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THE ODDFELLOWS

The Oddfellows are one of the oldest of the friendly societies. The oldest surviving rules of an Oddfellow lodge are dated 1730 and relate to the Loyal Aristarcus Lodge No. 9 in London. The Order seems to have been a convivial society of a conventional Georgian type, evidently – given that there were presumably eight older lodges in existence – already well-established. There are hints that it had been influenced by the Society of Gregorians. If this was its original character its name might simply have been a joke; there were many convivial societies in London with comical names such as the Codheads, the Gang, the Friendly Batchelors and the Knights of the Brush. The membership seems to have been mainly from the tradesman class, although at the time of the Gordon Riots in 1780 John Wilkes and Sir George Savile, both politicians, were members.



Print of a drawing by George Moutard Woodward dating to 1810, showing a caricature of a British sailor being less than impressed by masked Oddfellow members at an initiation.

By the end of the 18th century many of the lodges, originally all more or less independent, had joined together to form the Patriotic or Union Order. According to **The Complete Manual of Oddfellowship**, published in London in 1879, the Patriotic Order in 1797 had five degrees, the Initiatory, Covenant, Royal Blue, Pink (or Merit) and Royal Arch of Titus (or Fidelity) Degrees, with signs, passwords, grips, oaths of secrecy, and an elaborate ritual involving costumes, props, lighting and sound effects.

The Nottingham Oddfellows (founded in 1812) laid down in 1835 that the chairman or 'Grand Imperial' of a lodge should have a scarlet robe with crimson cords, collar and cap, and yellow silk or gold trimmings; the 'Vice-Grand' had blue trimmed with white silk or silver; the 'Imperial Father' black gown, belt and hat with a scarlet collar and facings, and the Secretary a green robe

with scarlet facings, collar and turban. Ordinary members were to wear green velvet turban caps and green velvet collars with white borders; in addition past officers were to wear sashes of various colours. A Nottingham Oddfellow procession in the 1830s must have been quite a sight.

The 1797 Unlawful Oaths Act and the 1799 Unlawful Societies Act led to splits and secessions as the various Orders and individual lodges of Oddfellows grappled with the question of whether to abandon oaths and rituals, or carry on regardless.

Oddfellowship developed in the early nineteenth century as a friendly society, though in Britain it was subject to continual splits and secessions. The *Complete Manual of Oddfellowship*, published in 1879, stated that the most important groups of Oddfellows in Britain at that time were:

- **The Manchester Unity:** formed by a secession from the Patriotic Order in 1813.
- **Grand United Order of Oddfellows:** an early secession from the MU. Rules certified in 1851.
- **Nottingham Ancient Imperial Order of Oddfellows:** seceded from Sheffield Unity about 1812.
- **Ancient Noble Order of Oddfellows, or Bolton Unity:** seceded from Sheffield Unity in 1832.
- **British United Order of Oddfellows:** seceded from the Imperial Nottingham Order in 1867.
- **Improved Independent Order of Oddfellows, or London Unity:** seceded from the Manchester Unity about 1820.
- **Albion Order of Oddfellows:** seceded from the Manchester Unity at Nottingham in 1831. There were several secessions there from – the Nottingham Independent Order, the Derby Midland Order, the Ilkison Unity, the Norfolk & Norwich Unity.
- **Kingston Unity of Oddfellows:** seceded from the Manchester Unity at Hull in 1840.
- **National Independent Oddfellows:** a group with Chartist sympathies, founded in Manchester & Salford in 1846 as a secession from the Manchester Unity.
- **Ancient Independent Order of Oddfellows, or Kent Unity:** Originally founded at Woolwich in 1805, but not very active until 1861 ‘when the Britannia Lodge, as the mother lodge, began to issue dispensations.’ Rules registered 1871.
- **Wolverhampton Unity of Oddfellows:** ceased to exist as a separate order in 1876 when it amalgamated with the Ancient Order of Shepherds.
- There were at least ten other minor orders

In the nineteenth century Oddfellowship was exported to Britain’s colonies: it was and is particularly strong in Australia. The Manchester Unity finally began to accept women members after 1911 in order to qualify as an “approved” society for National Insurance, initially in separate women’s lodges and districts. Oddfellowship continued to thrive into the mid-twentieth century and the introduction of the state pension and the NHS. At least four orders of Oddfellows weathered the blow and continue to function today: the Manchester Unity, the Kingston Unity, the National Independent Order, and the Grand United Order. They continue to offer social fellowship in lodges, as well as mutual financial services, and continue to wear regalia.

Regalia, Jewels and Certificates

All the Oddfellow orders drew on a common stock of images for their characteristic emblems, and tended to employ a similar style of regalia.

Early 19th-century aprons were often hand-painted on white lambskin; later ones were generally white silk, trimmed in the colour of the degree (also in black, for mourning aprons, worn at Oddfellow funerals). The shape of the apron varied, as did that of the flap, although a double-

curved flap is very characteristic. Ribbon rosettes were also often applied to the flap and/or the apron; silk or gold bullion tassels often hung from the flap. The wealth of the different orders and of the lodges within the orders varied; very simple home-made aprons were also worn, and it is often impossible to identify which particular group of Oddfellows they belonged to.

The main surface of the apron was often decorated with a selection of the symbols of the order:



Early Oddfellow apron with double curved flap and silk tassels

- *A heart on an open hand.* This is the most characteristic Oddfellow symbol and any object bearing this is fairly certain to be an Oddfellow item – no other friendly societies seem to have used it. It signifies Friendship, and that any act of kindness (the hand) is without merit unless accompanied by the proper impulse of the heart.
- The *Terrestrial Globe* denotes the universal spirit of benevolence in Oddfellowship.
- *Hourglass.* Signifies Truth, the shortness of Time, and the certainty of death. It teaches promptness in assisting those in need and in improving oneself in the practical virtues.
- *Crossed keys.* Signifies the security of the Order and its finances, it is often used as a Treasurer's badge.

- *Beehive*. Illustrates prosperity and the rewards of hard work.
- *Lamb & flag*. The emblem of faith, purity & humility.
- *Skull & crossbones*. Signifies mortality.
- *The Eye of Providence*. This signifies the All-Seeing Eye of God and is also associated with charity, seeing where aid is required.
- *Noah's Ark*. Trust and safety
- *The Dove & Olive-branch*, usually with Noah's Ark, signify peace and goodwill.



Early Oddfellow mourning apron

The standard emblem of the *Independent Order of Oddfellows Manchester Unity* emblem consists of two short pillars on a plinth; on left pillar a shield with diagonal stripes in red and yellow (the arms of the City of Manchester), on right pillar a quartered shield of Britain (Scottish lion, Irish harp, two quarters of English leopards). Between the pillars is a moral scene (e.g. Britannia and natives, or the fable of Unity – a man getting his sons to break a bundle of sticks). Above this is a shield divided by a cross: in the top left quarter is an hourglass; in the top right quarter crossed keys; in the lower left quarter a beehive; in the lower right quarter a lamb and flag. There is a central escutcheon with a rose, thistle, shamrock and sometimes a leek. Flanking the shield are figures of Faith (with cross), Hope (with anchor) and Charity (either a woman with children, or a scene of the Good Samaritan). Below the shield there is sometimes a cornucopia and dove with olive branch, sometimes just fruits, foliage and more rose, thistle and shamrock. Above the shield is a globe with the word BRITAIN, surmounted by a heart-on-hand and surrounded by laurel sprays.

Above all is the rayed eye. However, individual elements of this emblem can vary, and the emblem is often simplified or elaborated depending on the size of the artefact decorated.



Manchester Unity of Oddfellows apron showing their full emblem

The emblem of the *Independent Order of Oddfellows Grand Lodge of Kent, or Kent Unity*, was a quartered shield: in the top left quarter an open Bible; in the top right four clasped hands; in the lower left an hourglass and scythe; in the lower right a skull and crossbones. In the centre is an escutcheon with heart on hand. The shield is supported by Faith (with cross) and Hope (with anchor). Below the shield is a scroll with the motto PEACE and GOODWILL TO ALL MEN. Suspended from the scroll are (left) crossed keys within a laurel wreath and (right) a set-square and clasped hands within a roped border. At the base is Charity (with children) and rose, shamrock and thistle. Above the shield is Noah's Ark, a dove with olive branch and a rayed eye, flanked by crossed swords and crossed halberds. Over all is the inscription GRAND LODGE OF KENT. INSTITUTED 1851. INDEPENDENT ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS.



Grand Lodge of Kent mourning apron with a metal set square pinned to the top

The emblem of the *Caledonian Order of Oddfellows (COOF)* shows a plinth: at the front of the plinth is a shield divided by a cross. In the top left quarter of the shield is a lamb and flag; in the top right, scales; in the lower left a dove; in the lower right a beehive; in the centre an escutcheon with a raised hand. On and around the plinth several figures; a Woodland Native American; a Turk; an African; a woman with children (Charity), a woman with spear and plumed helmet and a female angel. Over all is a rayed eye.

The emblem of the *Nottingham Ancient Imperial Order of Odd Fellows* showed an architectural feature with pillars, bearing on the front a scene of the Good Samaritan. On the left pillar is a shield with a cross and three crowns; on the right pillar a shield with arms of England. In front of the plinth is a crowned lion, a lamb and dove with olive branch, and the motto *UNITAS AMICITIA ET BENEVOLENTIA* on a scroll. On the top of the plinth is a quartered shield; in the top left quarter is an hourglass, in the top right a skull-and-crossbones, in the lower left a lion lying down, in the lower right a lamb. In centre of the shield is an open book; on mid-line below the book is a heart on hand, on the mid-line above it is an eight-runged ladder. Round the shield is a garter with the motto *HONOUR ALL MEN BUT SERVE THE BRETHREN*. Above this is a dove with olive branch on a heraldic wreath; the moon and star in sky; above all a rayed eye. Flanking the shield are figures of Faith (with cross); Hope (with anchor); Charity (with children). Foliage, fruits, rose, thistle and shamrock.

The Nottingham Ancient Imperial Order of Odd Fellows eventually became the *Nottingham Oddfellows Friendly Society*, with a simplified emblem consisting of a dove and olive branch, and a

shield on which is shown an hourglass, a ladder, skull and crossbones, an open book, a lion, a lamb, and a heart in hand. The motto was still UNITAS, AMICITIA ET BENEVOLENTIA.



Apron of the Caledonian Order of Oddfellows



Collarette and jewel of the Nottingham Oddfellows showing their emblems

As can be seen above, Oddfellows also wore other regalia which included sashes, collars and chains, frequently decorated with tassels, braid, bullion fringes and stars. The sashes often incorporated a silk panel printed with the emblem of their order while the collars had metal or embroidered letters attached indicating their office or the unity they belonged to.



Collar for a Past Grand Master of the East Anglian Unity



Sash of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows



Collar and Chain of the Grand United Order of Oddfellows

Jewels associated with the Oddfellows often get mistaken for Freemasons jewels as they often share the same symbolism and indeed are made by the same manufacturers



A selection of jewels from the Improved Independent Order of Oddfellows, London Unity



From left to right; a Member's jewel for the Independent Order of Oddfellows East Anglia Unity, a Secretary's jewel for the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows and an art deco styled Committee Member's jewel for the London Special Conference, also of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows

Certificates were also decorated with the same emblems that the various unities used. Often these would be brightly coloured and would be framed to hang on a wall.



Membership certificate of Joseph Harper for the Free and Independent Order of Oddfellows when he joined the Mineral Spring Lodge No. 3 in York in 1872

Degrees and Offices

As in freemasonry, Oddfellow lodges were organised with a series of degrees and offices, with some being progressive. At the head of a Lodge was a **Noble Grand Master** (NG), supported by a **Vice Grand** (VG), an **Immediate Past Noble Grand** (IPNG) and an **Elective Secretary** (ES), these being the Principal Offices. Assistant Offices were that of **Guardian**, **Warden** and **Conductor**. Each lodge would also have a **Financial Secretary** (FS), also sometimes called a Permanent Secretary (PS).

Any member could take the four Minor Degrees- *White, Blue, Scarlet and Gold*, which taught ethical lessons. The Past Officers Degrees were for members who had held the Principal Offices, the *Past Elected Secretary's Degree*, the *Past Vice Grand's Degree* and the *Past Noble Grand's Degree*, each degree was a short lecture with accompanying signs and passwords.

Finally a member who had also held the Immediate Past Grand Noble's office could take the Purple Degree, after which he was eligible for election to the more senior District Officer's posts.

A member could stand for Vice Grand if they had done two of the Minor Degrees, served as two of the Assistant Offices and held the post of Elective Secretary. Once they had taken the other two minor degrees he (or she) could become Noble Grand Master for a year, after which they were a Past Noble Grand (PNG).

Similar offices were held at the District level, although referred to as Provincial, as in **Provincial Grand Master** and **Past Provincial Grand Master** (PPGM), with there being a **Provincial Corresponding Secretary**. At the head of the whole order was the **Grand Master**, with Immediate Past, Deputy and Past Grand Masters accompanying.



Member in the regalia of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows, circa 1910.

The Oddfellows seem to have had a taste for ceramics as well as regalia; in collections of ‘Masonic’ mugs and jugs it is commonplace to spot one bearing Oddfellow emblems. Watches and clocks were also produced with the face bearing Oddfellow symbols.



Early 19th century mug and pocket watch with the emblem of the Bolton Unity of Oddfellows, the three faces in the shield represent the masks used in the initiation ceremony.

Further reading:-

The Oddfellows 1810-2010, Daniel Weinbren, Cavendish Press 2010.

Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies, Victoria Solt Dennis, Shire Press 2005.

See also the website of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows, which had a section on the history of the organisation- http://www.oddfellows.co.uk/Site/Content/Gen_Content.aspx

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