

THE LODGE ALMONER AND HIS DUTIES

Though the Premier Grand Lodge was formed in 1717, followed by the Antients Grand Lodge in 1751, and the fact that the Premier Grand Lodge in the General Regulations of 1723 made mention of Charity Funds for both private Lodges and Grand Lodge. Nothing appears to have been done to impliment these funds (at least as far as Grand Lodge was concerned) until 1724, when it was proposed that a Charity Fund be established. No one appeared to take notice of this fund, for in 1727 the Deputy Grand Master said that he was extremely concerned that in so long a time he had not received one shilling from any Lodge or brother. Though there is mention of Stewards, there is no mention of an Almoner. This may be the reason brethren, why we find on reading the Quarterly Communications for the 18th Century we find payments to the Grand Charity were very irregular to say the least.

Though the Office of Chaplain was established as an additional Office in 1796 in the Premier Grand Lodge, it would appear that the Office of Almoner along with that of the U.C., his Assistant., Organist, Asst.Sec., and Lodge Stewards were not introduced (as additional Offices) until after the Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1814, nor then until a few years later.

The willingness of our Antient Brethren to help their distressed brethren had been noticed and there is frequent reference in the minutes to the family of a needy brother. The importance of assisting the children led one lodge to start a special fund for this purpose, observing with concern the distressed circumstances of several of their brethren, and the exposed situation of their children. At the same time viewing with pleasure the daily progress being made in the (Premier Grand Lodge), Freemasons' Charity in St. Georges Fields, for female children. This induced them at a meeting of the Charity in 1798 to consider the means for to establish a Masonic Charity for the clothing of the sons of indigent Freemasons. As mentioned the date of the Premier Grand Lodge founding of the Charity for the female children was 1788, yet we find no appearance of the Office of Almoner. We see however that the Junior Warden of the Lodge was responsible for the safe keeping of any monies for the Charity. The Antients Grand Lodge also founded a Charity for Boys in 1808, but in 1817 after the union the two boys Charities were formed into one, which was known as the Royal Masonic Institution for Boys. In 1842 the Annuity Fund for Brethren was opened and that for widows in 1849. By this time the Office of Almoner had been

instituted, but still nor directive as to his duties. With regard to the Almoner, the Alms chest was a box provided in a church to receive contributions; in a masonic lodge it is the charity box which provides the funds with which the Almoner relieves any Brother, sometimes members of a Brother's family, who need help. Though this area is kept very tight under the regulations today. At St. Pauls Cathedral, in London, he distributed the alms, had care of the burial of the poor, and educated in music and literature for the service of Church. Many of the old Guilds regularly relieved distressed brethren and their families, and there are records in the fourteenth century of an amount of sevenpence per week (say two or three days wages) being allowed a member of the Lincoln Guild of Tailors. There is no doubt that the Lodge Charity-Box probably suggested by the Alms box of the guilds, was known far back in the eighteenth century. In a Sheffield Lodge in 1764, and probably much earlier, there was a rule that

On each stated Lodge Meeting every member shall spend and put Sixpence into the chest for the relief of distressed Freemasons. The Junior Warden shall keep an exact account of the reckoning.... upon his negligence or omission he shall be accountable for the deficiency.

The period at which the Almoner came into his own, was between the 1st and 2nd World Wars, when many distressed brethren roamed from one end of this country to the other in search of employment, something many of the brethren in this Lodge had never seen or in fact heard much about. The Worcester Lodge have an Almoners book, which is now in the Museum, listing the names and addresses where brethren in transit looking for work and being assisted by the Almoner of the Lodge before going on their way. The town to which they were travelling to seek work was also listed. Not only does this book give an insight to the difficult times in the History of this Country, but shows the brotherly love extended to those in need.

Since 1945 there have been vast changes in our Charities, the R.M.I.G. and the R.M.I.B. has now been amalgamated into the Masonic Trust for Girls and Boys. The Boys School was sold only a few years ago and the boys educated out at other schools, some even living with their only surviving relative. The Girls school has become an independent educational establishment operating in the private sector. The only difference between this and other independent schools, is that it is obliged to receive girls placed there by the Trust. The R.M.B.I. Homes now total sixteen in different parts of the country.

This Institution was named the R.M.B.I. in 1850, when they built a home at Croydon, this home was closed several years ago and a new home built at Hove. This home is open only to those brethren and wives who are receiving a Annuity. We have however a further 16 homes round the Country. Funds to establish a Hospital were started in 1911 and various premises were occupied as Freemasons War Hospital between 1914-18. The Freemasons' Hospital and home was opened in 1920 and the hospital was moved to its present site in 1933 since when it has been known as the Royal Masonic Hospital. This establishment payed its part in the second world war, being used free of charge as a military Hospital. The Grand Charity distributes both in and outside the Craft, and gets its money by a payment from each brother in the return to Grand Lodge Annually. It like the R.M.B.I. the Boys and Girls raise funds by an Annual Festival. The R.M.H. has no festival, and only raises its money on the work it carries out. The Samaritan Fund of this Hospital relies on covenants, and fund raising by the Appeals Committee and Friends of the Hospital. This fund enables brethren and their wives to obtain treatment even if they cannot afford the full fees, or even none at all. The Grand Charity may give up to £1500 per year to anyone not covered under the other Charity Regulations. Such a case may be a widow who married again and on the 2nd husband passing away requested aid on her first husband being a member of the Craft.

You might now ask where the Almoner of the Lodge fits in, as I have said their are no duties laid down other than being such an additional Officer who may be appointed after the Union in 1814. At any Installation you attend, you will never hear any Almoner instructed in his duties, only thanked for all he has done. Yet it is one of the most important Offices in the Lodge. His Office does not concern any of the ceremonial of the Lodge, but Human beings in the persons of the brethren of the Lodge and their families. His work can do a great deal more to enhance the Order in the outside world than any other Office. There is nothing which gets the Craft a bad name quickly that the failure to act when someone says they lost their husband and no one from his Lodge has been near to see her since his death.

Brethren in a good many of our Lodges the brethren think the Almoner is that brother who receives the alms collection on the night of the meeting. Unfortunately in the cause of raising money, the rescent appointment of Charity Steward has overshadowed that of the Almoner. This is caused by the need to raise money in large sums by Covenant, in fact he is listed in the Officers as being above the Almoner.

Once he collects his money and puts it in the bank he can rest in peace. This the Almoner cannot do as he may as soon as he feels he can rest another case can arise and once more he has work to do. One might say the Almoners duties have been lightened by the appointment of a collector in the name of Charity Steward. Only a few years ago the Almoner had to collect as well. In this Lodge there was a system where every brother in the Lodge paid the Almoner £1.00, and it would appear that once per year names were drawn out of a hat, and the brethren concerned had £10.00 sent to the Charity their choice. Brethren don't ask me how it worked, I among others paid in for 10 years and saw no payment. Others had their name come out within the first three years and thus qualified before they had completed payment of their tontines. However the Girls Festival stopped the Tontine system and all brethren then took out Covenants. This is why eventually a Charity Steward was needed, and the poor Almoner like his customers went a different route.

Brethren will note that I have tried to show how great a field the Almoners work is spread over. Not only has he the responsibility of visiting the aged and the sick, but has the care of those who cannot look after themselves. In addition he has the responsibility of not only pre-paring and submitting petitions for his own brethren and wives, but also has to act at times as a visiting brother to carry out the same work for brethren in his area for other Provinces.

This Lodge is one of the few who carry out the visitation and the giving of flowers and presents at Xmas time, as well as when they are ill. I would remind you that an Almoner cannot do his work well without the assistance of the brethren of the lodge. Often an Almoner is the last person to get to know there is anything wrong.

When one is drawing up a petition for assistance, it is usually found especially among widows, that they do not want you to know how badly off they are, and one has to probe very carefully to get at the truth. On the other hand the Almoner has to make sure that a person is in real need for the various charities look very carefully at each petition presented. We in this Lodge have been very lucky and had two widows obtain assistance to enter Nursing Homes, one being a widow of a brother of this Lodge and the other a widow who had remarried and her second husband died but the masonic contact was through her first husband who was a member of a Lodge in China in the 1930 period.

The remarkable point in this case was the fact that the Grand Charity people approached me to see what they could do. On asking the question as to their taking up the case, I was informed that the Grand Charity can look at all these cases which the other Institutions

cannot touch because of their Constitution, and can award assistance up to a sum of £1500.

I have already intimated that these Petitions take a great deal of time, and patience, it is hard work, but when you see the results it is an Office worth while. So you see brethren that your Almoner not only works for this Lodge but even for other Lodges, Districts and Provinces. May I also inform you that no petition for a widow or a member of this Lodge can go ahead without your approval, as the petition has to be put before the Lodge without naming the person for approval, and authority to forward it to the Charity concerned. In that Petition there is the question as to what the Lodge has already done to help, and this is why a Lodge should have a healthy Alms Account, we never know when that assistance will be required.

A petitioner asking for assistance, i.e. being in need (not one wishing to go into the Masonic Homes) and must normally be receiving supplementary Pension from the State. There is also a limit as to what the Craft can give before the State claw it back from us by reducing the supplementary Pension. If a Petitioner is in a Nursing home or to go into one, then the Craft normally make up the difference of the cost not covered by the state. If the Craft agree an Annuity for a person at home, then each year the Province send a Xmas present cheque for £50.00. I do not quite agree with this, five years ago we used to send the Annuitants a Christmas parcel worth approx £40 a cheque. In this way a brother or the Almoner took that parcel and able to chat to the person and ascertain if things were alright. That contact has gone, only because it meant work buying the product putting up the parcels. So all they see is the Postman with a letter containing a cheque.

There are one or two things which I hope every brother will not Please dont build up the hopes of your own family that should any happen to you they will be kept upto the same standard of life the Craft. Brethren this is a fallacy all the Craft can do is to make the life of a widow a little better. If a person has Annuity and is living in their own home, and then they sell the Property, then the Annuity and all the other aid stops until some time as they are in trouble again. The same thing also happens a widow or brother sell the home to hand the capital over to then neither the N.H.S. or our own Charities will assist the case had one case like this several years ago in this Province.

Please remember that the Craft is not a philanthropic Society is willing to help and assist those worse off than ourselves