

Lecture 9 Wiltshire Chapter of First Principals No 6731

A talk given by E Comp Anthony Wilson, Past President of the Committee of General Purposes

The Royal Arch Bicentenary

ME Grand Superintendent and Companions, I am sure you are all aware that Grand Chapter is planning a major bicentenary celebration in October 2013. However, the announcement appears to have caused a little consternation or confusion as to what we are actually celebrating. Those versed in the history of the Royal Arch know that it cannot be the bicentenary of Grand Chapter as that was formed in 1766. Nor can it be the bicentenary of Supreme Grand Chapter in its present form as that was the result of events which took place in 1817. What we are celebrating is the final and full acceptance by the whole English Craft of the Royal Arch as an integral and important part of 'pure antient masonry, which statement in itself needs a little explanation.

For a period of just over 60 years from 1751 to 1813, two Grand Lodges existed in England. The 'Premier' founded in 1717 as the first Grand Lodge in the world, and the Antients founded by disaffected brethren of mainly Irish origin in London in 1751. When the negotiations between the two Grand Lodges to establish a union began in 1809 one of the major differences between them was their attitude to the Royal Arch.

The Premier Grand Lodge did not accept the Royal Arch as part of their system. Indeed their attitude to it was at times quite hostile. Their Grand Secretary in 1756 wrote to a brother in Germany, who was claiming charitable assistance on the basis that he was both an Antient and a Royal Arch Mason, stated that his Grand Lodge was neither Antient, Arch nor Royal Arch and that they considered the Royal Arch "to be an innovation to seduce the brethren from the true paths of Masonry". Quite how he squared this with having himself been Exalted a few weeks before penning the response, history does not record.

Indeed it was senior members of the Premier Grand Lodge who formed the first Grand Chapter in 1766. A Chapter had been meeting in London for nearly a year when in July 1766 they exalted the then Grand Master, Lord Blayney and he signed a document known to us today as the Charter of Compact, which converted them into the Excellent Grand and Royal Chapter of the Royal Arch of Jerusalem. Lord Blayney was immediately elected First Grand Principal. Within a very short time they seem to have remembered that their Grand Lodge did not like the Royal Arch, and they tampered with the new Charter altering its date to 1767 (being one year later) and placing a capital P before Grand Master after Blayney's name to imply that the events had happened after he ceased being Grand Master. For over 150 years it was believed that Grand Chapter dated from 1767, until in the early 20th century both the Charter of Compact and the original Minute Book of Grand Chapter were rediscovered in the vaults in the old Freemasons' Hall, and the discrepancy between the minutes and the Charter were noticed. A bit of forensic work soon revealed that the Charter had been tampered with.

The Premier Grand Lodge's attitude to the Royal Arch gradually softened. In the 1790s they rather condescendingly minuted that they "had no objection to it as a separately ordered society". Indeed that is what it was. The Grand Chapter had its own rules, Grand Officers and separately chartered Chapters with no connection to the Craft Lodges other than common memberships.

The Antients, however, readily embraced the Royal Arch and worked it as a fourth degree within their Lodges, regarding their Lodge Warrant as sufficient authority to work any of the known Masonic degrees and Orders. If they wished to exalt any of their members they would simply call a lodge, usually on a Sunday, open it in the Third Degree then open as a Chapter and exalt the candidates. Their Grand Secretary Laurence Dermott, who did much to promote the Royal Arch, characterised it as "the root, heart and marrow of Masonry, the very capstone of the whole Masonic system".

Dermott was a wily bird, and, on learning of the formation of the Grand Chapter by members of the rival Premier Grand Lodge, he raised a question in the Antients Grand Lodge as to whether or not it was proper for the Antients Grand Lodge to discuss Royal Arch matters when there would be those present who were not members of the Royal Arch. Getting the desired answer, namely that it was not proper, he then proposed the formation of a Grand Chapter to deal with such matters. However, the body never really existed other than as a Committee of qualified members of the Antients Grand Lodge. Any decisions it might make – no minutes for it appear to have survived – would have to be ratified by the Grand Lodge. It had no Grand Officers and, as we have seen, no separate Chapters the Royal Arch members forming inner circles of the Craft Lodges.

When the negotiations for the Union of the Grand Lodges were taking place this difference of attitude to the Royal Arch – the Premier Grand Lodge regarding it as a separate entity and the Antients holding it to be the summit of their system – could have caused the negotiations to founder. A typically English compromise (some have unkindly called it a fudge) was reached, which was embodied in Article 2 of the Articles of Union between the two bodies and has been the preamble to the rules in the Craft Book of Constitutions ever since.

That preamble defines 'pure antient masonry' thus - "pure antient masonry consists of three degrees and no more, viz. those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch" By this definition the members of the premier Grand Lodge accepted the Royal Arch as an integral and important part of basic Freemasonry and the Royal Arch took its rightful place in the Masonic system. That compromise was agreed and the Articles of Union were signed by both Grand Lodges early in December 1813 and enabled the Craft Union and the formation of the United Grand Lodge to take place on 27 December 1813. It is that union we will be celebrating in October 2013.

As part of those celebrations the Second Grand Principal in Grand Chapter last November announced the launch of The Royal Arch Masons 2013 Bicentenary Appeal. With the full support of the First Grand Principal, HRH The Duke of Kent, the appeal hopes to raise a significant amount to be placed in Trust, the income generated will be donated to and administered by the Royal College of Surgeons to fund young surgeons carrying out vital research as Royal Arch Masons Research Fellows.

Why support the Royal College of Surgeons? There is a long tradition of Masonic support for the Royal College since its formation. When Grand Lodge was organising its 250th anniversary celebrations in 1967 the then Grand Master, Lord Scarborough, suggested every member donate £1 for every lodge of which they were a member. When the fund closed it had reached over £650,000. The Fund is administered by Trustees, of which I am one, but the income is passed to the Royal College who, in conjunction with the trustees, decide which research projects should be funded. In the past funding has been either for specialist equipment or research, but in recent years it has gone to young research surgeons, who are known as Freemasons' Research Fellows, who are working in specific areas. We currently support 3 or 4 fellowships a year, which we select from 6 proposals for funding. It is clear that there is a need for funding of additional fellowships, which are highly valued by the Royal College.

I don't know how many of you were present on the two occasions on which Freemasons' Research Fellows attended Grand Chapter to report on what they were doing and what their Masonic grant was achieving. They were inspirational meetings – although at the first presentation rather vivid illustrative slides were used, which were perhaps not the best thing before lunch, and on the second occasion there was a mass crossing of legs in the Grand Temple when the subject of prostate research was discussed by a rather elegant female surgeon. Studies undertaken by Freemasons' Research Fellows has led to significant improvements in hip and knee replacements, stroke prevention, reconstructive surgery for trauma and war wounded victims, cancer survival rates, less invasive surgery and quicker recovery and skilled operations to improve hearing and sight, to name but a few initiatives.

The Royal College of Surgeons is a registered charity. It is not part of the NHS and receives no government funding. It relies solely on the generosity of the public. Freemasonry has been

one of its greatest regular sources of income. The £650,000 raised in 1967 has resulted in over £3.6 million being passed over to the Royal College in the intervening years but the College is always in need of more money. It was for this reason it was decided the Royal Arch Masons 2013 Bi-Centenary Appeal should support the Royal College. The Committee of General Purposes and the Rulers wanted to establish a permanent and continuing contribution to the community as a whole. What better than to provide another source of income for vital research which will be of lasting benefit to mankind?

I hope that you have seen the appeal document – if not I am sure that the Second Provincial Grand Principal has copies. There are roughly 100,000 members of the Royal Arch. If each of us gave a minimum of £10, together with gift aid, that could raise in excess of £1 million. A Grand Charity Relief Chest has been set up, ensuring there will be no administrative costs and all the money donated will go to the Fund.

The Royal College is always happy to organise a presentation by the Freemasons' Research Fellows on a provincial basis, and if you would like the Royal College presentation team to support your fund raising please contact Alex Maclean Bather at Freemasons' Hall

In the appeal document HRH The First Grand Principal, who is also the Royal Fellow of the College, wrote "This campaign gives us an excellent opportunity to contribute further towards something that is helping to save lives and improve the quality of life for us, our children and our grandchildren".

I heartily recommend the appeal to you and hope that you and your Chapters will give it your full support.

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