

What Is a Lewis?

From the New Orleans Scottish Rite Trestleboard, Nov/Dec 1998

A lewis is an operative tool, Masonic symbol, or young man adopted by a Lodge. A lewis is an instrument in operative masonry. It is a cramp iron, which is inserted into a cavity prepared for that purpose in any large stone, so as to give attachment to a pulley and hook whereby the stone may be conveniently raised to any height and deposited in its proper position.

The contrivance was known to the Romans, and several taken from old ruins are now in the Vatican. In addition, in the ruins of Whitby Abbey in England, which was founded by Oswy, King of Northumberland, in 685, large stones were discovered with the necessary excavation for the insertion of a lewis. The word is likely derived from the old French *livis*, any tool for lifting. The modern French call the instrument a *louve*.

In the English system of Masonry, the lewis is found on the tracing board of the Entered Apprentice, where it is used as a symbol of strength, because, by its assistance, the operative mason is enabled to lift the heaviest stones with a comparatively trifling exertion of physical power. It has not been adopted as a symbol by American Freemasons, except in Pennsylvania, where it receives the English interpretation.

The son of a Mason is, in England, called a Lewis, because it is his duty to support the sinking powers and aid the failing strength of his father. In the rituals of the middle of the last century he was called a *louffton*. From this the French derived their word *louveteau*, and call the daughter of a Mason a *louvetine*. *Louveteau* is probably derived directly from *louve*, the French name of the implement.

In Browne's Master Key, which is supposed to represent the Prestonian lecture, we have, in part, the following dialogue:

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 Freemason's Lodge?

A. As a cramp of metal, by which, when fixed into a stone, great and ponderous weights are raised to a certain height and fixed upon their proper bases, without which Operative Masons could not so conveniently do.

Q. What is the duty of a Lewis, the son of a Mason, to his aged parents?

A. To bear the heavy burden in the heat of the day and help them in time of need, which, by reason of their great age, they ought to be exempted from, 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.