UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND
APPROVED ORATION

"THE SKIRRET"

Oration Number: OR08023

LEVEL: BEGINNER

Third Degree

THE SKIRRET

It is suggested that the Orator should show the skirret to the audience and it might help to have a print-out, appended at the end of theis oration, showing the intersecting circles produced by use of this instrument.

At first view, the skirret might appear to be the 'Orphan Annie' of the working tools in Craft Masonry. It is the only one of the nine working tools that is not shown on your Grand Lodge Certificate and the explanation of its use is somewhat terse and ambiguous.

Even the origin of the word skirret is shrouded in mystery. The earliest known Masonic text mentioning this working tool by this name is dated 1825, which may explain the absence of this tool from the Grand Lodge Certificate as the current design, aptly named the Pillars Certificate, dates back to 1819. Outside of Masonry, the only use of the word skirret is as an alternative name for the sugarwort, a vegetable of Asian origin cultivated for its sweet-tasting tuberous roots. It has even been suggested that, as a name for a working tool, the word is a Masonic invention. Nevertheless, as we shall see, our operative forebears certainly used a system corresponding to the skirret in the task of laying out the foundations of buildings.

The ritual states that "The skirret is an implement which acts on a centre pin, whence a line is drawn to mark out ground for the foundation of the intended structure", and its moral significance is that it "points out that straight and undeviating line of conduct laid down for our pursuit in the Volume of the Sacred Law."

This explanation might well give the impression that the skirret is just a holder for a length of string which can be drawn out to mark a straight line. In fact, the key to understanding its mode of action lies in the phrase 'centre pin'.

When the foundations of a large building, such as a church or cathedral, were laid, it was essential to get the proportions correct, and to ensure that the angles were right angles – no easy task at ground level. It was here that a cord or chain and a centre pin were so essential. Firstly, a line would be drawn to mark the axis of the building, often

running due east and west in the case of ecclesiastical structures. The pin would then be inserted into the ground at a point on this line and, using the pin and cord as a gigantic pair of compasses, a circle of appropriate size would be marked out, perhaps by a series of pegs.

Next, the centre pin would be inserted at one of the two points where the circle crossed the original line and a second circle would be marked out.

This resulted in two overlapping and intersecting circles, the circumference of each passing through the centre of the other. A line drawn through the two points where the circles intersected would be exactly at right angles to the first. If the process is continued along the lines, eventually the site would be accurately divided into squares, oblongs and other geometrical shapes according to the architect's plan or design. Hence the skirret, or whatever it was known as to our operative forebears, reveals how the squares and straight lines of the edifices we build are born of centres and circles; the symbols, respectively, of our true inner natures and of eternity.

It is easy to see how the now ruined Glastonbury Abbey and the other buildings in its grounds would have been set out by use of this geometrical system. Given its central place in sacred architecture, it is not surprising that the image of the two intersecting circles became a sacred symbol. Several such symbols are to be found in and around Glastonbury and are said to date back to the dawn of Christianity. An excellent and exquisitely wrought example is found on the lid of the well in the Chalice Garden where, according to legend, the Holy Grail lies hidden. Other traditions link this symbol to Mary Magdalene, the Beloved Disciple, representing the eternal union of love between the male and female aspects of the Divine.

But what relevance does the skirret have to those of us who seek to apply the symbolism of the working tools of our Craft to our thoughts, actions and indeed to our whole lives? In many ways, the skirret was the most central and important of the working tools of the operative masons as it was by the application of this implement that the building changed from a mere idea, an inspiration, a plan or design, into the reality of the foundation from which the final edifice would rise in all its glory. Indeed, it was the first tool to be used in the actual task of building.

In this sense, we often reach points in our lives when we need to carry our intentions into positive and practical action, and we all know people who are full of grandiose schemes but are remarkably inept in carrying any of them to fruition. An important lesson that we learn in Masonry is to translate our charitable intentions into practical action, not just in giving alms but in actively serving a brother, friend or the wider community in time of need. In this context, some brethren talk of the spirituality of Masonry but the word spirituality is not easy to define. So often it conjures up a sense of a vague supernatural mistiness, but a helpful definition is “the ACT of using our inner resources of peace, love and compassion for the benefit of ourselves and others”.

You may well wonder why this definition mentions ourselves and others rather than just others. This is because the practical act of serving others is a certain way of lifting one out of gloom and depression. As one psychologist remarked, “Go out and serve and see your depression lift”. This is reminiscent of the Exhortation in the Third Degree, when you were reminded of the ACTIVE principles of universal beneficence and charity, and urged to “seek the solace of your own distress by extending relief and consolation to your fellow-creatures in the hour of their affliction”.

Thus, beginning at the centre of our being, we draw a spreading network of circles to encompass all of humanity and thereby, though perhaps only in a small way, contribute to a much needed universal peace and harmony and, at the same time, shed light on our own inner natures. The Sufi mystic-poet Jelalludin Rumi sums up the place for the symbolism of the skirret in the life of a Mason - “The place that Solomon made to worship in is not built of earth and water and stone, but of intention and wisdom and mystical conversation and COMPASSIONATE ACTION.”