

THE LODGE OF HOPE FLOORCLOTH

Hanging on the wall of the museum is a remarkable object. Measuring 220cm long and 180cm wide, it is silk, backed on to canvas and painted with masonic symbols in white, silver, grey and gold all on a black background. This is the floorcloth of the Lodge of Hope, No. 433, of Brightlingsea, Essex, dated to 1780.



This image is a negative of the original for clarity, some emblems were originally in silver and have grown very faint over time.

Tracing boards are a standard feature of lodge furniture within Craft Freemasonry, the symbols on them illustrate the ritual dramas and act as visual reminders of the moral lessons encountered during the degree ceremonies. Originally these symbols would have been drawn in chalk on the floor of the room the ceremony was taking place in, but nowadays they are three separate panels, each with their own individual design, containing the symbols associated with the Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft or Master Mason degrees

The Lodge of Hope floorcloth represents a mid-way stage in the development of the tracing board. Rather than having the various designs drawn in chalk on floor of the meeting room, a floor cloth which already had the

designs painted on it could simply be unrolled instead. It is possible that there were separate floor cloths for the different degrees but none are known. Surviving examples, such as this floorcloth, have all the symbols included together. Some would find their way onto the various tracing boards, while many others remain as the working tools and furniture of a lodge. In the years up to 1813 specifically religious references were removed from both ritual and masonic symbolism to allow it to appeal to members of many faiths, so symbols such as the pot of manna or the tablets of the Ten Commandments do not appear in later Masonic usage.

In 1820 a mason named John Harris, a miniature painter and architectural draughtsman, created tracing boards for the first three Degrees of the Craft, establishing them as an accepted, though unofficial part of Craft Freemasonry in England. Harris made a number of slight modifications over the years, as the popularity of his design grew, but they are all referred to as the “Harris Tracing Board” and it is still one of the most common designs of tracing board seen today.



A set of three miniature 1825 Harris tracing boards bound together in a red leather folder.

The floorcloth is one of the oldest examples known and had been in the possession of the Lodge of Hope No.433 for many years before coming to the museum. The Lodge was founded in 1836, so is considerably younger than the cloth itself, however it is possible that it was inherited from its mother lodge, Angel Lodge No. 51, which was founded in 1735. During the Second World War the cloth was rolled up, placed into an iron drainpipe and concealed beneath the floorboard of the masonic hall in Brightlingsea for protection. It survived the war and was eventually loaned to the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, where it resides today.

For more information on tracing boards-

Tracing Boards : Their Development and their Designers by Terence O. Haunch, Hamilton House, 2004.

Tracing Boards of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry by Julian Rees, Lewis Masonic, 2009.

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