

A Brief History of the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Order of Free Gardeners

By Trevor Powell (PM)

1. Introduction

Brethren, this talk was prompted by a visit to Melbourne when I saw an insignia showing a similar arrangement to our own square and compasses.



Figure 1 Showing a Typical Insignia of the Free Gardeners

It was placed above a door in Elizabeth Street in the Northern end of the CBD. I was intrigued, and on another visit to Melbourne tried to find the same place to take a photograph. Unfortunately I couldn't find it again, for reasons which will sadly become apparent during this talk.

On investigation the insignia was shown to represent the Free Gardeners organisation and I determined to find out some more about this organisation which I hope you find interesting.

Interestingly enough there is a reference to the Free Gardeners in the Lord of the Rings by Tolkein:

"The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command."

2. Origins and Original Purpose

The Order appears to be Scottish in origin; nobody now knows when gardeners in and around the Lothians and Fife region began to organise, however, the earliest surviving record of a Lodge of Free Gardeners is a minute of a Lodge in Haddington, dated 16th. August 1676. The nature of the early minutes of this Lodge suggest that it is much older than this. There is also a record from Dunfermline dated 1715.

The formation of Free Gardeners seems to have coincided with a growth of interest in landscape gardening by the wealthy local gentry and the increased need for gardeners.

The majority of early rules are concerned with the practical aspects of gardening such as disseminating information as well as the distribution of new plant varieties throughout the membership, however, some rules also state that money will be used to help distressed widows, orphans and the poor of the lodges.

3. Operative Free Gardeners

In similar fashion to early Freemasons Lodges in Scotland, early Free Gardeners Lodges were predominantly Operative with these Gardeners being employed by the local landowners to work on the large estates and country houses. Country houses with formal gardens were becoming very fashionable and plants and new varieties of shrubs and plants were brought to Scotland from Europe and the New World to furnish them.

Gardeners also pooled their money to buy flower and vegetable seeds which they grew and sold the crop, profit going back to Lodge Funds.

Some Lodges put money raised into the purchase of land for cultivation and generation of an income hence minimising, or indeed removing the need for subscriptions from the members.

4. Speculative Free Gardeners

The early Gardeners Lodge seem to have existed in parallel with early Masonic Lodges. Both Free Mason and Free Gardener Lodges included clauses that allowed

non-practitioner members to join (ie speculative members). In the case of the Free Gardeners this was at a higher rate of membership fee compared to operative gardeners. This was an essential difference between the two institutions. The status of the 'gentlemen' members of Freegardeners was of importance to the Dunfermline gardeners; their published history always contained a cumulative membership list headed by a duke, the naming a marquis, six earls, seven lords, eight knights and hundreds of professionals (soldiers, ministers, advocates) and other landowners or lairds. However, by the end of the eighteenth century such illustrious company had faded away except for a Dunfermline which still included some professionals as members. This falling away might be due to the rise in popularity of Freemasonry.

Another difference between the two organisations was the imposition of an upper age limit for entry which, according to an Article of the Cambuslang Lodge, was 40 years of age. This was obviously applied to limit the exposure of expense due to the increasing drain on resources by the older members.

4. Rise and Transition to Friendly Society Status

At the time of the rise of Free Gardeners, the medieval trades such as masons, bakers, wrights and hammermen etc formed contracts between themselves and the town or city council as representatives of the community. These were incorporations and had a significant standing with the local community.

In common with other professions, gardeners organised because they felt a pressure to regulate skills and training to protect their own reputations. But gardeners in particular lived outside burghs on nearby landed estates or market gardens and so were not in a position to easily gain incorporation.

In spite of this they did the best they could and organised themselves so that the industry was regulated.

Each Lodge stated the prerogatives of the craft, membership qualifications and how they were to organise. The Incorporation of Gardeners of Glasgow is believed to be only group in Scotland to gain incorporation status with the gardeners and greengrocers had become incorporations of the city by 1626. Nowhere else had a gardeners' incorporation and by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries incorporations had ceased to be created.

Some of the societies joined together in 'Orders' led by a 'Grand Lodge'. There were several orders based in Edinburgh, Glasgow and England, however, some of the older lodges stayed independent

There was no overall governing body or Grand Lodge. In Scotland, at least six Grand Lodges existed around this time and many of the older Lodges were Independent.

Attempts to form a Grand Lodge were therefore relatively unsuccessful.

The Order expanded outwards from Britain to South Africa, Australia and three Lodges were formed in America, Ash Lodge in New Jersey, America's First Thistle Lodge in New York, and Lonaconing Thistle Lodge in Maryland.

By the late 1800`s the Lodges had lost much of their ties with the old Operative system and had developed into “Friendly Societies” and they therefore began to attract members from among those who were not gardeners. By the nineteenth century the lodges were mostly benefit societies. Dunfermline went as far as forming a separate section for those interested in horticulture.

Were they pushed in this direction because of their inability of gaining incorporation status?

In this way Lodges provided sickness benefit and pensions as well as grants and annuities.

5. Benefits

Friendly Societies were a very popular system of organisation. Members would pay a regular fee and would qualify for many privileges including death benefit, funeral expenses, medical care etc. whole families would be members.

As an example of the benefit which could be obtained by a member the following provides us with an example:

Peter Donald joined the Ancient Society of Gardeners in Dunfermline on 10th June 1864. He was then 38 years old, just under the upper age limit for membership. It cost Peter £4 16 shillings and 3 pence to join, but that was the only payment he made to the society. Dunfermline was unusual because it did not need to ask for regular contributions from its members being able to fund its commitments from the regular revenue it received as a landlord in Dunfermline.

Despite his age at entry, Peter was able to benefit from his membership for many years. He was admitted as an annuitant (pensioner) of the Society on 31st October 1891 and in 1910 his annuity was paid to him in New York, USA, where he was resident where he died on 9th April 1915. Over the years his benefit totalled more than £150, a good return on his investment.

Everywhere Lodges flourished, and became very influential financial institutions.

By the mid 1800`s the order boasted thousands of members and the Order was certainly as strong if not stronger than Freemasonry in Britain. At the peak of the movement there were more than 10,000 Free Gardeners in the Lothian area alone

belonging to more than 50 Lodges. Juvenile and even women-only branches opened at the end of the 19th century.

6. Officers

In Dunfermline the senior officer was called "Deacon", with the title later changed to 'Chancellor'. In Haddington, the titles 'President' or 'Chairman' were used. From other documents it would appear that the lodge officers consisted of the Master, two Wardens, Chaplain and Inside and Outside Tylers.



Figure 2 Showing Insignia of Lodge Officers



Figure 3 Showing “Old Adam” and Office Bearers of Penicuik Thistle Lodge



Figure 4 Showing Office Bearers of Black Agnes Lodge, Dunbar



Figure 5 Showing the office bearers of a Lodge in Dunfermeline 1916

The Free Gardeners organisation appears to have been essentially democratic being run along similar lines to the Free Masons with the officials regularly elected and the box where their money and papers were kept being the subject of regular audit.



Figure 6 Picture showing Penicuik Thistle Lodge Office Bearers Posing in front of the Master's House

7. Ritual

Free Gardeners Ritual is claimed to be older than Masonic Ritual which, as we know, is based on the building of King Solomons Temple. It is based on the story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis Chapter 2 verse 15 – “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.”). Adam was therefore the first Gardener.

The newer lodges appear to have accumulated legends, rituals and craft practices as time progressed.

There were three degrees: Apprentice (based on Adam in the Garden of Eden), Journeyman (based on Noah's Ark) and Master Gardener (based on King Solomon).

Each ceremony appears to have included an obligation, passwords, signs and a catechism.

1st Degree

This is based on the Garden of Eden and Adam's fall from grace.

The working tools of the degree consist of:

- Square – squaring moral actions
- Compasses – to encompass the initiate with due submission to the rules
- Pruning Knife – the most useful implement in Gardnery for pruning and grafting as well as the cultivation of one's mind and the embrace of brotherly affection

It is interesting to note that the secret imparted to the initiate is purported to be the original secret entrusted to Adam and not Eve hence the basis for the male only membership.



Figure 7 Showing a 1st Degree Tracing Board

2nd Degree

This degree links the Garden of Eden with Noah and was known as the Journeyman's degree. Since Noah was the first head of mankind following the flood, he was considered to have great importance in the organisation and was ranked as the second head gardener.

The degree centres on a journey of the newly entered apprentice as a Gardener. The degree describes a journey from the Garden of Eden via other Gardens to the Garden of Gethsemene.

3rd Degree

This degree centres around Solomon who was considered to be the third or master gardener. Solomon was considered to be most knowledgeable of all trees, shrubs and plants and is credited with providing to the building of the Holy Temple; cedars to strengthen the holy temple walls, ivy to adorn the walls and hyssop for sprinkling and

purification. Hence the Gardeners claim that although the stonemasons may have built the holy temple it was the Gardeners who finished the job and were associated with it for a longer period due to their tending the gardens and providing the olive branch for the high priest to take into the holy of holies which they did regularly.

8. Regalia

The appearance of gardeners' artefacts appear to be in the Masonic style of symbolism with aprons, collars and jewels of the Order showing a similar symbolism to Freemasonry.

Principal Emblem

The principal emblem has the square and compasses conjoined as in the Craft with a pruning knife open at an angle of sixty degrees to indicate the gardening connections.



Figure 8 Showing the Principle Emblem of the Free Gardeners

Collars and Jewels

These were decorated by plants and produce such as pineapples, grapes, flowers and, in particular, roses and thistles. Cultivation of the former were considered to be the ultimate test of a good gardener in raising pineapples and grapes in Scotland.

Working tools were also included such as crossed spade and rake, watering pans, reel and measuring line etc



Figure 9 Showing the Insignia of Office of Some Collars



Figure 9 Showing a Detail of one of the Insignia of Office



Figure 11 Showing a Master's Jewel



Figure 12 Showing a Sash of the Order

Aprons

Aprons were of two types; long aprons reaching the ankle, embroidered with numerous symbols relating to the legends of the order. Shorter aprons with a semi-circular bib, which bear a strong resemblance to the Freemasons aprons of Scotland.

Painted aprons include scenes such as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, the main emblem just described and representations of gardeners' tools. The latter were symbolised in the ritual catechisms in the same way that the operative masons' tools are symbolised in Freemasonry. The letters P.G.H. and E.

are code for the four rivers (Pishon, Euphrates, Gihon and Hiddekel) that flow through the Garden of Eden.

The letters A.N.S. and O are also present which refer to the three Grand Master Gardeners (Adam, Noah and Solomon) and the Olive sign and grip of a Master Gardener.



Figure 13 Showing a Example of an Apron



Figure 14 Showing a Example of an Apron



Figure 15 Showing a Example of an Apron



Figure 16 Showing a Example of an Apron



Figure 17 Showing Examples of Free Gardeners Aprons



Figure 18 Showing Examples of Free Gardeners Aprons

Banners

The order were known to march regularly unlike Free Masons and so banners were designed and displayed. These included designs similar to those seen on the aprons.

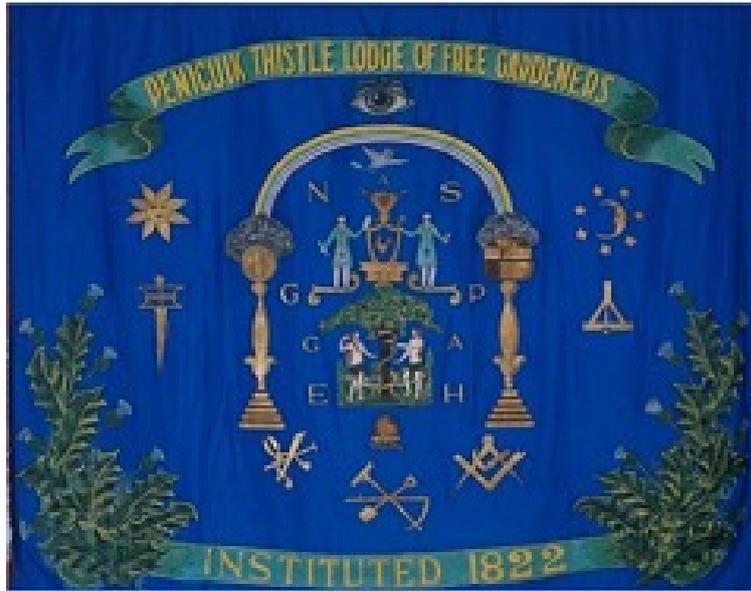


Figure 19 Showing a Banner of Penucuik Lodge

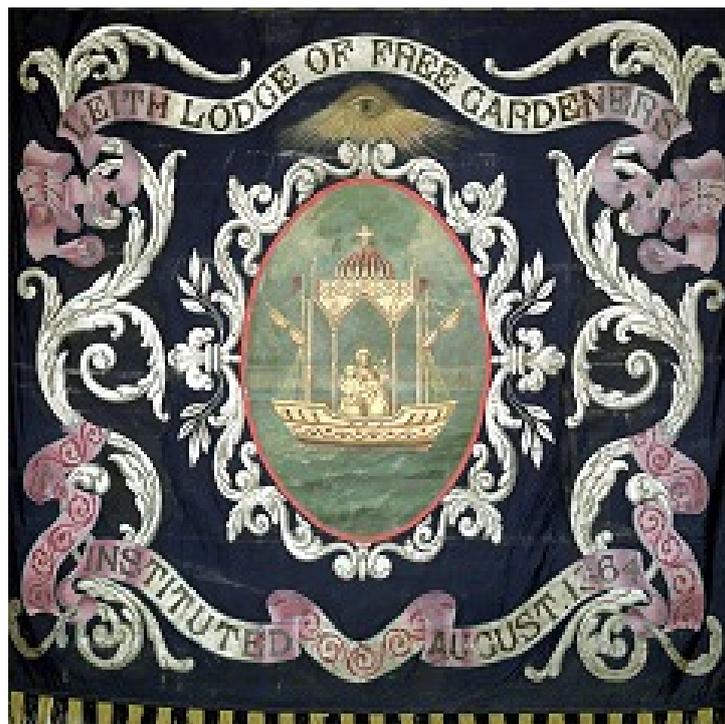


Figure 20 Showing a Banner from Leith Lodge

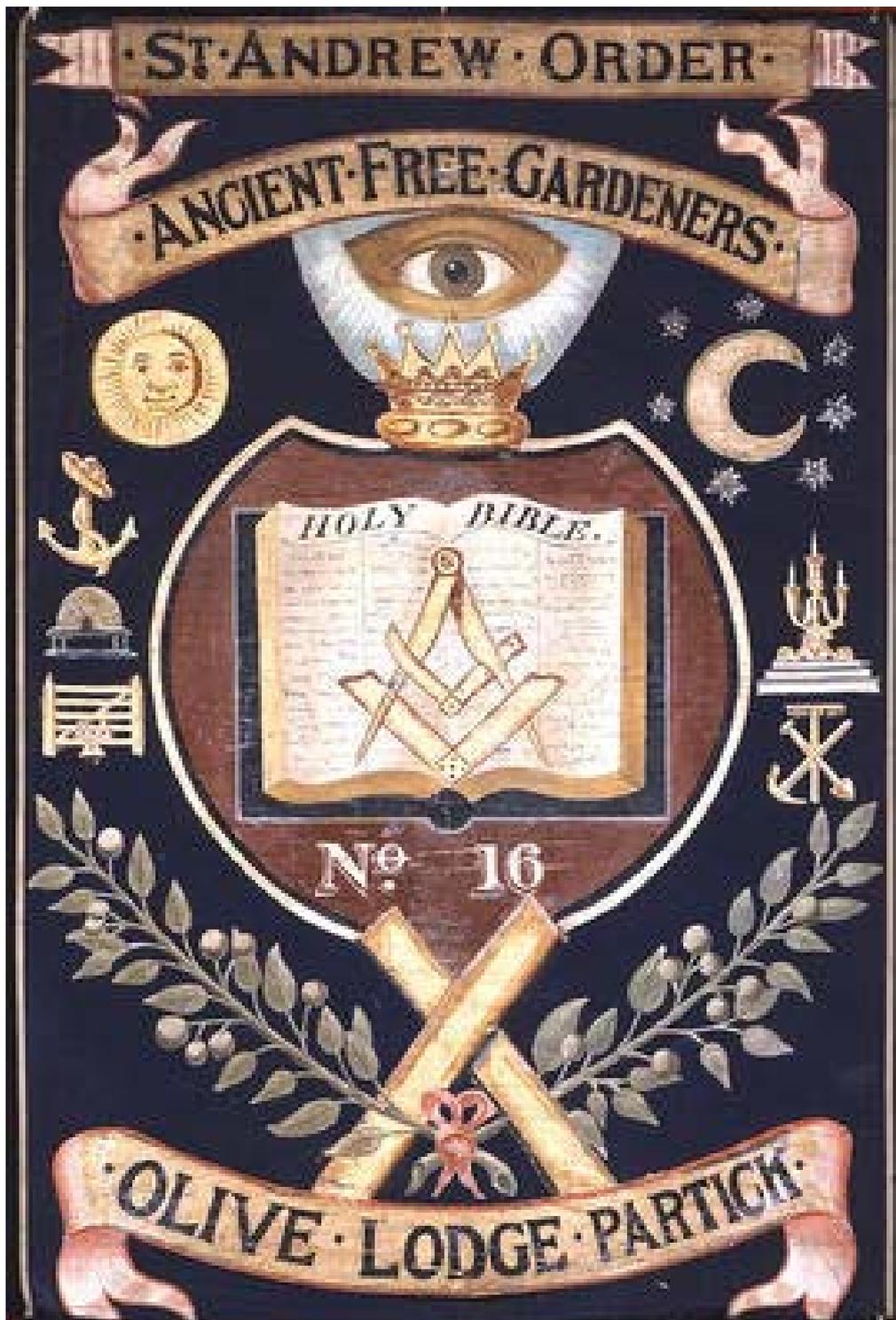


Figure 21 Showing the Lodge Banner of Olive Lodge Partick

9. Demise

General – UK

The National Insurance Act in the UK changed friendly societies; those that were strong could become 'approved' under the act to administer its provisions for their members. Unfortunately individual lodges tended to be too small. Even the total membership of the lodges affiliated to Grand Lodge in Edinburgh was too small to survive. So throughout 1911 all the lodges of the Ancient, the British, and Western Orders and the unaffiliated societies met. Together they numbered around 70-80 lodges and 12,000 free gardeners. Delegates discussed the formation of an association of 'Free Gardeners in Scotland for the purposes of the Act (Section 39), whilst 'maintaining their craft connection with the Orders'.

For 30 more years the friendly society sector delivered state welfare, however, the economic crisis in the UK of 1929 weakened the charitable capacity of the Free Gardener Lodges. Social protection Laws further weakened the attraction of mutual aid. Then, after the second world war, in 1946, the British Labour Government, nationalised the whole process. A scheme was introduced whereby money would be deducted by Employers from Employees wages and sent to the Government. This Income Tax would provide free hospital care, dental care, medical care, unemployment payment, sickness benefit and many other benefits to the whole population. In fact the British Government was to provide on a grander scale the services which Friendly Societies had provided. From then on the State took all responsibility for benefits and pensions.

With their main reason removed friendly societies quickly declined. Their staff became civil servants almost at a stroke and their members deserted in droves. The few that stayed found it difficult to attract new ones. In those hard times after the War people could not afford to pay two sources and as the Government Tax was Law, Free Gardeners Lodges closed almost overnight

By the mid 1950`s very few Free Gardeners Lodges existed and all Grand Lodges had sadly closed (the old Lodge at Haddington closed in 1954). By 1960 it is thought that all Lodges in Great Britain had become dormant.

Victoria Australia

Some Free Gardener Lodges continued abroad, with some surviving in Australia and South Africa.

A report taken from the Australian Prudential Regulatory Body (APRA) website dated Saturday 30th September 2006 states that the Grand United Order of Free Gardeners friendly society which was established in Australia in 1866 was being forced to close.

The friendly society apparently has 300 members, with a \$1.8 million funereal fund and \$3 million in a management fund with \$2 million having been loaned to members. The reason for the demise of the society APRA states that the friendly society can't meet the new standards of compliance and governance which came into effect on 1st October 2006. APRA has ruled that the society's financial arrangements are tantamount to a tontine.

I am pleased to report that, according to Graeme Galloway (the contact given for the Victorian Free Gardeners), although the Society is in liquidation, the fellowship is continuing with meetings continued to be held in the East Kew Masonic Centre.

10. Revival

In 2002 a move was made to revive the Order in Scotland by collectors of Free Gardeners paraphernalia. Against all odds, a few Free Gardeners Lodges still existed in South Africa and Australia, contact was made with these Lodges and in 2002 a number of Free Gardeners visiting Scotland on vacation, opened a Lodge and Initiating interested parties into a new Lodge named The Countess of Elgin Lodge. In this way the Order has been revived in Scotland with a Preservation Society established to promote this new Order. Another Lodge was also founded taking the names of two old Gardeners Lodge; Adelphi and Bluebell to form The Adelphi Bluebell Lodge No.4 to which members were admitted in 2004. This is an Independent Lodge and does not act as a governing body or Grand Lodge but follows the principals of early Scottish Free Gardeners who established Lodges where there was a need for them.

The aims of the revived Lodge are to research and preserve Free Gardeners ritual, secrets and paraphernalia. There are still only a few Free Gardeners Lodges, with only eight having been established since the revival. The Adelphi Bluebell Lodge No. 4 at the time of this talk has 50.

References:

1. Cracking the Freemasons Code by Robert L D Cooper Chapter 10
2. Private correspondence from James Jack, Adelphi Bluebell Lodge, Uddington Scotland
3. www.historyshelf.org
4. Adelphi Bluebell Lodge website