

Friendly, Fraternal and Freemasonic – the Associational Material Culture of England.

Mark Dennis
The Library and Museum of Freemasonry

Introduction

Fraternal organisations, self-created and not relying on authority derived from Church, State, Monarchy or the Medieval Guild system, are one of the major creations of the Enlightenment ideals of the 1700s. They appropriated the symbols of office from these bodies including aprons, collars and chains, sashes and gauntlet cuffs. They were the precursors to the trades unions, building societies and the welfare state. They used symbolism borrowed from elsewhere and mixed it to create unique identities.

Many fraternities had a ritual. This was a drama, used to create a shared experience and a sense of belonging. In the modern world role play and 'virtual reality' are used as teaching aids. This was an early attempt at the idea. The content of the plays would be published so that members could learn it but often these books would omit some elements which would be taught to the member on an individual basis. This prevented imposters attending meetings which was very important to prevent fraud given the charitable and benefit nature of most fraternities.

Some of these organisations disappeared when the Welfare State took over their functions; others were absorbed into banks and building societies. A few continue today including friendly societies such as the Oddfellows, Foresters and Druids, and pure fraternities like the Freemasons and the Buffaloes.

Museum collections will typically have items preserved by individual members of these organisations and, more rarely, full sets of regalia and equipment for the organisations to which they belonged.

Fraternal Faces

These images are typical of the photographs taken of members of fraternities to proclaim pride in membership and commemorate events such as processions. They are a useful way to find out how to display the items in collections and also show the range of gender, age and social class present in these organisations.

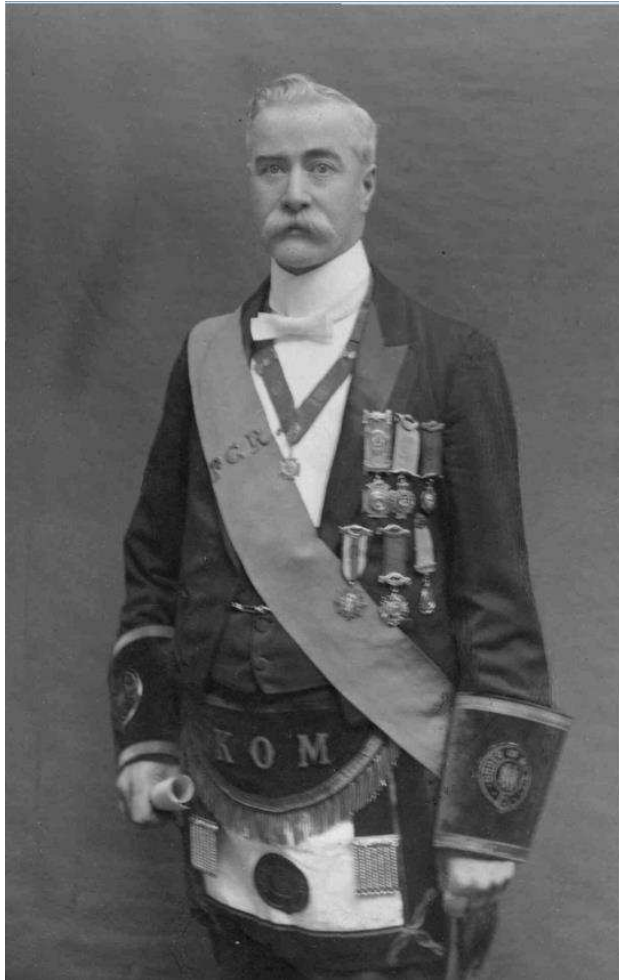
A: Forester, early 20th Century.



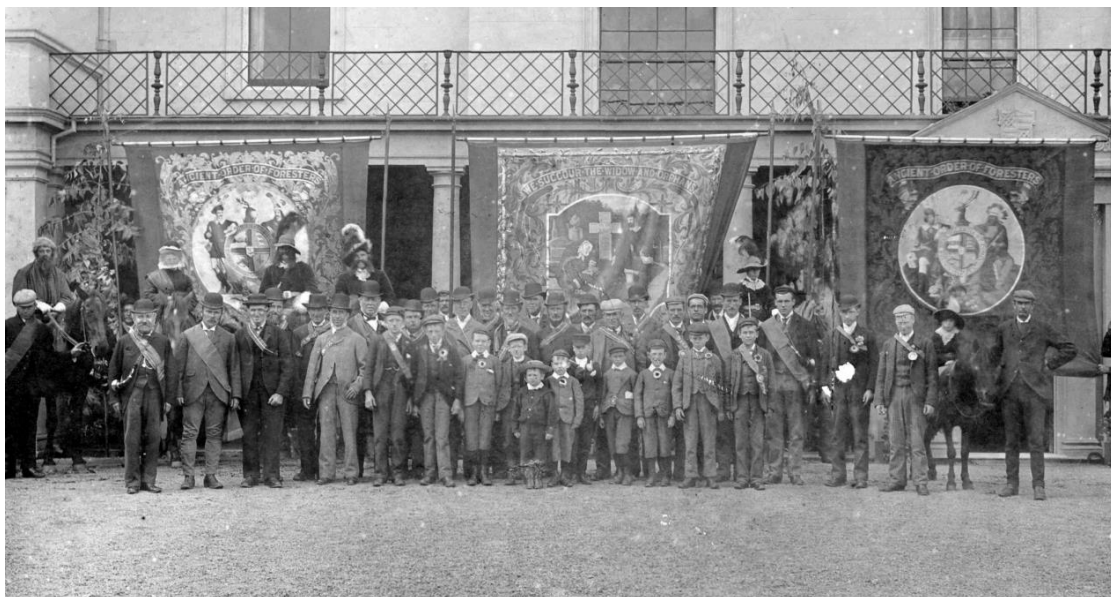
B: Juvenile Oddfellows, early 20th century



C: A Knight of Merit in the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes. Late 1800s or early 1900s.



D: A late Victorian group of Foresters showing juvenile members and the costumes and banners used when processing. Late 1800s.



E: A Carnival Float of the Oddfellows. Probably 1920s.



Four Worlds

These organisations produced objects bearing their symbolism. One way to analyse the items is to group them into four 'worlds'.

The place where the organisation meets and has its symbolism on show to members only.

The organisation interacting with the outer world on its own terms in ways such as dinners with non-members, church services and processions.

The member at home, filling their dwelling with 'branded' items proclaiming membership.

The member in the street, wearing jewellery and badges or carrying other items to indicate their membership either clearly or covertly.

This is a complicated subject but here are some examples of items you may encounter. Each is listed with the organisation, a symbol that they bear and finally the nature of the object itself.

1. **Freemasons – craft lodge / Square and compasses / firing glass**

No one knows quite how freemasonry came about, but Masonic Lodges under the control of the Grand Lodges of England (covering England and Wales), Scotland and Ireland have existed for nearly 300 years. They use a legend about King Solomon and his temple, divided into three dramas, to teach moral lessons. They wear ceremonial regalia in their ceremonies.

The Square and Compasses mean life lived in an upright fashion (the square) and within bounds (the compasses). They existed in emblem books, created to teach moral ideas to adults, before they were used by the freemasons. They are also used by other organisations but normally seeing them means the item is masonic.

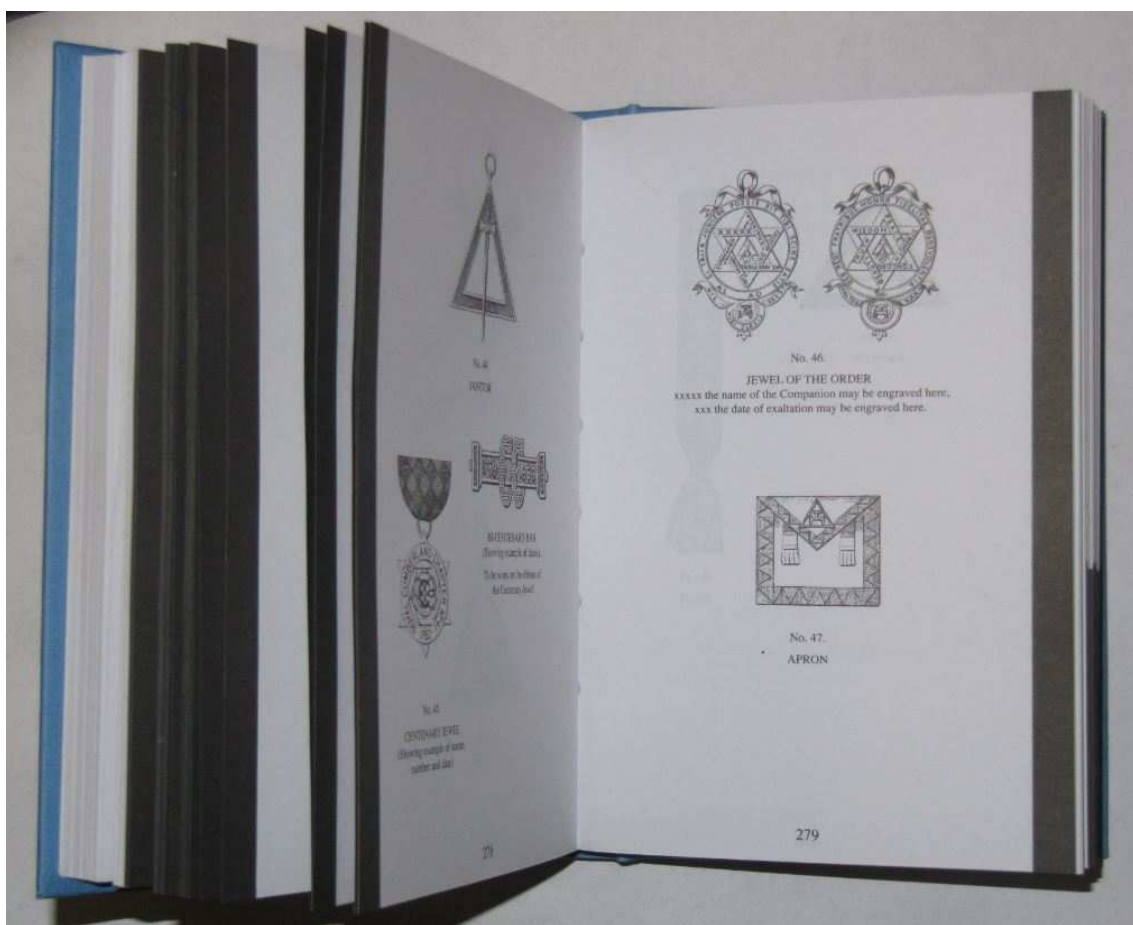


The Firing Glass is a masonic style of glass with a very heavy foot. This was originally used to make a sharp rap on the table, rather like a shot (hence firing glass). These were used in ceremonial toasts and are still made to celebrate anniversaries of lodges.

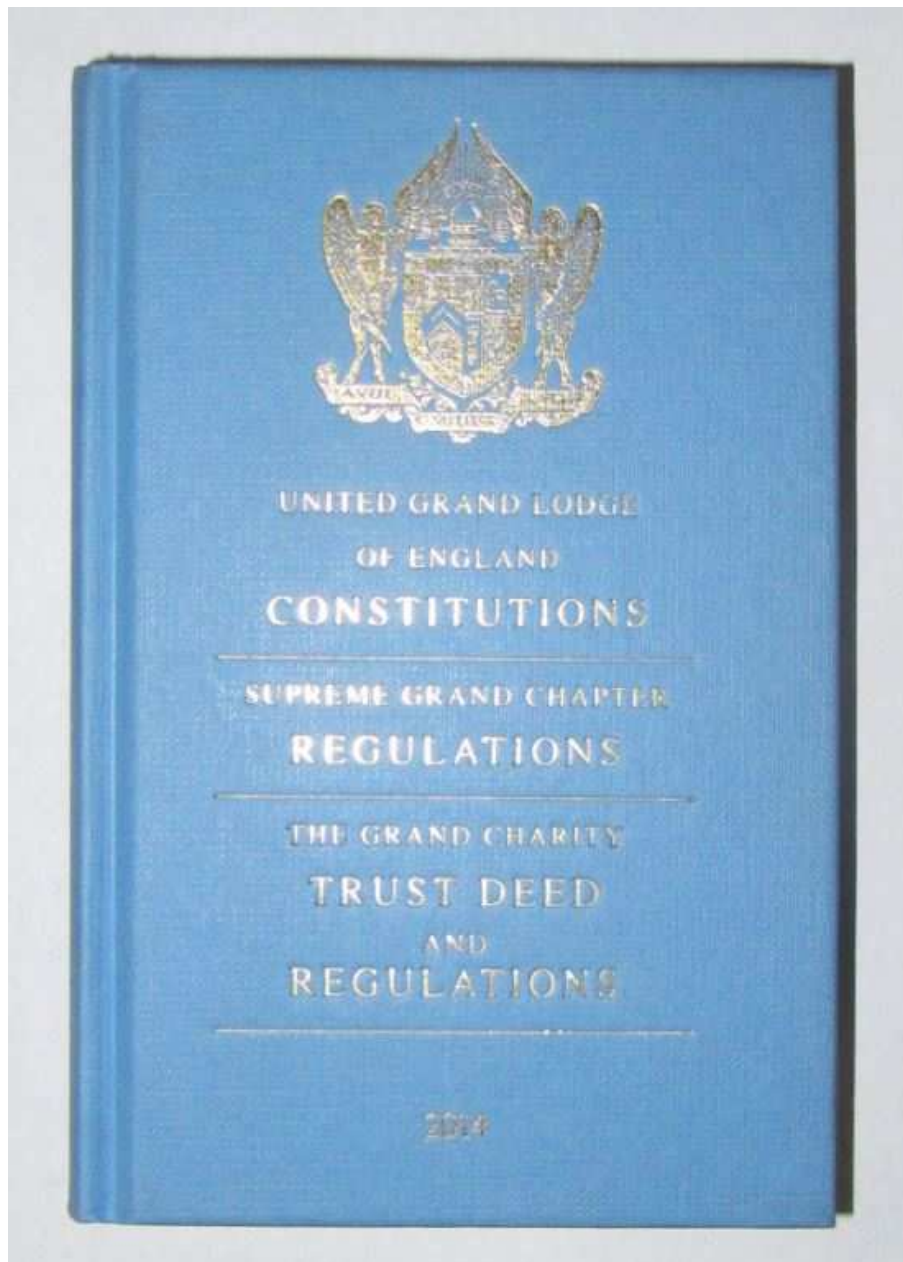
2. Freemasons – royal arch / interlaced triangles / book of constitutions

Freemasonry in England is divided into many masonic 'orders' each of which uses a legendary or Bible story as a drama to create a link between members and teach moral lessons. The Royal Arch is the most important of these after the Craft Lodge. Its regalia is based on the hangings in Solomon's Temple and its ceremony forms a sequel to the first three ceremonies, set in the time of Prince Zerubbalel of Israel.

The interlaced triangles, sometimes called the Seal of Solomon, is the badge of the Royal Arch.



Most fraternities have a published rule book to explain the structure, regalia and purpose of the organisation. This is often very detailed in its content and is the most important source for understanding the organisation. In Freemasonry this is termed the 'Book of Constitution' and editions have been published since 1723.



3. **Oddfellows – Manchester Unity / hourglass / saucer**

The Oddfellows have existed since the 1700s. They are a 'Friendly Society' which means that as well as ceremony and regalia they have a structure as a savings club which takes regular payments from members in return for agreed payments later. These typically included sickness pay, payments for funerals and support in times of distress. Friendly societies were the founding bodies of the welfare state and were used to distribute funds in the early years of the 20th century. The Oddfellows were the largest, with the Manchester Unity having a national membership.

The Hourglass symbolises the passing of time in life and that it should not be wasted.



Tea services bearing fraternal designs were most common in temperance organisations but also appeared in other orders.



4. **Oddfellows – Manchester Unity / Open hand / juvenile ribbon**

The Oddfellows split into many separate bodies and some organisations called themselves Oddfellows without any direct link to the larger organisations. These are called 'Unities' and are mostly regionally based.

The open hand, normally with heart on the palm represents giving freely with an open heart. If you see it on an item it is normally from one of the Oddfellow Unities.



Many of these fraternal organisations had juvenile sections to encourage the young to save and to socialise in controlled conditions. These were some of the earliest youth clubs. Decorative woven ribbons – termed 'Stevengraphs' were produced for many fraternities as souvenirs. The same technique was used to create cheap but colourful regalia.

5. **Oddfellows – Nottingham Unity / skull and crossbones / apron**

The Nottingham Unity of Oddfellows split from Manchester Unity over a disagreement about the ceremonies and symbolism. The shield on this apron is the most distinctive part of their imagery.

The skull and crossed bones, sometimes called the 'emblems of mortality' are used in many contexts to remind people of the approach of death and the need to prepare for it, both morally and financially. They are often seen on tombstones.



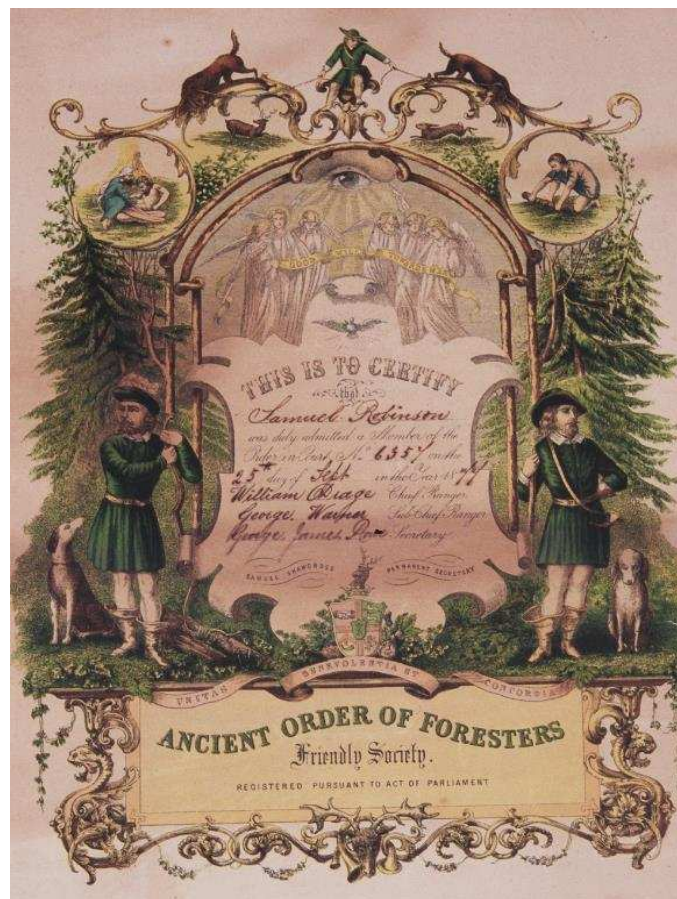
Most trades had an apron that was distinctive to them, butchers with blue stripes and fishmongers with red being one example that survived into the 20th century. Many other organisations also used aprons as an easy way to wear imagery. Aprons are most famously used by freemasons to be a symbolic representation of the stonemason apron.

6. Foresters / Forester / certificate

The Ancient Order of Foresters was formed in the 1700s.

The Forester was an idealised figure from English myth, he represented the honourable and noble ideal to which members should strive. Many fraternities used legendary figures or ideals in their symbolism and ritual. In the Foresters members would dress as the 'Forester' to process in the streets, often on horseback.

Certificates are issued by nearly every fraternity as a proof of membership. In many they were intended for prominent display in the home and were sometimes supplied framed. They are a rich source of art and symbolism. They normally have the name of the member, their lodge (or other body – fraternities could meet in groves, lodges, chapter and even tents) and the awarding body. Some organisations like the Hearts of Oak benefit society had no regalia or ceremony but still issued elaborate certificates.



Certificates almost always give the name of the fraternity and have room to include all the fraternity's distinctive symbolism. They are often invaluable in identifying small items such as jewels which may display a reduced version of the symbolism and often do not name the organisation.

7. **Rechabites** / tea service / all seeing eye

The Rechabites were a major temperance organisation (opposed to alcohol consumption).

Temperance organisations often printed their symbols on tea or coffee services. The possession of relatively high worth items such as bone china emphasised the saving in money and increase in respectability that abstention from alcohol was felt to give to members.



The All Seeing Eye – this has been widely used as a reminder that God watches over us and sees everything we do. It also occurs in a religious context, often in a triangle representing the Trinity of God the father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit. Today it is often associated with freemasonry but this is only one of the many organisations to use it, so its presence can mislead.

8. **Druids / oak tree / medal**

The Druid orders started in the late 1700s as a national order. They looked back to the misunderstood early history of England and saw the Druids as an early monotheistic religion cruelly destroyed by the Roman invasion. The two main orders found in objects are the Ancient Order of Druids (AOD) which was a fraternity with ritual and charitable collecting and the United Ancient Order of Druids (UAOD) which split from it and became a working class friendly society. Note that these orders are not the same sorts of Druids as those involved with Eisteddfods or new age ceremonies.

Druids, in legend, met in Oak groves and oak leaves or trees are common on most items used by the Druid orders. The sickle, used to cut down mistletoe was also a characteristic emblem of all the druid orders and here is resting on the bottom of the medal. The Greek letters TD (tau, delta) were used by the Ancient Order of Druids to represent the legendary Druid 'Togo Dubilinus' and are unique to that order.

Commemorative medals were given out by many fraternities as awards or souvenirs of events. These were sometimes adapted to be worn as here with the crudely added hole for a thread.



9. **Free Gardeners / Pruning knife / jewel**

The Free Gardeners are one of the oldest fraternities and seem to have begun in Scotland. The earliest rituals date from the 1720s. They developed as a benefit society, losing their aristocratic membership to the freemasons relatively early on. The symbolism related to the Garden of Eden from the Biblical Book of Genesis and the four rivers described as flowing from it. The ritual referenced Adam, Noah and Solomon.

The pruning knife, representing both gardening and the need to 'prune' bad habits and impulses, is the most obvious sign of a Free Gardener item. It is often combined with the square and compasses but the Gardeners are not a masonic organisation.

Badges, termed 'jewels' are worn by all fraternities. They show membership, indicate progression and are used to commemorate events. This example shows that the member has been the head of his Free Gardener lodge. The ring allows it to be hung from a ribbon or a collar.



10. **Order of the Phoenix / Phoenix / sceptre**

The Order of the Totally Abstinent Sons of the Phoenix was a temperance organisation. It split a number of times and had both female and juvenile divisions. It was based in the South of England. The various splits had names like the United Juvenile Order and the Original Grand Order.

The Phoenix, symbolising rebirth, was used by this organisation to represent the new start in life for people who gave up drink.



Sceptres are used by royalty and senior members of the army and royal court. Fraternities sometimes adopted these for members holding office. They usually have a decorative top with symbolism of the organisation.

11. **Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes / colour coding / clay pipe**

The RAOB was set up by stage hands in London as a trade association. It quickly became popular and developed a national structure. It was charitable in nature but not a friendly society as although members gave money they had no automatic right to support. The original ceremonies were intended to be 'fun'; its name derives from a music hall song 'Chasing the Buffalo' and its first ceremony is the Kangaroo Degree. (This apron does indeed show two kangaroo)

Colours are often significant in fraternities. In the Buffaloes red indicates the 'Knight Order of Merit' and sky blue 'Roll of Honour'. The jewels for these degrees are also shown in the photo. The Oddfellows have a colour coded series of ritual ending in the Purple Degree. In freemasonry sky blue indicates lodge members and dark blue senior ranks.

In the Buffaloes during the ceremony marking each change of level a clay pipe, wrapped in silk of the appropriate colour, is broken over the member's shoulder. In the first degree there is no ribbon but it is traditional for all present to sign the pipe as a memento. Pipes also exist with moulded decoration for fraternities. These were commercially produced for sale to members.



12. **Shepherds LOAS / lamb and flag / collarette**

The Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds Ashton Unity was formed in 1826 by 12 men at the Friendship Inn at Ashton under Lyme. By 1914 it had 143,00 members. The title 'loyal' was a deliberate signal to the authorities of honourable and patriotic intention and the shepherds were those in the Christmas story in the Bible.

The Lamb and Flag is a Christian emblem but was also used by some fraternities to represent the members as being under the care of a 'Good Shepherd'

In addition to wide collars, organisations sometimes had collarettes, these were narrow and often to allow jewels to be worn close to the collar of the member. This was a way to allow more than one jewel to be worn and still be seen. It is an idea borrowed from the national orders of knighthood where the neck badge was worn in this way with formal dress. They can also replace collars as here, being more comfortable to wear.



13. **Shepherds (Forester) / shepherds crook / pouch**

Many fraternal organisations had 'inner orders'. These were sometimes exclusive to certain groups within the organisation but the Ancient Order of Shepherds within the Order of Foresters were simply a way to pay additional dues and receive higher levels of benefits. This, compared to the Ashton Unity, is one of many cases of separate organisations having similar names and symbolism.

The shepherd's crook is a simply drawn or embroidered shorthand for a shepherd and his flock.

The pouch is an unusual item and copies the bag carried by shepherds when nursing lambs. It was probably made either for use in ritual or as part of a costume for use in public processions.



14. **Sons of Temperance** / collar / photograph

The Sons of Temperance started in the USA but were introduced to England in the 1840s as part of the emerging temperance movements. They still exist.

Not a simple symbol but fraternities diverged from the shapes used by civic and royal bodies to produce collars of distinctive shapes. These typically fastened in front with a rosette bearing imagery relating to the organisation, sometimes as a medal stamped design applied to the rosette. These shapes are very useful to identify organisations in group photographs where the more detail symbolism is hard to see.



Photographs are an important way to identify organisations. Members were proud of their status and membership, especially when working class and unlikely to take part in the civic life of their towns. Many organisations paraded on annual feast days and pictures of these events are important in the social history of the locations concerned.

15. **Knights of the Golden Horn / Monogramme / Gauntlet**

The Knights of the Golden Horn were an inner order of the RAOB, with all members at the level of Knight Order of Merit or above. They later split into an independent fraternity and still meet.

Simple monogrammes are often found on regalia. They can relate (as here) to the name of the organisation or to mottos that it uses.



Some fraternities used gauntlets, gloves with reinforced cuffs, to reflect their trade origins. These later evolved into separate cuffs used to show symbolism. Gloves could still be worn but they became separate.

16. United Female Friendly Society / pole brass / print

Women only fraternities existed from the late 1700s. These paraded behind bands as early as the 1840s and form a gendered identity and public presence that often surprises those that associate this sort of activity with the much later campaigns for womens' suffrage. Some of these organisations used the term brother rather than sister and so it can be difficult to identify regalia when it is without provenance.

Fraternal societies in processions often carried brass emblems on long wooden poles. Their tops often survive but seldom with the pole. Ribbons were often used to decorate the poles.



Commercial prints and book illustrations are a primary source for fraternities. This example of the Female Friendly Society dates from the 1840s. Female wages were generally lower than those of men so female societies often had poorer quality or home made regalia.

17. **Loyal Orange order / William of Orange / regalia of the Royal Black Preceptory**

Fraternities could also express identity around religious and political belief. The Orange Order was formed in the late 1700s to support Protestant loyalty to the Hanoverian monarchs. William of Orange riding a horse appears on many Orange Order items. The King invited to Britain to replace the Catholic dynasty he remains a key figure in Protestant legend. The order became known for processions and also developed inner orders of the Royal Arch Purple and the Royal Black Preceptory.



The regalia shows imagery that appears to be masonic (Square and Compasses), Oddfellow (three links), masonic knight Templar (the skull in a triangle) among other images and the colour is not what you might expect from the Orange Order. This makes the point that when deciding on the identity of an item it is essential to consider the context in which a symbol is used.

18. Friendly Society / Image of a meeting / Loving Cup

The Loving Cup is an item used in ceremonial dining. A toast is drunk by a member while those each side of them turn outwards to guard him. The cup then passes to the next member on the table. It comes from the Livery Companies and societies of the elite but was, and is, used by many fraternities to help bond members. They can be in precious metal but normally for fraternities they are in cheaper ceramic.



The society for which this was made is unknown but its meeting is depicted on the cup. Many fraternal societies, especially friendly societies, were small and have left few physical traces.

19. Loyal United friends / crown / glass window

Fraternities were a means for arriving communities to integrate and obtain financial support. The Loyal United Friends was initially Jewish and set up in a house on Princelet Street in the East End of London. Its symbolism suggests that it later admitted Christians.

The Crown, emblem of royal power, is used by many fraternities. They had no authority to do so and it is normally in the context of loyalty to the state and to the country. At a time when working class organisations were regarded with suspicion as being a possible start to revolution this was an important visual statement.



Rooms where these organisations met often had special fittings or decoration. This engraved glass panel may have been from one of these rooms. We are not entirely sure of its function. This is normal as many fraternities did not write down a full guide to their activities. We are still learning and discovering.

20. **United Patriots Benefit Society / Clasped hands / collar**

The United Patriots Benefit Society was the fraternal arm of the Chartists, a political movement.



The clasped hands are present on many fraternal items, representing brotherhood and mutual support. They are sometimes thought to represent the 'grip' that many fraternities used to allow members to identify each other but this would not be accurately depicted.

21. Transport and General Workers Union / bee skep / sash

Trades Unions grew out of the fraternal movement and for many years continued their traditions including parading banners, wearing regalia and having ritual.

The Beehive or 'bee skep' (to the right) represents hard work and shared purpose based on what people observed in the life of a bee colony. This image appears on many fraternal objects.

Sashes were worn by officers in the army and members of orders of knighthoods. Borrowed by fraternities they were a means of showing symbolism that did not involve a trade apron. They could be woven, printed or, as here, embroidered. This sash has the handshake and beehive common to many fraternities but also a 1930s London trolley bus to show the link to transport. Earlier versions depicted horses.



Some other common symbols and the reasons for them:

All these organisations had officers that carried out practical or ceremonial functions. Many of the images used to show their rank were common across them and do not, of themselves, indicate the organisation. Among them are:

22 Crossed quills – symbolising writing and used for the secretary



23. Key – symbolising security and used by treasurers



Many organisations also borrowed imagery from religion which related to virtues. (others, including the Foresters were so determined to be secular that attempts to include bible stories in their imagery were resisted).

The theological virtues

These are depicted on a mourning apron from the Oddfellows. These would be worn during funerals and a guaranteed funeral was one of the key benefits of friendly society membership.

Faith with a cross

Hope with an anchor

Charity, often holding children but here with food and drink being offered.



Sun, moon and seven stars

Earlier periods believed the universe centred on the earth and was relatively simple. This group represents that universe.

Sources:

Two accredited museums specialise in the symbolism and history of fraternal organisations. Some of the surviving organisations have museums but they are not always accessible to the public.

Library and Museum of Freemasonry

www.freemasonry.london.museum

The People's History Museum in Manchester

www.phm.org.uk

The Shire book 'Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies' by Victoria Solt Dennis ISBN-10: 0747806284 remains the only obtainable guide to the objects of this field of study.