

The Schaw Statutes (1598 & 1599)

William Schaw (c. 1550–1602)

William Schaw was a Scottish Courtier, Architect, and Master of Works to King James VI of Scotland (later James I of England).

William Schaw's key role was "As Master of Works", he was responsible for all royal building projects, castles, and palaces, giving him authority over the operative stonemasons (working craftsmen).

Schaw is considered a crucial figure in the development of modern Freemasonry due to his efforts to organize and standardize the Scottish stonemasons' craft.

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The Schaw Statutes are two key documents (1598 and 1599) issued by Schaw as the General Warden of the master stonemasons. They were intended to reform and regulate the trade.

The Schaw Statutes transformed the stonemasons' lodges from loose trade guilds into a structured, self-governing system, providing the fundamental administrative and organizational framework for the future rise of modern Freemasonry.

This formalized Lodge Structure, standardized the rules, hierarchy (Wardens, Deacons, Masters), and governance of the masons' lodges (meeting places). The statutes set clear rules for apprenticeship terms (seven years), qualifications, and entry fees. It required masters to be competent, prohibited them from taking work they couldn't complete, and enforced safety regulations with penalties for violations.

The statutes also mandated that lodges keep written records, making them fixed, permanent institutions. The 1599 statute included a requirement for masons to be examined in the "Art of Memory", hinting at the more symbolic / esoteric aspects that would develop into Speculative Masonry.

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Every Freemason who spends time reading about the history of the craft will eventually ask himself the same questions. When and where did Freemasonry start?

The origins of Freemasonry belong to a time when record-keeping and academic discipline were 'questionable' at best. A time when the vast majority of people could neither read nor write, and as a result, the history of the Craft has been open to imaginative interpretation and wild theory through the centuries.

Despite this, there is one individual that stands out as its Principal Architect, the 'Master of Works' to King James VI of Scotland. The Father of Modern Freemasonry, William Schaw.

Today most Freemasons are familiar with the date 1717, being the year that the Grand Lodge of England was formed. The first of its kind in the world, however, often misquoted by masonic historians as being the birth of modern speculative Freemasonry. As a date however, it has only minor importance in the overall development of Freemasonry which existed long before these four lodges met within the 'Goose and Gridiron Tavern' in St Paul's Churchyard.

A hundred or so years prior to this were very aptly named 'Scotland's Century' in David Stevenson's work 'The Origins of Freemasonry'.

In Scotland, we find the most extensive collection of Masonic records to be found anywhere. The earliest attempts at organising lodges at a national level, the earliest use of the word 'lodge' in the modern masonic sense and the earliest evidence that these were permanent institutions along with the oldest surviving minute books and other records of these lodges - something we can attribute directly to William Schaw.

Following the 'Union of the Crowns' when James VI of Scotland became James I of England uniting both Kingdoms with a single monarch in 1603, Scotland still retained its own parliament, monetary system, laws, religion and Freemasonry.