Masonic Ciphers – The Enigma Within Freemasonry

by WBro Bob Codling of Keystone Lodge No. 363

Before I start, I must ask two questions
Firstly: Is there anyone here below the rank of a MM
Secondly: Does everyone has a copy of the hand-out sheet.

What is an enigma? - The dictionary defines it as a person or thing that is mysterious or difficult to understand.

If I were to ask each of you what the word "enigma" meant to you, how would you respond. Some of you may think of the famous German coding machine of the 2nd World War, which was used to encrypt messages and which proved particularly difficult to decipher. It took boffins at Bletchley Park and elsewhere many months to crack the code.

Now Freemasonry has its own form of enigma machine, known as the Masonic code, or Masonic cipher. It is much simpler than the German machine; but even so, if you don't know the key, or code to crack the cipher, it will remain gibberish.

Many Masons don't know that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the use of a Masonic cipher to communicate in a secret code language was fairly widespread. Not that the Masons invented this code, otherwise known as a Pigpen cipher, of which this is a simple example. It has been in existence since Roman times and variations of it have been used by many people and organisations since then, even the military.

Any coded message is designed to conceal its meaning to all except the sender and recipients who hold the key to unlock it. Without that key the message should remain unintelligible.

There is a need for Masons to protect their secrets, even in their writings. We must not indite, carve, mark, engrave or otherwise them delineate on anything movable or immovable under the canopy of heaven. Ciphers were an excellent tool for Freemasons to write these secrets and not violate their obligation and, as such, were commonplace, particularly amongst French Masons. But nowadays this code is hardly ever practised; although an example of this very code does appear in almost every lodge in England and probably every single one of you here tonight has seen it, though I dare say some of you may not have recognised it.

Let's start with the basics – This slide is a replica of the hand-out and depicts the Masonic code or Masonic cipher, which is the key, essential to decoding this particular cipher.

Top left you can see a 9-cell matrix with letters A to I.

Alongside that a similar 9-cell matrix with a dot in each cell and letters J to R.

Next to that is a St Andrews cross with letters S to V and lastly another St Andrews cross with dots; and letters W to Z, thus covering the complete alphabet.

If we refer to the ABC matrix; and look at the matrix below that, I've shown some cipher characters in the cells which represent the letters A to I, etc., etc.

Below that again, those same cipher characters, but without the lines of the matrix.

Looking at the bottom set of cipher characters, if you were to close up all the gaps between them, you would end up with only the lines of the matrix, comprising just two horizontal and two vertical lines.

Thus, the shapes of the cipher characters in a cell are similar to the lines that form the cell it occupies. Therefore, a U-shaped character relates to the letter B (bravo) and the box-shaped character relates to the letter E. (echo)

In the next matrix where the cells have dots in them. The U-shaped character with a dot in it represents the letter K, (kilo) not the letter B, (bravo) because B's character is U-shaped without a dot.

The two St Andrew's cross matrixes follow a similar explanation.

I'm not going to spend this evening just talking to you, there will be some audience participation – and we'll start with this slide as a simple example.

(At this stage I would display a slide showing the host lodge, written in cipher characters, then with some banter, invite the audience to see if anyone can, with the aid of the hand-out, decode the message)

ⴂ◻<V>ᴇ◻◻ ᴸᴇᴐᴐ◻
K E Y S T O N E   L O D G E

ᴦᴇᴸᴨᴐᴊᴸ◻
R O C H D A L E

At first glance, I expect you think it just gobbledygook, but each of you has a copy of the Masonic code which should enable you to decipher the text. Who thinks they know the first few characters.

(The characters of the lodge name are then progressively revealed in a series of slides which are omitted for brevity)

As you can see, once you have the key the cipher is relatively easy to decode. Decoding in this way is also called transliteration.

As Master Masons there an example of this cipher code which I would think every one of us sat here this evening has seen on several occasions and is of great significance to all MMs.

If we now refer to two illustrations of the Third Degree Tracing Board, which were both designed by Bro. John Harris, the one on the left was done in about 1820, the one on the right done in about 1845 and it is the latter one which is used in a majority of Emulation Lodges in the English Constitution. On both tracing boards you will observe several easily recognisable objects in the open grave – the symbols of mortality in the form of, the coffin, the skull and crossed bones; the implements used to slay our Master HAB – namely the plumb rule, the level and the heavy maul; the working tools of the Third Degree – namely the skirret, pencil and compasses, etc., etc. There are some fairly obvious differences between these two TB's which are can be seen at a glance but and others which are less so, but I don't intend to dwell on these differences.

I'll refer to the Emulation 3rd Deg TB, with which we are probably more familiar

Now, somewhere on that Tracing Board can be seen some characters which comprise short straight lines joined together at right angles. These are not Hebrew letters or some other ancient language; they are cipher characters, as used in the Masonic code.

Here we have an enlargement of the TB. Now that you know what sort of shapes we are looking for; can anyone identify them?

There are two such characters near the top of the TB and three below that. Below that yet again are three zeros with some more cipher characters and finally below them are four more characters.

This slide shows the tracing board together with those cipher characters.

Using the key on the hand-out, when we de-cipher them, we come up with these letters.

I think you will agree they are rather meaningless; that is because the creator of this tracing board has introduced a twist to the cipher code.

But before we look at how this twisted code was devised, it is important that we have the proper understanding regarding dates.

As Freemasons we are aware of the two ways of dating things, firstly the common way, by stating the year, such as 2020, or more precisely 2020AD meaning 2020 Anno Domini.

Secondly, the other method known to Masons, is to add 4000 to the stated date. Therefore 2020 would become 6020 to which we would add the letters AL meaning Anno Lucis which means "in the year of light" or alternatively "since the creation of the world."

If you care to inspect your own Grand Lodge Certificate you will see it bears an "AL" date rather than an "AD" date. Now, remember this AL notation, for we shall return to it later.

Another point to bear in mind is that all Hebrew text reads from right to left, which is opposite direction to the way we, in the Western world, normally read things.

On this Tracing Board not only are these ciphers depicted left to right, but additionally, they are mirror image, this character next to the three zero's is a clue. It is intended to be a figure 3

If we now mirror image the TB with all the characters, we come up with a different set of cipher characters.

This slide shows a mirror image of the Tracing board, together with the new ciphers and a four-digit number which is clearly 3000.

The cipher key would allow us to derive the following letters

These letters can now be related to key aspects of the 3rd Degree ritual: The top two letters T and C; relate to the p.w. leading to the 3rd Degree and which character was the first artificer in metals.

The letters HAB refer to the architect of KST, our noble Master whose death is described in the 3rd Degree ceremony.

Regarding the letters AL and the number 3000: The Traditional History tells of the untimely death of our Master HAB, who was slain three thousand years after the creation of the world, i.e. 3000AL, or AL3000 as it appears here.

And finally, the letters M and B. They represent the substituted word in the 3rd Degree, communicated to each candidate with the f.p.o.f.

Some of you might wonder why, when one word is referred to, we find two words are given; well in prior to Union in 1813, we had two Masonic Grand Lodges, the Antients and the Moderns. The Antients had their word (….NE), while the Moderns had a slightly different one (….ACH). Upon the formation of the Union there were lengthy discussions to settle upon a ritual agreeable to both parties. Eventually a good old English compromise was reached - both words shall be used, perhaps in the expectation that one would prevail. Here we are, over 200 years later still using those two words in our 3rd Deg ceremonies. The Traditional History tells us their respective meanings are: "the death of the builder" and "the builder is smitten".

So there we have it brethren, the salient points of the 3rd Degree ceremony depicted on the 3rd Degree Tracing Board, in just a hand full of characters, albeit in cipher code.

I shall return to the slide with two TBs, one of the finer details is that on the earlier version the letters M B appear only once indicating that only one word was communicated with the f.p.o.f., the way it would have been done before the Union.

WM and Brethren, that completes my presentation about the Masonic Cipher and I would be pleased to answer any questions before moving on to the next section of this presentation

The Masonic Cipher and its Variants

There now follows a succession of about 60 slides, most are self-explanatory requiring only a brief explanation

a) Complexity of the cipher, with its weaknesses allowing it to ne de-coded. Further measures that can make it more difficult to decode. High scoring letters in the Scrabble game relate to the least commonly used letters in the English language and the most frequently used letters have the shorter dots/dashes in Morse code
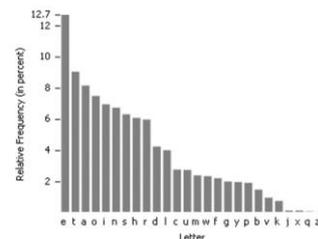

Permutations of A - Z

Permutations of A - Z

The number of permutations when re-arranging the standard alphabet is factorial 26, which is calculated

as 26 x 25 x 24 x........x 3 x 2 x 1

= 403 with a further 24 zeros behind it

...

Frequency of letters used in English language

...

Frequent letter combinations

...

Basic Pigpen Cipher

Pigpen Cipher With Code Word "WEST"

...
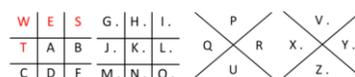
Pigpen cipher with additional matrix
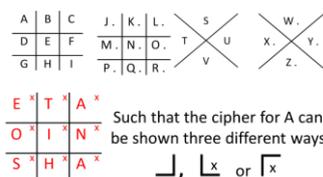
Such that the cipher for A can be shown three different ways

...

Frequency of letters used in English language

Scrabble letters: J & X = 8, Q & X = 10

Morse Code: E = .   T = _
A = _ .   I = . .   M = _ _   N = . _

...
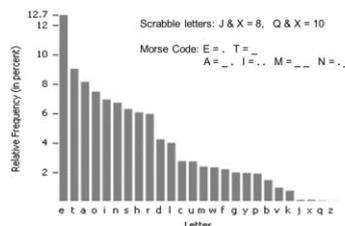
b) Other Masonic Ciphers

A quotation from Albert Pike in cipher code

Albert Pike Cipher

A .	B .	C .		K :	L :	M :		T	U	V
D .	E .	F .		N :	O :	P :		W	X	Y
G .	H .	I.J .		Q :	R :	S :		Z		

R E M E M B E R   D E A T H

Rosicrucian Cipher

…

Knights Templar Cipher – Type 1

…

Knights Templar Cipher – Type 2

…

c) Certificate of the "Rite of the Seven Degrees" 1789

Certificate of the "Rite of the Seven Degrees" 1789

This is an Anglo-French certificate of THE CHAPTER & GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND, 1789

This wonderful certificate uses ciphers symbols at numerous locations:
In the rectangular border
At the bottom of the sheet
In most of the eight square panels
I would draw your attention to both top corners which display a cipher key.

Here is that key enlarged, and you will see the format is fairly similar to that shown on the hand-outs

If we consider the ciphers in the rectangular border, which I don't expect you to be able to see that clearly, they are decoded thus

The certificate has all the significant words of the 3ʳᵈ Degree, as used in 1789, by both the Antients and the Moderns

d) Masonic Gravestones

The gravestone of James Leeson, d. 1792
For a long time, the cipher code at the top of the stone remained a mystery, but the secret was decoded and published in the New York Times in the 1950s. as:
"REMEMBER DEATH".
It uses the same cipher as Albert Pike, mentioned earlier

Thomas Brierley's grave, at Mellor near Marple, Derbyshire
The cipher on the headstone was presented as a mystery in books and newspaper articles right into the latter part of the 20th century. The headstone is actually written in five pig-pen variations. The text at the head of the stone says "Thomas Brierley made his ingress July 16th 1785, His Progress was ...... Years And his Egress ......". The headstone was never completed after his death.
The cipher at the foot of the gravestone says "Holiness of the Lord".

…

Walter Creighton Bell
Past Master of Hotspur Lodge, No. 1626, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
The cipher at the bottom of this gravestone reads right to left and bottom to top:
A FAITHFUL FRIEND AND LOVING BROTHER

…
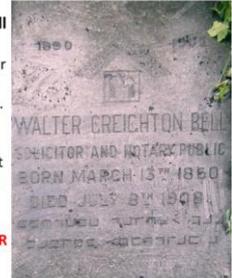
Ciphers on John Dakin's Gravestone

TRUST IN GOD FOR YOUR SALVATI ON

…   …

e) Mark Masonry

Provincial Mark Token

THE MARK PROVINCE OF EAST LANCASHIRE

Two Old Mark Masonry Jewels with cipher lettering

HTWSSTKS   TSWTBLBTCSOTC

…   ..

Two Old Mark Masonry Jewels
The matrix here is similar to, but not the same as the Albert Pike cipher shown earlier with dots and double dots.

Additionally, the letters here are a mnemonic using just the first letters of words, rather than a complete portion of text

Right   -   H T W S S T K S
HIRAM, TYRIAN, WIDOW'S SON, SENDETH TO KING SOLOMON
Characters which will be familiar to most Mark Masons
Left: -   T S W T B L B T C S O T C
The stone which the builders Left became the Copestone of the corner

f) Examples from further afield

Unusual triangular plate for an American Chapter

Cipher for an American Chapter Triangle
This is an interesting and complex one to explain – it is essentially a mirror image of the outer triangle, left-to-right

JAH BEL ON

Normal   Mirror Image

AB.	CD.	EF.	ST.
GH.	IJ.	KL.	UV.	WX.
MN.	OP.	QR.	YZ.

…

Cipher for the Chapter No. 260 Penny

JAH BEL ON

AD.	BE.	CF.	JX.
TQ.	UR.	VS.	KW.	LY.
GP.	HN.	IO.	MZ.

…

Cipher for the Royal Arch Mason Penny

AN.	BO.	CP.	KX.
DO.	ER.	FS.	JW.	LY.
GT.	HU.	IV.	MZ.

JOPPA - KEBRAOTH   MARK . WELL

Another Royal Arch Mason Penny

THEY RECEIVED EVERY MAN A PENNY

…

g) A few other Masonic artefacts depicting ciphers

Early French 1ˢᵗ Deg. Tracing Board with Cipher Matrix

…

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Jewel for AUL No. 4 found in Norwich, Connecticut, Ohio. Possibly an American Union Lodge.

Cipher text reads:
LET THERE BE LIGHT   I AM THAT I AM
AND THERE WAS LIGHT

…

Metal Token for Lodge Les Amis Philanthropes, Versailles, France. Encircling the central design at the top in a border is cipher text:-

DES AMIS PHILANTHROPES

…

Token commemorating Bernard-Raymond Fabré-Palaprat, Grand Master of the Knights Templar in France, circa 1821
The Templar cipher 'BGRN = RAYM, D. G. H. FF. SS. S. M. H. B. S. P. / FABRH = PALAPRAT'. When expanded it reads as:-
Bernard Raymund, by the grace of God and of the holy brethren, Grand Master, and pontiff and patriarch. Fabré-Palaprat.

…

h) Finally a non-masonic cipher

Levasseur Cipher

Oliver Levasseur was a French pirate, also known as La Buse, the buzzard who was captured and hanged in 1730.

Standing on the scaffold, he tore off a necklace which he threw into the assembled crowd with his final words, "Find my treasure, the one who may understand it!" The necklace bore a code of seventeen lines leading to, legend says, his fabulous treasure.

Many have tried to decipher the code; but it remains unbroken. Why would there be such interest in this cipher, well the treasure is said to be worth 250 million pounds.

WM and Brethren, I hope you have found this brief introduction into Masonic ciphers of some interest. As we have seen, within Masonry several different ciphers have been developed by the various degrees or orders, each to guard their own secrets.

If you wish to research ciphers further, I think you will find it a very large topic and quite intriguing.

If anyone has any questions, I shall do my best to answer them.

Thank you WM and Brethren, that concludes this lecture.