

## **Interesting variations in present Royal Arch ceremonies**

A principal wish in the heart of The Duke of Sussex following the Union of the Grand Lodges in 1813 and the comparable R.A. governing bodies by 1817, was to have a similar uniformity of working in the Holy Royal Arch portion of English Freemasonry as was attempted in the Craft. Efforts to that end were certainly inaugurated by the Duke and for anyone who has grown up with Royal Arch Masonry south of a line from Ipswich to Oxford and then down to Portsmouth, in other words the extended Home Counties, the impression you would receive is that, apart from a very slight variation in wording of the clothing ceremony or addresses by the Principals, every Royal Arch ceremony in England is virtually identical. Such is the limited impression of any South-eastern Royal Arch Mason and it is only as one reads more widely or, better still, visits Chapters more extensively, and especially in the Northern and Western Provinces, that it becomes abundantly clear that any early impression of uniformity is simply due to one's isolationism and lack of experience. The actual situation proves to be very different.

Let me begin with three Chapters that I will call D. B. and S. (Nos. 2129, 2355 and 296). We are talking about Chapters that were formed in 1948, 1911 and 1821 respectively. The distinctiveness of all three is apparent from the very outset of their meetings.

To assist at the Opening all the Companions gather within the Chapter room doorway and stand behind the 3 unrobed Principals and the rubric in S. states specifically that the D.C. 'forms them all up in the West'. In D. and B. Their Excellencies first gather round a Bible and say together the words: "We three do meet and agree... before taking the 7 steps. In S. the Principals begin with these steps during which they pause at the 3rd for J. to say, 'God Omnipotent', at the 5th for H. to say 'God Omniscient' and at the 7th for Z.'s 'God Omnipresent' followed by his saying the usual opening prayer.

In D. and B. there is a variation for at the 3rd step Z. begins with 'O Lord God Omnipotent', at the 5th H. says 'O Lord God Omniscient' and it is J. who says 'O Lord God Omnipresent' yet it is Z. who recites the usual prayer though it begins with the unusual words, "O Lord God, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, until all hearts are open. . ." — following which the Principals proceed to the East and share the WORD (at least so says their ritual, albeit it is nowadays the Name).

In S. the threefold 'agreement' follows the 7 steps and this itself is distinctive. The Principals remove their gloves, place their right hands on top of each other's, not forming a A , and after Z. says the words they are repeated together by H and J and there is no fourfold chorus of 'Agree, agree,...' When this is completed the whole volume, not just the right hands, is raised and lowered 4 times. After the Bible has been saluted the D.C. lays it at the foot of the pedestal, which incidentally, is surrounded by the circle of the Zodiac on the floor.

The Principals now form two triangles and, bending their heads below the upper 'arch' thus formed, they exchange the Name. That done they replace their gloves, ascend to their chairs, put on their robes and collars and kiss their sceptres before taking their places and having Z. declare the Chapter open.

In D. and B. there is yet another variation. The Principals there, you may recall, are also in the East but they now begin a catechism.

Since this is known in some other parts of Derbyshire and much of Northern England I will here repeat. The questioner is Z. Ex. Comp. J. whence come you? From Babylon, the land of captivity. Ex. C. H. whither are you journeying? To Jerusalem, the land of promise, M. Ex. What has induced you to leave Babylon and go up to Jerusalem? M. Ex, Cyrus the King has released us from our long captivity in Babylon & permitted us to return to our native land in order that we may assist in rebuilding the Holy Temple. Have you any further object in view? We have, M. Ex. We hope by a diligent search among the ruins of the first Temple to recover the long lost genuine secrets of a M.M. Z. Ex. Comps. H. and J. it shall be our sole aim and purpose to assist you in your pious endeavours.

This is the moment when in all the 3 places the D.C. invites the rest of the Companions to advance from the West, making the Reverential sign, stepping and bowing three times before they too take their seats. The officers now also robe themselves and put on their collars and in S. the D.C. now places the Bible open on the top of the pedestal. [It is worth noting that when anyone else enters the Chapter there subsequently he is called upon to advance with the 7 steps and bowing to the altar.

If these different features intrigued me then a visit to Pontefract in 1994 was an even greater surprise. I had been recommended to visit St. Oswald Chapter there by the Provincial Grand Scribe E. of Yorkshire, West Riding and so different were I and another Grand Officer expected to find it that the Chapter Scribe E. took us aside in a robing room to explain. I should have guessed, with an ancient print of Pontefract Castle on one wall and a most unusual 1805 chart of the Christian degrees on another of that same room, that we were to be treated to some antique working.

The first difference was that for the initial opening work only the current Principals and Past Principals are allowed to be present. (Happily, in this instance, the visiting Grand Officers were also accepted.) The current Principals are not robed and they, surrounded by the P.Ps. all standing in the west, start the proceedings with (i) a declaration of their intent to open, and a unique prayer said by Z.; (ii) a reading from the prophet Zephaniah by H.; (iii) the usual prayer by J., "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts.. ." The 3 unrobed Ps. then move to the East by the 7 steps alongside the banners but with sliding steps that form right angles. When they have reached the East all the other Ps. have to copy their method of moving to join them. The 3 Ps. put on their gowns.

The D.C., being a Past Pr., is asked to open the door and admit the S.N. who is then instructed by the M.E.Z. to allow all to enter who are duly qualified to do so. The S.N., whose constant post is at the door, opens it and admits one by one all the members and then the visitors. Each enters carrying a staff as if newly invested. The S.N. collects the staves, thus ensuring that all admitted are bona fide R.A. Masons.

A full catechism is now exchanged with each of the officers but the answers given by the Sojourners certainly took my breath away.

These are the responses to the M.E.Z. 's enquiry regarding their duties:

2nd Asst. Soj. 'To guard the First Veil, M. Ex., and allow none to enter save such as are in possession of all Signs, Tokens and Passwords thereunto belonging and not even then without having first acquainted the P.Soj.'

1st Asst. Soj. 'To guard the Second Veil, M. Ex., and allow none to enter. .' (the rest of his reply being the same as that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asst. Soj.)

PS. 'To guard the Third Veil, and allow none to enter save those who are in possession of all the Signs, Tokens and Passwords thereunto belonging.'

The answers given by J. and H. to Z. 's questions are also different: J. To aid and assist in carrying out the Lord's work, M.Excellent. H. To aid and assist in completing the Lord's work. J. now offers a form of the prayer which I have only found elsewhere in the Camborne working in Cornwall: 'O God, thou Great and Grand Architect of the Universe, Grand Prince and Ruler of the world, just and only Cause of all existence, at Thy word the pillars of the sky were formed and its beauteous arches raised. Thy breath kindled the stars, adorned the moon with silver rays, and gave the sun its resplendent luster... endue us with a competency of Thy most Holy Spirit that we may be able to trace Thee in all thy glorious works... that Thy praises may resound from pole to pole and re-bound from the vaulted canopy of heaven...' — and that is only half of the whole.

What is noticeable is that the Companions of the Pontefract Chapter stand for prayer with their arms extended down and close to their bodies and their fingers slightly overlapping. (Demonstrate) Further questions are now put to J. and H. before the 3 Principals at their chairs say in turn, 'In the beginning was the Name', 'and the Name was with God', 'and was God'. They follow this with each saying one of God's attributes.

The moment has now come for the 'agreement' to be shared but in this Chapter everyone does so in threes. The words are not repeated in turn but said all at once by all the members in their groups.

Visitors are joined in the triangles by a local Chapter member who leads the way. (The fascinating implication here is that of course all visitors will naturally know the words used in this Chapter.) It is in fact the same as in Camborne save that NAME is substituted for WORD and the repetition of 'Agree' is accompanied by the practice of bringing the upper hands down to the lower in four rapid movements — the origin of which is found in Antients working.

Yet even this is not the greatest difference. As the Sacred Name is changed you discover that it is not JE HO VAH. The form used, as far as I am aware, and in the understanding of St. Oswald Chapter, is not used anywhere else in England. It is composed of two parts — one part of two syllables referring to a synonym first used by Jewish Rabbis to denote God without mentioning the sacred letters, J.H.V.H. whilst the second part is of one syllable and is the first half of a term used in Hebrew for God's Holy Name. I must keep you in suspense no longer but tell you what that word is — it is A DO SHEM. (Repeat) The Hebrew words from which this is formed are ADO nai and SHEM Hamphoresh. It is a perfectly legitimate alternative for the usually employed name and in some respects grants even greater reverence to what is on top of the

pedestal — for, whilst the name exchanged is so different and unique, the letters on the top of the pedestal are J.H.V.H. as with many others of us.

As we are now thinking about the pedestal you should know that in this Chapter it is not H. and J. but S.E. and S.N. who veil or unveil the plate of gold, as they do of course in most normal ceremonies. It is now time to share 3 variations with you regarding the practice of the Exaltation ceremony. The first one occurs in certain West Lancashire Chapters in the Preston area and is briefly described. When the candidate is first led round the Chapter he is not just taken round the perimeter. He is led in a figure of eight through the banners and around the floor to the west of the pedestal. This for long puzzled me until there came to my notice in the last year the work of Chapter of Pythagoras, Cambridge.

What is significant here is that this Chapter was founded in 1828 and consecrated by the Revd. George Adam Browne, the chairman of the committee set up by The Duke of Sussex in 1834 to establish the uniform working which he desired. To find the variations still so prevalent in this Cambridge Chapter is therefore ironic, to say the least.

In this Chapter the candidate makes no initial circuit of the Chapter but after making his first 7 steps, is instructed in the art of drawing out two capes-stones', lowered 'within the Arch', hears the first reading and is then led round the inner floor of the Chapter — they call it traversing the vaulted Chamber and try if aught he can discover — and in the course of his weaving journey is helped to feel part of the pedestal. It seems clear that this is what is done earlier in Preston.

In addition this Cambridge working completes the ceremony after the obligation, has the new Companion invested with his regalia and then sits him down whilst the 3 Sojourners act out their story.

Nor is that all. When they have finished their 'drama' they sit and the M.E.Z. carries out a catechism or Third Part regarding the ceremony which they have performed. As a tiny flavour of this interrogation let me quote two sections:

Z. Why do you advance in that manner (with 7 steps)?

P.S. In token of the 7 liberal arts and sciences forming so many branches of that grand and universal one called Masonry.

Z. Pray Sirs, who and what are you?

PS. Sons of Science, citizens of the world, Brothers of every worthy Mason and Companions to those of your exalted Order...

At Exmouth one Chapter still has the Ark of the Covenant in front of the central pedestal and in Plymouth the Arch is positioned at the East end of the temple with the pedestal between the Arch and the Principals. Between the Arch and the candles that are arranged between the banners to the West there is in the floor a trap-door giving access to a vault approximately 4'6" in depth.

Having been admitted and knelt in the West the candidate is conducted by seven serpentine steps via the North to a position just in front of the Arch but with his back to the eastern edge of the trapdoor. When he has removed two of the Arch stones the P.S. opens the trapdoor behind him and as the M.E.Z. instructs that he be lowered into the vault he is firmly gripped by the P.S. and 1st Asst Soj. Who tell him to jump backwards. He is thus lowered into the vault where he is joined by the PS. who remains there for the first

reading. The candidate having found the scroll the PS. Leaves the vault and with the Asst.Soj. helps the candidate to spring upwards and forwards. The whole procedure is repeated after the removal of the Keystone. So far as the Grand Superintendent of Devonshire is aware, and certainly in my knowledge, this is the only vault south of the border with Scotland.

The Chapter of Friendship at Portsmouth was once No. 3 and is famous as being that Chapter in which Thomas Dunckerley was exalted and where he introduced the Mark Degree to members of the Premier Grand Lodge. It meets in a room that is redolent with a sense of tradition and it would be surprising if there was not something to mark it out with a variation or two. For tonight I simply want to describe how when the Chapter is closing the Principals leave their sceptres behind as they descend to the altar.

The command 'To order' is given and all stand with the sign of Reverence. The PS. then reads The Epistle to the Hebrews 9, verses 2-8, which is worth recalling: "For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table, and the bread of the Presence, and this is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold and which contained a golden urn holding the manna and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail..."

It is on this passage in the V.S.L. that the Principals lay their hands as they make their 'agreement' together and it is on these open pages that all the Principals present salute the V.S.L., whilst the Companions salute the volume closed. The 3 Ps. having given the 'Gloria in excelsis' we then have our last surprise as the M.E.Z. recites the Anglican collect: 'Prevent us O Lord in this and all our doings with Thy most gracious favour.. .' and it is on that Christian worship note that the Chapter closes.

As you stand listening to the Hebrews passage your mind connects with the contents on the tables behind the Veils in that previous English form of Royal Arch Masonry, you remember what was said in Pontefract, and you recognise without a doubt that The Duke of Sussex never did get his wish about uniformity fulfilled.

For my part I am extremely glad that he didn't.