

A NEW LOOK AT THE CHARTER OF COMPACT

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We have met in open Convocation for the best part of 230 years by authority of a document entitled the Charter of Compact.

It is dated 22 July 1766 and is available for you to inspect in our library and museum in this building. If you do, you will note that the date has been altered to 1767 - with a few additional changes.

In 1951 Comp J Dashwood published an article in the transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge entitled The falsification of the Charter of Compact. His claim was that the change of date was a falsification perpetrated by a member of the Premier Grand Lodge - probably its Grand Secretary, Samuel Spencer - to avert great embarrassment to the members of the Craft. The Premier Grand Lodge had consistently and overtly objected to the Royal Arch. Thus the appointment of Lord Blayney, Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge, as First Grand Principal of the newly formed Excellent Grand & Royal Chapter, so Bro Dashwood states, must have been highly embarrassing. The change of date to a year later would show Lord Blayney now to be a Past Grand Master and acting in his private capacity, so to speak.

This theory of falsification has remained unchallenged to date, and this morning I would like to put before you an alternative possibility: that far from being a subversive and illicit act, the change of date to the Charter of Compact was an overt, deliberate and approved act to reflect correctly events as they were occurring.

There are three major flaws in Bro Dashwood's theory.

First, the question of motive: the Charter of Compact was intended for and available to members of the Royal Arch only. What would be the point of altering the Charter of Compact supposedly to alleviate the embarrassment of members of the Craft, when this document would not be accessible to them?

Secondly, that of membership: Grand Chapter consisted entirely of members of the Premier Grand Lodge - the Antients practising the Royal Arch as a 4th Degree. More importantly this membership consisted of a large number of high ranking and distinguished Masons from the Premier Grand Lodge. Not just Lord Blayney himself but also names such as Dunckerley, Heseltine, Galloway and French amongst others, as well as Samuel Spencer himself, the Grand Secretary. Surely the change to the Charter of Compact, if it were a falsification, would have been intended for the hierarchy of the Premier Grand Lodge. The hierarchy, however, were already converted to Royal Arch Masonry and any such intent would have been defeated.

Lastly, the matter of opportunity: when and how were the alterations to the Charter of Compact executed? If you do inspect the Charter, you will find it to be a stupendous and impressive document. Complex and elaborate, highly decorative, illuminated with gold highlight. The changes that have been made are delicate and intricate. The dates on the jewels along the side of the Charter have also been altered and the letter "P" has been inserted in front of "Grand Master". These could not have been carried out in a hurry. How was the Charter removed from the hands of the members of the Royal Arch? Is it possible nobody noticed its removal, absence or return? Was there collusion between Craft and Royal Arch members? There are too many questions left unanswered in Comp Dashwood's theory of falsification.

The alternative possibility, I would like to suggest, rests on the fact that Lord Blayney was only exalted into the Royal Arch on the 11 of June 1766. He was, apparently, immediately appointed 1st Grand Principal and entered into a Compact with the Companions of the Order. In their enthusiasm, I believe, the Companions were optimistic in expecting to have the physical Charter, properly drafted and executed, by the next quarterly convocation but one, namely on 22 July 1766, only five very short weeks away.

When the meeting was held on that date, I believe, the Charter of Compact was simply not ready. There is a distinct possibility that the Charter was not ready for several of the subsequent meetings and that Francis Flowers, the Grand Scribe, had to make the rounds in order to obtain the signatures of those named in the document.

When the Charter was finally properly and legally executed with the final signature, we were already in 1767. The change of date was intended merely to reflect that fact, with the consent, knowledge and approval of those who were aware. This would explain why there is no mention of the Charter of Compact in the minutes of Grand Chapter for 22 July 1766 or at any other date.

Companions, we sit in comfort in this wonderful temple secure in the confidence of a well administered and successful Supreme Grand Chapter. It cannot be easy for us to visualise and appreciate the difficulties of the Supreme Grand Chapter in its embryonic days, well over two centuries ago: within a few short months of its formation there were resignations from Grand Chapter, a lack of attendance and even two expulsions. Meetings were called for and never held. Lord Blayney's appointment as First Grand Principal is unrecorded. The scribe took on the responsibilities also of the treasurer and a general atmosphere of mismanagement is prevalent. A change of date, as I suggest, overtly applied to a document merely to reflect events without recording them, would not be surprising

Companions, Masonic research, indeed all research, is carried out along two parallel lines: on the one hand the discovery of new source documentation to add and fill gaps in our knowledge. On the other hand, the use of existing material to enhance our views of our own history and look at known facts from a different perspective.

This needs imagination, I hope, this morning Companions, I have stirred your imagination.