the world. Understanding its context helps to explain the origins of modern Freemasonry and shed light on the relationship between Freemasonry and Society today.

The video in this folder imagines the production of the this very important document, the 1723 “Constitutions of the Freemasons”.

The original source of this material is the United Grand Lodge of England.