

LECTURE TO THE WARWICKSHIRE INSTALLED MASTERS' LODGE

30 NOVEMBER 2006

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“Worshipful Master, Brother Wardens and Brethren,

My talk this evening is entitled “Warwickshire Freemasonry – a look forward”. I have to say right at the outset that I have no crystal ball to enable me to look into the future with any degree of certainty but I have some knowledge of Warwickshire Freemasonry in the past, particularly during the past forty years, a detailed knowledge of the current state of affairs and so from that background I will share with you my views as to how the future may unfold.

In order to look forward it is often helpful, first, to look at what has gone before.

The first recorded instance of a Masonic meeting in Warwickshire was in April, 1728 at the Woolpack Inn in Warwick. James Prescott was the first Provincial Grand Master. This was the year in which the 4th Lord Kingston was appointed Grand Master and the year before Grand Stewards were first appointed.

The oldest Lodge still existing in the Province is St.Pauls Lodge No.43 whose origins date back to 1733 closely followed by Trinity Lodge No.254 1755, Shakespeare Lodge No.284 1792, and Apollo Lodge No.301 1794.

During the period of 278 years since the first meeting the number of Lodges has grown to the present total of one hundred and ninety eight. The number has been higher but during the past two years three Lodges have surrendered their Warrants and two more last week, one being one hundred and four years old and the other one hundred and forty years. Two more are due to hand their Warrants back next year. Undoubtedly since 1728 several other Lodges were consecrated and subsequently ceased to meet.

The point that I am making is that Lodges are similar to an organic being in that some prosper and grow whilst others ultimately wither and die.

I have not researched the number of Brethren over the years but I can say that thirty five years ago there were in excess of fourteen thousand in the Province whereas today the figure is just above five thousand single memberships and declining at about two percent per year. There appears to have been an expansion in membership after the First World War and particularly after the Second World War. That latter generation of Freemasons is regrettably coming to an end which explains, in part, the reason for the decline in membership.

In this Province approximately two hundred Initiates join our Lodges each year but regrettably the number of deaths and resignations far exceed that number resulting in a net decline in membership. This trend is repeated in many other Provinces, particularly those with large urban conurbations, but there several Provinces whose membership increases each year. One of my fellow Provincial Grand Masters, whose Province is a

large rural area comprising about forty Lodges, told me that he starts to get worried when the membership of one of his Lodges drops below sixty Brethren.

Although our Lodges are attracting these two hundred Initiates their average age last year at fifty three was the highest, by Province, in Grand Lodge.

If we now examine how that membership is spread throughout the twenty-one Craft meeting places in the Province we see that Lodges tend to have larger memberships, twenty-five to forty-five, in the smaller urban and rural areas whilst it is in the large urban area, Birmingham, where Lodges are struggling to maintain levels of membership. Of the Lodges which meet here forty-eight have fewer than twenty five members and of them, eighteen have fewer than sixteen members, one as low as twelve, but there are Lodges with very small numbers in all the meeting places within the City.

Attracting new members, of the right calibre, into the Craft is of paramount importance and is the most important issue facing the Lodges in this Province. To most of us who have been in Masonry for some time this is a new and strange phenomenon. During our membership we have lived on a Masonic diet of Installations, Initiations, Passings and Raisings. Except as prompted by the ritual, we have not had to explain the philosophy of Freemasonry and what it means to us; to explain the benefits of being a Freemason. That is exactly what we have to do now if we are to attract new blood into our Lodges. The policy of openness has to proceed unabated.

I now quote: 'Brethren, the opportunities our Lodge has, the facilities it enjoys for the promulgation of our sublime principles are bounded wholly and solely by your efforts. This, our army of the Great Architect of the Universe, requires recruits. You, its officers and privates, have been well trained in the service; you know its privileges, enjoy its advantages. It is for you to spread the knowledge of it.'

Brethren, herein lies your duty, and the performance of it shall redound to you as individuals, as men and as Masons, in this glorious advancement of our cause. Your responsibility to Freemasonry does not end with your becoming a Freemason. It only begins there.

Those words were spoken by W.Bro.E.Lawrence Levy when he addressed the Lodge of Israel No.1434 on Monday, 12th November, 1900, one hundred and thirty six years ago when the Lodge was going through a period of no Labour.

He went on:- 'Brethren, an institution like a Masonic Lodge, must, if it is to succeed, endear itself to its members. The mere facts of membership, the bare act of joining the Lodge, the idea of simple connection therewith, are insufficient without ties of a broader, deeper kind. Mere perfunctory identity with the Lodge is valueless. The act of the payment of fees, a necessary compliance with the duties and obligations of membership, a mechanical walking through, contributes little. What has the Lodge done, is it doing, or is it prepared to do, to nerve you to make your fellow-man as rich in Masonic attributes as you yourselves so fortunately are?'

History does indeed repeat itself.

Freemasonry is a disciplined society which requires commitment and has financial consequences. When I first joined my Mother Lodge in 1967 the membership was in excess of sixty-five. We had an all inclusive subscription, a principle which is truly

Masonic, encourages Brethren to come rather than not to, and has some benefit that the income from those who do not attend more than offsets the incurred costs of those who do. Some were Country Members whom we rarely saw, some were elderly and infirm, but the majority attended the Lodge regularly. Many had one hundred percent attendance since their Initiation. Most of the Past Masters attended all of the Officers' meetings. I waited four years to become a Steward and then there were eight Stewards. It took me fifteen years to reach the Chair. There may have been ten members who were in Chapter, a few in the Installed Masters Lodge but I doubt if there were any of them who were in a second Lodge or any of the additional orders. There was a ceremony at every meeting. The Brethren were totally committed to their Lodge and supported everything especially the social functions. The Summer Outing, two hundred and fifty at the Ladies' Informal and three hundred at the Ladies' Formal, most in white tie and tails. The Lodge social function was then and I believe still is the ideal way of introducing gentlemen to Freemasonry.

Life in those days moved at a more leisurely pace. Some of our Past Masters on Lodge day attended their offices for the morning, lunched together at the Kardomah, walked up New Street and along Broad Street for tea at Kunzles, before crossing Five Ways to Francis Road for their Lodge meeting.

In those days the Lodge of Instruction and the Past Masters' and Officers' Meeting were on different evenings. After each of these meetings we all adjourned to the Crusader at Five Ways where we enjoyed each others company until closing time. This was of course pre-breathalyser!

The social activity of a Lodge is an important contributory factor towards the success of the Lodge. In many Lodges this has been ignored either on the grounds of cost or lack of interest. In many Lodges today Brethren whiz in just before the Lodge opens and depart straight after the Festive Board not having spoken to many other than those in their vicinity at the Festive Board. In my opinion it is vital that social activity is maintained. If white tie and tails no longer turn on the Brethren and their Ladies but dinner at the Dog Track does then that is the way forward. Socialising helps to cement our Masonic friendships.

I do recognise that social circumstances have changed over the years and if Freemasonry is to prosper in the future these need to be taken into account. Wives and Partners, these days, often make an important contribution to the family finances in addition to the normal duties of being a Wife, Mother and homemaker.

Happy family life also means spending quality time together. Members of the family want to pursue a much wider range of interests, often involving the parents, than was possible hitherto. These not only make a demand on the family finances but on free time. Modern society, quite rightly, demands something more challenging than a day out at the Lickey Hills. Holidays abroad these days go on around the calendar.

Although we are told that the modern generation has more leisure time there is immense pressure on many young men in pursuing their careers. They are not always masters of their own destiny in being able to attend their Lodge or choose to take a half day of their precious holiday entitlement to ensure their attendance. The changing global economy is putting increasing pressure on companies in this country especially in this City where manufacturing has been so prominent in the past. The labour force is, or has to be, more mobile these days and often Brethren, in their early Masonic career, change vocation or are posted away. This happened to a Brother in my Lodge in the mid-nineties but now that he has retired I am delighted to say he is rejoining his Lodge.

I have mentioned the financial implications of being a Freemason. Brethren, you hardly need me to remind you what they are but I think they need to be put in context with respect to the modern economy. Some Lodges still have Bye-laws with an Initiation Fee as low as £30. I think that is far too low, that we are under-selling ourselves. Ah comes the cry 'We do not want to put candidates off.' Brethren, if we have candidates concerned about whether the fee for them to join Freemasonry is £30 or £100, the question we have to ask ourselves is are they the right people to become Freemasons? They are joining a world wide organisation where they can visit any Lodge, with whom we are in accord, and be greeted by strangers as a Brother. Contrast these costs with the cost paid by the Initiate joining Arts and Crafts Lodge in 1920 which was sixteen guineas. That equates to over £2000 today. Or their dining fee for a guest at half a guinea which equates to over £70. The joining fee for Seymour Lodge in 1900 was seven guineas. Contrast also the cost today to join the local golf club or gym.

If I take the basic subscription at £150; add to that the cost of seven Festive Boards at £20 each including drinks, silver serviced in a private dining room, add to that seven charity boxes at £5 each, it totals less than £350. I maintain that that represents excellent value for money. The expense increases when Brethren decide to widen their Masonic activity by visiting other Lodges and/or by widening their Masonic experience by joining other Orders. As I have already said, the costs borne by our predecessors for their Masonry represented a larger part of their disposable income than is the case today.

An important factor facing the Brethren in the future, if numbers continue to decline, is that the cost per head of running our meeting places will increase. The demise of Lodges will only exacerbate this situation. I fear that some meeting places will not survive. In some Provinces there are already instances of Masonic premises becoming economically unviable, being sold and the Lodges removing to other existing Masonic meeting places thereby helping to contain costs.

Every meeting place which is owned masonically has a Board of Directors comprising local Freemasons who give generously of their time and expertise for the benefit of the Lodges which meet there. By and large they have done a good job but, in my opinion, have succumbed to pressure from their Lodges about costs, often to the detriment of standards and of the building. There is no better example than the building we are currently in and how that matter has now been addressed.

We have to ask ourselves are our buildings places where we are proud to take our ladies, guests and potential candidates or are they generally tired, dusty, dark, dingy and poorly decorated. Are they conforming to all aspects of current legislation? I believe that the majority of Brethren have, quite wrongly, little interest in the building where their Lodge meets as long as it is available when the Lodge wants it. They put the interest of their Lodge first and totally disregard any responsibility, or interest, for maintaining the meeting place. In extreme cases, being under no liability such as a tenancy agreement, they can remove their Lodge to another suitable home in three months, thereby helping reduce cost at their new home but exacerbating the situation at the place they have left. Several Lodges have moved from here but almost none of them have successfully increased their membership. Perhaps there should be key money payable not only to the place they leave by way of compensation but also to the place they join. Directors of Masonic Meeting places will have to keep a weather eye open on their future financial success. Much better to have planned a closure than have it thrust upon them.

When a Lodge reaches a stage where the membership is low and the average age of the members is high, there is almost no way back. That said in the mid nineteenth century Trinity Lodge was down to eight members when a new member joined and was responsible for introducing several more. Similarly in Athelstan Lodge during the same period. In recent years Grand Lodge has recognised declining memberships by allowing Lodges to amalgamate, thus allowing some preservation of identity. For some reason which I do not understand, whilst other Provinces have been quite successful in forming amalgamations, Lodges in Warwickshire have so far set their face against this course, preferring to hand in the Warrant. On the other hand we have some small Lodges continuing to meet enthusiastically and successfully. As the Worshipful Master of a small Lodge meeting here said recently "There is no way we are going to hand in our Warrant!"

Another possibility is for a small Lodge to form a partnership with another small Lodge; for each of them to agree to meet four times a year and for the Brethren in each Lodge to agree to attend the eight meetings thereby rendering mutual support. Barnard Lodge meeting here, has a very small membership but they have been pro-active in visiting other Lodges who in turn reciprocate by supporting them. In this building joint Festive Boards are often held.

Now I look to the future. The Ancient Customs and Landmarks of our Order as explained in the ritual are set in stone. Tinker with them and we are, I believe on the slippery slope towards extinction. It is the fact that our secrets and mysteries are veiled in allegory that makes Freemasonry curious to some outside the membership. I believe it is the personal example we can display to our fellow man as a result of our being a Freemason which is likely to attract a more worthy future member. Some other institutions have adopted considerable change in the hope of being more attractive. A good example is the Church of England. Look at the changes it has introduced over the past thirty years in an attempt to appeal to a wider congregation. I believe the changes it has introduced, such as the use of modern language, have to a large degree, removed much of the awe and wonderment, and have been counter productive. To use the modern phraseology the Church has been dumbed down. We, in Freemasonry, should learn from this example. As Freemasons we are taught to be cautious and evolution not revolution should be our watchword.

Freemasonry is not a religion nor is it to be considered as a substitute for one. I wonder if in years to come potential candidates will still be asked if they believe in a Supreme Being. The society in which we live are alleged to be eighty percent agnostic. If this is the case it leads me to ask myself if a man who is agnostic cannot profess and support our Masonic principles, based upon moral virtue, to the same extent that we do. I leave you to ponder that question.

It is to the format of our meetings not the ritual that we should also look. Sometimes our meetings are undoubtedly not as well organised as they might be, taking far too long. Some thought beforehand on the part of the key players, particularly the Worshipful Master and Director of Ceremonies, can rectify this without detracting from the occasion. This planning was done by the Past Masters of yesteryear at the Officers meeting and not on the hoof outside the door of the Lodge.

When Lodges have no labour they often appear to me to lack imagination in the content of their agendas. You will remember from the Prestonian Lecture given in Tudor Lodge last year that the point was emphasised that in the early eighteenth century the Lodges in London were engaged often in debate on matters of scientific interest. A discussion in open Lodge, perhaps on a Masonic topic, has the advantage that all Lodge members can

take part yet we hardly ever do it. The Brethren may thereby make a daily advancement. It is also important that the ritual is not forgotten by performing demonstrations of the ceremonies. Learning and performing ritual leads to a better understanding of it by those taking part.

Similarly at the Festive Board slick service from the waiting staff plus an efficient D.C. should ensure that things do not drag on. Do you demand a high enough standard of service from the caterers employed in your meeting place? Ideally and importantly, between the end of the Lodge meeting and the start of the Festive Board there should be half an hour for Brethren to socialise with one another to cement friendships.

Steps in these directions will assist the Lodge to open later as well as retaining the interest and enthusiasm of members. The aim of every Worshipful Master should be for him to send the Brethren home with smiles on their faces looking forward to their next merry meeting.

We need to maintain standards in our Masonic life especially in a world where standards are declining. I see this decline creeping into Freemasonry in the abrupt manner in which some Brethren treat each other rather than the more gentle manner we expect within the craft. Brethren, Freemasonry is not the commercial world. On the contrary the time spent in our Lodges and in each others' company is an escape from it. Gentleness and Gentlemanliness should be our watchwords. We need to maintain the mystique in Freemasonry so that it does remain different from other organisations. To repeat myself we need to maintain standards, standards in our ritual, at our Festive Board and in our own personal behaviour.

Important though attracting Initiates is, it is even more important that firstly they are of the right calibre, secondly that they will fit in with the Lodge and thirdly to retain them. They need mentoring in a Masonic sense so that they can feel at first hand the warmth of true brotherly love, especially whilst they progress through their formative years. They should not be left on their own. So often today's proposers have limited experience themselves and so should not be expected to carry out this duty.

In the future I fear that the number of our Lodges will decline. Most will continue with their efforts and continue to enjoy their Masonry but some will find the odds too great. I anticipate that amalgamations will occur in the future. In this regard I am confident for the future. I can quote several examples of Lodges in Birmingham who have made significant progress during the last few years, from a low base, in the numbers now in their Lodges and appear to have turned the corner. There are some very successful Lodges meeting in this building. Their success is built on firm traditions, good ritual, a pro-active approach in seeking new members and a lively social programme.

The number of Brethren may continue to decline but at some time I predict that this rate of decline will decrease.

The most worrying thing in my opinion is the continued viability of our meeting places, which are solely based upon Masonic activity, if the Brethren are not prepared to meet the increasing costs. The Brethren are very parochial in respect of the place where they meet but I predict that at some time in the future meeting places will close and the Lodges displaced move in elsewhere. There will be consolidation. I hope they would remove to a Masonic centre so that they contribute towards our economy and not that of the private

sector. If we were a commercial organisation it would have happened by planned direction long ago.

In this building some sixty percent of our income is from non-Masonic sources. In other words the periphery has become the product. Some Masons view that as a good thing because it subsidises our Masonry. I believe it is a very mixed blessing which needs continual monitoring. Conference and Banqueting is a fickle industry, especially in a building not built especially for the purpose. That said we have here one of the finest Masonic meeting places outside London in which we have invested heavily in refurbishing and we should all play our part to the full to ensure its future viability. The alternatives to change the building may well involve massive disruption which some brethren would find unacceptable but would have the great advantage of us being in possession of a large capital sum and a down-sized building. That is a step that can only be taken once and is irreversible.

Being a Freemason offers an enthusiastic Brother the opportunity to broaden his Masonic knowledge by joining one or more of the many additional Orders which operate in this Province. When this happens the Brother sometimes lets his enthusiasm run away and he gets swept away on a tide of excessive time and financial commitment. My observations indicate that his attendance at his Craft Lodge can then become infrequent and that at the Past Masters and Officers Meeting virtually non-existent. His Craft Lodge becomes weaker as a result because those following him on through the Lodge do not have the benefit of his encouragement and experience in Freemasonry in general and their Lodge in particular. In extreme cases the Brother devotes far more of his efforts to the additional order at the expense of the Craft. A strong Craft is essential to maintain strength in the other Orders. If you find yourself in this situation, particularly if yours is a small Lodge, I ask you to examine your conscientious and readdress your priorities.

I started this talk quoting 1728 and all that. Since the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1813 the character of the relationship between the Province and the private Lodges therein has remained largely unchanged but now I have introduced the Visiting Officers scheme which should, importantly, further enhance a two way dialogue. Changes in Provincial boundaries do not occur often. Tudor Lodge was the subject of a just such a change in the early nineteen hundreds. At that time it met in Harborne, then in the Province of Staffordshire, but when the County boundaries were changed and Harborne came into Warwickshire, Tudor Lodge opted to become a Warwickshire Lodge. When I look into my crystal ball one change which might be considered at some time in the future could be the establishment of a Metropolitan Grand Lodge of Birmingham involving the incorporation of all Lodges currently meeting within the City boundary.

I am very optimistic that Freemasonry in Warwickshire will continue to flourish in the future with a reduced membership. It has faced vicissitudes in the past as it will in the future. We need to have the courage and resolve to face these challenges. We should never forget that we are merely the custodians of our Lodges. We inherited them from those who have gone before us. We hold them in trust and have a duty to do our utmost to hand them on to future generations so that they in turn can enjoy the benefits of being a Freemason and pass the Lodge on to their successors.

Worshipful Master, I thank you for affording me the great privilege of being able to share my thoughts in the Lodge and I thank you Brethren for listening to me so patiently."