



The Different Designs, Names, Origins & Masonic Significance of our Gavel.

There is little known in our Masonic lodges throughout the four quarters of the globe regarding the gavel, and why we have such a varying amount of different designs, from Palm, Hammers, Mallets, Traditional Auctioneer, Setting Mauls, Keevils, or gavels made of wood, plastic, brass, silver, ivory, bone, stone, glass or a mixture of all. Much confusion prevails in this subject going back to the cloudy mists of antiquity, so it is my aim to lead you from the brief theories/facts and origins of the gavel to the current use in our lodges, why we use them and the correct order and conduct while administering a knock. The Cambridge Dictionary quotes the Gavel as a small hammer used by a Judge, Auctioneer or Chairman, to call order or attention -The Origin is.....Unknown? This makes my task somewhat difficult, and I beg your leave to consider the facts, and hopefully you will be better informed at the end of this journey. Excluding the use of stone age man using his club to beat on the floor to summon his partner or the Scandinavian mythology, where Thor was given a special hammer or mallet made by Loki (one of the Norse Deities) to destroy his enemies, conveniently we move on to something that is more in keeping with historical events.

Henry II or Henry Plantagenet, Born in France 1133 who was ruler of Normandy and Anjou, restored order to his people by using his talented chancellor Thomas Becket, by reorganising the judicial system including criminal justice, and establishing courts and prisons for those waiting trial. As a consequence he sent his judges to dispense with his justice. Eventually mallets/gavels were adopted as a substitute instead of summons and writs, as they were a lot lighter to transport. The Gothic Courts which were held in districts where Judges ordered tribunals to assemble, started delivering these mallets/gavels among the villages inhabitants. When in possession they instantly knew it was an emblem of

Judicial authority and passed it on to neighbours who congregated at the designated place.

In 1360 there was in use a type of Maul or Mell Called a "Keevil" this is documented in the Fabric Rolls held at York Minster. These were used in the building of the choir added to York Minster Cathedral in the 14th Century, made from Oak grown in the forest of Galtres which is located North of the City of York. Cathedral builders (interesting enough) used either a Keevil (gavel) hammer or Maul/Mallet, whether a Quarryman, Sculptor, Stonemason, Blacksmith, Glass Maker, Stone Cutter, Carpenter or Roofer. Whether any of these Master Builders ever used gavels in their meetings is open to debate (although they did hold Masonic meetings) nevertheless these get-togethers were conducted strictly in private and no records were either kept or still in existence. If the York Keevils were indeed used in such meetings, they could be considered the oldest Masonic gavels in existence.

The word gavel could have its origins from the observation, that the true Masonic gavel shape (mentioned later) resembles a gabled roof. The German name for Gabel is Gipfel or "Giebel" meaning summit or peak, transposed as time progressed to Gavel in English. It should be noted that in German Lodges the gavel now is called a hammer just to confuse things. The word "Gavel" is Middle English 1100-1500 and also describes a tribute or rent paid to a superior. If it was a payment in kind it was hyphenated e.g. gavel-corn or gavel malt etc, from this sprung "gavlet" a legal writ used to recover rent, and Gavelman... who was the tenant that was liable for the rent, so the term "Gavel" is generic and used to describe many things including mallets, mauls, keevils or even a payment!

In the Middle Ages mallets were thrown around the ground, and where these landed, the area within was acknowledged as the possession of the thrower. This gave rise to the symbolism of the mallet indicating the Master's possession of his lodge. In contrast in an English Ordinance of 1462 where its similar use was thrown, this defined the territory surrounding a lodge, where it was viewed "That lewd women should remain, far from the sacred enclosure as a hammer could be thrown. This hammer was also considered a religious symbol in the middle ages, as it was used to establish propriety rights over land and water. Therefore in the 15th Century this custom of throwing was adopted and practiced by the Masonic Fraternity. Today it is still considered an emblematic pledge of a Masters ownership over his lodge during his year, but before you say

we no longer throw the gavel or hammer, the use of this implement perpetuates the medieval concept of ...possession.

The first recorded name of Gavel attributed to a person, was historically recorded in immigration records (mid 1600s) from the great migration of Europe, where migrants travelled on cramped diseased ships and landed in British Colonies in the New World, which eventually was known as Canada and the United States.

As early as 1739 both gavels and mauls were referred to as a Hiram.

In 1792 the mallet appeared as an official item with other Lodge Working Tools.

I put forward as a true Masonic Gavel  that having a head shaped like a typical diamond with its base cut off an inch from one of the points and looking like a gable of a roof. An important point to make is not to get this gavel confused with the Setting Maul , which is found in some lodges. This was used for setting up the stone in the building of King Solomon Temple and one of the working tools in the Mark Degree, having the same emblematical meaning as the common gavel in the first. Its use in medieval times was to set stones or tapping them to a firm seat in the mortar. In certain Masonic ceremonies it is the death of a builder, so the use of this maul today by a Master of a Lodge is incorrect for general use, as the gavel is used as an emblem of power, preserving order in the lodge, where the maul could be considered a symbol of untimely death.

The early Masonic Lodges that existed in the first part of the 1600 and 1700s used a Setting Maul for maintaining order in a meeting. The shape was that of today's maul but with a broad flat base, so that when the Lodge was in session it was stood upright, and when laid in a cradle it was in recess. This is not to be confused with the calling off, with the Wardens raising and lowering their columns, as there is no official reason why they do this, but if you consider the above, there is (if you excuse the pun) ... a striking resemblance!

In 1884 there was a Masonic club formed by members of the Emulation Lodge of Improvement, called THE GAVEL CLUB meeting at the Freemasons Tavern, London with the object of providing refreshment, combined with amusement, for those Brethren who being members, had attended the workings of a lodge that evening. At these gatherings, harmony and good fellowship reigned and a jocular practice of fining

each other to the extent of one penny for various offences real or imaginary (mostly the latter) resulted in considerable sums finding their way into the coffers of the Masonic Charities in the course of the year.

There are many interesting historical Lodge gavels and mauls, such as a miniature maul in the possession of the Scottish Lodge Mother Kilwinning made from the wood salvaged from Spanish Armada. Grand lodge holds in its collections a gavel set made from the rafters of St Pauls Cathedral, a gavel fashioned from the stock of a Swedish rifle found in a trench from the Battle of the Somme and a gavel with an aluminium head made from the Zeppelin.

The Masonic significance of the common gavel, that being common as the entered apprentice enters a lodge (in a state of ignorance) and is shown to the candidate to remind him symbolically he should use it in Freemasonry to divest himself of the vices and over exuberance of life. Years later when he has the honour to represent his lodge as their Master, the gavel is placed in his hand to yet again remind him that we all need to strive to improve in manners and character, never to forget that we came from humble beginnings. No gavel in use in a lodge regardless of its type or material can break off corners of rough stones, its symbolism is there and not for its practicality when back in the operative days the stonemason who wielded it, chipped and formed stone every day transforming a rough stone into a smooth ashlar.

In our lodges the Wardens should remember that not only has the gavel served millions of people of different cultures and beliefs, it represents their power also in keeping order in the lodge, allowing people to enter and leave, informing Brothers what is occurring, not forgetting the most important part, of when to go to refreshment. The gavel should be sounded loud enough to be heard by all, but not too loud as to be disrespectful, in order with pauses between the Wardens knocks and the Master, and never to be used when not in keeping with tradition, out of turn or in jest.

So to conclude, although Thor`s mallet was the thunderbolt and thunder of life, to this day the symbolism is not lost, as couples in Finland still strike fire with steel in humble imitation of the thunderbolt in marriage ceremonies of their nuptial rites. Whether this relates to a Masonic lodge as in the first degree working tools, by recognising the wife as a force of

conscience, which should keep down all vain and unbecoming thoughts, is another matter for debate, and would take a brave man to consider it! How many of you here have read your King James Bible presented at your initiation? I will quote..... St Mathew; Chapter 7:19 verses 7 and 8

“Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.

“BRING IN THE CANDIDATE”!

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