

The Lewis

The stonemason's lewis is a device used in raising and lowering stone blocks in the course of building, as exemplified by the smooth ashlar in the derrick on the Senior Warden's pedestal. The Romans in their day are thought to have used it in the building of the Flavian Amphitheatre, and the Saxons in the building of Whitby Abbey in the seventh century. There is ground for believing that the device was employed in putting into place some of the more massive stones of Hadrian's Wall or Roman Wall (A.D. 120-209), for what appear to have been lewis holes can still be seen in parts built by the Roman Emperor Severus, who heavily repaired the wall in A.D. 209.

Statements that the lewis derived its name because it was used by an architect in the service of Louis XIV are wide of the mark. Documents of the years 1352, 1357, and 1368, reproduced in L. F. Salzman's book just mentioned, give the word lewis in some of its early forms (lowys, lowettis, lussis) while a sixteenth-century drawing in the same book shows a lifting-rope attached to a stone by means of the lewis.



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Above: the steel wedges, spacer, and bolt; below a cut-away view showing the Lewis in position ready for raising or lowering the stone block

The stonemason's lewis is a grapnel, for which a specially shaped socket needs to be cut in the top face of the block of hard, strong stone that is to be lifted. (A lewis might break away in a heavy block of soft stone.). Two opposite sides or ends of the socket are undercut, *not all four* as often pictured. Two projecting wedge-shaped, tapered steel keys are introduced into the socket, and between them is inserted a parallel steel spacer, which spreads the wedges into the undercut parts; then a shackle-pin, or bolt, is passed through the upper extensions of all three, and provides a hold for the lifting chain. The illustration clearly shows how the device works. The precise purpose of the lewis is to allow the hoisting chain of the derrick, or crane, to raise the stone and then lower it into its exact, final position in the wall, which could not be effected if chains or ropes passed underneath the stone. When the stone is in its exact place, the shackle-bolt is removed, thus allowing the spacing piece to be withdrawn, and then the two wedges.

Somebody has written that the lewis enables the operative "to lift the heaviest stones with a comparatively trifling expenditure of physical power," but this is a complete misconception, the lewis being nothing more than a convenient method of attaching the hoisting chain to the stone.

The Lewis as a Symbol

Obviously the lewis is an appropriate symbol of strength—a double symbol, inasmuch as its name has been given to the son of a mason, his duty being to bear the burden and heat of the day that his parents may rest in their old age, thus rendering the evening of their lives peaceful and happy. This double symbolism is mentioned in some old catechisms, but the usual Craft ritual does not refer to it, although the device has a place in Mark masonry. The American Craft system, except for the State of Pennsylvania, does not know it. From a late-eighteenth-century catechism comes the following:

Q. What do we call the son of a Freemason?

A. A Lewis.

Q. What does that denote?

A. Strength.

Q. How is a lewis depicted in a Mason's lodge?

A. As a cramp of metal (etc.).

Q. What is the duty of a lewis ... to his aged parents?

A. To bear the heavy burden (etc., etc.) so as to render the close of their days happy and comfortable.

Q. His privilege for so doing?

A. To be made a Mason before any other person, however dignified by birth, rank, or riches, unless he, through complaisance, waives this privilege.

There is good ground for believing that the lewis originally was the first son born to a man after that man had become a freemason. Apparently the lewis was used as a subject for moralizing in the eighteenth-century lodges, for the minutes of St Paul's Lodge, now No. 43, of Birmingham, report the offer "of a very curious and valuable triangle, perfect ashlar and luis, but it being refused as a present, it was unanimously agreed to pay £2 2 0 as a small compensation for same." We find the lewis keys

depicted on a pierced silver jewel of about 1760, and they are a feature of the curious old engraving (see Plate XXII) in which the hands of the effigy are the lewis keys, while a smooth ashlar fitted with a lewis bolt rests on the square pavements.

The curious fable of how Hiram Abif attained the privilege of being a lewis is recounted in an earlier section dealing with the Hiram tradition.

The Son of a Mason

How did 'lewis' come to mean the 'son of a mason'? It does not answer the question to say that the device supplied the name, and inevitably suggested the symbol, because the device itself appears to have gone out of use in the English operative craft, and it is difficult to find mention of the word lewis in early eighteenth-century print. In France the device was known in 1676, in which year it is to be found in an architectural work, but not by that name. Mason members of the wellknown French fraternity, the Compagnonnage, used it and called it a 'louve,' possibly because a *louve* is a 'she-wolf,' and the grip of the lewis might be likened to the grip of a wolf's fangs. In course of time the device came to be known as a *louveton*, and had a plural form *louveteaux*, or, more probably, the steel wedges came to be known as *louveteaux*, the literal meaning of which is 'male wolf cubs.' The Compagnonnage, being a trade fraternity, with liabilities to its members in their days of sickness and old age, extended its charitable care to the orphan sons of its mason members; these boys came to be known as *louveteaux*-wolf cubs. Thus by this time the French masons had arrived at a ready-made symbol, which English speculative masonry adopted; but, in spite of all the learned research that has been applied to the subject, we do not know how or when the word *louveteaux* became 'lewis,' *if it ever did*. Any readers keen enough to follow up the matter should study the later pages of *The Wilkinson Manuscript*, edited by Douglas Knoop, G. P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer, with the assistance of many skilled colleagues. This pamphlet, which contains the most serious attempt so far made to explain how the English word 'lewis' was derived, dwells upon the possibility of a natural development from the French words above given.

But, with all deference to the above authorities, a digression must now be made to consider the possibility of a rather different theory. At one time in some districts of Scotland an ex-apprentice who failed to gain admission into the fraternity was known as a 'lewis,' or 'lose,' or 'loss'; the difference between him and the cowan, if there was any at all, could hardly have been worth mentioning. The Harris MS. No. 1, dating to the second half of the seventeenth century, insists that "You shall not make any Mold, Square, or Rule for any that is but a Lewis; a Lewis is such an one as hath served an Apprenticeship to a Mason but is not admitted afterwards according to this manner and Custom of making Masons." Naturally, the unfortunate lewis, or cowan-lewis, might have been, and probably was, the son of a mason. Who knows? But he had ceased to be an *honoured* son, although the fault was not necessarily in him but quite possibly in the trade system.

The present writer's conjecture is that Anderson, on behalf of the English speculatives, took the emblem from the French. In his hands *louveton* and *louveteaux* became 'lewis'; the 'male wolf cub' became the 'eldest son of a mason'; but, whereas the cub had received its sustenance from the fraternity, the lewis was now expected to sustain his parents. The fact that the original lewis was not certainly a mason's son would not worry him. By uniting the French emblem with a Scottish term, and garbling both of them, Anderson was able to give the speculatives a new and attractive symbol, and ultimately to introduce more correctly, reintroduce---to the English operatives a mechanical device whose purpose was new to most of them, and whose name may have been new to them all. Then came a stroke of fortune! A child was about to be born to her Serene Highness Augusta, the wife of Frederick, Prince of Wales, who was initiated into masonry on November 5, 1737. There was in existence at the time "The Deputy Grand Master's Song," and on the occasion of the Prince being made a mason Bro. Gofton added this special stanza to it:

Again let it [*the bumper*] pass to the ROYAL lov'd NAME,
Whose glorious Admission has crown'd all our Fame:
May a LEWIS be born, whom the World shall admire,
Serene as his Mother, August as his Sire.

We can safely draw the inference that Gofton knew of the lewis as a Masonic symbol, and was perpetrating a pun, and a particularly good one, too, bearing in mind that the Prince of Wales's second name was Lewis. Equally safely, we can conclude that the use of the word in Gofton's verse fastened itself upon the imagination of the Brethren in those rather obsequious days, and did more than anything else could have done to make the emblem popular in the Craft. Anderson, in preparing his Constitutions Of 1738, embodied the new verse and chorus, the latter in slightly edited form. This conjecture may contain an error which time will reveal, but meanwhile the likelihood must not be overlooked that a Scots term of reproach, applied to an unfortunate apprentice, has been promoted to be a term of honour. Cowans, loses, and lewises-all in the classes of inferiority! What an ironical position if it should prove that the speculatives' honoured lewis-the support of his father, the hoisting key that never fails to grip the stone is only one variety of the poor old operative cowan!

A Lewis's Privileges

Although the name 'lewis' was not well known in England until late 1730's, it does not follow that there was anything new in the privileges which came to be afforded to the eldest son of a mason. In the Aberdeen operative lodge in the seventeenth century a member's eldest son, or the husband of his eldest daughter, was excused on entry from the need to make the customary gift of apron and gloves to every member, and there was a custom in the old guilds for a Master's eldest son to have his passage into the fraternity eased by the reduction or remission of fees. That benefit does not apply in English speculative masonry, where the lewis's privilege amounts to nothing more than that of being entitled by custom, and not by rule, to be initiated before any other Candidate under consideration at the time; whereas, in the Scottish system, there is a rule by which "sons of Master Masons under Grand Lodge "may be initiated at the age of eighteen, and a custom in some lodges allowing reduced fees. The English custom is not without a few exceptions, as in Anchor and Hope Lodge, Bolton, No. 37, where the lewis is admitted at a reduced fee.

Lewisa !

Readers may smile at the way in which the word 'lewis' has been bestowed on a mason's daughter. For example, the minutes of the old lodge meeting in 1739 at the Turk's Head, Fleet Street (it is now No. 20), record: "Our Brother Delarant presented the lodge with a bowl of punch on his having a Lewisa born, and her health was drunk in form."

Apparently, too, in some rituals of about 1770 there was this toast:

"To all our royal and loyal, great and little Lewises wherever dispersed, not forgetting the Luisas."