

This is an unofficial publication.

It is designed to offer plausible explanations to issues and matters that are not freely available for discussion and which clearly ought to be understood.

These thoughts are not the definitive explanation of the subject matter but simply serve to arouse the interest and to provide food for thought.

In life and Freemasonry the learned brother knows:-

- What has to be done,
- Where to do it
- When to do it
- How to do it
- Who to do it to

BUT

- Does he know WHY he is doing it?

The Goat Rider Series of mini books seeks to give the reader something to think about if nothing else.

If you can accept this as it is intended, as one mason's perspective, then read on, if not put it down, it is not for you.

THE COWAN



We have all heard the oft-repeated phrase...*to keep off all Cowans and Intruders*.....

So! Exactly what is a Cowan? Do you really know or just think you know? Together we will have a look at the meaning of the term Cowan.

The Oxford International Dictionary of the English Language gives the following definition of the word

"Cowan": Cowan - 1598 [?] 1. Sc. One who does the work of a mason, but has not been apprenticed to the trade. 2. Hence, One uninitiated in the secrets of Freemasonry 1707. 3. slang. A sneak, eavesdropper.

Before we get into the crux of the subject please remember that there will always be those who want to see the nail holes...who want to put their hand into the wound made by the Roman spear...That's their problem...leave them with it.

Let's try to shed some light onto the matter at hand.

The Oxford English Dictionary, as quoted by Harry Carr, gives the following:

One who builds dry stone walls (i.e., without mortar); a dry-stone-diker; applied derogatorily to one who does the work of a mason, but who has not been regularly apprenticed or bred to the trade.

Bro. Harry Carr writes:

“Cowan” is an essentially Scottish trade term, and it belongs to the time when lodges, as trade-controlling bodies, put restrictions against the employment of cowans, in order to protect the fully-trained men of the Craft from competition by unskilled labour.

The earliest official ban against cowans appeared in the Schaw Statutes in 1598.

To better understand the position of the Cowan it is necessary to look at the organization of the old operative guilds.

In the days of James I of Scotland (*born 1394, reigned 1424-37*), a statute was passed empowering craftsmen in their different branches to elect a wise man of the Craft to be the leader of that craft so that the King be not defrauded in the future, as had been in the past; because of untrue men in the Craft.

Trade associations were formed from a desire for union, self-protection and self-government among the members.

In pre-reformation times, they also had religious duties to fulfil and were frequently dedicated to a Patron Saint.

The members of some were bound to pay, in addition to other contributions, the "Weekly Penny" for the maintenance of the Craft's Altar, and the sustenance of the priest attached thereto.

Their charters of incorporation were granted by the town council upon the requisition of the body concerned.

The early Craft was divided into several ranks or divisions. There were several classes of members.

The building trade then as now allowed for specialization and indeed good workmanship demanded it.

For the work itself there were the quarrier, the waller or rough mason, the hewer and the builder, and any worker might devote himself to one or the other of these divisions of the trade of construction in stone.

Theoretically it was possible to have a guild for each, but practically the quarrier and the rough mason were looked upon as the labouring class, while the builder and especially the hewer were looked upon as skilled artisans, and in more intimate relationship to the designer or architect, whose position they frequently encroached upon or even occupied.

The hewer and builder were both masons par excellence, though the hewer was especially the freemason.

The English Statute of 1459 shows that the rough mason or waller, or builder with unhewn stones and without lime

(like the Scottish Cowan) was a lower class tradesman according to the wages then fixed

The skilled and privileged Craft as a body was normally divided into members as follows:

1. Honorary, or non-trading, afterwards the dominating feature leading to speculative Freemasonry.
2. Freemen of the Craft in full membership and with full privileges.
3. Servants or operative and skilled employees permanently retained by certain freemen as employees.
4. Journeymen, free of the Craft, operatives duly skilled and open for employment day by day, but travelling from one master to another and not in business for themselves.
5. Apprentices.
6. Cowans or Cowaners, i.e., freemen or journeymen restricted to one class of work

It appears that in England c.1459 the freeman of the Craft, whether in full standing or only partially so as a journeyman or apprentice was of a different and higher class than even the Master Rough Mason or the Master Cowan.

A lad might be apprenticed to a Cowan for that class of work as well as to a mason, but only the mason had a Craft Guild or incorporation.

The Cowan being the unskilled labour, did not require a guild to protect privileges, as he had few or none to protect.

The following minute from the Lodge Canongate Kilwinning at Edinburgh may be of some interest.

Dated 21 September 1642: "*In the presence of George Frier deacon, John Paterson a non-tradesman was admitted a freeman.*"

It must be remembered that these early Scottish Lodges were not speculative lodges but trade societies, to which either for feudal, or personal reasons honorary members such as John Paterson were frequently admitted.

Paterson was probably a person with some standing in the community.

In 1707, in its ordinance against the employment of Cowans, the Lodge of Kilwinning described a Cowan as a mason "*without the word*" - a member of the Craft without full privileges.

However, the employment of Cowans by master masons for any kind of work, when no regular craftsman could be found within 15 miles was permitted in the early part of the 19th century.

The employment of Cowans was prohibited in 1600 by the Glasgow incorporation of Masons, but a minute in February 1623 contains the record of a person booked and received as a Cowan being authorized to work stone and mortar, and to build mortar walls, but not above an "ell" in height (*Engl. 45", Scot. 37.2"*), and without the power to work or lay hewen work, nor to build with sand and lime.

There are many minutes of Cowans being admitted to the Lodge in the Canongate during the 17th century, e.g.,

"27 May 1636: Johne McCoull Cowan was admitted during his lifetime to work as a Cowan any work with sand and clay only, without lime."

3rd March 1650: John Sime admitted as a cowaner.

18th June 1653: John Baird, cowaner admitted.

11th July 1655: John Bauchop, cowaner admitted.

10th March 1669: Wm. McKean admitted as a cowaner.

2 Murray, "Freeman and Cowan" in A.Q.C., Vol. 21, p. 1963 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

When Cowans were admitted, and many of them were, they were allowed to work only in the particular area covered by the lodge to which they were admitted; for the privilege as in the case of Johne McCoull he was to pay the lodge the sum of four pounds yearly, in quarterly payments.

Should he default in his quarterly payment for more than 20 days, the fee was doubled.

From the foregoing it can be seen that the term "Cowan" meant something entirely different in the operative years of the Craft than now in use in speculative Freemasonry.

It seems quite clear that the word "Cowan" is of Scottish origin, and is from operative masonry. That the Cowan could become a member of the masons craft is also clear.

They were, however, different in many respects:

- 1. Cowans could not use lime in their mortar.*
- 2. Cowans worked with unhewn stones only.*

3. *Cowans were free to work only in the area in which their lodge had jurisdiction. If they moved, they would be out of work until they were admitted to another lodge.*

Ok! Where do we go from here?

When the Tyler says that he is to keep out all Cowans and Intruders...exactly what is he telling us?

Simply put he is telling us that he will keep a look-out for those who might be UNINTENTIONAL listeners.

In other words Freemasons of a lesser degree who might, if permitted to be close, hear, unintentionally, something of a superior degree.

Our Tyler is also telling us that he will also be on the lookout for intruders .

Masonically “Intruders” are those who seek to gain admission into our assemblies but who are not qualified to enter.

Our faithful Tyler is not looking for Dry Stone Dykers

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