

Freemasonry in troubled times, and these are troubled times.

On the 15th May 2015, for the amalgamation of my lodge Tranquility 274 with Hospitality 1697, our daughter lodge. I was tasked, as WM, to give a talk about our history at that time we had 236 years of continuous lodge membership and meetings.

I had been through 230 plus years of minutes and other records from our archives and had a comprehensive list of dates and important milestones. All the time I was researching and jotting down ideas there was a constant nagging and I could not shake the feeling that there was more to discover. Something fundamental.

One question kept coming along like a conveyor belt from the back of my head, what links them to us? What gossamer thread connects those men to us, hardy men with no electricity or cars or mobile phones, not for them, the excuse that my drive was snowed in. They turned up on horseback in all weathers. They stood outside as initiates properly prepared, some of them must have been blue with cold when they were first admitted.

What links them to us is history and their personal experiences and struggles living up to our ideals in times that were sometimes troubling to them.

We were going through turbulent times ourselves with the financial crisis of 2008 still having an impact. I had had to cut back on the number of lodges I attended through loss of income and various other side effects of the crash. A few of my brethren had been considering their continued attendance of any lodge never mind cutting back.

And this brother is the theme of my paper to you all after much, much deliberation.

1789 was the year of our foundation. We have all heard that the mutiny on the bounty and the storming of the bastille happened in this year.

I would like you to participate with me in this:

Reflect with me on some of the momentous occasions have taken place in the last 200 plus years. Deaths and births of monarchs. Wars in which our brethren lost their lives, there is a plaque to the fallen on the wall outside the door of the lodge.

We are advised to refrain from the discussion of religious and political topics to maintain harmony in the lodge. When we reflect how could our forebearers not discuss such issues? Fortunately, we do not have the pressures put on us these days that our past brethren had, let us look at some examples.

The American war of independence in 1783 was if you believe the tales to break free from the oppression of monarchy and start a new state with freemasonic principles at the core of their beliefs. How did our brethren react to this? When family members may have been in the armed forces. Serving in the colonies. We know that many regiments at the time had travelling lodges. A crisis of conscience is inevitable, and, from our records, we know they had them.

1794 William Pitt the Prime Minister, worried about the revolutionary fervour in France spreading to Britain, instigated political repression. I would imagine that our brethren felt this keenly. One could be arrested and interned, without trial, for sedition. Would our

practises and beliefs contradict the standards of the era and render us liable to arrest as freemasons? What were our brethren at the time thinking and talking about?

1829 Stephenson's rocket. Some, most of us remember Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon. How fascinated I was as a young man. I would argue that our brethren thought the same about the first Rocket, the steam engine. I thought my children were going to live on the moon. One may say we were used to technology in those days and it was just a continuation of this. Our forefathers, however, must have wondered what would come next. Imagine the conversations that took place at the festive boards in those days.

Our Kings George 3rd and 4th were held up to ridicule and had their carriages stoned when they went about their duties in London. They were satirised awfully in the press and, if you believe our history books, were not popular with the masses at all. As supporters of the monarchy can you imagine the personal struggle some of our brethren must have endured, having sworn an oath to our monarch? George III suffered from mental illness as made famous by the film `The madness of King George` in 1994. George IV ruled as Prince regent until his father's death in 1820 when he succeeded him. His reign was tarnished by his dissolute way of life and was full of scandal and extravagance.

The battle of Balaklava 25th October 1854 is remembered for the charge of the light brigade immortalised in Tennyson's poem. But one of our own led the heavy brigade that day. General Sir James Yorke Scarlett, he successfully repelled two Russian attacks and it was only when the Russians tried to move the guns that Lord Raglan ordered that action that led to that fateful incident. I bet he was a hoot to have at the bar regaling his brethren with tales of derring do from far off battlefields. This may have countered the awful tales of the suffering of the troops in the Crimea.

1889 that was a momentous year, the first test match started between Africa and England in Port Elizabeth. Our brethren would get news of this momentous match weeks after the game was over. Speculation must have been rife at our lodges on the proceedings and speculation about the outcome. A period of relative peace for the nation and topics could turn to other matters.

Boxing's longest day July 1889 Richburg Mississippi. John L Sullivan beat Jake Kilrain after 75 rounds to win the world championship. Fought over two hours 16 minutes in heat of 100 degrees. Reported as the last bare-knuckle bout. Obviously, not been not been to one of our committee meetings. That must have got the tongues wagging. This was also the year that Preston North End won the inaugural football league how the rivalries that persist today were played out we will never know.

1914 Was a truly memorable year and the men of this area can have been discussing little else. The PALS battalions started in this region and for the next four years there was carnage not only on the battlefield. Our lodges were decimated, and some did not survive the loss of brethren. There is one account of a lodge closing because the brethren did not want to meet anymore because the repeated reminding of the loss of their brothers would be too hard to bear.

If you will allow me to skip to the end of the first world war I would like you to reflect on the first armistice day. I was reading about the first Remembrance Day. On the 10th November 1919 King George V hosted a banquet in honour of the President of the French republic. The following day, 11th November they held the first Remembrance Day in the grounds of Buckingham palace. When I was thinking of this my mind was instantly cast back 40 years to an incident when I was a young soldier. After a particularly brutal tour of Northern Ireland we were given two weeks leave. Some of my company organised a knees up in the local TA barracks for the second weekend of our leave. I remember the tremendous sense of loss after I had a few beers. It was only then that it hit me. Our fallen were conspicuous by their absence. Billy was there but only had one leg. Pete was there but was still in a wheelchair. (names changed). Imagine then, our brethren meeting for the first time after such a great conflict. The sense of loss must have been excruciating, yet they still attended.

Our 150th took place over two days 15th and 16th July 1939, what were our brethren talking about that month I wonder? Please allow me to move forward in time, I would be in danger of repeating myself in covering two World Wars even though they stand alone in their horror and repercussions around the world.

I remember in the 1990s there was an attempt almost to expunge Freemasonry from the Civil Service. Every single person in the judiciary, police, prison or anywhere else in Government employment was asked to complete a form that asked if they were a Freemason. I must admit I considered my response carefully.

Well brethren, we live in troubled times so why do we keep our Masonic membership, our ideals, and our generosity during a period when it would be so easy to pack it all in?

If you will indulge me, I will try to answer this rhetorical question. I have been through personally difficult periods and, without going into specifics, I have always used my lodge membership as an anchor to keep me from drifting. I have been able to put on my suit and tie and head to a place where I will be among friends, people who share my ideals, hopes and aspirations. I almost become another person and, for a few hours, can forget my troubles. In that guise I demonstrate to others the best that I can be. My sorrows are usually assuaged by good company, shared experience, a little alcohol, and fine fare. Through our present predicament our lodge have arranged a weekly quiz. We quickly demonstrated our ignorance of anything outside our own experience and the meetings became a chance to chin wag and check on the wellbeing of our elder brethren. We discuss the issues facing us, of course we do, but the objective is to get back to our hall and continue our long and illustrious history

I heard a gentleman speak in 2018. I cannot remember the main body of the talk, but the last few sentences resonated with me. He said, " people may forget who you are. They may forget what you say or how you looked. They will never forget how you made them feel". That brethren is my submission. Troubled times they may be and have been, but it is our bond, our shared experience that keeps us attending and troubled times would be much harder without that.

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