

FROM PRIVATE HOUSE TO MASONIC HALL

STANLEY HOUSE

Stanley House was built as a family home, in the last decade of the 19th Century by Mr James Pollitt JP. Who was a founder of the nearby Openshaw brewery, which accounts for the fact that the original chimney pots, were in the form of beer barrels. The house was named after his grandson Stanley Pollitt, who sadly fell from a tram, on Manchester Road outside the property, and died from his injuries the following morning.

From this incident, many ghost stories connected to this splendid Victorian building emanate.

Its use as a family home ceased when the Pollitt family moved to Chapel-en-le-Frith, at the beginning of the Second World War. The house was then commandeered by the Army, and became the headquarters of the bomb disposal squad.

Following the end of hostilities, the local hatting industry, made it their headquarters, as there were many manufacturers in the area. However, some years later, with the decline of this industry, the building was put on the open market, and was purchased by just four Masonic Lodges, and after much volunteering work by them and their families, tuned into a masonic Hall which held its first meeting in September 1968.

How did this happen?

Prior to 1945 Freemasonry in Audenshaw was based on two lodges, namely Audenshaw and Aldwyn, both of which met at Rycroft Hall, when the offices belonged to the Audenshaw Urban District Council. At the same time brethren of King George V Lodge were meeting at Albert House, Ashton. But as several members were living in Fairfield, Audenshaw, they were anxious to form a new lodge in this area, providing suitable accommodation could be found. Unfortunately, it could not. At the time, Stanley House was on the market for £1000, but was unsuitable, as it was in a poor state of repair following its wartime use by the army.

With the ending of the war, history repeated itself and masonry experienced the same boom that occurred after world war one. All lodges were confronted with increasing waiting lists of candidates. King George V then had over seventy members, and with the return servicemen to their homes in the area, the formation of a new lodge was again brought to the forefront.

Fortunately, one of the larger houses in Fairfield, Moss Nook House, had been purchased by Worshipful Brother Frank Massey, of KGV lodge, who owned the small hotel next door. Frank renamed it and turned it into the Trough House Hotel. He offered to convert a couple of rooms for masonic purposes, and a new lodge Fairfield was consecrated in 1953 and moved in.

Other lodges and chapters were formed, all moving into Trough House, until, in 1964 the Manchester ring road was proposed, and Trough House was compulsory purchased as part of this scheme. On this news Worshipful Brother Massey decided he would retire from business rather than wait for the Trough House to be demolished.

The lodges and chapters meeting there, together with those from Rycroft Hall, formed a committee to search for suitable premises. Many were viewed but found unsuitable or beyond budget. But as the search went on, news came that Stanley House, now owned by the British Hatting Manufacturers Association who were moving to Stockport, was again to be put up for sale.

The members of the committee then had a sneak preview of the premises, due to a brother mason Worship Brother, Jim McNulty, who was luckily the Hatting Association Secretary. The ground floor was a physics laboratory, the first floor a chemical laboratory, the top floor offices and the basement a heat room, where all types of hats and materials were tested.

The Committee's first impressions were that this building would be just right. The ground floor would be the dining room, the first floor a lodge room, the top floor a Steward's flat and the basement would provide ample storage facilities and boiler room

The committee reported back, and after many meetings, and much beer drinking in the Higher Openshaw Conservative Club, which the committee had made its HQ, it was resolved that the building was to be purchased.

The finances required of £10,000 should be obtained by forming a new company and selling shares to lodges, applying for a loan from the East Lancashire Masonic Benevolent Institution. Our APGM Sir Frank Lord, made the initial approach and arranged meetings at Bridge St between the proposed directors the DepPGM WBro Fred Towns and the ELMBI committee.

The ELMBI agreed to take out a mortgage on the building, which the lodges would pay back at a low fixed interest rate. A further loan was agreed with a brewery, who were anxious to open an outlet in the area. The vendors were keen to proceed but the committee could not until the new company had been formed. It was agreed, however, that a sum of £200.00 would be acceptable as a deposit and act of good faith. The vendors required this immediately.

John Humphries of Fairfield lodge, who had used his knowledge as a solicitor to guide the committee, knew that there were no such funds readily available, and on arriving home, informed his wife Connie of the setback. Following a few hurried phone calls, Connie, the then Secretary of the Fairfield Lodge Ladies Committee, told John to buck up. A signed cheque for this sum would be available from the ladies the next day.

John presented the cheque the following day and the building was secured. Whoever said ladies were not needed in Masonry clearly hadn't met Connie or the Fairfield Lodge Ladies Committee.

A great effort was then made for more craft lodges and other orders to join Stanley House, and many who had been meeting in pubs and restaurants, were quick to sign up grateful for this opportunity.

After much voluntary hard work by members and their families, to ensure that Stanley House was made suitable, the very first lodge meeting was held on the 2nd Wednesday in September 1968 when Worshipful Brother Colonel Jack Rodgerson, the Master of Fairfield Lodge declared "this lodge and building duly open".

With more masonic orders now moving in and with the founding of new lodges and chapters the building was bursting at the seams, and the dining room was too small for most social events, meaning ladies evenings etc having to be held elsewhere in larger premises, leading to a loss of revenue.

The next door building had prior to the purchase been demolished with the land standing empty. The land was then purchased for £1,500.00 and planning permission obtained to develop a car park and allow development to the rear of the original building.

Following a very heated meeting it was decided, with a loan of £56,000.00 plus 2% interest above bank rate, to go ahead and build an extension, which provided a larger main function room with bar and toilets, to the ground floor, and added an additional large lodge room and storage space above.

The overall bill with inflation was in the region of £110,000. This proved something of a disaster, as inflation took off soon after the building work finished, though with much support and fund raising by the 800 members over the years this was overcome.

The extension was opened on 1st September 1973 by WBro Bartle Hodgkiss our APGM with WBro John Humphries having the honour of occupying the chair for all his input over the years.

The rest of course is history.

Trough House still stands opposite and is used as offices, as the motorway, now open as the M60, was built a mile north of its original destination. Stanley House has since had many extensions and improvements to the original building with further loans and voluntary work carried out by its members. Hopefully masonry will continue to flourish at Stanley House for many years to come.

WBro Donald Roberts PJGD.