

SECRET SOCIETY ISN'T SO SECRET

Freemasons using social media to attract new members

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THEY'RE famous for rolled up trousers and exposed nipples – but the Freemasons are keeping up in the 21st century – they're even on Twitter.

It's part of an effort to stop the Freemasons vanishing. Lodges have been closing across Wales and England at rate of almost 100 a year and membership has dropped by almost 20% since 2007.

But speaking ahead of a Sky 1 documentary series, which will look into the world of Freemasonry, South Wales' provincial grand master Gareth Jones said the Freemasons in South Wales have a significant social media presence, which was started around five years ago to try to attract younger people.

He said: "It's not about dumbing down, it is about recognising that if you want to get people to know about you and you want to attract a broader range of good quality people from whatever background or religion, you have to respond to the fact that they get their information and look for things in a different way than when I joined.

"In South Wales we have a significant social media web presence and a pretty good website. We started it maybe five years ago to try and attract younger people into South Wales."

They have branches at Swansea and Cardiff universities.

"We have two uni lodges in South Wales which seek to attract undergraduates," dad-of-two and

grandfather-of-two Mr Jones said.

"They are very successful, doing very well. The Cardiff University lodge is growing at the rate of something like five or six members a year,"

Those lodges have "40 or 50" members.

"We have also got a new young masons organisation, which is a scheme that is growing across England and Wales," Mr Jones said.

A retired Welsh Government civil servant, Mr Jones has embraced the world of social media himself, although his Twitter account is set to private.

It describes Gareth as the "Provincial Grand Master of the Masonic Province of South Wales, Most Excellent 3rd Grand Principal of Supreme Grand Chapter".

"You can follow me on Twitter if you're so inclined, I'm @PGMSouth-Wales," he said.

"And we have a Facebook page, too, which is on our website," he said.

While membership has fallen among other age groups, it increased 7.65% among 21 to 30-year-olds in the two years to 2016.

Freemasonry Today described it as "a significant reprieve from a death knell for us all".

Now they want to build on that.

Freemasons have opened their doors to television cameras for the first time in the Sky five-part documentary, *Inside the Freemasons*. The series hopes to lift the lid on the secrets of the ancient brotherhood, celebrating its 300th anniversary this year.

They visited Wales for the show, which starts tomorrow.

There is, however, one group still banned from the society – women.

"There are no plans to let women in, and I personally do not think that will ever happen," Mr Jones, from Cardiff, said.

"There are, of course, lady mason organisations, some of which are very successful.

"Many of our lodges across England and Wales share their facilities with lady masons.

"We are not in any way opposed to their existence. But I personally do not see the day when the united grand lodge of England, our governing body, will admit them."

He added: "I think there's still a place in our society for both men and women-only organisations.

"No one ever asks the Women's Institute why they do not admit men."

■ **Inside the Freemasons starts tomorrow on Sky 1 at 8pm.**

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Inside The Freemasons

8pm, Sky 1

"Without the ritual it would be quite boring to be a freemason," admits one of the Bedford members of the 300-year-old brotherhood, and after the opening episode of this five-part documentary series it's hard to disagree with him. You won't be even marginally enlightened as to what Freemasons actually do when they're not dressing up in regalia and learning arcane speeches by heart (perhaps they don't do anything), while the cameras are not allowed in to the initiation ceremony of young farmer James – although another Mason reveals that it involves baring a breast to prove you're not a woman. "There's no distinction between men," says the affable Provincial Grand Master Tony, although it would seem that there is a distinction between the sexes.

TV and radio Watch this

Inside the Freemasons

8pm, Sky 1

The extreme secretiveness of the Freemasons has led to suspicions that they are engaged in all kinds of far-reaching conspiracies. In this series, they partially lift the lid on their activities to assuage such fears. You soon suspect that all of the solemn ritual represents a front for middle managers and salesmen to give each other a commercial leg-up and have a few drinks away from the womenfolk.



Inside the Freemasons

SKY1, 8.00PM

◆ As the fraternal society marks its 300th anniversary, this new documentary goes behind the scenes at the United Grand Lodge of England in London for the first time to explain what it means to be a Freemason today. *PS*