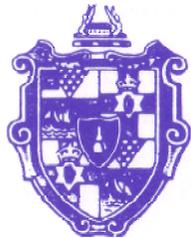


*Provincial Grand Lodge
of
Ancient, Free & Accepted
Masons of Antrim*



Constituted 1868

FREEMASONRY

Your Questions Answered

This year the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Ireland celebrates the 275th Anniversary of its constitution in 1725.

In beautiful eighteenth Century idiom Freemasonry is described as 'a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'. This, in fact, an accurate and precise description of Craft Masonry, albeit in rather mystical terminology.

The purpose of this booklet is to give straightforward answers to questions which may be posed by members of the general public. The text is unambiguous and it clearly outlines the origins of the Masonic Order together with the principles on which it is founded.

On behalf of the Provincial Grand Lodge, may I accord sincere thanks to the members of the Province's Education Committee for the time, thought and energy which they expended in the compilation and presentation of the booklet.

I am certain that the booklet will engender much interest and I wish to commend it to the reader for serious contemplation.

ROBERT J. THOMSON
Provincial Grand Master

Reproduced for this Web Site with the kind permission
of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Antrim

Freemasonry - defined

WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

Freemasonry is one of the oldest fraternal, non-political, non-sectarian societies. It is concerned with high moral and spiritual values and is open to men of integrity, of any religion, who believe in a Supreme Being.

Freemasons are expected to adhere to three principles:

- **Brotherly Love** Every true Freemason will show tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behave with kindness and understanding towards his fellow human beings.
- **Relief** Freemasons are taught to practise charity and to care, not only for their own members but for the community as a whole, by both charitable giving and by voluntary effort.
- **Truth** Freemasonry strives for truth and requires high moral standards of its members.

HOW AND WHEN DID FREEMASONRY BEGIN?

According to the legends which form part of the tradition of Freemasonry, the fraternity dates back to the time of the construction of King Solomon's Temple. This enormous structure required a highly organised workforce and led to stonemasons, architects and others being organised into various grades or guilds, each with its own responsibilities. Towards the end of the 19th Century, while excavating in the Libyan Desert, archaeologists unearthed papyrus records describing meetings around 2000 BC of such a guild. These records included not only matters such as working hours, wages and rules for their labour, but also the relief and assistance for workers in distress and for widows and orphans.

Of the many great buildings erected by masons in the Middle Ages attention has focused mainly on the great cathedrals of Europe and England. In order to build these vast structures, it was necessary for masons to gather in large groups which moved from one finished building to the next one under construction. Considerable knowledge of geometry, arithmetic and engineering was necessary and these craftsmen formed themselves into guilds to maintain a level of qualification for their membership and to protect the secrets of their trade. The resulting Guild of Stonemasons became a significant centre of learning, serving not only to protect its members but also to educate worthy apprentices and to increase the reputation of the craft. In those days, it was not possible to verify a craftsman's credentials by any means other than by signs and words, so appropriate ones were selected for this purpose.

Much of the work of those marvellous craftsmen survives to this day and from it we find a living inspiration to bring similar qualities to the creation, not of a material building, but of a brotherhood of men of good will.

The status and reputation of these Craft Guilds rose to such a height that it became common for leading citizens to become honorary members. They were known as 'Speculative' or 'Accepted' Masons, the qualified craft masons continued to be known as 'Operative' Masons. As the number of these 'Speculative' Masons grew and as matters concerned with education and qualifications of craftsmen were formalised and controlled at national level, so the structure of the guilds changed over the years and lodges came to be formed exclusively of such members. They retained the Masons tools e.g. square, compasses, and rule, as symbols in their teaching and from this we find in general every day language such phrases as 'on the level' and 'a square deal'.

This development led to the formation of Grand Lodges, the Grand Lodge of England, the first Grand Lodge in the world, being formed in 1717, Ireland followed in 1725 and Scotland in 1736.

WHO CAN JOIN?

Membership is open to men from all walks of life who are law-abiding and of good character, there is no social or financial distinction. The essential qualification for admission is belief in a Supreme Being.

Each member is encouraged to do his duty to his God, by his own tradition, and he is required to conform to the law of the land in which he resides and by which he is protected. Freemasons are ordinary men who try to live as good citizens with high moral principles. They do not claim a monopoly on these standards but by joining together in lodges they practise and teach ideals of kindness, honesty, decency, fairness, courtesy, understanding and concern for others and hope thus to become better members of Society.

WHAT IS A MASONIC LODGE?

A Masonic Lodge is a group of Freemasons established, usually on a local basis, to enable the members of the group to meet regularly in a well-known venue such as a Masonic Hall or a Masonic Centre. Most lodges meet monthly except during the summer period. Lodges in Ireland are brought together first of all in districts known as Provincial Grand Lodges, in this area lodges come under the jurisdiction of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Antrim. In turn, Provincial Grand Lodges throughout Ireland are brought together under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Ireland.

WHAT HAPPENS AT LODGE MEETINGS?

As in any organisation, the meeting is first called to order. The ceremony of Opening the Lodge then takes place; this is quite formal and draws on elements of the very foundation of Masonry. It serves to remind Freemasons of the virtues by which they seek to live.

Once the Lodge is opened, minutes and correspondence are read, projects are planned, and other business is conducted very much like any other organisation.

When new members are being received or when existing members are being advanced through the Degrees of Craft Masonry, formal ceremonies are again used to teach and remind those present about important moral lessons. Degrees are conferred during the business section of the meeting.

The formal ceremony of Closing the Lodge then ends the meeting which may be followed by supper.

HOW MANY DEGREES ARE THERE IN FREEMASONRY?

At its basic level, known as 'The Craft', Freemasonry has three degrees beginning with the degree of 'Entered Apprentice' representing the apprentice of the working stonemason who learned how to use the tools of the trade. After a period the 'apprentice' progresses to the second degree of 'Fellow Craft', or 'Fellow of the Craft', and after another period to the third degree of 'Master Mason'. The period between degrees would usually be a minimum of three months.

WHY DO FREEMASONS WEAR REGALIA?

This is historical and symbolic and serves to indicate where members rank in the organisation. Aprons, collars and cuffs derive from and reflect the protective garments worn by original stonemasons. In olden times the apron would have been of leather, tied around the waist to protect the mason as he handled stone. The ceremonial aprons worn at Lodge meetings become more ornate as the member progresses through the degrees of Freemasonry.

IS FREEMASONRY A SECRET SOCIETY?

Freemasonry is not a secret society but it is a society with a few secrets. Very few, in fact, and these are solely concerned with traditional methods of recognition among members.

Members are free to acknowledge membership of the Order and will do so in response to reasonable enquiries. They are encouraged to speak freely about Freemasonry. There is no secret about any of the aims and principles. The Laws and Constitutions are available to the public and many books on Freemasonry are available in any good public library.

Meeting places are well known and, in many areas, are used by local bodies for activities other than Freemasonry.

WHY DO FREEMASONS TAKE OATHS, SOME OF WHICH CONTAIN HIDEOUS PENALTIES?

In each degree ceremony the candidate or member is required to make a solemn promise, or obligation, never to reveal certain matters which are about to be revealed to him. Again, these relate to the methods of mutual recognition which have been retained for reasons of tradition.

When Masonic ritual was developing in the 1600's and 1700's it was quite common for legal and civil oaths to contain physical penalties for breach of such promises. Freemasonry seemed to follow the practice but the so called 'hideous penalties' contained in the obligations were symbolic and were not carried out. In the 1800's they were relegated to mere historical mention.

WHY IS ANCIENT RITUAL STILL USED BY FREEMASONS IN THIS ULTRA-MODERN WORLD?

The narrative and symbolism of ritual which has been passed down through many generations impresses the principles and teachings of Freemasonry more firmly in the mind of candidates and members than if they were passed on in the matter-of-fact modern language. Ritual is one of the aspects of the Order which members enjoy; the shared experience seems to bind them together.

IS FREEMASONRY A POLITICAL ORGANISATION?

Freemasonry is non-political. It has no political attitudes except to require its members to be peaceable and law-abiding regardless of the individual political opinions they hold outside the Order. Discussions on politics at Masonic meetings are strictly forbidden.

There are some self-styled 'Masonic Bodies' in certain parts of the world which encourage their members to participate in political matters. These Bodies are not recognised by the Grand Lodge of Ireland and other regular Grand Lodges, contact with them is prohibited.

IS FREEMASONRY A RELIGION OR A RIVAL TO RELIGION?

Freemasonry is not a religion or a combination of religions, it is not a rival to religion or a substitute for it, nor is it 'antireligious'. Freemasonry expects each member to practise his own religion, it regards a man's relationship with God as a purely private matter and never enquires into it, or lays down any rules about it. No discussion on religious matter is permitted at Masonic meetings.

WHY DO FREEMASONS USE TERMS SUCH AS 'THE VOLUME OF THE SACRED LAW' AND 'THE GREAT ARCHITECT OF THE UNIVERSE'?

'The volume of the Sacred Law' is a general term used to describe the Sacred Books of religions. For Christians it means the Holy Bible, for Muslims it means the Koran, and for Jews it means the Torah.

Similarly, 'The Great Architect of the Universe' is a general term used when referring to God in the various religions.

The members of each religion know what the terms mean to them. Their use discourages disharmony, but they are not used in an attempt to roll all religions into one or to create a specific Masonic Sacred Book or God.

ARE ROMAN CATHOLICS ACCEPTED INTO FREEMASONRY?

Members of the Roman Catholic faith are accepted into Freemasonry, they have the essential qualification for membership, a belief in a Supreme Being.

In the past, some of the Grand Masters have been Roman Catholics and, at present, there are many members of that faith in the Order.

WHY ARE THERE NO WOMEN IN FREEMASONRY?

The early stonemasons were male and in the period when Freemasonry was developing the position of women in society was much different from that of to-day and, as a result, they were not part of the organisation. That situation continues today but there are somewhat similar societies for women which have Lodges in Ireland.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEMASONRY AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS THE ORANGE ORDER, APPRENTICE BOYS, HIBERNIANS AND BUFFALOES?

There is no connection between Freemasonry and any other Order. Freemasons, however, may be members of other orders, that is a matter for the individual.

ARE FREEMASONS EXPECTED TO 'LOOK AFTER THEIR OWN'?

A Freemason's duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Freemasons. Any attempt to shield another member who has acted dishonourably or unlawfully is strictly forbidden. Similarly, the use by a Freemason of his membership to promote his or another member's business, professional or personal interests is not permitted.

WHAT SUPPORT DOES FREEMASONRY GIVE TO THOSE IN NEED?

Since its earliest times, Freemasonry has been involved in caring for families of deceased members, and also members who are in distress. Widows, orphans, the aged and members who are going through difficult times may be supported by counselling, by practical help or financially. In recent times, substantial sums have been donated to non-Masonic organisations, especially in the medical field. In the past ten years more than £1,000,000 has been donated for non-Masonic caring throughout Ireland. This trend is firmly established and will continue.

WHAT PART DOES FREEMASONRY PLAY IN SOCIETY?

Just like members of other organisations, Freemasons take part in many activities in the community. They are encouraged to play their part in Society, to be tolerant, benevolent and to serve others. In this way, Freemasonry is a part of Society and not apart from it.

IS FREEMASONRY AN INTERNATIONAL ORDER?

Only in the sense that Freemasonry exists throughout the free world - there is no international governing body. The Grand Lodge of Ireland is the supreme authority for all its Lodges. It is an entirely independent and autonomous body, though it works in close co-operation with more than one hundred other Regular Grand Lodges throughout the world, including its sister Grand Lodges in England and Scotland.

HOW DOES ONE JOIN FREEMASONRY?

Most members have come into Freemasonry through contact and friendship with existing members. If, however, someone wishing to join does not know a Mason, information may be obtained at the address below.

As is the case in most clubs and fraternities, applications are considered in accordance with the bye-laws of the organisation. Potential members are not pressurised into joining. If they join it is because they want to, not because of undue pressure.

Membership is a commitment to live with integrity and honour, to care for others, to trust each other and to place one's ultimate trust in one's God.

**PROVINCIAL GRAND LODGE OF ANTRIM
PROVINCIAL MASONIC HALL
15 ROSEMARY STREET,
BELFAST BT1 1QA**