

Was there ever such a change?

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It is sometimes remarked in the latter years of the 20th century that there has been far too much change in the practice of the Craft. For those who only have their sights on the differences in Masonry between 1950 and 1999, the complaint - and it usually is a complaint - might seem to have some justification. Yet the truth is that from the time when the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717 began to alter and adapt what had been the practice of such Freemasonry as existed previously change has been at work in some parts, and during most periods of the Craft's existence. As used to be said in the Organisation for which I once used to work, "Constant change has come to stay".

Yet there was one period in the Craft's existence when perhaps the most profound changes occurred that English Freemasonry has ever known and they came about in a very short period of time. I refer of course to the years that followed upon the historic union of the hitherto separated Grand Lodges known as those of the Moderns and the Antients, which had existed from 1717 and 1751 respectively. It was as a result of the agreement reached between those who negotiated their merger into one United Grand Lodge - a merger that has lasted until the present time that real changes took place. It is of the alterations in the very appearance and style of Freemasonry that then occurred that the title of this lecture "Was there ever such a Change?" might be considered a fair description. What the various facets of that change were forms the substance of what follows.

The principal change that then took place may have seemed to be one simply of a legal nature, but its implications were much more far-reaching than simply the words included in the Act of the Union. I refer to the declaration that henceforth the 'pure Ancient Masonry (of England) consists of three degrees, and no more; viz. those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft and the Master Mason (including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch)'. At first sight this may now seem to most Masons the most natural and obvious statement of the way things ought to be. That is because the steps taken by the Duke of Sussex and those responsible with him for the well-governing of the Craft were generally so effective that, today, the great majority of

Freemasons would not only consider this statement to be true but would even wonder why those who formed the Union even bothered to include the Order of the Holy Royal Arch.

Yet that was not the effect, which soon became apparent when this article of the Union began to be implemented. At least half of the then existing lodges in England were accustomed to a very different way of looking at their Freemasonry. On the one hand they believed that whilst it was customary for every Mason to progress through the three basic degrees they also believed that to receive the degree of the Holy Royal Arch was essential in order to complete one's Masonic career.

The way to that degree was by several other essential steps of which the degree of being installed in a Craft chair or a parallel ceremony of 'Passing the Chair' were the principal ones. Some would have also expected candidates for the Royal Arch to be Mark and Mark Master Masons as well as being Excellent and Super Excellent brethren. The fact that there had been for at least half a century some recognition that Royal Arch Masons also recognised a link with Knight Templary and even Rose Croix has also to be acknowledged. When therefore all this Masonry, practised in every part of the British Isles, but also in every quarter of England, was now stated to be peripheral and without any status in antiquity, it was a severe change that had to be faced.

Moreover it had been customary for at least half the Masons in England to regard their Craft Lodge warrants as being all the authority which they needed in order to carry out the extended Masonry to which I have just referred. Evidence of this fact is actually still around by reason of the kind of Opening ceremony that is used in degrees 'beyond the Craft'. The similarity is because the pre-Union assumption was that these other degrees were part of, and therefore must conform to, basic Craft lodge custom. To be suddenly made aware not only that such 'extra' degrees were not really essential, that they were not permitted to be practised under the Lodge warrant and that if they were to be carried on they would require additional means of authorisation was a change of fairly extreme proportions.

Within five years of the Union a letter was sent to the Duke of Sussex, Grand Master, from certain brethren of Lancashire, with

the Deputy Provincial Grand Master as the principal signatory. The letter contained the following passage:

"We beg to observe, that we are under the fullest conviction that the Royal Arch is a component part of Craft Masonry, and consequently requires no other Authority, than a Craft warrant to render their Meeting perfectly legal, and agreeable to ancient Custom."

To show both how law abiding they sought to be but how strongly they felt to be their cause, they added the following:

"We therefore pray, that your Royal Highness will be pleased to make this Communication known to the members of the **United Grand Lodge** assembled at the next Quarterly Meeting, in order that our Opinions, if correct may be confirmed, or if erroneous, that they may be refuted."

It is no part of this lecture to enter further into what became known as the secession of the 'Grand Lodge of Wigan' but these opinions, so cogently expressed to the proper government of the Craft, surely help to register an attitude to a major change that has certainly not been reproduced since. This is because the changes that have subsequently transpired have just not been of anything like the same consequence.

Yet this regulation regarding the 'nature' of Freemasonry was by no means the only change that Freemasons then had to encompass. There were practical matters of administration and conduct that must have caused strong ripples of astonishment, if not downright dissatisfaction.

One of these was the changing of Lodge numbers. Anyone who wants to know what numbering meant to our Masonic ancestors ought to read the story of what happened when the Grand Lodge of Scotland was set up in 1735. Such was the intensity of feeling about being given due acknowledgement of their antiquity that not only did the Lodge of Edinburgh become No. 1 but Melrose demanded that it be No.1 and Aberdeen No.1 whilst the 'Old Mother' Kilwinning claimed the number 0; or was it 0 for original? Almost a century later, feelings could still run high when it was agreed in England 'that The two first Lodges under each Grand Lodge (shall) draw a lot in the first place for priority, and to which of the two Lot no. 1 shall fall, the other to rank as No. 2; and all the other Lodges shall fall in alternately." In the

result the highest position was allotted to the 'Grand Masters Lodge', the senior lodge of the Antients from 1751, whereas the Lodge of Antiquity, one of the founding lodges of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717, had to content itself with being in second place. That was change indeed and this would not be the only lodge that must have felt that unity amongst Freemasons was bought at some cost.

As there was this alteration in the numbering of lodges so there was also a new arrangement in regard to the selection of Chapters. Unable to believe that Royal Arch Masonry could no longer be conducted under a Craft warrant it now appeared that there was to be regulation as to how many Chapters would be allowed in any one area. Since the requirement of being a Past Master in the Craft for joining the Holy Royal Arch was likely to restrict the numbers of Masons available, it was now felt by the new Supreme Grand Chapter to be more sensible if the number of Chapters was limited - to something like one Chapter per three or four local lodges. In itself the idea was obviously sensible, but in terms of contrast with past practice this was another change too far. For those who fervently believed, as did the members of former Antients lodges that entry to the Royal Arch was the 'sumum bonum' of all preceding Masonry it was contrary to all their convictions to concede that any authority could so restrict any lodge in offering that opportunity to its members. This was another thorn in the side of such as those protesting Lancashire Masons.

And even that was not all. Within the next 20 years this same new Supreme Grand Chapter was going to change the ground of admission to the Holy Royal Arch and allow those who were but Master Masons to apply for membership. At a stroke this meant that the intervening steps including Installation or Passing the Chair and the three stages known as the Veils, were all rendered meaningless and unnecessary. Of course it meant that a whole new pool of potential Chapter membership was created but in the process some half of English practice was effectively scrubbed out. This too was a change the dimension of which involving as it did notable changes in Chapter ritual details, was immeasurably greater than anything we have witnessed since.

Another change, however, was no less striking. It was now required that the old practice of meeting in the lodge room around tables with the juxtaposition of dining and doing ritual was to cease. There was to be a clear line drawn between the two activities. More dignity, it was thought, might be accorded to ceremonies that ought not to be sullied with the dangers of overindulgence in food and drink, not to mention spittoons and chamber pots. Examples of the latter from the 18th century are certainly on view in not a few lodge museums.

Accordingly the tables no longer appeared when the lodge met for business with a ceremony to be conducted though bits of them had to be retained to provide what we call the pedestals of the Master and Wardens and for the desks of the Secretary and Treasurer. After the Lodge was closed the brethren either brought the tables in to dine in the same room or they repaired to some other room or place for their refreshment. The change in any case was substantial and doubtless led to many regrets about 'the old days'. What we need to understand is that despite the change Masons have always considered the two parts of the evening as belonging to each other and it remains the case that as the Master rules over the lodge business so he is also meant to rule at the dining board. He has always presided at both.

The change in this arrangement also meant that there was now the whole floor for the use of such items or drawings as the Lodge was accustomed to employ for the instruction and enlightenment of its members. Accordingly the drawings on the floor that had had to be fitted into an angle of the tables could now be provided on a fuller and more ample scale or more objects could then be laid out on the central floor of the lodge room. The idea of having more permanent tracing cloths and then boards began to catch on and as soon as a room became no longer rented but owned by the lodge a carpet could be provided. The furniture of the present sort of meeting place was almost in place.

Yet even this was not the end of the story. Just as the United Grand Lodge, and especially its Royal Grand Master, had secured the tidying up of the conduct of lodge business so there were also proposed new forms of dress. What these were I have

looked at in some detail in another lecture about Clothing but it is necessary that we record here two points that link in with what we have already considered.

The first point is that in order to drive home the claim that ancient Masonry consisted only of the three basic degrees, it was essential that what Masons wore should reflect that fact. If, as we know there were, Masons who attended Craft lodges sporting aprons that bore the insignia not only of such degrees as Mark, Ark and Royal Arch, but even of Knight Templar, Red Cross and Rose Croix, then it was essential in the Grand Lodge's eyes to stop that as soon as possible. The only way to do so was to devise the right and only forms of dress allowable.

The second factor was that just because the United Grand Lodge was now having to manage units that had had allegiances to differing Grand bodies, it had to assert its new control in some way that was not only permanent but visible. To remove the right of individual Masons to decide what kind of aprons they could wear, if they were able to afford them, was both a noticeable declaration of superiority whilst also claiming to be in accord with the same Grand Lodge's principles. If it was on the one hand desiring to admit into its lodges free men of every kind without political, religious, social or racial distinction, then it made sense to ensure that its member should all have commonly acknowledged forms of dress. There was no place for a division based on the ability of members to have variegated ritual garments.

It is as we consider all these aspects of what might be called the 1813 'revolution' that we can truly say, "Was there ever such a Change?"