

THE WORCESTER LODGE AND ROYAL ARCH MASONRY

Brethren, I must start by reminding the members of the Worcester Lodge that, as ancient a body as you are – being now comfortably into your third century – your lodge is not the first to have met in Worcester. It is now impossible to tell precisely when Freemasonry was first practised in this city, but we do know that the first Worcester Lodge, N^o 60, met at the Stonemasons Arms in Great Fish Street and dated its warrant from 16 March 1757, although there is considerable evidence from brief references to it to suggest that it had been in existence for at least a few months – possibly even a year or two – earlier. And, of course, it begs the question as to where its founders came from. Unfortunately, as no Minute Book survives, we also do not know when it ceased to exist. The last positive reference to it is in *Berrows Worcester Journal* for 1769, but there is a strong possibility that it continued for several years thereafter; indeed, your own late W. Bro. John Brooke more or less suggested that its rump may have formed the nucleus of your own foundation in 1790, despite originally belonging to a different constitution. An Antients lodge, it appeared in their sporadic list of lodges for 1804 and 1813 but not, surprisingly, for 1807. At any rate it was totally defunct by the Union of the Grand Lodges in 1812 and was erased.

It was *Berrows Worcester Journal* which was also the vehicle for your own foundation. In its issue of 1 April 1790 the paper carried an advertisement informing its readers of the intention to found a new Masonic lodge in the city. The advertisement ends: “For the purpose of promoting a constitution, Chapters are held every Sunday evening at the Rein Deer, all it is brought to its wished for crisis. The company of every brother is requested.” Who the advertiser was is unknown, nor is it clear why he should have been confident that his announcement would be read by a sufficient number of keen Freemasons in the area. Also curious is the use of the word ‘Chapter’ in this context. The outcome, however, is well attested and, of course, resulted in the warranting of your own lodge, then N^o 574, towards the end of the year.

As I have already said, the first Worcester Lodge was an Antients lodge while you, the second, were a Moderns lodge. The most experienced Masons amongst you will, of course, be thoroughly conversant with the distinction, but for the benefit of the younger brethren I crave your indulgence while I explain – it also has a considerable bearing on the subject of my talk.

From the foundation of the first “Grand Lodge of All England” by the association of four separate lodges which met at the Goose and Gridiron tavern in St Paul’s churchyard, London, in 1717 Freemasonry began a rapid expansion, not only in this country but also on the Continent, particularly in France. But while it had its devotees, it also had its detractors – attacks on Freemasonry are, I assure you, nothing new at all – culminating in the notorious work published by Samuel Pritchard in October 1730, *Masonry Dissected*, in which he exposed the ceremonies in full: signs, grips, words and all. Hoping to acquire social or financial benefits from becoming a Freemason, there was then a rush to join by – to use the old phrase – ‘making Freemasons clandestinely’, that is putting men through spurious or even the correct ceremonies but outside the confines of a regular warranted lodge. Grand Lodge could envisage its recently won authority being eroded and, in order to regain the upper hand and expose impostors, it began to alter the ancient Landmarks of the Order; that is to say, amongst other things it transposed the modes of recognition of the first and second degrees, abolished deacons and omitted the Master’s installation ceremony.

This, in turn, angered traditionalist Freemasons, to such an extent that on 17 July 1751 a group of five lodges met at the Turks Head tavern in Greek Street, Soho,

and founded "The Most Antient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons" pledged to work the traditional ceremonies under the "Grand Lodge of England according to the Old Institutions". To circumvent this long-winded title they became known for short as the 'Antients', while the premier Grand Lodge were then in consequence dubbed the 'Moderns'. The Antients were also sometimes referred to as 'Athol' Masons, after the third and fourth Dukes of Athol who were its Grand Masters for over half of its existence. But, for the purposes of my title, what concerns us is the relative attitude to Royal Arch Masonry of these rival Grand Lodges.

Despite a far more recent birth – unless you believe the findings of the controversial recent Masonic book *The Hiram Key* – it has to be admitted that the place and date of the origins of Royal Arch Masonry are just as obscure as those of speculative Craft Masonry. Scotland, Ireland, France and England can all make some claim to have originated the ceremony, with France perhaps having the edge over the others. Whereas Craft ritual is based on the construction of the first or Solomonic Temple and ends with the loss of the secrets in the third degree, Royal Arch Masonry takes the building of the second Temple and the recovery of those secrets five hundred years later as its theme, highlighting the importance of the domed or arched vault. The date of origin is also uncertain but is probably the fourth decade of the eighteenth century; it was certainly in being by 1744.

For all that the Moderns Grand Lodge had tampered with the ancient Landmarks of the Order, it appears that they would have nothing to do with this new Royal Arch degree, but insisted that it be worked outside their lodges as a separate ceremony. In fact in 1766, almost fifty years after their own foundation, they established by a Charter of Compact a Grand Chapter to take control of all their Royal Arch Chapters.

On the other hand the Antients, many of whom were Irish, welcomed it. The rapid expansion of the Antients was due in large measure to the energy and organisational ability of their first Grand Secretary, Laurence Dermott. An Irishman of considerable foresight, he appreciated that a ceremony which included the recovery of the lost secrets would be more popular in attracting candidates, and it was mainly he who was instrumental in adding it to their working in their lodges as a fourth degree. But whether it was worked in their Worcester Lodge N° 60 we shall never know since, as I have said before, no written records of that lodge survive. My guess is that it probably was.

Paradoxically we do know that the second Worcester Lodge worked the Royal Arch ceremony. But how can this be, I hear those of you who are still awake saying to yourselves, when I have already told you that you were founded a Moderns lodge? In the first place, it has generally been acknowledged that the further the distance from London the more amiable – or at least the less hostile – were the relations between Freemasons of the two differing Grand Lodges. Secondly, it has already been suggested that the demise of the first Worcester Lodge may have led to the creation of the second; or, of course, it may have been the other way about – the rise of the second led to the death of the first. Either way the suggestion is that there was an intermingling of personnel, just as there had probably been in Stourbridge in the course of a similar situation during a similar period. And thirdly, it is also known that there were quite a number of Moderns lodges – possibly reacting to the considerable recruiting success of the Antients – which did have deacons, admitted Antients as visitors, and even performed the Royal Arch ceremony as part of their ritual. They were called 'Traditioner' lodges and were in the forefront of the movement for union. 280 Lodge may well have been one of these.

I say 'may well have been' because, as I am sure you are all sadly aware, your first Minute Book, covering the vital formative years, was lost sometime in the middle of the last century. How then do we know that the Royal Arch degree was worked in 280 Lodge prior to the Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813? The evidence, it has

to be said, is entirely fortuitous, being an allusion in passing in the Minutes of the Lodge's February meeting of 1828 to a piece of 'any other business' in which it was resolved "that Bro. John Dent be paid the sum of twenty-three pounds, balance of account due to him, which he paid to the Widow Allen in 1819 for a Regalia for Royal Arch Chapter, which is now deposited at the Rein Deer Inn, and is to become the property of the Lodge; and which sum was promised to be paid to the late Brother John Allen, and many members of the Lodge having been exalted by him".

Now, John Allen was installed Master of your lodge three times, in 1807, 1808 and 1812, and he is known to have died during his third Mastership in May 1813. With your Master's installation taking place at the December meeting, it is therefore most probable that he first conducted a Royal Arch ceremony in the Lodge in 1808 and that the regalia referred to dates from that period. After the reference to it in the February 1828 Minutes nothing more is heard of it until your Lodge's first historian, W. Bro. Christopher Whitney Griffiths who looks down at us from the left of the Secretary's table as I speak – dressed, incidentally, in Royal Arch regalia – wrote of it in his 1870 labour of love *Reminiscences of the Worcester Lodge N^o 280, and of Other Masonic Institutions in the Province and City of Worcester*. Let me use the author's own words: "Beyond the information contained in the foregoing minute, nothing was heard of the first Royal Arch Chapter or the Regalia, for which this sum was voted, until a few years ago, when it was the writer's privilege to rescue the remains from the auctioneer's hammer, and restore to the members of the present Chapter that which, although sadly depreciated by the ravages of time, is still highly interesting as illustrating the working of the degree, its vestments, jewels, etc., and is worthy of preservation as specimens of the past". These 'specimens' can usually be seen in our fine Museum next door but, with the new Curator's blessing, I have them with me now.

If John Allen's death in May 1812 did not completely kill off Royal Arch Masonry in the Worcester Lodge N^o 483 (as it then was), the Union of the two Grand Lodges in December of that year certainly did. Being generally in the ascendant from the Craft point of view, the Antients were able to gain their own way in this respect, with the result that it was "declared and pronounced that pure Antient Masonry consists of Three Degrees and no more, namely those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft and the Master Mason including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch"; but, with the Moderns possessing a Chapter structure, a compromise had to be reached and thus, four years after the Craft Union, Royal Arch matters were finally settled in 1817 with a separate but closely allied Supreme Grand Chapter and the completion of the third degree worked in distinct Chapters.

For some reason which remains unknown, it would appear that the many members of the Worcester Lodge recently exalted by John Allen made no attempt to form a Royal Arch Chapter at this time – or, if they did, the loss of your first Minute Book, which covers the period up to the end of 1819, means that we are unlikely ever to discover. Nor was any leadership shown by the then Provincial Grand Master, another John Dent, despite the fact that he had been appointed Grand Superintendent of Royal Arch Masonry in Worcestershire in December 1812. Very much an 'absentee landlord', he had played a significant part in the union process, becoming the first Grand Treasurer of the United Grand Lodge from 1813 to 1826 and similarly in the Grand Chapter from 1817 to 1825, but he ignored the affairs of his Province.

No more, indeed, is heard of Royal Arch Masonry in Worcestershire until 1844 when a simultaneous movement in Dudley and in Worcester resulted in the formation of the Chapter of Dudley attached to Harmonic Lodge and St Wulstan's Chapter attached to the Worcester Lodge, consecrated within a week of each other in December of that year. And I am pleased to say that the moving spirit this end of the Province – and he was also to be the founding Master of Semper Fidelis Lodge in 1846 – is with us

today, albeit in portrait form to the right of the Secretary's table. W. Bro. Joseph Bennett had become Master of the Worcester Lodge in December 1843. An extremely keen Freemason, he was determined to form a Royal Arch Chapter. He gathered eight other Founders, petitioned Grand Chapter and received a Charter or Warrant dated 6 November 1844 for St Wulstan's Chapter N° 349, as that was then the number of your Lodge until the final renumbering by Grand Lodge in 1863. Why, you may ask, was the name of St Wulstan chosen? This is none too difficult to answer but, I have to confess, it had never dawned on me until I came to write the Chapter's history four years ago. Apart from being in the days before the custom of naming Chapters after the Lodges to which they were attached, 1844 saw the preparations in Worcester for marking the 750th anniversary of the death of the City's greatest saint and bishop on 19 January 1095. What more auspicious name could have been chosen at the time?

And who were the Founders? The first three – Joseph Bennett, James Knight and Robert Rising – were good friends, being Worshipful Masters of the Worcester Lodge in successive years, 1843, 1844 and 1845 respectively; and they were also members of the Chapter of Fortitude N° 348 (now 279) of Leicester, though Leicester seems to have been a long way to have gone for their Royal Arch Masonry. Benjamin Stable and William Corles (Junior) were also members of the Worcester Lodge, the former elected Master in 1849; his Chapter was Fortitude N° 51 (now 43) of Birmingham, but that of William Corles is not known. Richard Lockett was a member of the Palladian Lodge and Chapter N° 141 (now 120) of Hereford, and both Richard Masters and Richard Gibney were members of the Foundation Chapter of Unanimity N° 97 (now 82) of Cheltenham. Nothing, not even his Christian name, is known of the last Founder, J. Cox, and W. Bro. Whitney Griffiths seems for once to be wrong in regarding him as a member of the Worcester Lodge since he does not include him in his own list of its members. In any case, for some unknown reason, the last three Founders never appeared at all, not even to the Consecration meeting.

Despite the fact that the Charter expressly indicates that the first Chapter should "be opened on Wednesday the 18th day of December", Joseph Bennett called an earlier meeting – one that we would now refer to as a Founders' Meeting – for the 9th at the Bell Hotel in Broad Street which, in 1842 and again largely at Joseph Bennett's instigation, had replaced the Rein Deer Inn in Mealcheapen Street on the grounds that the latter was too small for the numbers then attending. The Minutes of this business meeting are written up in the first Minute Book in Joseph Bennett's hand. It was attended by the first six Founders and, surprisingly, by one visitor, Comp. Thomas Shepherd. He was to become one of the first six joining members of the Chapter and was, along with two of the others – William Corles (Senior) and John Dent – a member of the Worcester Lodge and very possibly one of those exalted by John Allen thirty years earlier. And it was this John Dent, it will be remembered, who was the one who had acquired the original regalia from John Allen's widow.

The Consecration took place on the appointed day, 18 December, as arranged, with the proceedings starting at noon and lasting "upwards of two hours" – laconically dismissed in the Minute Book in one line ".....the usual ceremonies of consecration performed....." as if it was a familiar everyday occurrence! After the Consecration the Companions were "called from Labour to Refreshment", though how long a break they had is not recorded. They then returned to Labour and proceeded with a normal Chapter meeting, confirming the business of the pre-Consecration meeting, electing joining members and then undertaking the exaltation of no less than ten new Companions simultaneously, all of them members of the Worcester Lodge. The Chapter was then again called to Refreshment "and the evening spent in the most perfect harmony and mutual congratulations on the formation and prospects of St Wulstan's Chapter". In fact, they must have had so substantial a banquet that when they resumed the Chapter meeting, after dining as was the custom in those days, further business had to be postponed as the Minute Book says "in consequence of the lateness of the hour"!

The prospects for the new Chapter were, indeed, good. Over the next six years there were sixteen further exaltations, thirteen being from the Worcester Lodge, and four joining members. But a combination of misfortune, in the form of death and serious illness to key members, and poor forward planning brought the Chapter temporarily to its knees when there were insufficient duly qualified Companions to fill the three Principals' chairs. The gap lasted for eight years, from February 1850 to February 1858, when a fresh start was made with Joseph Bennett again in the main Chair. Unfortunately Christopher Whitney Griffiths, who was a member of the Chapter at both ends of this hiatus, does not explain why the gap lasted so long. But, once it had re-started, the Chapter has never looked back and is currently one of the strongest in the Province.

And what of the Worcester Lodge's connections with its Chapter since those earliest days? Of its total of 509 members, of which you, Worshipful Master, became the 498th the meeting before the Chapter's sesquicentenary, 217 have come from the Lodge. Not surprisingly, until Semper Fidelis Lodge had its own Chapter in 1890, the Worcester Lodge provided around half the members – 104 out of 201. Since then, for a variety of reasons, 280 Lodge applications for exaltation have tumbled off: only 41 out of 155 since the centenary in 1944 and only 11 out of 69 in the last twenty-five years, so that at present only seven of you remain – seven out of a total current Chapter membership of 56. The last of these, I am delighted to say, W. Bro. Bill Stallard, joined us only last November, but is helping to extend that marvellous family record of service to both Lodge and Chapter which stretches back, in the Chapter's case, to 1870.

Worshipful Master, I trust I have not lulled your brethren into too deep a slumber, but may perhaps have awakened in some of the newer members an interest in Royal Arch Masonry in general and in St Wulstan's Chapter, your Chapter N^o 280, in particular. You, of course, will be able to answer any questions they may have and, I trust, will steer them in increasing numbers once again in that direction by persuading them to complete their Third Degree.

Richard E. Jordan

P.S.G.D., A.S.C. & G.M.

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