

Provincial Grand Master's Address - 2nd April 2015

Whilst the primary focus today is those I have appointed or promoted, it is also my opportunity to recognise what has been achieved over the past year, to thank those who have contributed to that achievement and to focus attention on our priorities and direction for the future.

Today's recipients have served Freemasonry well. I thank each of you for your loyalty and contribution. I hope that in accepting the honour you will commit yourself to do your best to continue and extend that support in the coming years. Well done and please enjoy what is a very important and great privilege.

I thank the outgoing Provincial Team. We have had a busy year, you've shown real commitment and enthusiasm and we've had a really happy time together. I welcome the new Team and look forward to working with you during what looks to be another full year of events.

Later this month a number of our brethren will be honoured with Grand Rank.

Receiving First Appointments:

As Past Junior Grand Deacon

W Bro Ben Batley

Asst PGM

As PAGDC - W Bros

Richard Ellis

Provincial Grand Secretary

David Maddern

Provincial Grand Charity Steward

Ray Beckingham

Provincial Grand Mentor

Mark Sweetland

Benevolent Lodge, for services to MetGL

Receiving a promotion as

PGSwdB

W Bro John Winston
PJGD

Deputy PGM;

W Bro Ron Goacher

Past Secretary of Somersetshire Lodge, London

I congratulate each of you and we wish you a happy and memorable day.

The retirement of VW Bro Ray Guthrie as Deputy PGM marks 18 years of active work for the Province. Following appointment as Provincial Senior Grand Deacon, Ray enthusiastically involved himself in the foundation work for masonic education and mentoring and was first editor of the Provincial magazine. In 2001 at the age of 49 he was appointed Assistant PGM, serving 5 years in that role with an overlapping 8 years as Deputy PGM of the Mark Province and my Deputy for the last 4 years.

Somerset freemasonry has gained immensely in having a man of many talents, enthusiasm and energy in these key roles for so many years. His skills have been well matched by his friendly and approachable style, clear thinking, common-sense and wise counsel. He has earned the respect of us all and he has been a great support to me over the last 4 years.

Brethren, Bro Ray is still young and fit enough to enjoy retirement from active office and I am sure that you will all join me in thanking him as he steps down today. He is also too young and fit to let go entirely and I'm delighted and grateful to say that Ray will continue to work with the Executive on the key areas of succession planning and leadership development.

W Bro John Winston is well known to you all and his experience and expertise make him a fitting successor as my Deputy and I shall enjoy working with him.

W Bro Ben Batley brings a wide range of experience into the Team. He will lead on Recruitment, Retention and Member Development. Each of these are of vital importance to the future of every Lodge and I am sure that you will welcome him into your lodges and give him full support as he seeks to help and assist you.

Last year, Somerset faced the worst floods in living memory and over £200,000 was raised by Freemasons to aid in the recovery work. The Flood Recovery Grants Committee lead by W Bro John Winston has awarded grants totalling some £120k for a range of projects and schemes. Further projects are under consideration. The Committee has closely engaged with the affected communities and ensured that projects are carefully chosen and fulfilled. Our support has been much appreciated and brought great credit on and positive acknowledgement of Freemasonry. I congratulate Bro John and his Committee for their work and also acknowledge the considerable help and assistance of Justin Sargent, Chief Executive of the Somerset Community Foundation.

In 2011 I announced a £2.8m target for the Grand Charity Festival in 2020. Last September we celebrated our first £1m and Laura Chapman, Chief Executive of the Grand Charity spoke at each of the well-attended parties. She powerfully illustrated the extensive range of support and benefit that the Grand Charity delivers on our behalf. We should be in no doubt that our donations are well-targeted and effective.

Your generosity so far is absolutely magnificent. With 43% of the time gone we have now raised £1.2m. Most lodges have actively engaged with the Appeal and it is a pleasure to acknowledge this by Ashlar awards and seeing an increasing number of brethren wearing the Festival Jewel. To achieve our target, all lodges need to actively support the Festival and give it due priority. I commend the use of Gift Aid. It is easy to use and having relieved the Treasury of £500k in Gift-Aid during our last Festival it really is worth doing. Please ask your Lodge Charity Steward to sign you up and take a few minutes to read the Grand Charity Leaflet in the recent edition of Freemasonry Today.

I express my thanks to W Bro David Medlock, Festival Chairman, W Bro David Maddern, PG Charity Steward, the Festival Committee and all Charity Stewards for their support and hard work.

A recurring theme and priority of my period in office has been the health and well-being of the lodges in Somerset. There have been a number of initiatives to support lodges and to identify and share good practice.

Last summer we developed a 5 year plan for the Province to give clearer direction and goals. From this evolved the 'Future of My Lodge' project lead by VW Bro Guthrie. Almost all lodges recently took part in a series of 8 workshops which generated many good ideas and views. These are summarised on the Provincial website.

The aim of the project is to stimulate each lodge to undertake a health-check involving all its members and to identify what needs to be done to help them enjoy, value and enthuse about their membership. The ultimate goal is better retention and improved recruitment. I have been very encouraged by the positive way in which this project has been received.

Two points I would like to make today:

.

Firstly, we are not looking for anything sophisticated or lengthy, just enough to identify to your members what the issues are and how you intend to tackle them. There are examples of plans produced by lodges and masonic centres on the website for reference.

Secondly, we are keen to see how we can assist you. Your plans will help us to do that. We hope to receive these from you by the end of April.

Several topics were identified for provincial help and we will be working on these over the summer. These include:

- Resources to help newer members learn more about Freemasonry and to gain more understanding;
- Improving the retention and retrieval of members who don't attend and eventually resign or cease membership;
- Providing training for lodges to develop their own social media;

Please let us know if there are other topics you feel we should consider or if you would like to help.

The FofMyL activities take place against the backcloth of the work of the Membership Focus Group (MFG) at Grand Lodge. This Group, under the Chairmanship of RW Bro Ray Reed, is undertaking a wide-ranging review of all the membership aspects of Freemasonry, our public profile and our internal processes. The overall aim is to identify what needs to be done to ensure that Freemasonry has a secure and respected future and is a successful membership organisation.

There are no quick fixes although the Group is already informing thinking and policy at the highest level. The way forward must be heavily influenced by your views as members and so the MFG is seeking grass-roots opinion through surveys, interviews and group events.

The results of the first member survey feature in the latest edition of Freemasonry Today. These results provide a clear steer to the MFG and indeed to all lodges as to what we should be preserving, providing or developing. I encourage you to read the article.

https://gallery.mailchimp.com/a19ebddb1f56f7e5d85e4ab82/files/Membership_Focus_Group_Expectations_Survey_Results.pdf

There are now over 7,500 signed up for future surveys but the MFG would like more of you to take part. Within the next few days a second, survey will be launched. Please see the Provincial website for details on signing up. Your views, ideas and opinions really do matter. <http://www.ugle.org.uk/mfg>

Freemasonry has experienced a numerical decline similar to many other membership organisations. If you believe that Freemasonry has much to offer the good man and society in general, then I hope you will agree with me that hope isn't enough, that we have to act and be prepared to adapt in order to arrest the decline, recognising that we have to be more open, confident and communicative; and that our lodges must offer a genuine and rewarding welcome and experience.

This objective lies behind our FofMYL initiative and the work of the MFG. I am delighted that Somerset lodges are engaged with this process and look forward to seeing some tangible benefits emerge.

Brethren 2017 offers a great opportunity to move this agenda forward. The 300th anniversary of Grand Lodge is an almost unique and timely platform on which to promote all the good things about Freemasonry, to celebrate our heritage, the great benefits of membership and what we contribute to our communities through our charitable work.

Whilst there will be national and provincial events, the greatest opportunities will spring from your enthusiasm, by working together at each masonic centre to seek opportunities for celebration, participation in local community events, charity presentations, socials and open activities. If, as I hope, it will lead to greater interest in membership then we need to be well prepared, welcoming and attractive.

The 2017 Committee, chaired by W Bro David Mason, is co-ordinating plans and developing resources and materials for use during the year. They need an early indication of your proposals so that they can help and ensure events are co-ordinated especially with regard to working with the media, civic dignitaries and charities.

Last year I consulted Lodge Secretaries on the idea of making a co-ordinated donation from lodges and the Province to a suitable charity in 2017. Various options have been explored and I announce today that the chosen charity for 2017 will be our two Air Ambulance services, Dorset & Somerset and the Great Western. I hope that between us we can donate £30,000 shared between the two services. We are all aware of the magnificent work of the Air Ambulance service charities and I hope that all Lodges will endorse the proposal and contribute to this deserving cause. I suggest that the equivalent of £5 per member from each lodge, topped up by the Province would achieve the target. It is broadly equivalent to one raffle or Gift Aid donation per member over the next 18 months.

Last year I announced the formation of the Somerset Masonic Friendship Association under the Presidency of RW Bro Stanley Hopkins. The first year has seen inaugural meetings of several new groups of either, or both, widows and brethren who have become disengaged from regular masonry. The local social gatherings bring great enjoyment and happiness. The buzz of excited conversation demonstrates that the effort is worthwhile and that we are meeting a great need. However, we are only scratching the surface of that need. There are many more that would enjoy an occasional gathering were they to know about it and be assisted to attend. Potentially this is another job for the Lodge Almoner but I am very aware that many almoners already feel over-worked. I suggest that there is scope to appoint an assistant Almoner who could be the link with the SMFA pass on information and identify those that would really enjoy an occasional outing.

I hope that all lodges will respond positively to requests to assist with this work.

Brethren, 2015 is a special year for the Royal Arch in Somerset. It celebrates 250 years of continuous working since the first documented Royal Arch meeting in Bath in 1765. I extend the congratulations of the Craft to Ex Companion, John Bennett, Grand Superintendent and all the Companions of Somerset.

The work of Lodge Officers is considerable and I thank them all for their commitment and hard work. The Provincial Management Team endeavours to provide a range of support and advice to lodges and brethren. It is a 24/7 unpaid operation. On your behalf I thank the Executive, members of the Provincial Management Team and their assistants, the Education Team, the Web and Social Media teams, Compass Editor, the Reference Book Team, officers of the year and many others for their contributions, much of it quietly and willingly undertaken day by day.

I congratulate W Bros Richard Ellis, Barry McCormack, Lindsay Smith and their teams for organising and running this successful gathering. I also thank the Winter Gardens Team for once again being excellent hosts.

Conclusion

Brethren, we are a happy and friendly Province and it is my hope and prayer that we shall see it grow and prosper.

I hope that you and your families will continue to enjoy the many benefits of membership.

I thank you all for what you do for Freemasonry and for your local communities.

Please take my good wishes back to your lodge and to your families. I wish you all God's blessing and a very Happy Easter.