

Masonic Membership Myths Debunked

John L. Belton, P.M.

This very useful article should be read by every Lodge member and Grand Lodge officer who is interested in the survival and future of the Fraternity. Bro. Belton destroys five popular myths about membership trends: 1. The popularity of Masonry reached an all-time peak after World War II; 2. The peak memberships of post-WW I and WW II were due to men returning from the armed forces and seeking a similar environment in which to socialize; 3. The major cause of the current loss of members is death; 4. The cause of today's smaller Lodges is the shortage of Candidates and is due to the state of the economy, a bad press for Freemasonry, etc., etc.; 5. Our problems are not the same as those (insert the name of any Lodge, District, Province, or Grand Lodge). It's axiomatic that if you want to solve a problem, the first step is to know what problem you're trying to solve. This article is a major help in that effort.

I don't have a copy of Heredom No. 9 - only No. 5 (inscribed to me by Brent Morris after visiting Washington in 1998.

This paper is by Patrick Byrne MA PM and contains many of John's observations:

I am indebted to M. B. for providing details of the membership trends in Freemasonry.

From 1900 to 1960 there was a steady growth in membership of the Craft, apart from brief periods of decline during World Wars 1 and 2, and during economic recessions. In the early 1960s, some 20,000 Grand Lodge Certificates were being issued annually to new Masons; by contrast, in 2007 only 8,103 certificates were issued and this downward trend continues. The 2007 figure, equates to around one new member per lodge per year.

The effect of these numbers on Freemasonry can be seen from the number of new Lodges consecrated. Between 1900 and 1914 about 60 new lodges a year were consecrated. During the periods of both wars recruitment levelled off but following both wars the rate increased dramatically. During the 1920s the average was well over 100 new lodges a year and between 1945 and 1950 the average was over 180. The rate slowed down in the 1950s but was still over

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60. There is now a net decline in the total number of Lodges year on year and the total is now 403 less than it was in 2000. It is commonly assumed that the large increase after the wars was due to a wish on the part of the survivors to continue the comradeship they experienced during the war. Whether this is true or not we should make more of the masculine need for comradeship.

Here in Surrey our membership has dropped from 19,500 in 1967 to 9,000 today. This is a reduction of some 50% and yet the total number of lodges in Surrey has hardly fallen. Clearly a consolidation of lodges **must** take place and it seems axiomatic that this downsizing will be enhanced if it is managed. The fact that lodges are independent does not diminish the case for producing a schedule of Lodges at risk and making that list available to those Lodges on it. Clinging to the wreckage seems, to me, to be a very inferior option.

I have requested data for the above issue from our official visitor - but so far I have not had an acknowledgement of my three emails.

It would also help the process of retrenchment if Provincial Grand Lodge would hold a list of Lodges that are interested in amalgamation and make it available to other Lodges on application. This would enable discussions on amalgamation to start before it is too late. We should not underestimate the problems of amalgamation – such as – which lodge will hand in its warrant, who is going to be master, secretary, DC and all the other offices. Provincial Grand Lodge could assist this process by providing informal guidance.

While on the general area of matters outside the control of the Lodge – Provincial Grand Lodges do – from time to time – get applications for membership directly from the general public. There should be a transparent method by which these potential new members are passed to Lodges – with priority given to stable local lodges in need of new members.

The membership crisis poses many questions, and the first one, which must cross every enquiring mind is, “So what? This is the

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market in operation. No organisation can keep growing and a cull of the weaker Lodges was inevitable sooner or later.

If we accept this view and enjoy our Masonry we need only sit back and become one of a more select few. But, and it's a big "but", what if unknown socio-economic factors are at play which will one day sweep us away too. In that case we must examine our Freemasonry and see what – if anything – can be done to ensure the survival of our lodge.

In the past – when I have undertaken research – I have looked through the available research data to form a view before extending my researches into interesting areas. On the subject of Masonic membership, the available data are very thin on the ground. This is a remarkable observation about an organisation, which spends a quite inordinate amount of time and effort collecting and collating membership data.

There are a few despairing letters in Masonic magazines, noting our falling numbers, none of which appear to have been followed up by the commission of proper analysis. Indeed, the only academic quality research I have identified is in the magazine of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of the USA, Heredom, Volume 9, 2001:

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John is a Past Master of the Internet Lodge No 9659 and has a similar paper available in that lodge's library.

The Heredom paper can be found at - <http://www.lodgehope337.org.uk/lectures/belton%20L2.pdf>

Its conclusions are:

1. After WW2, a 12% smaller share of the male population, were choosing to be Freemasons, than after WW1.
2. After the two World Wars men started joining Freemasonry in ever smaller numbers soon after the end of the wars.

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3. It is not the death of older Freemasons that threatens the survival of Freemasonry but those who join and leave soon afterwards.
4. It is not the general climate of anti-masonry which is to blame for the decline in membership but the shorter length of stay of new Masons.

John Belton produced some astounding figures concerning lengths of membership:

	Year
	1945-49
	1950-54
	1955-59
	1960-64
	1965-69
	1970-74
	1975-79
	1980-84
	1985-89
	1990-94
Length	17.5
	20.8
	15.4
	14.8
	15.5
	12.5
	9.2
	7.8
	5.4
	4.1

This rate of attrition is almost a straight line pointing to an average length of stay of zero years by around 2005. Now we must acknowledge that the sample of lodges was very small at 8. However, we must also be concerned at the similarity of the data across the eight lodges and the fact that 3 of them are English.

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5. The final conclusion of this research is that – while a few lodges do “buck the trend” – they are exceptional and the trend of falling numbers is universal.

The message from this research is unequivocal. We must make our Freemasonry more attractive to new members – so that they will remain active – or Freemasonry will die out.

There is a caveat, which must be mentioned about this research. If you look back at lengths of membership from a single point in time then the earlier memberships will always be for longer periods because the newer members have only been members for a few years. I have drawn a dotted line on the graph based on corrected figures and it points to the same outcome – an average length of stay of zero years by the later date of around 2015. I have discussed this inbuilt bias with John Belton and this was his response:

I did stop doing any calculations nearer than 5 years from the date - because the figures were clearly not representative of anything much in such a short time scale. The case was 'proved' when I was getting high levels of leaving between 5 and 10 years. Of course the actual final 'dwell time in Freemasonry' gets bigger the longer one goes on with the study - but that is always going to be the case. The challenge was to find what I could do with data from individual lodges - the result is what my research showed. Sadly the problem of access to data is the perennial problem with this sort of research - one learns to make do!

Publication of the results produced many differing responses, initially much denial (I simply threw out the challenge - prove me wrong - please do try), then general acceptance. Has the work changed anything? Probably not, most Freemasons are allergic to change and they will try and stick to "we've always done it that way" until there is no way back. That dislike of change can be found at Grand Lodge, Provincial Grand Lodges and Lodges alike!

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I am sure you will all agree that these are depressing conclusions, but what I find most surprising is that this research has been around since 2001, I wonder how many here today were aware of it.

John Belton looked at other sociological research to try and identify what changes in society were causing the reduced popularity of Freemasonry. He concluded that, what John Galbraith called the “Culture of Contentment”, has a negative effect on Masonic membership. That is to say, the richer a society thinks it is (I said “thinks” because this theory is about perception rather than reality) then there is less need for anyone to become a Freemason.

This hypothesis suggests that Freemasonry is perceived by non-Masons rather like a Friendly Society in which case we can probably substitute the growth of the UK Welfare State for John Galbraith’s “Culture of Contentment”. Galbraith was American and they do not have a welfare state as we know it.

John Belton contends that his theory fits the swings in Masonic membership growth from its peak popularity in 1933 – after the Great Depression – to the present. His findings indicate that Freemasonry is cost sensitive and – more importantly – reward sensitive. That is to say, modern man will want to know what’s in it for him. This is a very non-Masonic sentiment but one which we will need to work with, if our order is to survive. On the plus side, in a year’s time we will be emerging from another deep recession and men may – once again – be looking for sanctuary.

I would like to make an important point. It appears, from John Belton’s conclusions that new masons join because they perceive there will be an advantage to them. The problem, for us is that Freemasonry’s benefits take time to permeate into new brethren. It follows that during the early days - if they feel that there are no obvious advantages, they will leave.

We have to find ways to retain new members during those early days.

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So, armed with some knowledge, where do we go from here? I believe we should start at the top.

I invite you to imagine yourself in the position of wanting to become a Mason, but you are not sure why. In this technological age you would probably turn to the United Grand Lodge of England's website. There you will find the following comment:

Its [Freemasonry's] constitutions and rules are available to the public. There is no secret about any of its aims and principles.

You would probably search the website to find out what these "aims" are; every organisation has "aims". If you look hard enough you will find this statement – the nearest I could find to a set of "aims".

Freemasonry is a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms, and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides.

I invite you to put yourself in the position of considering joining a Lodge and pose this question, "Would these words inspire you to go further?" You could delete "Freemasonry is" and insert "Cistercian Monks are" and no one would raise an eyebrow.

If, like me, you consider that Freemasonry has so much more to offer, then Grand Lodge must take a lead. What about mentioning:

Friendship;

Loyalty;

Companionship;

A peaceful sanctuary in an ever more threatening world;

Charitable giving;

A way to keep your mind active;

A chance to act – for aspiring thespians;

Male company and a good meal;

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Research Lodges for those interested in Knights Templar, Rosslyn Chapel etc;

Self awareness;

Self improvement.

Just a few of the tangible and intangible benefits that I have personally experienced and gained from Freemasonry, you must all have others. Perhaps we could create an “explanation of Freemasonry” that we can show to anyone who shows an interest in our order. Let **us** at least behave as if we do want others to join.

In the next section of this paper I will discuss the abovementioned issues, which might form the basis of an introduction to Freemasonry.

Let me start with friendship:

I have not been able to source research material for the UK, but Americans are quite close to us sociologically. According to a study in *American Sociological Review*; in 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide on matters of importance. By 2004, that number dropped to two, and one in four had no close confidants at all. Americans have a third fewer close friends and confidants than twenty years ago — a sign that people may be living lonelier, more isolated lives than in the past.

Why is this important?

There is a mounting body of evidence pointing out that all close social bonds are good for health.

Recent medical research has shown that while men tend to conform to the accepted "fight or flight" model in reaction to danger, isolation or anxiety - the release of the hormone oxytocin by women causes them to adopt a different strategy: they "tend and befriend".

Scientists now believe that the "tend and befriend" model could be one of the reasons why women consistently outlive men.

Marla Paul, author of [The Friendship Crisis](#) says: "Friends are not a luxury. They are essential." This should come as no surprise, we are brought up within the protection of a caring family and when we

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leave home there is a large hole in our lives and we need to find a substitute.

In other research, when people were asked “what gives meaning to your life”? The top answer was “friendship”.

It is no coincidence that everyone who responded to my questionnaire answered “friendship” or a synonym, such as comradeship, to the question, “what do you most like about Freemasonry”?

If you doubt the therapeutic value of Freemasonry to your health – enquire what are the requirements to live in one of our old peoples’ homes? When I asked, on behalf of my grandmother, some thirty years ago, it was having the ability to feed and dress oneself and be at least 85 years old.

The next item from above, is a peaceful sanctuary in an ever more threatening world.

In including this item I am drawing on my own experience. Before I retired, I would set off from Leicestershire – for a Lodge or Chapter meeting - sometimes after a very stressful day. I would spend the drive down to Surrey questioning my sanity for adding a 250 mile drive to my workload. The drive back was always the same. I would feel relaxed, happy and contented; it was as if I had journeyed down to a Surrey health spa for relaxation therapy.

Recent research suggests that this might also due to the “tend and befriend” hormone, oxytocin, but whatever it is, surely we can find someone who can put it in a bottle for new members.

Next is charity

I am one of those traditional Masons who miss the old days, when we did our bit for charity and basked in the knowledge that no one else knew what we had done. I know that we began to publicise our charitable work as a response to those who wished to denigrate our order, but I’m not sure that in making our charitable works public, we have accrued any benefit. It will certainly not attract new

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members, who have been brought up to believe that the state will take care of everything. There are other organisations, such as Rotary and the Lions, which concentrate more on charitable work than we do and they are losing members every bit as fast as us, supporting the conclusions of John Belton's research.

In expressing a personal view, I do not believe that we can ever return to the past, I wish simply to say that highlighting our charitable aims is not the way to gain new members. However, mentioning it gently, in passing, I suggest says more about us.

Next is a way to keep your mind active

There is so much research to show that the way to stave off dementia is to keep your mind active, that I will take it as read. We have all seen lodge secretaries and treasurers carrying out their duties well into their seventies. Then, because they feel they ought to allow others to serve, they hand over the baton and within a very few years they shuffle off to the Grand Lodge above.

There is a lifestyle pattern emerging which points to Freemasonry being good for longevity. Perhaps Grand Lodge would like to publish the ages at death of our members. I will have a modest bet that it is above the national average and even above our non-Masonic peer group.

The motto, "Join the Freemasons and live ten years longer", would solve our recruitment problems overnight.

Next is a chance to act

It is funny how the most unlikely ideas turn out to have potential. Our use of learned-by-heart ceremonial certainly gives us the confidence to address meetings and builds our self-esteem.

By way of confirmation on this point, I was discussing this paper with a Masonic friend and he said that from his point of view, the self improvement issue is important. He doubted whether he could

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have done as well in his professional life without the self-confidence he got from Freemasonry”.

What I hadn't realized, until I looked it up, was that it is becoming more difficult to get into amateur dramatics. This quote is from the Theatre Research International (2001), Published by Cambridge University Press:

Much of today's state-funded theatre, that ostracises the amateur, has its roots in early twentieth-century amateur/professional collaborations and grassroots activity in the inter-war years.

In other words, the amateur theatre is also suffering from the nation-state, which John Belton suggests is causing Freemasonry to contract. If we could attract enough aspiring amateur thespians we would solve our ritual problem at a stroke.

The repetitive nature of our ceremonies clearly is not to every new member's taste and the pressures of modern work make the learning of large tracts of ritual too threatening for some.

We have made a good start by breaking up the ceremony and involving more lodge members in its delivery. This has not only been welcomed by many lodge members but also commented on favourably by several visitors.

We should, though, recognise that today's youngsters all want to be TV stars. There appears to be an opportunity to publish, say, the first degree charge, and let interested men know that within Freemasonry, they can learn it by heart and deliver it to an appreciative audience.

This will not solve our recruitment problem on its own but it might encourage a few new members with a thirst for good ritual.

Before I pass to the next subject area, I must mention that not everyone likes performing ritual in public. Indeed, one brother reported that three people with whom he had discussed possible Masonic membership replied that the thought of doing ritual put them off.

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We must make it very clear to potential new brethren that they are under no obligation to go through the chair. In addition, we should avoid pressurising brethren to take office if they show reluctance.

There are other ways that a brother can, “make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge”, than by going through the chair. New brethren are only encouraged to study “such of the liberal arts and sciences as lie within their compass of attainment”. My own grandfather – who, to his eternal credit, brought me into this lodge some 40 years ago - was a fiercely proud Freemason for many years but never took office.

Now we come to male company and a good meal

The good meal is a somewhat English custom. Here in Surbiton we are hostage to the hall and I understand that if we don't eat here we cannot use the temples. The problem with the good meal is one of price or more accurately value for money and I will return to that in Part 2 of this paper.

Male company has been touched on earlier – it is comradeship or brotherhood. These are difficult concepts to articulate without falling foul of our discrimination laws but one explanation which I feel captures the masculine need to find our feminine side is:

Comradeship is the feminine virtues of affection, empathy, and caring transformed into acceptable masculine behaviour.

To me, Masonic friendship has no motive, only friendship for its own sake; and it is not new. The first book of Peter, in the Volume of the Sacred Law says:

Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

The feminine nature of comradeship captures the zeitgeist and should be attractive to modern men, we should not be afraid of acknowledging it.

Next comes the research Lodges for those interested in Knights Templar etc

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One of several aspects of Freemasonry – which I find baffling - is its reaction to the Knights Templar and the Da Vinci Code genre of books. When the question “How and when did Freemasonry start?” is posed on the Grand Lodge website, the answer is straightforward, “It is not known”.

If Grand Lodge really has no idea how we started why not open up the debate. Millions of men find it very interesting.

Perhaps this quote from another John Belton paper – Communication and Research versus Education published in *Ars Quatuor Coronati*, sums up the present position:

There is a big question-mark over whether research lodges consider that part of their remit is the dissemination of Masonic information to the world of Freemasons. All the online evidence is that they see the communication function as irrelevant. This seems oddly in contradiction to their founding ideals!

Self awareness and self improvement

Almost everything I have discussed so far points towards Freemasonry working positively to improve a brother's self esteem and self awareness.

Media stars such as Madonna, spend millions on Kaballah and other self improvement moral codes. Freemasonry has quite a lot of Kaballah built into its ritual and yet none of the attractions of Kaballah seem to rub off on us. There seems to be an opportunity here to raise our profile.

In conclusion

The introduction of mentors – to nurture new Masons – is clearly a sensible step. Modern man clearly needs a helping hand to get him through his early days as a brother, when the rewards are less than obvious.

However, unless there is a “virtuous learning circle” attached to this initiative, the chances of success are reduced. What do I mean by

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this statement? We all need to continually learn from experience. We need to know what makes new Masons unhappy and the most appropriate course of action to resolve their problem. Put another way, how should we modify our behaviour to reduce negative developments.

Grand Lodge has a 194 page guide for mentors on its website, which says that Provincial Grand Lodge mentors will hold regular feedback meetings to keep Lodge mentors abreast of best practice. This guide was issued in 2007 so it appears that this part of the mentoring initiative is not yet in place in Surrey.

A simpler alternative would be for Provincial or Grand Lodge websites to have a section where mentors can record the sorts of problems they have experienced with new Masons, and what strategies successfully overcame the problems; also, those that failed.

Mentors could email in their experiences and Grand Lodge or one Province could collate them into a help page, which mentors will be able to access. I, and my fellow older brethren, are moving into uncharted waters, we need to be advised of the best practices to help us to adjust to these new challenges.

Most of the points made above will require action at Grand or Provincial Grand Lodge level if they are to reach those who might want to join our ranks. My own experience and that of John Belton suggests that neither Grand Lodge nor Provincial Grand Lodge will do much – if anything – to publicly assist this process.

It is not my role to suggest how they might move forward but I can point to a group of men who can.

In 2007, four lecturers from the University of Wolverhampton Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group and Wolverhampton Business School published a paper entitled - Can Brotherhood be Sold Like Soap...Online?

Finally, is there anything we can do as a lodge?

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This paper has so far shown, in painful broad brush strokes, what is most likely to happen to Freemasonry if we do nothing. The way to survive is to recruit new members and to change sufficiently to make them want to remain active members. As I have just mentioned, the likelihood of practical support from above is remote and so we are on our own. This should not stop us from asking for help but the harsh reality is that the future of this lodge is probably entirely in our own hands.

How we might change our lodge will form the Part 2 of this paper, when I will present the findings of the questionnaire. This will not uncover any golden bullet – rather our need to constantly identify, remove or diminish the obstacles to new members joining and remaining.

It is, though, a fact that there are already obstacles which stand in the way of any Mason bringing in a new member. To start with, it is generally understood that any brother who introduces a new member is responsible for his subsequent behaviour. This clearly originates with the charge-after-initiation, from the words;

“... and by refraining from recommending anyone to a participation of our secrets unless you have strong grounds to believe that by a similar fidelity he will ultimately reflect honour on your choice”.

This can be a deterrent for anyone – especially a younger Mason – to introducing anyone. If they get it wrong there is the fear that their reputation will be damaged. If they get it right no one will remember that they introduced the successful brother. We must make it clear to all younger brethren that once the lodge votes on a potential new member and takes steps to initiate them, then from that moment, the lodge accepts responsibility for the new member and his future behaviour within the lodge. In other successful organisations, members who bring in new members get rewarded not punished.

Furthermore, we give little guidance to our younger brethren on what to say to someone who expresses an interest in the craft. Perhaps this paper might form the starting point of a written

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presentation that could be given to a potential new member to read. Let's be honest, we have no secrets that aren't already available on the internet, and there is everything to be gained from being more open.

We clearly need to make our meetings more interesting and we need to introduce more new members. Yes, a number will leave early but our presence here today confirms that some men do find Freemasonry compelling, even in its current form.

In short, we need to find ways of identifying people like us.

That may prove impossible and so we must reconcile ourselves, initially, to a larger throughput of new members; quite a few of whom will leave early. If we continue to insist on "quality" over "quantity" – whatever that means - we will slip gently into oblivion. I have seen hundreds of new Masons and in my experience some of the most unlikely candidates turn into the very best Masons and vice versa.

In making this suggestion, I am emphatically not proposing that we drop such tenets as the requirement to believe in a Supreme Being; rather, if a Mason knows someone about whom he is not absolutely sure, he should allow some leeway and give the potential Mason the benefit of the doubt. Freemasonry is – as we now know - self selecting. If a new member does not like us he will leave.

Freemasonry is about altruism. Modern social pressures are creating harder, harsher and more selfish men – we simply have to take a pragmatic approach to new members or there will be no suitable candidates left.

If we seriously believe that Freemasonry is a force-for-good then we should trust its teachings to turn a few more rough ashlar into smooth ones.

ACTION POINTS

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YES

NO

1

Request Grand Lodge and Provincial Grand Lodge to make their websites more inviting to potential new members, and to distribute new applicants fairly.

ü

2

A help page should be set up describing mentors' experiences in alleviating the problems faced by new members.

ü

3

The barriers to introducing new members should be removed.

ü

4

An explanation of Freemasonry should be prepared emphasising the benefits to potential new members.

ü

A HISTORY OF BRITISH FREEMASONRY 1425-2000

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CENTRE FOR RESEARCH INTO FREEMASONRY AND
FRATERNALISM

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A HISTORY OF BRITISH FREEMASONRY 1425-2000

There is this wonderful shibboleth that Freemasonry never changes. As somebody who for 28 years made a daily advancement in the Grand Lodge library, researching for myself, helping others with their researches, I know the greatest myth in Freemasonry is this one: that nothing has ever changed.

John Hamill

Let me begin with a confession. I trained as a historian, but I am not sure that I ever really was a historian. My career is defined by libraries and archives. As a postgraduate, in studying the records of the rising of 1381 at the National Archives, I was fascinated not so much by the event itself but rather by the way it seemed to shift, change and ultimately disappear in the textual gaps and interstices of the documentary record. During twenty years at the British Library, I was struck as much as anything by the way in which our understanding of history is profoundly shaped by the intervention of librarians and curators. The most fascinating aspect of the past six years for me has been the further exploration of another

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remarkable and completely different library, the Library and Museum of Freemasonry at Great Queen Street, and I have been entranced by the unexpected intersections between that collection with those I have previously known, through figures such as the masonic artist and British Museum facsimilist, John Harris,² the Secretary of the Records Commission and Provincial Grand Master of Kent, Charles Purton Cooper,³ and the benefactor of the British Library and Provincial Grand Master of Shropshire

¹ 'The Current State of Masonry', available at: <http://www.freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/current.html>.

² See Janet Ing Freeman's entry for Harris in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and Toshiyuki Takamiya, 'John Harris the Pen-and-Ink Facsimilist' at <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/johnharris.html>.

³ On Cooper as a freemason, see now Alan Eadie, *1857 and All That* ([Canterbury?]: Provincial Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of Kent, 2008), pp. 10-20.

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and North Wales, Thomas Egerton.⁴ And now I am about to have a different type of engagement with another remarkable library at Lampeter.⁵ This is a path of exploration which would be unfamiliar, perhaps unwelcome, to many academic historians. And increasingly it is a path unfamiliar to librarians. What it represents in intellectual terms I am not sure – if it is history, it is a very different sort of history from that commonly practised in many universities today. Perhaps it is something closer to the archivists' history of which the medievalist V. H. Galbraith dreamed.⁶

When I gave the inaugural lecture for the Centre for Research into Freemasonry,⁷ I began by illustrating the countless significant bibliographical discoveries that await the assiduous user of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry. The approach to the history of Freemasonry I espoused in that lecture is one that reflects my training as a documentary-based historian, namely that the route to understanding the history of British Freemasonry lies through the energetic exploration of the neglected

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boxes of correspondence and other primary materials in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry and in other major collections such as those of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. These documentary researches need to be framed within a broader engagement with historical debates, but the engine house of the re- search lies in that documentary investigation. The neglect of the his- tory of Freemasonry, I suggested, was in large part the result of the failure by researchers to get their hands dirty in those unopened boxes at Great Queen Street. Since that time, I have learnt an important and salutary lesson. The records do not speak unbidden. We can look time and time again at the second edition of Anderson's *Book of*

⁴ On Egerton as a freemason, see Alexander Graham, *A History of Freemasonry in the Province of Shropshire* (Shrewsbury: Adnitt and Naughton, 1892), pp. 5-30. Correspondence by Egerton as PGM is held in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry in London.

⁵ The Special Collections at Lampeter include books formerly owned by Georg Kloss, whose celebrated collection of Masonic publications is now held by the Grand Orient of the Netherlands, and by the Duke of Sussex. I hope to write further on the masonic interest of the library at Lampeter.

⁶ V. H. Galbraith, *Studies in the Public Records* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948), pp. 7-8.

⁷ 'Freemasonry and the Problem of Britain', available at: <http://tinyurl.com/5wrszz>.

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Constitutions, but it is only if we consider wider political history that we can understand why this new edition of the *Book of Constitutions* was published in 1738. The initiation of Frederick Lewis, Prince of Wales, as a freemason took place in 1737, at precisely the time Frederick moved into overt political opposition to his father George II.⁸ Supporters of the Prince of Wales were ostracised by the royal court. The celebration by the freemasons of their initiation of the Prince of Wales could hardly have been a more politically charged act and the publication of the new edition of the *Book of Constitutions*, which de- scribed the initiation of the Prince

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in fulsome terms, was equally pro- vocative. Likewise, the attacks on Lord Zetland as Grand Master during the period from 1854, leading for example to the formation of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons, are a direct expression of the profound but brief political crisis precipitated by the disastrous conduct of the Crimean War. Just as the middle classes more widely attacked the elderly and ineffectual aristocrats in charge of the War Office, so younger influential freemasons rounded on the Whig aristocrat Zetland who, it was claimed, would much rather spend a day at the races than attend Grand Lodge.⁹

In short, the history of British Freemasonry will only begin to make sense if we interpret it in the light of wider history. Freemasonry cannot be explained by Freemasonry.¹⁰ For that reason, it is perhaps more urgent that we establish a framework of interpretation for the history of Freemasonry than that we continue to explore those ne-

⁸ I owe this point to my friend Professor Aubrey Newman, who first noticed it in his paper on Frederick Lewis and Freemasonry at a session organised by the CRFF at the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Oxford in January 2006.

⁹ This issue is explored at greater length in Andrew Prescott, 'Well Marked? Approaches to the History of Mark Masonry' in Andrew Prescott (ed.), *Marking Well: Essays on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England and Wales and its Districts and Lodges Overseas*, (London: Lewis Masonic, 2006), pp. 5-44.

¹⁰ Cf the comment of Lord Northampton as Pro Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England at a meeting of European Grand Master on 5 November 2007 that 'Freemasonry has no role outside Freemasonry and that the only influence it should be seeking is over itself and its members'. However valid such a view may be within a masonic system of morality, from the point of view of the historian it is an oxymoron.

glected documentary materials. Documentary historians such as me are often dismissive of historians who focus on the wider shape of history, but it is only when we contemplate an institution where no such shape has been proposed that we realise the fundamental importance of such

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frameworks for all aspects of historical study. A historian attempts to describe changes of societies, cultures and institutions in time. Freemasons are often anxious to establish that they are the guardians of an esoteric truth, a pure and accepted Masonry, that has passed down unchanged through time. There is a fundamental conflict here which means that, in a masonic context, too often history does not happen.

Galbraith proposed an archivists' history marked, not by artificial chronological distinctions, but rather by the succession of documents.¹¹ In such a view, the division of history by centuries is artificial and meaningless. Years such as 1500 or 1550 are unremarkable. More meaningful is perhaps the year 1559 which saw the inception of the tellers' views of accounts, the first attempt to draw up a kind of balance sheet of the public finances. One might certainly agree that the orthodox division of history into centuries is unhelpful, and that other systems of chronological division more valid, but it is only in contemplating a history without such chronological distinctions that the importance of these divisions is realised – a history without chronology is moribund and lifeless. Historians now refer to many baffling chronological distinctions, such as the long eighteenth century or the short twentieth century, but these reflect vigorous debates as to the shape and pattern of history. It may seem that debating the shape and structure of the apparently random succession of the history of events is, as Foucault suggested, futile. But again it is only in contemplating the sterility of a historical discussion which has largely ceased to search for such patterns that one realises why such frameworks are indispensable.¹²

This sterility it seems to me characterises the discussion of the history of British Freemasonry. When I began to research the history of

¹¹ Galbraith, *loc. cit.*

¹² This issue has recently been visited on an extended scale by Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

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Freemasonry, I was told that one of the great attractions of the subject was that it was only necessary to know two dates, namely 1717, the foundation of the Grand Lodge in London, and 1813, the formation of the United Grand Lodge. The more sophisticated might wish to add to this 1751, the date of the foundation of the Ancients Grand Lodge. So, three dates: 1717, 1751 and 1813. There, it was thought, you had the history of British Freemasonry.

The existing standard reference works on the history of British Freemasonry reflect this chronological structure: pre-history to 1717; early years of the Premier Grand Lodge to 1751; the period of the two Grand Lodges from 1751 to 1813; and the rest. Regardless of anything else, you will see how this treatment of the nineteenth century is particularly unsatisfactory – clearly, Freemasonry in 1890, with its multiplicity of orders, its lavish masonic halls, its newspapers and burgeoning professional membership, was very different from Freemasonry immediately after the Union. Yet our accepted chronological structure for the history of British Freemasonry implies the appearance of modern Freemasonry, fully formed, in 1813. When did the change between the situation in 1813 and that in 1890 take place? No one says, and nobody appears to be interested – a far livelier source of concern is whether ‘antient Masonry’ was mangled in the course of the Union. Likewise, how did the commercialised mass-membership Freemasonry of the 1930s emerge from that of the 1890s? Was the First World War a dividing line? We do not know. Without debates about where these dividing lines are placed, without more dates and without more chronology, we do not have history. What I want to do this afternoon is to try and kick-start such a debate by proposing a chronological framework for the history of British Freemasonry. It is, as my friend Michel Brodsky, time to put the clock back in the centre of the room. At this stage, any proposed framework is bound to be arbitrary and will certainly be wrong, but unless we have such a hypothesis to react against, the history of British Freemasonry will continue not to be written.

I propose that the major divisions of the history of British Freemasonry are as follows. First, from 1425, the approximate date of the composition of

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the Regius Manuscript, to 1583, the date of the copy- ing of Grand Lodge MS. 1 and the appointment of William Schaw as

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Master of Works to James VI of Scotland (possibly not coincidental events). The second period would then run from 1583 until the foundation of Grand Lodge in 1717. The next lasts from 1717 to 1736-7, the dates of the foundation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland and of the initiation of Frederick Lewis respectively. I'm not entirely happy about whether this forms a distinct period, or is simply the first part of a longer period which runs to 1763, the beginning of the dispute about the incorporation of the Premier Grand Lodge. From 1763, there is definitely a major change which continues until 1797-8, the dates of the publication of the works by Barruel and Robison alleging masonic complicity in the French Revolution. The ensuing loyalist anxiety engulfed British Freemasonry until long after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and perhaps still casts a shadow over Freemasonry today. However, there can be no doubt that 1834 marked a further sea change in British Freemasonry, encapsulated by the publication of the first number of the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*. A further cataclysmic change occurred with the secession of a group of Canadian lodges from the United Grand Lodge in 1855 and the formation of the Mark Grand Lodge in 1856. The eventual emergence of a late Victorian consensus was marked by the appointment of Edward Prince of Wales as Grand Master in 1874. The subsequent period marked a plateau of English masonic history. I have agonised over whether one might see the 1930s as a further turning point, but I feel that the Freemasonry which emerged in 1874 remained in essence unchanged right the way through until the 1960s, which marked the beginning of the latest and current phase of masonic history.

So I am proposing a ten fold division: (1) 1425-1583;

(2) 1583-1717;

(3) 1717-1736/7;

(4) 1737-1763; (5) 1763-1797-8; (6) 1798-1834; (7) 1834-1855/6;

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(8) 1856-1874;

(9) 1874-(say) 1967;

(10) 1967 to the present day.

There are two important points I should make here in proposing this framework. First, while this periodisation relates to major events in masonic history, it is not completely driven by them. The early 1830s, for example, are a watershed in political, social and cultural history, as well as in the history of Freemasonry. The history of Freemasonry does not exist in isolation, so its periodisation should reflect wider historical periodisation. Second, while, in drawing up this framework, it is necessary to nominate specific years as dividing lines, of course the transition from one period to another was more gradual than this framework suggests. What I will attempt to do for the remainder of my time this afternoon is to try and justify this framework, and briefly review why these particular periods seem to me distinctive.

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1425-1583

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One of the earliest distinctive references we have to a freemason is an indictment against Nicholas le Freemason who in 1325 was accused of helping prisoners escape from Newgate gaol in London.¹³ However, this is simply the earliest known use of the word in English, and there is a reference in Latin to *sculptores lapidum liberorum* (sculptors of freestone) in London as early as 1212. The origins of modern Freemasonry as a social movement lie in the religious fraternities which flourished particularly after the Black Death of 1349.¹⁴ These fraternities existed primarily to pay for prayers for the souls of their members, but increasingly, particular fraternities were favoured by certain groups of craftsmen, and they began to assume responsibility for trade regulation.

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These emergent craft guilds began to be dominated by elite groups within individual trades, frequently creating class-based tension. A suggestion that this happened within the craft of stonemasonry occurs in London in 1376, where there is a reference to the gild of ‘freemasons’ which was afterwards struck out and replaced with the word ‘mason’, suggesting that the term freemason was a contentious one.¹⁵ There are other indications that from the late fourteenth century the term freemason was increasingly being applied to the more prosperous masons who contracted for individual jobs.

The Black Death had caused a shortage of skilled artisans, and the government struggled to try and keep wages down. Wage pressure was particularly acute in the building trades. In 1425, a statute was passed forbidding masons from holding assemblies to demand higher wages.¹⁶ It is in this event that we can find the beginnings of the myths of Freemasonry. Groups of junior masons developed a legend

¹³ Andrew Prescott, ‘The Earliest Use of the Word Freemason’, *Year Book of the Grand Lodge of the Antient Free and Accepted Masons of Scotland 2004* (Edinburgh: Grand Lodge of Scotland, 2004), pp. 64-7

¹⁴ Andrew Prescott, ‘The Old Charges Revisited’, *Transactions of the Lodge of Research No. 2429* (2005), pp. 25-38.

¹⁵ Prescott, ‘Earliest Use’.

¹⁶ The original 1425 petition of the Commons against the ‘annual gatherings and assemblies of masons in their general chapters’ is in the National Archives: SC 8/24/1196.

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that they had been given ancient charters allowing them to hold their assemblies. They also reacted against the increasing stratification of their trade by developing legends which sought to demonstrate that all masons were brethren of equal status. The two manuscripts recording these legends, preserved in the British Library and known as the Regius and Cooke manuscripts, were apparently used by these illicit gatherings.¹⁷ The core legends of Regius and Cooke, and in particular the claim that the masons received a charter from the non-existent Prince Edwin, an alleged

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son of the Anglo-Saxon King Æthelstan, remain of fundamental importance to modern Freemasonry. Freemasons have long hoped that these legends embody some kind of ancient legend handed down by word of mouth, but the evident manipulation of these legends in Regius and Cooke indicates that the legends were in 1425 of recent invention and primarily intended to protect stonemasons from the effects of recent labour legislation. These legends were to achieve a new impetus in the middle of the sixteenth century, when renewed inflation led to further attempts to restrict the wages of craftsmen. In 1552, the leaders of a strike of building workers at York were imprisoned.¹⁸ In response, there was a further substantial elaboration of the legends originating in Regius and Cooke, with Edwin's grant of a charter to the masons being placed specifically at York, a new detail apparently intended to bolster the position of the York building workers. This first phase of the history of Freemasonry could, I think, be called the syndicalist phase.

1583-1717

In 1583, the syndicalist phase succeeded to what David Stevenson

¹⁷ As well 'The Old Charges Revisited', I have discussed the Regius and Cooke manuscripts in 'Some Literary Contexts of the Cooke and Regius Manuscripts', in T. Stewart (ed.) *Freemasonry in Music and Literature*, The Canonbury Papers 2 (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2005), pp. 1-36, and "'Kinge Athelston That Was a Worthy Kinge of England": Anglo-Saxon Myths of the Freemasons' in J. Wilcox and H. Magennis (eds.) *The Power of Words: Anglo-Saxon Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg on his Seventieth Birthday* (Morgantown: University of West Virginia Press), pp. 397-434.

¹⁸ D. Woodward, 'Wage Regulation in Mid-Tudor York', *The York Historian* 3 (1980), pp. 7-9; and 'The Background to the Statute of Artificers: the Genesis of Labour Policy, 1558-1563', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 33 (1980), pp. 32-44.

aptly called 'Scotland's Century'.¹⁹ On 21 December 1583, William Schaw was appointed Master of Works to King James VI of Scotland. Two

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days later, a new manuscript was copied out containing copies of the legends first recorded in the Regius and Cooke manuscripts, which is now Grand Lodge MS 1.20. Whether it was actually copied for Schaw we cannot say, but we do know that, from this point, copies of these texts, now known as the Old Charges, began to circulate among Scottish masons. Schaw radically reformed the organisation of Scottish stonemasons in two sets of statutes approved at assemblies of Scottish masons in 1598 and 1599. There is no need here to detail the main characteristics of Schaw's reforms, which have been lucidly described by Stevenson. They include the establishment of separate lodges, organised on a territorial basis, answerable directly to the General Warden, holding regular meetings and keeping regular minutes. There are hints that Schaw also sought to interest members of these lodges in the new esoteric and philosophical developments, such as the 'art of memory'. The lodges of masons established by Schaw began to prove attractive to members who were not working stonemasons, such as Sir Robert Moray, who became profoundly interested in the legends and symbolism of the craft of stonemasonry.

While the organisation of English masons remained more informal and ad hoc, some of the features evident in Scotland can also be seen in England from the middle of the seventeenth century. In particular, meetings of stonemasons also became of interest to those who were not working stonemasons, the most celebrated examples being the scientist and antiquary Elias Ashmole and the Chester Herald Randle

¹⁹ Stevenson's two books on the early history of Freemasonry, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590-1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *The First Freemasons: Scotland's Early Lodges and Their Members* (2nd ed., Edinburgh: Grand Lodge of Scotland, 2001), remain the fundamental starting points for anyone interested in the early history of Freemasonry.

²⁰ A facsimile, transcript and description of the MS by G. W. Speth is *Quatuor Coronatorum Antigrapha*, 4 part 1 (1892). The manuscript was recently described by Pamela Robinson in her *Catalogue of Dated and Datable Manuscripts, c.888-1600 in London Libraries* (London: British Library, 2003). Sadly, the manuscript was mutilated by a former member of staff of United Grand Lodge in the 1970s.

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Holme.²¹ To some extent, this may reflect Scottish influence, as Scottish masons such as Moray spread awareness of the features of masonic organisation in the northern kingdom. However, the interest of figures such as Ashmole and Holme in Freemasonry probably also reflects more local conditions. The membership of lodges in York suggest that local stonemasons may have encouraged influential townsfolk, who helped set their wages, to join the lodges to help create awareness of the traditional claims of the stonemasons to a fair wage, set, it was said, by St Alban and with a lineage dating back to biblical times.²²

In London, this process of creating an elite group with organisations of stonemasons in order to bolster the claims and prestige of the trade led to the emergence during the seventeenth century of an inner group within the London Company of Masons known as the Acception, which included some of the most prosperous architect-masons as well as men such as Ashmole.²³ However, there were tensions within the London Company of Masons. The London Company be-

²¹ Holme, whose papers now form part of the Harley Manuscripts, provides another point of contact with the collections of the British Library. The first event ever organised by the CRFF was a presentation by Nat Alcock of his CD-ROM of Holme's *Academy of Armory* (1688), which contains an early reference to freemasons.²²

On York, there is much information for further investigation and exegesis in the remarkable book by my old friend and indefatigable Masonic researcher, the Revd. Neville Barker Cryer, *York Mysteries Revealed: Understanding an Old English Masonic Tradition* (Hersham: Ian Allan Publishing, 2006). On building trades in the north of England at this time, see also Donald Woodward, *Men at Work: Labourers and Building Craftsmen in the North of England, 1450-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Jennifer Alexander's recent work on seventeenth-century masons' marks, and in particular her description of the way in which marks were used as a form of 'signature' prominently displayed in buildings such as Apethorpe Hall in Northamptonshire, suggests shifts in trade organisation during this period which are probably relevant to the emergence of Freemasonry as a social organisation: 'Apethorpe Hall Research Programme: The Recording of the Masons' Marks', *Research News: Newsletter of the English Heritage Research Department* (5: 2006-7), pp. 19-22.²³ M. D. J. Scanlan, 'The Mystery of the Acception 1630-1723: A Fatal Flaw', *Heredom* 11 (2003), pp. 83-140. Matthew's researches, when published in their final form, will transform our understanding of this period of masonic history.

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came increasingly impoverished²⁴ and responded by trying to extend its control of the trade, allowing the Acception to fall into abeyance.²⁵ Increasingly, the London Masons' company seems to have concentrated on bolstering the position of its junior members. These shifts in emphasis within the London Company seem to be reflected in a change of name in 1655 from the Company of Freemasons to the Company of Masons. These problems may have been intensified by attacks on the London companies by James II.²⁶ By 1701, the masons' company of London was one of the smallest in the city, with a membership returned at 64. Only the Fletchers (18), Musicians (19), Fruiterers (38), Scriveners (39) and Salters (60) were smaller. By contrast, the Carpenters had nearly 100 members.²⁷ The London masons were, if not decayed, in far from good health.

1717-1736/7

It is in the context of the crisis within the London Company of Masons that the creation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 must be viewed. If the Grand Lodge was indeed a revival, as was afterwards claimed, it was perhaps a revival of the Acception. Within the city of London, the formation of the Grand Lodge was by no means an uncontentious act. While other groups, such as the Society of Ancient Britons, organised regular processions in the city,²⁸ the institution of an annual procession and feast by an organisation which claimed jurisdiction over building operations in London and its environs was clearly a

²⁴ In his will dated 1680, Thomas Knight, 'cittizen and freemason', and at that time warden of the London Masons' Company, described how he had lent the company one hundred pounds. He had since received various moneys on behalf of the company, but these were less than the amount owing to him, so he cancelled the debt: National Archives, PROB 11/63.

²⁵ But cf. J. Boulton, 'Wage Labour in Seventeenth-Century London', *Economic History Review* 49 (1996), pp. 268-90.

²⁶ On the fraught history of the city companies under James II, see Mark Knights, 'A City

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Revolution: the Remodelling of the London Livery Companies in the 1680s', *English Historical Review* 112 (1997), pp. 1141-78.

²⁷ Figures taken from *The Lists of the Liveries of the Fifty Six Companies, in the City of London: as delivered upon oath to the Right Honourable Sir Thomas Abney, Knt;* (London: Tho. Cockerill, 1701).

²⁸ Newton E. Key, 'The Political Culture and Political Rhetoric of County Feasts and Feast Sermons, 1654-1714', *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994), pp. 223-256.

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challenge to the city companies.²⁹ At this level, one feature of the first twenty years after the formation of the Grand Lodge was the articulation of an administrative structure which would have caused some degree of tension within the city of London and beyond. This was most vividly expressed in the insistence of the Grand Lodge that individual lodges should be controlled by it, holding warrants from the Grand Lodge and obeying its rules.³⁰ This was by no means accepted by all those connected with the Grand Lodge, as is apparent in William Stukeley's formation of a lodge in Grantham without authorisation of the Grand Lodge.³¹ But connected with this administrative articulation was the development of an extended cultural and social agenda. This was at one level political, in its extravagant insistence of its support of the Hanoverian succession.³² At another level, it was scientific, with a stress on geometry and measurement which was explicitly connected to new developments in scientific thought. But an even more important thread was aesthetic. The early activities of the Grand Lodge were explicitly linked to aesthetic propaganda in support of Vitruvian architecture and opposed to Gothic traditions, seen as monkish and ignorant.³³

In many ways, this innovative metropolitan Freemasonry was inclu-

²⁹ This is discussed in Andrew G. Pink, *The Musical Culture of Freemasonry in Early Eighteenth-century London*, unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 2007.

Andrew's thesis vividly demonstrates how the investigation of Freemasonry can uncover new and unconsidered social and cultural communities.

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³⁰ Cf the experiences of the *Philo Musicae et Architecturae Societas*, discussed by Andrew Pink. The minute book of the *Philo Musicae*, with an introduction describing the problems of this lodge at the hands of Grand Lodge, was edited by W. H. Rylands as *Quatuor Coronatorum Antigrapha* 9 (1900).

³¹ Discussed in David Boyd Hancock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002).

³² The Hanoverian component of early Grand Lodge Freemasonry is memorably described in Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, 2nd ed. (Temple Books, 2004). See now also P. Elliot and S. Daniels, 'The "School of True, Useful and Universal Science"? Freemasonry, Natural Philosophy and Scientific Culture in Eighteenth-Century England', *British Journal for the History of Science* 39 (2006), pp. 207-229.

³³ This theme of early Freemasonry as aesthetic propaganda was memorably discussed by James Stevens Curl in a lecture on *Symbolism in Eighteenth-Century Gardens: a Freemasonic Connection* given to the CRFF in December 2006.

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sive, as is evident from the prominence of Jewish and Huguenot membership of early lodges. But the increasing insistence of the Grand Lodge on a distinct political, cultural and social agenda proved contentious. This is expressed in the alienation of William Hogarth who was a member in 1730 but had apparently become disillusioned with the social and cultural agenda of Freemasonry by 1736. Likewise, the metropolitan emphasis of this phase of the history of Freemasonry created tension with other towns, as for example at York where its historian Francis Drake eloquently articulated the claims of York to be regarded as the true seat of Freemasonry. The emergence of Grand Lodges in Scotland and Ireland was also likewise a reaction to the growing pretensions of this Hanoverian and Whig London Freemasonry. The tensions created by the emergence of metropolitan Freemasonry came to ahead with the initiation of Frederick Lewis in 1737. This overtly political act by the London Grand Lodge inaugurated a period of tension and fractiousness.

1737-1763

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The crisis precipitated by the support of the Grand Lodge for the Prince of Wales culminated in a bout of violent boisterousness in 1741 when the Grand Lodge's dignified procession in London was disrupted by the mock procession of Scald Miserable Masons. Andrew Pink has recently explored how the mock processions of the Scald Miserable Masons may be linked to the emergence of the Patriot opposition to Walpole, centred on Frederick Lewis. By 1747, the Grand Lodge felt unable any longer to parade in public. The extent to which the formation of the Ancients Grand Lodge in 1751 was linked to these events requires further exploration, but certainly the creation of a separate Grand Lodge in London reflects the increasing splintering of the masonic world.

Within England, this crisis in the authority of the Premier Grand Lodge evidently led to the loss of many members. However, at the same time Freemasonry was spreading beyond the British Isles. Benjamin Franklin had printed an American edition of the Book of Constitutions in 1734, and by 1749 he had been warranted as Provincial Grand Master of Philadelphia. Yet as Freemasonry spread abroad it

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became increasingly a focus for tension and disharmony.³⁴ The Premier Grand Lodge stumbled in its administration of foreign lodges, as is reflected in its confusion over Franklin's appointment. The differences between French and English Freemasonry, sometimes reflecting explicit Jacobite involvement, created increasing tension. Above all, papal suspicion of Freemasonry, resulting in a series of papal bulls against masonic meetings from 1738, made Freemasonry a more contentious activity on continental Europe. The English best-selling book describing the sufferings of the mason John Coustos at the hands of the Portuguese inquisition contributed to a view of Britishness which emphasised anti-catholicism,³⁵ and also illustrated how Freemasonry had become a politically and socially charged institution.

1763-1797/8

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1763 not only marked the beginning of the dispute about the incorporation of the Premier Grand Lodge, but was also the end of the Seven Years War, an important stage in the emergence of Britain as a world power. It appears as if the Premier Grand Lodge was determined that it should create a social organisation worthy of a new imperial power. In Sweden, for example, the Premier Grand Lodge worked closely with British diplomats to try and drive out a French-controlled form of Freemasonry.³⁶ This formed part of a wider attack on French political influence in northern Europe. The Premier Grand Lodge claimed to be the Supreme Grand Lodge of the world, and energetically promoted its influence through the new British Empire, for example through such events as the initiation of the Indian Prince

³⁴ On the impact of the international spread of Freemasonry, see now the lively and wide-ranging survey by Jessica Harland Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³⁵ The reference is of course to Linda Colley's *Britons*, but in some ways the trajectory of Freemasonry during the eighteenth century could be seen as subtly different to the 'Colley thesis'. Scottish and English Freemasonry became increasingly divergent, while in Wales Freemasonry had little impact at all. Moreover, the tension with the Catholic church was arguably chiefly a spin-off from papal political concerns.

³⁶ Andrew Prescott, 'Relations Between the Swedish and English Grand Lodges in the Eighteenth Century', in A. Önnersfors and H. Bogdan (eds.) *Between Mysticism and Power Politics: Swedish Freemasonry and the European Enlightenment* (forthcoming).

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Omdit-ul-Omrah Bahauder at Madras in 1777. The Premier Grand Lodge marked this occasion by sending a letter of congratulation accompanied by a blue apron, 'elegantly decorated' and a copy of the Book of Constitutions, 'bound in the most superb manner'.³⁷

Yet, just at the time that Premier Grand Lodge was expressing the most lofty international ambitions, its influence within Britain was being undermined by the success of the Ancients Grand Lodge in recruiting

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lower class members in the English provinces.³⁸ Moreover, the Ancients Grand Lodge forged far closer relations than the Premier Grand Lodge with the Grand Lodges in Scotland and Ireland. Thanks to Laurence Dermott, the Ancients Grand Lodge fostered a form of Freemasonry which contrasted profoundly with the highly Whig and rationalist Freemasonry of the early years of the Premier Grand Lodge. Róbert Péter has recently argued that this reflects counter-enlightenment tendencies,³⁹ and certainly the success of the Ancients needs to be seen in the light of the same kind of religious and class tensions which underpinned the success of Methodism.

The reaction of some of the leading personalities associated with the Premier Grand Lodge was to seek to enhance the respectability and prestige of their form of Freemasonry. A characteristic figure here is William Preston, the Master of the Lodge of Antiquity, one of the four lodges which had formed the first Grand Lodge. Through successive editions of his *Illustrations of Masonry*, Preston sought to promote a reformation of Freemasonry which would place less emphasis on lively sociability, would stress the spiritual and philosophical bene-

³⁷ The gift is noted in the 1784 edition of the Book of Constitutions, p. 322. Omdit's reply, enclosed in an elegant cover made of golden cloth, is printed on pp. 333-334 of the 1784 *Book of Constitutions*, and was anthologised by William Preston, Stephen Jones, Joseph Sketchley, George Smith and others. According to Phillip Stanhope, *Genuine Memoirs of Asiaticus* (London: G. Kearsley, 1784), p. 84, Omdit was 'of a mild disposition, totally lost in the pleasures of the seraglio, and is indeed little more than a state prisoner in his own palace'.

³⁸ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: the Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 309-349.

³⁹ Róbert Péter, *The Mysteries of English Freemasonry: Janus-faced Masonic Ideology and Practice between 1696 and 1815*, unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Szeged, 2006. I was very honoured to serve on the committee which examined this thesis.

fits of Freemasonry, and, above all, present Freemasonry as a highly respectable and elevated form of social activity. A similar approach is evident in the energetic work of Thomas Dunkerley in promoting the

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Premier Grand Lodge in the provinces. Like Preston, Dunkerley also sought to enhance the spiritual content of Freemasonry by introducing to the Premier Grand Lodge a whole host of other masonic orders ranging from the Royal Arch to Mark Masonry. Both Preston and Dunkerley also sought to encourage Freemasonry to enhance its respectability by moving out of taverns into specially built masonic halls. The success of Preston and Dunkerley in enhancing the social character of Premier Grand Lodge Freemasonry was patchy. While a lodge such as the Lodge of Nine Muses in London contained a glittering array of fashionable artists, architects and musicians, a few miles away, a lodge under the Premier Grand Lodge in Wandsworth comprised chiefly market gardeners and tradesmen.

1797-1834

This drive to enhance the social prestige of English Freemasonry received a body blow in 1797-8 with the publication of works alleging that Freemasonry had been used as a cover organisation by Jacobin elements promoting the French revolution. William Preston was prompted to write at length to the *Gentleman's Magazine* protesting the loyalty of English freemasons and their attachment to the established constitution. But the tensions buffeted British Freemasonry. In Sheffield, masonic lodges split following disputes over the use of the masonic hall by the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information. Spies reported to the Home Office on proceedings in masonic lodges in Leeds. A lodge in Brentford was accused of plotting to assassinate the King. The reaction of masonic lodges was energetically to protest their loyalty. The Lodge of Lights in Warrington turned itself into a branch of the local militia. Many lodges changed their name to emphasise their loyalty and attachment to the crown.⁴⁰

But Freemasonry received a further body blow with the realisation that Irish rebels had used forms of masonic organisation in organising

⁴⁰ Andrew Prescott, 'Freemasonry and Radicalism in Northern England 1789-1799: Some Sidelights', *Lumières* 7 (2006).

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the Irish rebellion in 1797. The government proposed banning all meetings behind closed doors, which would have outlawed Freemasonry. Eventually, following a dramatic debate in parliament, an exemption for masonic lodges from the Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 was hastily patched up.⁴¹ This legislation drove a wedge between Freemasonry and other forms of fraternal society. The Oddfellows, for example, suffered from restrictions on their use of ritual. While Freemasons were proud of their exemption under the Act, the privileged legislative position of Freemasonry caused it to become increasingly estranged from other forms of fraternal organisation.

These social and political pressures underpinned the Union between the two Grand Lodges in 1813. Freemasons in other parts of Europe were anxious as to whether the Grand Lodges in England really had the degree of control of their members that they claimed. The Swedish Grand Lodge for example felt that English lodges too readily admitted lower class sailors and mariners, who created problems when they returned home and tried to join lodges there.⁴² The British government remained concerned as well – the Home Office put pressure on the Ancients Grand Lodge to ban meals after masonic meetings, as too much loose talk might take place there. In negotiating the Union of the two English Grand Lodges, the Duke of Sussex had a variety of concerns. At one level, he wanted to ensure that there was no danger that Freemasonry could be used by seditious elements. At another level, he sought to make Freemasonry fit for the Empire and sought a uniformity of practice across the British Empire. He hoped that the Union of the English Grand Lodges would be followed by union with the Grand Lodges of Scotland and Ireland, and this probably explains some of the detail of the resulting reform of masonic ritual and practice. The Duke also had wider ambitions from his reform. He hoped that, in achieving the Union, he would also perform a greater service for humanity as a whole. He was fascinated by the idea that Freemasonry embodied remnants of an ancient sun religion which predated Christianity, and employed Godfrey Higgins, who

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⁴¹ Andrew Prescott, 'The Unlawful Societies Act of 1799' in M. D. J. Scanlan (ed.), *The Social Impact of Freemasonry on the Modern Western World*, The Canonbury Papers I (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2002), pp. 116-134.

⁴² Andrew Prescott, 'Relations between the Swedish and English Grand Lodges'.

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had pioneered such theories in his publications, to investigate further the origins of Freemasonry. Higgins claimed to have found evidence to support this case. Aided by Higgins, Sussex dreamed of using Freemasonry to give a new religion to the world which he felt would be a boon to civilisation.⁴³

Despite this religious radicalism, Sussex showed a less assured touch in dealing with social and economic change. He insisted that freed slaves could not become freemasons, creating chaos in the organisation of Freemasonry in the Caribbean which lasted until the 1850s. Despite Sussex's interest in the work of Robert Owen,⁴⁴ he was un-sympathetic to the needs of the new industrial cities, which perhaps underpinned the secession of groups of lodges in the north-west of England following the Union.⁴⁵ On the whole, the new class of industrialists seem to have taken little interest in promoting Freemasonry in the industrial towns. A characteristic situation appears to have been that in Bradford, where the masonic lodge continued to be chiefly populated by artisans who apparently sought to use the lodge to retain a sense of that community which the industrial development of the town had shattered for ever.⁴⁶

1834-1855/6

The increasing social cleavage between Freemasonry and other forms of fraternal organisation was vividly expressed in 1834, when the Tolpuddle Martyrs were arrested and tried under the Unlawful Societies Act, an event which was toasted by officers of the Grand Lodge who urged masonic lodges to check that their exemption was in or-

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⁴³ On the relationship between Sussex and Higgins, see Andrew Prescott, 'Godfrey Higgins and his *Anacalypsis*', *Library and Museum News for the Friends of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry*, 12 (Spring 2005), pp. 2-6.

⁴⁴ Roger Fulford, *Royal Dukes: The Father and Uncles of Queen Victoria* (Duckworth, 1967), p. 267. A letter by Owen inviting Sussex to chair a co-operative meeting to be held at Freemasons' Hall in London in 1840 and urging the Duke to 'head the party of Rational Reformers without violence' is printed in Gregory Claeys, *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets and Correspondence (Correspondence 1839-1858)* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 72-73.

⁴⁵ David Harrison, 'The Liverpool Rebels', *MQ* 13 (April 2005), pp. 34-36. ⁴⁶ Andrew Prescott, 'Well Marked?', p. 26.

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der.⁴⁷ Yet social change was beginning to pose greater challenges for the Grand Lodge. To Sussex, the capacity of Freemasonry to reform society was best expressed in its ability to help transcend Christianity. For others, such as the physician Robert Crucefix, Freemasonry needed to undertake more direct social action. Crucefix promoted a scheme for the creation of a home for elderly and impoverished freemasons, to which Sussex was opposed. The passing of the New Poor Law in 1834 gave an added urgency to Crucefix's campaign; there was now a serious possibility that freemasons could be con- signed to the workhouse.

Crucefix launched the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* to help promote his campaign for the masonic asylum. The *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* quickly became a vehicle for a new type of Freemasonry, which may be linked to wider demands for reform at this time. Crucefix argued for a Freemasonry which was more evangelistic and more committed to social reform. Above all, he argued that Freemasonry should be more explicitly Christian. In this, Crucefix's great ally was the clergy- man George Oliver who, reacting directly to the ideas of Higgins and his populariser Richard Carlile, developed a Christian theology of Freemasonry which was to be enormously influential for the rest of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Crucefix saw the promotion of masonic charity as linked to wider provision for self-

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help and security – from 1848-9 he even renamed his magazine the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review and General Assurance Advocate*.

For Crucefix, Freemasonry was intended for the respectable middle classes. The *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* carried anxious reports about masonic beggars, usually members of lodges in Ireland and Scotland, who were thought to be illicitly using masonic lodges as part of the system of tramping in search of work – the kind of distinctly unrespectable practice to which Crucefix was opposed. Crucefix's success in promoting this reformed middle class Freemasonry was distinctly

⁴⁷ Andrew Prescott, 'The Spirit of Association: Freemasonry and Early Trade Unions', available at: <http://tinyurl.com/6ne5np>

⁴⁸ Andrew Prescott, 'The Devil's Freemason: Richard Carlile and his Manual of

Freemasonry', available freemasonry.com/prescott05.html

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at: <http://www.freemasons->

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patchy – while his influence on the resurgence of lodges run by his followers such as Birmingham was enthusiastically reported in the pages of the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, in other industrial towns such as Bradford or indeed Sheffield, his impact was more limited.

There is no need here to go into the details of Crucefix's titanic dispute with the Duke of Sussex. For the historian, it was a boon insofar as allegations of the misreporting of discussions in the Grand Lodge by the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* led to the keeping of detailed minutes of debates in Grand Lodge. The important point is that the cleavage evident during Crucefix's lifetime continued after his death in 1850, with the Whig Grand Master Lord Zetland subject to ferocious attacks for his complacent administration of the craft in the pages of the *Freemasons Magazine*, the successor to the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*. Crucefix had marked out lines of division within Freemasonry whose influence is still apparent.

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1856-1874

Discontent with Zetland's administration of Freemasonry came to a head in 1855 with the secession of a group of Canadian masons to form their own Grand Lodge.⁴⁹ This was followed shortly afterwards by the formation of a Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons. I have discussed the context of these events recently in my contribution to the book *Marking Well*, so I will not dwell on them here. The important point is that they formed an integral part of a short-lived but profound social and political crisis precipitated by the inglorious conduct of the Crimea War. The attacks on Zetland were spearheaded by a masonic journal called the *Masonic Observer*, written by a group of radical young Tories including Canon George Portal and the Earl of Carnarvon. This argued for a greater role for the provinces in masonic organisation. These demands were linked with such reforms to provincial organisation as the introduction of provincial yearbooks, more frequent meetings of the province and a more active role for Provincial Grand Masters.

This can be seen as part of a wider demand for greater access to po-

⁴⁹ James Daniel, 'Grand Lodges in British Colonies' in *Masonic Networks and Connections* (Melbourne: Australia and New Zealand Masonic Research Council, 2007).

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litical and social authority for the social leaders of the new industrial cities. This is vividly expressed in Birmingham, where a number of wealthy factory owners and members of the social elite sought to institute a lodge to be called the Lodge of Progress, which would meet in a masonic hall, avoid alcohol at masonic meals and stress the virtues of charity, temperance and respectability.⁵⁰ Similar shifts can be seen in many other industrial towns. To cite again the example of Bradford, the Lodge of Hope was taken over by a new group of wealthy immigrant entrepreneurs, who earnestly debated how masonic virtue could best be achieved.⁵¹

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It is at this point that Freemasonry becomes an overwhelmingly middle class vehicle. It is worth noting that this appears to be a largely English phenomenon. In Scotland and Ireland, significant working class membership of Freemasonry has been retained to the present day. In England, the importance of Freemasonry for the cohesion of the social elites in provincial towns and cities was expressed in the building of masonic halls (facilitated by the new availability of limited liability companies) as an integral part of new civic centres – in towns such as Manchester and Sheffield, immediately adjacent to new city halls and other public buildings.⁵²

One of the many further points for investigation in this pivotal period in the history of Freemasonry is how these changes were expressed in the role of Freemasonry in the British Empire. Some of the pressures within imperial Freemasonry were different and distinctive – for example, Indian districts were reluctant to allow non-Christians to join masonic lodges and only did so following explicit instructions from London. The reluctance of colonial freemasons in India to share their lodges with natives prompted a particular enthusiasm for the works of George Oliver and for the development of Christian orders – Indians might join a craft lodge, but only Christians could fully appreciate the

⁵⁰ Prescott, 'Well Marked?', pp. 27-8.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 26-7.

⁵² This should be placed in the context of the issues discussed in Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City 1840–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), although unfortunately Gunn does not discuss Freemasonry.

glories of Freemasonry, it was declared from the pulpits of churches in Bombay and elsewhere.⁵³

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From this charged and tense period, a consensus emerged by the 1870s, as indeed it did in British society more widely. This late Victorian consensus is reflected in the fact that when the Prince of Wales became Grand Master in 1874, the former firebrand Carnarvon became his suave and accomplished Pro Grand Master, while the other rebel of the 1850s, Portal, was at the same time busy bringing order and harmony to the many other masonic orders which had proliferated from 1856. Another epitome of this consensus can be found in the northeast of England, where the Mark Provincial Grand Master, the clergyman Canon Tristram, had as his indispensable lieutenant and deputy the former Chartist turned newspaper editor, Richard Bagnall Reed.⁵⁴

Late Victorian Freemasonry was settled in its position in society. The ins and outs of proceedings in various Grand Lodges were earnestly debated in *The Times*, while the freemason George Grossmith mocked the clerk Charles Pooter for his inability to understand masonic allusions. In towns and cities throughout the country, local masonic lodges formed an indispensable part of civic processions such as those organised for the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria.⁵⁵ Freemasonry was supported by a formidable commercial infra-structure, most visibly expressed in the firm of George Kenning which produced the expensive jewels and regalia which allowed the late Victorian middle class male a rare opportunity for conspicuous consumption.⁵⁶ Kenning also published one of the weekly newspapers, available on railway bookstalls, which debated leading issues in

⁵³ Harland Jacobs, *Builders of Empire*; Frank Karpriel, 'Freemasonry, Colonialism, and Indigenous Elites' in *Interactions: Regional Studies, Global Processes, and Historical Analysis* at <http://www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/interactions/karpriel.html>.

⁵⁴ See the chapter on Reed in Owen R. Ashton and Paul A. Pickering, *Friends of the People: Uneasy Radicals in the Age of the Chartists* (London: Merlin Press, 2002).

⁵⁵ See, for example, the photograph of the Diamond Jubilee Parade in Welshpool: <http://www.gtj.org.uk/item.php?lang=en&id=24641&t=1>.

⁵⁶ A selection of such advertisements is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/5fxxhr>.

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Freemasonry and reported on masonic personalities and events. This period also marked the emergence of Freemasonry as one of the most well-resourced and well-organised philanthropic bodies in the country.

Two features should perhaps be emphasised within this picture of prosperity, stability and growth. First, Freemasonry was not alone in this social landscape. It formed part of what Theodore Koditschek has described as a proliferation of middle-class associations 'organised around the principles of rational recreation and self-help' forming 'a rich participatory culture well-attuned to the demands of urban- industrial success'.⁵⁷ The growth of new more rational forms of recreation and leisure from the 1860s had been in part a reaction to a crisis of identity for the inhabitants of the large new industrial towns.⁵⁸ How were they to maintain the old sense of community and, in the case of the middle classes, affirm their civic leadership? One answer was to choose from a bewildering variety of new social activities. A fervent teetotaler could live out a life that was wholly supported by a variety of temperance organisations, commercial enterprises and publications. A committed freemason could likewise fill his week with a variety of masonic meetings, take in *The Freemason* for his weekly reading, read in the masonic library, and fill his house with a variety of masonic objects. Freemasonry was just one of many means by which the late Victorian middle classes could affirm their respect- ability and social prestige and feel a vicarious sense of community.⁵⁹

An aspect of this use of Freemasonry to express identity in the late Victorian period was the emergence of class lodges. Reluctant to enter

⁵⁷ T. Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban-Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 298.

⁵⁸ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1978).

⁵⁹ Cf Robert Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: the Culture of the Knights of Labor*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 233, who describes how the nineteenth-century Knights of Labor could 'fasten their cuffs with KOL glasses, adorn their shirts with

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KOL buttons, check the time on KOL watches, and drink water from KOL glasses...Knights could don KOL collar stays and watch fobs that proclaimed Knighthood's universalism.' For English comparisons, see Paul Martin, *The Trade Union Badge: Material Culture in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

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pubs and taverns, the establishment of a masonic lodge provided a means by which the new professional classes could socialise in a neutral atmosphere after work. Thus, members of the London School Board petitioned for the establishment of a masonic lodge so that they could relax after committee meetings were finished.⁶⁰ Similar lodges were established for many other professional groups. Particularly noteworthy among these are the lodges established for members of new public sector professions such as policemen and teachers. The class position of these groups was often ambiguous; Freemasonry provided one means by which they could claim to be middle class.

As part of this stress on respectability, religiosity proved to be increasingly important. With the adoption of popular hymn tunes, the prominence of the role of the chaplain and the pseudo-ecclesiastical atmosphere of many of the new masonic halls, attendance at a lodge meeting seemed almost like going to a religious service. The ecclesiastical atmosphere of English Freemasonry increasingly set it apart from Freemasonry elsewhere, most notably from the French Grand Orient which was by the 1870s increasingly atheist and secularist in outlook and was becoming the keeper of the flame of the Third Republic.⁶¹ These tensions came to a head with the dispute over the decision of the French Grand Orient to dispense with the requirement for belief in a supreme being, which resulted in the effective excommunication of members of that Grand Lodge by the British Grand Lodges. The two major power blocs of the masonic world which emerged in the 1870s still nervously look at each other over the masonic equivalent of the Berlin Wall. This schism cannot be entirely blamed on the French. As has been noted, while France moved in one direction, British Freemasonry was becoming more and more religious in tone.

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⁶⁰ Crichton Lodge No. 1641. I have printed this petition in 'The Study of Freemasonry as a New Academic Discipline' in A. Kroon (ed.), *Vrijmetselarij in Nederland: Een kennismaking met de wetenschappelijke studie van een 'geheim' genootschap* (Leiden: OVN, 2003), pp. 5-31.

⁶¹ The contexts of these developments are discussed in Andrew Prescott, '"The Cause of Humanity": Charles Bradlaugh and Freemasonry', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 116 (2003), pp. 15-64.

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It is for this reason that I am inclined to regard the late Victorian consensus in Freemasonry as persisting until the 1960s, with perhaps the celebrations for the 275th anniversary of the English Grand Lodge in 1967 marking its last gasp. Here, I have been influenced by the recent work of Callum Brown, who has argued that there was during the late Victorian period a deepening of popular religious sentiment in Britain, which he suggests persisted until the cultural shifts of the 1960s.⁶² It seems to me that you can see something of the same process in Freemasonry. Despite its claim not to require belief in any particular religion, from at least the 1870s Freemasonry became a very effective expression of the wider moral, cultural and political consensus which underpinned the British Empire. Regardless of whether they were non-conformist, Anglican, Jewish or Hindu, there was a strong understanding of what constituted proper behaviour for a loyal British subject, and this was underpinned by a kind of instinctive religious and moral discourse of precisely the kind that Callum Brown argues characterised the religiosity of British society through the 1960s.

The work of John Belton and others has established without any doubt the way in which the 1960s inaugurated a period of decline from the previous high levels of membership.⁶³ The complete collapse of the friendly societies after the Second World War seems to offer a chilling warning as to what might await Freemasonry. John Belton in particular has stressed

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here the relevance of the work of the sociologist Robert Putnam who has argued that the decline of group-based social activities in America represent a profound crisis for modern American society.⁶⁴ John and others have argued that a similar crisis

⁶² Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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⁶⁴ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). There are many critiques of Putnam. A useful starting point is Scott L. McLean, David A. Schultz, and Manfred B. Steger (eds.),

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John Belton, *The Missing Master Mason* (available at: neter.lodge.org.uk/library/research/innaug99.doc); 'Masonic Membership Myths Debunked' in Art Dehoyos and S. Brent Morris (eds.), *Freemasonry in Context: History, Ritual, Controversy* (Lanham, Md.:Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 313-334;

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can be seen in Britain, first in the collapse of the friendly societies after the establishment of the Welfare State and second in the fall in masonic membership.⁶⁵

However, there are some objections to the thesis that the apparent decline in British Freemasonry from the 1960s is an expression of the process described in Putnam. First, fraternalism appears historically to have been more important in America than in Britain. While fraternal organisations were an important, and neglected, part of late Victorian British society, they were by no means such an all-pervasive feature of male sociability in Britain as they were in America. Moreover, the leading case in support of the thesis of a crisis in fraternity is the friendly society, but these collapsed for precisely the reason that legislative pressure had turned them into little more than insurance societies and had undermined the fraternal aspects of their organisation. When the Welfare State replaced their benefit function, they had little else to offer.

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In contemplating the present challenges to Freemasonry, I wonder if the work of historians of religion like Callum Brown is not more helpful than that of sociologists.⁶⁶ Brown argues that Britain was characterised by a profound religiosity which was not effectively challenged until the 1960s. He suggests that the process of secularisation, placed by most historians in the Victorian period, actually did not get underway until the 1960s. I wonder if it is that challenge to religion, and the emergence of a secular society, which is at the root of the current uncertainties of British Freemasonry. Freemasonry in Britain had

Social Capital: Critical Perspectives on Community and 'Bowling Alone' (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Discussions of the decline of fraternal organisations have tended to be distorted by nostalgia and an assumption that fraternal charitable and other provision is necessarily for the public good. For a bracing corrective to this point of view, see David Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Likewise, the vested interests of large friendly and benefit societies delayed the creation of the National Health Service in Britain.

⁶⁶ Another discussion of these changes, which produces statistical evidence paralleling that for masonic membership, is Christie Davies, *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (Transaction Publishers, 2004).

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become so firmly yoked from the 1870s onwards to a broadly expressed religious culture in Britain that it was bound to be shaken to its roots by the sudden decline of that culture. In this context, the major features of the present period of the history of Freemasonry would be not so much the attacks of anti-masonic writers such as Stephen Knight as the inquiries into Freemasonry and religion by the Anglican and Methodist churches, which proposed that membership of Freemasonry was incompatible with membership of these churches.⁶⁷

Indeed, it could be argued that Freemasonry itself provides a major objection to the Putnam thesis. If fraternalism is in such a profound crisis,

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then why does Freemasonry remain in such a rude state of health? If nothing else the history of British Freemasonry demonstrates its durability, and I am sure it will not easily go away. The university to which I am moving was closely connected with the Anglican Church of Wales. At the time of its disestablishment in 1920, it must have seemed as if the Church in Wales, and its college in Lampeter, would not long survive. Yet the college is now a university and a former Archbishop of Wales is now the Archbishop of Canterbury (and a Druid). The Church in Wales demonstrates the tractability of British cultural institutions in a way which must give Freemasonry heart.

I hope I have said enough to show that, in considering the history of British Freemasonry, an important preliminary requirement is to consider its periodisation. And, in considering its periodisation, perhaps we might think about where it fits in subject and discipline terms. My suggestion that the work of Callum Brown might help in understanding the last two periods of British masonic history raises a broader question – namely that in studying the history of Freemasonry, it is to the history of religion that we should look for a disciplinary context.

One of the attractions of the study of Freemasonry is its inherently interdisciplinary character – to study fully Freemasonry we need the skills of the historian, the literary specialist, the museum curator, the art historian, the sociologist and so on. However, if the study of

⁶⁷ Cf Hamill, *op. cit.*

Freemasonry does not have a home disciplinary base, it again runs the risk of becoming sterile. The subject field in which the study of Freemasonry sits most comfortably is that of the history of religion (and this is one reason why I am delighted that Professor Luscombe, a distinguished historian of religion and religious thought, has chaired our session today). Freemasons, anxious to stress that their craft is a moral and not a religious

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system, have fought shy of admitting that the history of Freemasonry forms part of the history of religion, but I would suggest that the tools of the historian of religion are precisely those which the historian of Freemasonry requires. So, in presenting a periodisation of the history of British Freemasonry, I would draw your attention to the ways in which a lot of the features of this periodisation correspond to the periodisation of the history of religion in Britain. Freemasonry might not be a religion, but it is a spiritual journey, and the paths along which that journey are directed are those that also shape religions and religious history.

And, in conclusion:

Adieu! a heart-warm fond adieu; Dear brothers of the mystic tie!
Ye favoured, enlighten'd few, Companions of my social joy;
Tho' I to foreign lands must hie, Pursuing Fortune's slidd'ry ba';
With melting heart, and brimful eye, I'll mind you still, tho' far awa.⁶⁸

Following this lecture, six of the most loyal supporters of the work of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry at the University of Sheffield presented Andrew Prescott with a square inscribed 'Prof Andrew Prescott. We met on the level and parted on the square'. The presenters of this beautifully-made memento were: Alan Turton, John Wade, Tony Lever, Andrew Prescott, Jack Thompson, John Belton and John Acaster.

⁶⁸ Robert Burns, *Farewell To the Brethren of St. James' Lodge, Tarbolton*