

THE ORDER OF WOMEN FREEMASONS

We, the Order of Women Freemasons, didn't – like Topsy – just grow !

I would like to thank this Group and our host for the opportunity to say a little about the history and structure of the Order of Women Freemasons or, as we were formerly known, the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry. My purpose is to inform, and I have no wish to be controversial.

My remarks, particularly on the beginnings of our Order, owe a great deal to the Diamond Jubilee History written by R.W.Bro. Doris Smyth, F.A.G.M., in 1966, and I am indebted to her for her help.

In the 18th century in Europe, there had been a history of 'Initiative Societies' and 'Adoptive Lodges', both admitting women, but neither of which could be called true Masonry.

In the mid 18th century in Paris, some Lodges belonging to organised Freemasonry and warranted from London formed a French Grand Lodge. Freemasonry in France thereafter took many courses. Wars and revolutions disturbed Masonic life but also paved the way for freedom of thought among French Masons. The year 1882 saw a most significant event in *our* history. Under one of several independent Masonic authorities in France, very liberal control had been granted to daughter Lodges. One of these – *Les Libres Penseurs*, which worked under the charter of the Ancient and Accepted Rite of *La Grande Loge Symbolique de France* resolved that the time had come when women who had proved themselves true and of mature mind and understanding should receive initiation into Masonry. Their first initiate was Mlle. Maria Deraismes.

In consequence of this action, the Lodge *Les Libres Penseurs* detached itself from its parent body and formed a separate Masonic body known as *La Grand Loge Symbolique Ecossaise*. Among their early initiates was Mrs. Annie Besant, who quickly became a leader in the new movement, which from the time of its initial expansion, had been closely linked with the Theosophical Society, of which she was President. The name of this order was subsequently changed to that of the Universal Order of Co-Masonry in Paris in 1889. This movement came to England in 1902 and the first Co-Masonic Lodge was formed on 26th September.

After a few years, some of the English members became dissatisfied with the governance of Co-Masonry, feeling that their Constitutions were not consistent with the traditions of Antient Masonry, that French Masonry did not demand a belief in a Supreme Being and also with the fact that the Supreme Council was in France. These members wanted a Masonic Order to include women, practising Freemasonry on exactly the same lines as U.G.L.E., both in constitution, ritual and breadth of interpretation. Eventually, they felt their right course was to secede from the Universal Order of Co-Masonry, which they did in 1908. On 6th

March of that year, a small Masonic society was formed called the Ancient Masonic Union, which duly became a new order under the title of the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry.

On 5th June 1908 a meeting of these few took place and planned the first three Lodges of the new Order, which they called a 'free masonic association of men and women'. On 20th June the first Grand Lodge of the H.F.A.M. was opened in due, ample and ancient form by the first Grand Master of our Order - Dr. William Frederick Geikie Cobb, a member of U.G.L.E. and also a Co-Mason. Under the auspices of their own Grand Lodge, Lodge Golden Rule No. 1 was consecrated with Geikie Cobb as its first W.M., together with Lodge Emulation No.2 (W.M. J.W. Sidley) and Lodge of Unity No.3. The latter was the only one of the three to have a lady at its head - *Sister Florence Faulding*. By the end of the evening, she had become *W.Bro. Florence Faulding!*

I have the honour to have Lodge Golden Rule No.1 as my Mother Lodge - although I hasten to add that my direct knowledge of it does not go back to 1908!

G.M. Cobb was ably supported by his D.C.M. and great Preceptor R.W.Bro. Peter Birchall, and also by R.W.Bro. Peter Slingsby, who acted as Grand Secretary of our Order from 1912 until his death in 1935.

Another need which had contributed to the formation of the new Order was a desire for a closer return to the spiritual ideals of Freemasonry. The crest of our Order is three pillars, symbolising Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, the divine Attributes of the Supreme Being Himself, and, by extension, other elements of our symbolism.

In 1913, some of the members of Lodge Stability No.5 requested Grand Lodge to start Royal Arch working. This was refused on the ground of prematurity. The members of Lodge Stability refused to accept this ruling and resigned from the Order, to form another Order called the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons. It is this group which today has the Web site on the Internet which has attracted a lot of attention, and has also been the subject of a misleading periodical article. The H.F.A.F. have a small number of Craft and other Lodges.

In contrast, we now have 349 Craft Lodges, 59 Mark, 49 Chapters and many other Degrees, of which more later.

In 1958 our Order changed its name to the Order of Women Freemasons.

The administration of the Order is headed by our Grand Master, together with a Deputy and an Assistant G.M. There is a Grand Lodge, with a Grand Registrar, Grand Secretary, Grand Treasurer and all the other G.L. offices. We have London, Provincial, Scottish and Overseas Grand Ranks, but no Senior L.G.R. One major difference to U.G.L.E. is that we do not have Provincial Grand Lodges

and their associated administrations. The Quarterly Communications of Grand Lodge, are held, as being central, in Birmingham for Installation G.L. in October, in London in December and March, and in Birmingham in June. A Board of General Purposes was established in 1909, which continues to oversee the organisation of the Order.

Day-to-day work of the Order is administered by HQ staff. These ladies all work voluntarily, and are mostly part-time.

In our 91 years of history, we have had eight Grand Masters. The first, as we have heard, was William Geikie Cobb. Dr Cobb was Rector of St Ethelburga-the-Virgin within Bishopsgate in the City of London, between 1900 and 1941. His first wife and his daughter were both Masons in the Co-Masonic Order. One of the many innovations he introduced at his Church was "the setting up of a printing press in the vestry, on which he produced not only his parish magazine, but more important to us, the early issues of our journal, *The Gavel*. The City Press wrote of G.M. Cobb on his death "He was always in the news for he was never dull or inactive ... He believed in women in business... at a time when such views were not generally accepted... but perhaps he will be remembered better for his fight for marriage reform... and divorce by mutual consent". The eulogy concludes "Dr Cobb will be long remembered as a very charming man full of common sense tempered by much quiet humour. He was a mystic and a scholar and a very human fellow". What an obituary to be envied!

Dr Cobb was followed as Grand Master by M.W.Bro. Marion Lindsay Halsey, who happened to be the daughter-in-law of the then Deputy Grand Master of U.G.L.E. Initiated into Lodge Golden Rule No 1 in 1909, within three years she had become G.M. Her successor wrote of her, that she had... "Nobility of character, simplicity, independence, quiet insight, understanding, high ideals, wide culture and great qualities of leadership which won for her the affection, admiration and respect of all those who had the privilege of knowing her."

Her nobility of character was demonstrated when, in 1920 G.M. Lindsay Halsey headed a Petition to U.G.L.E. to recognise our Order as a *bona fide* body, both to 'legitimise' the growing number of lady Masons, but also to remove the conflict of interest borne by those gentlemen who wished to work for both organisations. This recognition – not a plea for integration – did not come to pass, and the decision was accepted with sorrow and dignity.

Under her successor, M.W.Bro. Adelaide Litten, who had formerly been Grand Treasurer and Preceptor, the Order expanded into the provinces, the Holy Royal Arch was introduced and much work was done for charity. M.W. Bro. Lucy Bertram O'Hea, Lady Markham, guided the Order through the years of the Second World War. Retiring through ill health, she moved to Nairobi and continued to work to promote the Order overseas.

The 16 years from 1948 to 1964, under the Grand Mastership of M.W. Bro. Mary Gordon Muirhead Hope, witnessed a huge expansion within the Order, both in the number of Lodges consecrated at home and abroad and in the introduction of further Degrees.

Her successor was M.W. Bro. Rhoda Low, by profession an accountant, Financial Director of a large manufacturing company, and a previous Grand Treasurer. She had been A.G.M. since 1951. Her administrative ability guided steady progress, with another 122 Craft Lodges consecrated in 12 years. Through her drive and guidance, our Diamond Jubilee was celebrated with an Especial Grand Lodge at the Royal Albert Hall and at services throughout the country, and the Headquarters building and Temple in London was enlarged.

Among the achievements of M.W. Bro. Frances Hall were the great expansion of the Mark Degree by the consecration of 24 Mark Lodges, and above all, the opening of the Doris Jones Memorial Home for sick and distressed Brethren at Worthing.

All our Grand Masters have been inspirational in their different ways - our present G.M., M.W. Bro. Brenda Fleming Taylor, has, since 1989, been concerned more with consolidating rather than expanding the Order, and has been instrumental in bringing a new sense of openness to our work and pride in our achievements and what we are. We look forward to our Centenary.

Craft Lodges are arranged on the same basis as U.G.L.E. We require our Candidates to believe in a Supreme Being and to be of mature age. Potential candidates are vetted at interview.

The pattern of expansion of our Craft Lodges is interesting - six Lodges (No.6 being the first Lodge of Installed Masters) had been consecrated by 1912. The first World War intervening, the next was Lodge Verity No.7 in 1925, which was made up principally of ex-Service women. Under Grand Master M.W. Bro. Marion Lindsay Halsey, Lodge Mercury No.11 was consecrated in 1928. The primary purpose of this Lodge was to act as a travelling Induction/Consecrating Lodge, to go out to the areas where womens' Masonry had not reached and to train officers ready for the consecration of their Lodge. Lodge Mercury had a great and celebrated history in starting new Lodges, and only ceased in the late 1970's. Lodge Mercury North No.111 was consecrated for the same purpose in northern counties in 1958.

On the foreign front, we also directed our efforts to recruitment. For this express purpose, Lodge Voyagers No.40 was formed in 1950, to act as a focus for interest in activities abroad, and to consecrate new Lodges overseas. Lodges were consecrated in Canada, Australia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. A Lodge was set up in Malta in 1961, but unfortunately did not survive the Mintoff era. Nearer home, the early 1950's also saw Lodges start in the Channel Islands and Northern Ireland.

We have a number of Installed Masters Research Lodges. But here we have one of the few differences in ritual between us. We do a ceremony based on the extended opening and closing of a Board of Installed Masters, together with its own Obligation, additional signs and Working Tools. There is, however, no question that this is thought of as a separate degree.

We use the Universal Ritual of 1968, sometimes with modifications traditional to individual Lodges, such as the inclusion of the 'long apron' in the First Degree, or the passage commencing 'Remember now Thy Creator in the days of thy youth...' from *Ecclesiastes* (Chapter 12) in the Third Degree. Charges are usually undertaken by Past Masters, and the Second Degree (Tracing Board) is nearly always given by the Junior Warden.

In 1929 it was judged that the time was right to introduce Royal Arch Masonry. Three Chapters constituted a Supreme Grand Chapter in 1931, and there are now 49 Chapters in existence. The Mark Degree was not introduced until 1946, with the Royal Ark Mariner following in 1950. There are currently 59 Mark Lodges operating.

The four Degrees of Cryptic Masonry were first worked in 1949, the qualification for entrance being membership of the Mark and Royal Arch, and having passed through the Craft Chair.

The Allied Masonic Degrees or St. Lawrence the Martyr, Knight of Constantinople, Grand Tilers of Solomon, Red Cross of Babylon and Holy Order of Grand High Priest have recently been introduced in the form issued by your Grand Council of the Allied Masonic Degrees. Prior to 1998, the degree of the Red Cross of Babylon was worked on its own, and this dates from the formation of Euphrates Council in 1954.

In Christian Freemasonry, all of which is headed by the Grand Master of the Craft, we have 24 Conclaves of the Order of the Red Cross of Constantine from which members can be advanced into the Appendent Orders of Holy Sepulchre and St. John the Evangelist. We have seven Templar Encampments (latterly called Preceptories), in which the Order of Malta is also worked. There are three Rose Croix Chapters, and, recently, a selective Consistory of Knights Kadosh has been opened. The Royal Order of Scotland operates on a similarly restricted basis. A Tabernacle of Holy Royal Arch Knight Templar Priests is another recent addition to the range of Christian degrees which we work.

In all the Christian Degrees, our qualification for membership is to be a Royal Arch Mason *and* to be in the Red Cross of Constantine, unlike yourselves, where Constantine is only a prerequisite for Holy Sepulchre and St. John the Evangelist. With you, admission to the Rose Croix degree requires only that the candidate be a Master Mason of 12 month's standing, but we again demand membership of

Constantine. This is also the case with the Royal Order of Scotland, which in addition is restricted to those who have been through the Craft and Royal Arch Chairs. As far as I am aware, the only Degree worked by yourselves and not by us is the Order of the Secret Monitor.

Raising funds for Charity is, of course, an important part of a Mason's responsibilities. We approach it in a rather different way, in that we do not invite regular subscriptions to a general charity fund and do not have the office of Charity Steward. All monies, whether destined for the Order's own charities or to outside causes, are raised through the efforts of the Brethren in arranging social functions, as well as collections in Lodge. A W.M. earns the Charity Sash if a certain proportion of her Lodge's income has been raised for charity during her year, and she designates her own favourite 'outside' charity.

In the early days of the Order, a Bureau of Service was established in 1928, where Brethren could offer their particular talents and expertise to help others. This ranged widely from assistance with Income Tax matters to supervision of girls leaving the (as it was then known) Borstal institution, as well as fund-raising. The Order worked extensively with Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, producing thousands of garments, and received many letters of thanks on behalf of the Queen over the years.

The Bureau of Service was replaced by various worthy causes, such as giving beds and equipment to the Florence Nightingale Hospital in North London, the purchase of 'Meals-on-Wheels' vans, and the sponsorship of an immigrant Polish refugee family. Today, the Order does not espouse individual causes, but has set up various Trust Funds, administered in accordance with Charity Commission rules. We also have a Building Restoration Fund, dedicated to the maintenance of our Georgian Headquarters in Notting Hill Gate, the freehold of which was given to the Order by a member of Lodge of Unity No. 3 in 1924 and subsequently enlarged to include a Temple. We have two residential or short-stay homes, one in Worthing and one in Lytham St. Annes.

A "Library of Masonic and kindred literature" was set up at the then headquarters as early as 1911, and its initial brief is interesting. Dr Cobb wrote "We should suggest that a three-fold division of the Library should be made corresponding to our three degrees. In the first, would be placed works on ethics; in the second, works on philosophy and especially psychology; and in the third, books on religion in its purest form." His list of examples included Aristotle's *Ethics* and Plato's *Republic*, psychology textbooks of the time such as William James' *Principles of Psychology*, and works on comparative religion, mysticism and Gnosticism. As the Order's Librarian, I can detect vestiges of the original plan – in particular, an emphasis on aspects of mysticism – but we have to remember here that one of the aims of our Order was to increase awareness of the spiritual basis of Freemasonry, and that our Founders worked on a high intellectual plane. In passing, I would remark that I am in process of re-

cataloguing and classifying the Library according to the system used here at Gt. Queen Street and in some Provincial Grand Libraries. I hope that this will contribute to a standardisation of procedures amongst us, and encourage interlending. I am indebted to Robin White for all his help and advice with my re-cataloguing. The collection is approximately 1,000 volumes, and I have a system of printed cards, whereby a Brother can contact me to request information on a particular book. I am also trying to add up-to-date works of practical interest to Freemasons, such as the duties of officers, to balance the intellectual emphasis.

We issue a periodical bi-annually, called *The Gavel*. The first issue was in April 1909, a single sheet folded into four in a blue cover with a drawing of a gavel on the outside. Entirely written and printed by Grand Master Geikie Cobb. It gave the meeting dates of the three Lodges of the Order, listed the 'more important' Landmarks of Masonry, the desirable qualifications of a Candidate and the objects of the Honourable Fraternity. The subscription was one shilling a year for four issues.

In 1910 UGLE sent a circular letter to its Lodges concerning 'irregular bodies', to which our fledgling Order responded by printing 1,000 copies of *The Gavel* and circulating them to the Lodges of the Order Obedience. Dr Cobb's "uncompromising and determined character" precipitated some criticism from his new Grand Lodge, and he resigned from the office of Grand Master in 1912.

The Gavel then ceased publication: "... it had a short but brilliant existence, not bringing peace but a sword. It was a weapon of offence, polemical, trenchant and utterly afraid...". These words were written by R.W.Bro. Peter Birchall, D.G.M., who in 1923 agreed to become the new Editor under the auspices of a magazine committee. Its aim was to be educational and informative, and polemics had no place. Over the years, *The Gavel* has increased in size and scope. As well as research papers, Masonic and social activities were reported, and soon Brethren themselves were asked to submit articles for publication. Questions and answers, correspondence, tributes to late Brethren, photographs and advertisements were all features introduced during the following years.

Until 1966, *The Gavel* included names and addresses of the principal officers of every Craft and other Lodge. This obviously grew out of all proportion and it was then decided to publish these details in a separate Yearbook. We also produce a slimline Diary with a week to view on the left and the relevant Lodge meetings on the right. Both of these are in my tender care.

Finally, for the most part, our regalia – collars, aprons and jewels - is exactly the same as yours, and certainly has no distinguishing marks, apart from the absence of Provincial designations. The only two minor differences that I know of are the collars of one of our research Lodges – Doris Jones Memorial No.300 – which although the usual pale blue, have a pink stripe. The other is the decoration of Grand Master's Grand Star, which is a breast jewel in the form of

two interlaced triangles. We do not have a separate apron for those Brethren who have received secrets but not passed through the Chair.

In most Lodges, we wear a long black skirt, white blouse and a surplice of white voile. Some Lodges have their own traditions, which include wearing evening dress for Installations, and white for a First Degree and black for a Third. Candidates wear a simple white cross-over pilgrim's gown over their clothes, with just enough skin showing to apply a poignard, Square or Compass.

So here we have a snapshot view of the Order of Women Freemasons. I hope that it has been informative, maybe has dispelled a few myths, and above all, has been of interest to you.

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