THE

FREEMASONS



PUTTING OTHERS FIRST

EXPLAINING FREEMASONRY
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The Grand Master

Freemasonry asks one thing above all of those who join it: that they should put the needs of others before their own. In the many years I have had the privilege of serving as Grand Master, I have seen that principle put into practice more often than I could possibly count, very often quietly, without recognition, and never with any thought of reward.

Our Grand Lodge was formed in 1717, in the age of the Enlightenment, a time of remarkable scientific discovery and considerable social change. The challenges of today are of a very different kind, yet I believe that the values Freemasonry has always upheld are as relevant now as they have ever been.

I am very pleased to commend this book, and the organisation it describes, to all who read it.

His Royal Highness The Duke of Kent, KG
Grand Master

This book explains Freemasonry as it is in the 21st century: where we come from, who we are and what we do. At the back is a glossary explaining some of the distinctive language we use, much of which has remained remarkably consistent since the two English Grand Lodges united in 1813.

What is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry is a unique membership organisation that has attracted members for more than 300 years. It has no political or religious affiliations, and its members come from different ages, races, religions, cultures and backgrounds. We meet in individual lodges, where centuries-old ceremonial traditions encourage us to practise tolerance and respect for others, to develop ourselves as individuals and to fulfil our responsibilities to our communities. Our social bond is equally important, and the time we spend outside the lodge, whether over a shared meal, a drink after the meeting or supporting one another in charitable work, is a core part of our members' experience. For many members, the friendships formed through Freemasonry last a lifetime.

Lodges meet throughout England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, as well as in many countries around the world. Women's Freemasonry has flourished under its own Grand Lodges for more than a century. Scotland has its own distinct tradition of Freemasonry under the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

One of the world's oldest civic, social and charitable organisations, modern Freemasonry has its roots in the traditions of the medieval stonemasons who built Europe's castles and cathedrals. Over time, these traditions evolved from those of working stonemasons into a voluntary fraternity centred on fellowship, morality, friendship and



self-improvement. This development took place against the intellectual and social upheaval of the Enlightenment, when established ideas about society, individual responsibility and human progress were being vigorously debated.

For Freemasons today, four important values help define how we seek to live our lives: Integrity, Friendship, Respect and Service. In a world of rapid change and uncertainty, these principles remain as relevant today as they have been throughout Freemasonry's history.

Ceremony is an integral part of Freemasonry. A Freemason's journey is deliberately progressive. New members begin with Initiation, becoming Entered Apprentices. They then progress through the ceremonies of Passing, becoming Fellow Crafts, and Raising, becoming Master Masons. These three stages form what is known as Craft Freemasonry. A Master Mason may then choose to continue into the Royal Arch, taking part in the ceremony of Exaltation. Together, these ceremonies use allegory, symbolism and shared experience to explore ideas of character, responsibility, fellowship and service.

The ceremonies are learned, rehearsed and performed by members for one another. They provide continuity with generations of Freemasons



who have gone before and give members the opportunity to reflect on the principles at the heart of Freemasonry. But a lodge meeting is also a social occasion. The formal meeting is commonly followed by dinner, traditionally known as the Festive Board, where members relax, talk and enjoy one another's company. Ceremony provides a shared experience; friendship gives Freemasonry much of its enduring strength.

Service is equally central to Freemasonry. Whether fundraising for charitable causes, volunteering for community organisations, supporting people in need or contributing their time, resources and skills, Freemasons seek to make a practical difference to the society around them. Charity is important, but the service Freemasons give extends beyond money: it is also about participating actively in the life of our communities.

This book is published by the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE), the governing body for Freemasonry in England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, as well as a number of lodges overseas. It is the oldest Grand Lodge in the world and one of the principal Grand Lodges representing Freemasonry in Great Britain today

This book is for our members, for their families, friends and colleagues, and for anybody who is interested in and wants to know about and understand what Freemasonry is now. It was compiled from many conversations with, and written by, a group of members of the United Grand Lodge of England, new and longstanding, from the very top of the organisation to some of its most junior members. These were complemented by discussions with Masonic historians, the leadership of the Freemasons' Charity and our fellow Grand Lodges in the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain.

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An introduction by the Pro Grand Master

Jonathan Spence, DL

I am pleased to welcome you to this book, which sets out in one place, and in plain language, what Freemasonry is and what it does.

I was asked to become a Freemason at 21, by the deputy headmaster of my school, who had served as an officer in the Fourteenth Army and had a certain something about him. I asked my grandfather, who was not a Freemason, though his father had been one in Scotland and his brother was, and I was sent to Rochester City Library to read what I could find before I said yes. Reading those books, I could never have imagined over 40 years later that I would be supporting the Grand Master in leading this organisation. Whilst Freemasonry has been a meaningful part of my life ever since, much like many of our members, it has never been the whole, but it is an important part of what I do. Family has always come first, then the responsibilities that come with working, before all the other things I do, including spending time with friends and supporting our neighbours and communities.

Let me begin with what we are. Freemasonry is one of the oldest civic membership organisations in this country and one of the largest. More than 160,000 members meet in lodges in every county of England and Wales, in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man and in 32 Districts overseas.

They meet for reasons anybody would recognise. They want the company of people they would not otherwise have met. They want something to belong to that asks something of them in return. They want a way of being useful close to where they live.

What holds it together is a set of values our members undertake to live by, which are integrity, friendship, respect and service. Those are easy words to print and a good deal harder to keep, and the honest measure of this organisation is not what it says about them but what its members do about them on an ordinary evening in an ordinary town.

Much of this work is quiet. A member notices that the widow of a member of their lodge has stopped answering her telephone, and does something about it. A lodge puts a playground back into use and never once asks to be thanked for it. Some of it is not quiet at all, and the sums our members raise for causes in their own communities run to many millions of pounds every year. To summarise, it is often doing the right thing even when it is difficult. That is the organisation this book describes.

> You could find friendship in a sports club, values in a place of worship and self-improvement in a night class. Freemasonry is the only place you would find all three together.

It is an organisation with an unusual claim on your attention, which is that it has been doing recognisably the same thing for 300 years. A member of 1750 would know the ceremonies our members follow today, and they would know the values behind them. What has

changed, and changed a great deal in the last 20 years, is who is made welcome, how openly we conduct ourselves and how willing we are to explain ourselves to people who are not members.

The lodge room is not off limits.
Ask a Freemason to show you one and they will.

We have not always been willing, or able, to explain ourselves, and the cost of that has fallen on our own members as much as on anybody else.

We have been widely misunderstood, and subject to prejudice as others have laboured under misconceptions, and we have played a considerable part in that ourselves at particular times.

The century that needs explaining begins with the First World War. Freemasonry entered it as a confident institution and left it profoundly altered, having lost members in the way that the whole country lost them. The memorial raised at Freemasons' Hall remains the plainest statement of that loss.

We are very good at talking about what happened 300 years ago, and very bad at addressing the last 100.

The years that followed were harder still. Across the world, governments named Freemasonry an enemy, for its independence and its habit of bringing people of different beliefs together, and persecuted its members for their membership alone.

Freemasonry was systematically persecuted under the Nazi regime,

which portrayed it as part of an imagined Jewish-Masonic conspiracy and regarded its principles of tolerance, fraternity and freedom of conscience as incompatible with National Socialism. From 1933 onwards, Masonic lodges across Germany were suppressed, their property and archives seized, and by 1935 all remaining lodges had been ordered to dissolve. As Nazi occupation spread across Europe, similar measures followed, with Freemasonry subjected to surveillance, discrimination, arrest and, in some cases, imprisonment in concentration camps.

In Britain, this Grand Lodge stood firmly against Nazism, but the threat was taken seriously. Preparations were made for the possibility of a German invasion, and the Nazis compiled information identifying prominent Freemasons and the locations of lodges, which would have allowed the Gestapo to target them had occupation come. One such list, prepared for an invasion of Britain and issued to officers of the Wehrmacht and the SS, named the Freemasons in this country who were to be rounded up.

The organisation here responded as institutions under attack generally do. It drew in, closed ranks and said less than it had said before. The instinct was an understandable one. It was also the beginning of the habit that has cost us most, because a habit formed in a decade of genuine danger long outlived the danger that formed it.

After the Second World War our lodges filled again. Those who had spent years in the close company of others came home wanting that companionship back, and wanting some structure through which to go on contributing where they lived.



Freemasonry offered them both, and by any measure it was a period of considerable success.

Then the country changed around us, and we did not change with it. Britain grew more open, a good deal more informal, and far more inclined to ask its institutions to account for themselves. We kept our own counsel at precisely the moment when everybody else was learning to explain themselves, and the distance between how we understood ourselves and how others understood us widened year upon year.

An organisation that will not explain itself leaves the explaining to somebody else.

I will not pretend that everything said about us in those years was unfounded. Some of it was fair. An organisation that keeps silent has little cause for complaint when other people speak in its place, and one that had grown a good deal narrower than the country it served could hardly object when that was pointed out.

None of this is comfortable to set down at the front of a book meant to celebrate an organisation of which I am proud. I have concluded that it belongs here all the same. An account that stepped around it would not be worth your time.

What I do say, and say without hesitation, is that the description no longer fits. The organisation these pages describe is not the organisation of 1950, or of 1980. Our own members will recognise the difference at once, and the wider public deserves the chance to see it too.

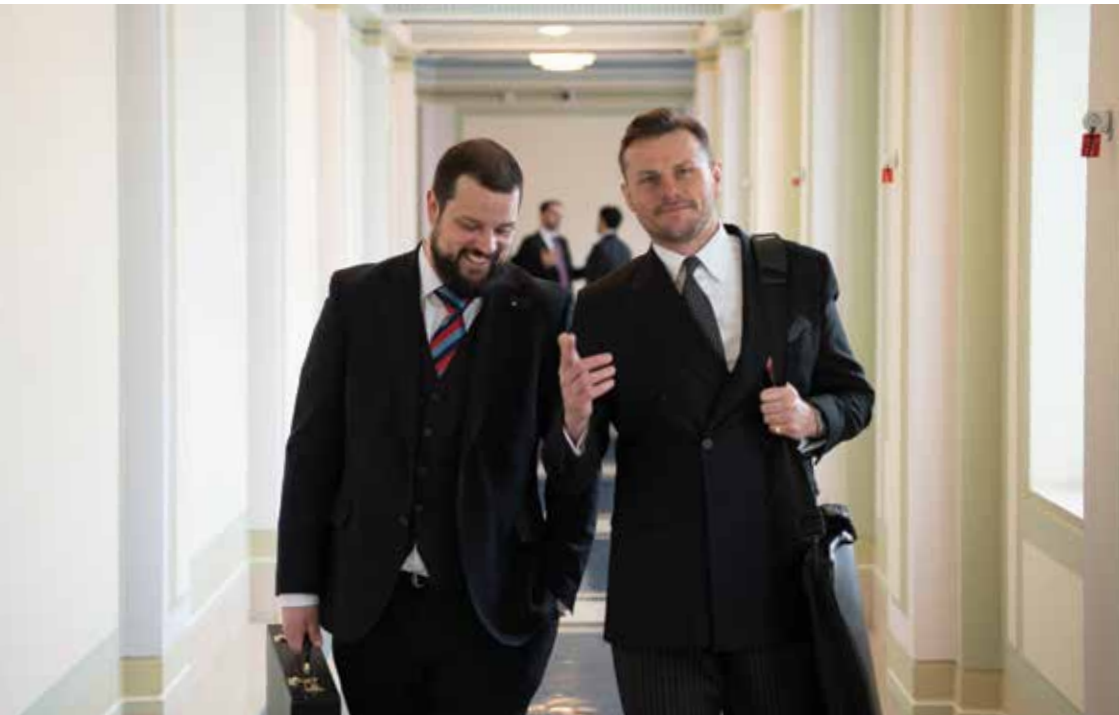
So what follows is neither an apology nor a defence. A book arranged around the questions our critics choose to ask would tell you a great deal about them and remarkably little about us. This narrative is arranged around what Freemasonry is: where it came from, what our members do when they come together, what they believe, what they give and how the whole of it is governed.

Freemasonry asks the same thing of everyone who joins, which is to put others before yourself.

It is the account of an organisation that intends to be here in another 300 years, and which has finally begun to say so out loud.

The evidence for that is recent and public. We open Freemasons' Hall to anybody who wants to walk through it. Our accounts and our rules are published for anybody who wants to read them. And in 2024 this Grand Lodge and the two women's Grand Lodges sat down at one table in the Council for Freemasonry for the first time in their history, and the Grand Lodge of Scotland joined them the following year.

Women have been Freemasons in their own Grand Lodges in this country for more than 100 years, longer than they have had the right to vote, working the same ceremonies our members work. The Council those Grand Lodges founded with us was established under the presidency of women Freemasons rather than under ours.



An organisation incapable of change does not do that.

We are an organisation, and we are also a community. Community is the truer word, because a community admits the good and the bad.

What I want over the next 20 years is simple. I want a member asked at work what they do on a Tuesday evening to be able to answer without hesitating, and I want the answer to be worth hearing.

This book was not written by a committee, and it was not written by me. It began as a series of conversations held over the course of a year with members new and longstanding, from the most senior to some of the most junior, who know their subjects better than any single author could.

The chapters open with the wider family of Freemasonry and the four Grand Lodges that work together to secure its future. They go on to where the United Grand Lodge of England came from and why it took the shape it did, to the ethical underpinning beneath it, to what happens when our members meet and to how the organisation is governed and held to account. They turn then to brotherhood, and to the service our members give where they live. They close by asking why Freemasonry matters, first to the individual and then to society.

I am grateful to everybody who took part in the preparation of this book, and would like to see the conversations this book will stimulate.

Jonathan Spence, DL
Pro Grand Master



Chapter One

The Council for Freemasonry



The Council for Freemasonry

One family, several orders

Four Grand Lodges practise Freemasonry in Great Britain. Two of them admit men, two admit women. Three of them founded the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain in 2024, and the fourth, the Grand Lodge of Scotland, joined in 2025 by a vote of its own Grand Lodge, having sat first as an observer.

This opening chapter is about those four Grand Lodges, about the countries and jurisdictions in which they work and about what happened when they finally sat down at one table.

Freemasonry in this country has never been a single organisation. The United Grand Lodge of England is the oldest of the four bodies



and the largest. Alongside it, for well over a century, two women's Grand Lodges have practised the same Freemasonry: the Order of Women Freemasons, formed in 1908 and known by its present name since 1958, and the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons (known publicly as the Fraternity of Women Freemasons and formed in 1913). The Grand Lodge of Scotland works a tradition older than any of them.

The women's Grand Lodges are not a late addition to Freemasonry and they have not been waiting to be let in. They have been there the whole time, and what has changed is that an intentional move has been made to bring them together.

You can have men's teams and women's teams.
It is still one Club.

What was missing?

For a century the orders practised the same Freemasonry without any formal way of acting together, and that was nobody's design. What was missing was coordination on the matters the orders hold in common, and the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain was created to supply it.

The role of the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain

The Council's purpose is formally to establish an overarching forum for collaboration, bringing together the community service ambitions of all four bodies, coordinating communication and engagement with other organisations, and driving the membership growth ambitions, particularly for women Freemasons.

The Council includes the heads of each Grand Lodge, and each Grand Lodge provides the President for a 12-month period, chairing Council meetings in strict rotation. The President for the first two years came from the Order of Women Freemasons and the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons, and the Grand Master Mason of Scotland held it in 2026.

Separate, and not divided

The arrangement respects difference rather than dissolving it. Neither women's order wishes to change who it admits. Their own position is that this is Freemasonry for women in the same way that ours is for men, and they are content for both to be true. The United Grand Lodge of England supports that position, and both women's orders support ours.

A joint statement to that effect was published in June 2024 and reported in the national press. Ceremonially the four bodies remain wholly separate; socially they do not, and there are joint events and joint celebrations alongside those in the individual orders.

Women Freemasons are addressed as brothers, because the word belongs to the fraternity rather than to the men in it. They do not regard what they practise as a variant of anything.

Why it changes the conversation

The formation of the Council provides an additional platform from which to showcase the women's orders as integral to the overall Freemasonry family. As a result there is more opportunity to raise awareness of the women's orders, which supports the recruitment of new members while also reinforcing the inclusive values of Freemasonry.

The Council also lets the four speak with one voice on significant issues that impact Freemasonry across the UK. For example, during the consultation in 2025 surrounding our members and the Metropolitan Police Service and the national conversation that followed, we were able to speak as one national institution.

Four Grand Lodges saying the same thing at once is harder to ignore than one.

The same values, kept separately

The wider family of Freemasonry in Great Britain is larger, older and more varied than the public believes, and for the first time in its history it is describing itself with one voice.

The bodies that make up the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain

In addition to the United Grand Lodge of England, the constituent Grand Lodges are:



The Order of Women Freemasons

Constitutionally the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry

Founded 20 June 1908
Grand Master Jean Michele Knight
Headquarters 27 Pembridge Gardens, London
Joined the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain as a founder member in 2024

The Order was formed in 1908 by Freemasons who wished to practise Freemasonry on the same lines as the United Grand Lodge of England. Its first Grand Master was a man, the Reverend Doctor William Frederick Cobb; every Grand Master since 1912 has been a woman. Men ceased to be admitted in the early 1920s and the Order has been entirely female since 1935. It added the words Order of Women Freemasons to its title in 1958, to avoid confusion with the younger order, and that is the name it is known by today.

owf.org.uk

The Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons

Known publicly as the Fraternity of Women Freemasons

Founded 27 November 1913
Grand Master Carol Cole
Headquarters 23a Great Queen Street, London
Joined the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain as a founder member in 2024

The Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons was formed in 1913 by members of the older order who wished to participate in the Royal Arch and could not obtain authority to do so. Its first Grand Master was Mrs Elizabeth Boswell-Reid, who held the office for 20 years and was succeeded by her daughter. Its first three lodges were named Stability, Wisdom and Strength.

hfaf.org

The Grand Lodge of Scotland

Constitutionally the Grand Lodge of Antient Free and Accepted Masons of Scotland

Founded 30 November 1736
Grand Master Mason Alexander C.G. Moncrieff
Headquarters Freemasons' Hall, 96 George Street, Edinburgh
Joined the Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain in 2025

The Grand Lodge of Scotland is one of the oldest in the world, and the lodges beneath it are older still: the earliest minutes it holds begin in 1598, more than a century before any Grand Lodge existed anywhere. About a third of Scotland's lodges were represented at its founding meeting in Edinburgh, and the lodges that pre-dated it kept their own procedures, regalia and forms of ceremony, which they hold to this day. It is led by a Grand Master Mason, and its decisions are taken by Grand Lodge assembled, up to 600 members at a time, on the recommendation of a Governance and Strategy Board created in 2023. Its lodges are organised in 32 Provinces in Scotland and 27 Districts overseas, with Superintendencies where the lodges are fewer. Its own strategic priorities are to place membership at the heart of Scottish Freemasonry, to grow Scottish Freemasonry, and to create inspiring communication and engagement.

grandlodgescotland.com

Chapter Two

Our beginnings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Our beginnings

Freemasonry has its origins in the medieval system of craft guilds, many of which (the London Livery Companies, for example) survived as clubs or charitable organisations as their original practical purpose was superseded. What made the forms and symbols of the stonemasons' guilds especially conducive to the development of elaborate ceremonies in addition is impossible to say for sure. But the central theme of building offers a powerful and familiar metaphor for creation and for individual and social improvement, captured in the double meaning of the word edification. So perhaps it was natural for people involved in debates about the future of society in the explosive light of revolutions in political and scientific thought in the 17th and 18th centuries to think of themselves as builders of a sort, and to adopt the conceit of the Freemasons' lodge for their gatherings.

Freemasonry is unusual, and that is deliberate. The unusual part is what makes it work.

It was natural, too, that there should be widespread disagreement between these various groups about what it was, exactly, that they wanted to build. Many saw the need to rebuild society in the light of knowledge furnished by research in the new sciences: a number of founding members of the Royal Society were Freemasons. Others (mindful perhaps of the psalmist's warning: "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it", Ps. 127:1) insisted that religion

was the only sure foundation for social progress. Each advocated for an interpretation of the imagery of Freemasonry that suited their purpose. The scripting of these ceremonies itself became a way of having these debates.

In time, in England, individual lodges formed alliances under 'Grand Lodges'. The first was formed in London in 1717; a second emerged in 1751. These amalgamated in 1813, the Union, to create the present United Grand Lodge of England. But this move to unification demanded a unified line on what 'Freemasonry' should stand for.

The lodges already had an agreed structure: Constitutions adopted in 1723 set down what Freemasons were to be. They gave the qualifications for membership, the duties a member owed to their lodge and to the civil authority and the rule that religion and politics stay outside the room. These are the foundation document of the organisation and they are still the basis of the Book of Constitutions a lodge adheres to today.

What they lacked was a common purpose. So one of the first acts of the new United Grand Lodge was to commission a single form of ceremony expressing a purpose all could agree on. Inspired by the work of the prominent Freemason and author William Preston, it sought this consensus in the widely accepted and time-tested ethical framework of Aristotle, which Freemasons today summarise as a commitment to brotherly love, relief and truth.

The agreed form of ceremony was settled in the years after the Union. Everything worked in an English lodge today descends from that

decision. What went into it was deliberately philosophical rather than doctrinal: an account of what human happiness consists of, and of what a society might be if its members took their obligations to one another seriously.

Our ceremonies are not performances. Ceremony has a place in every life, from a coronation to a two-minute silence, and ours is where Freemasons think about how to conduct their lives well.

These values remain core to our organisation to this day, and in a time of increasingly polarised public discourse, the power and appeal of this commitment has arguably never been greater.

Freemasonry asks two things of its members: look after yourself, and look after other people.

Two things followed from that settlement. The first is that the purposes of Freemasonry agreed then were framed as duties rather than beliefs, which is why Freemasonry has never asked a member what they believe beyond a single question, whether they believe in a supreme being. The second is that they were written to be practised rather than admired. Brotherly love, relief and truth describe things a member is expected to practise, especially where nobody is watching.

King Solomon's Temple, and its use as allegory

The ceremonies take their imagery from the building of King Solomon's Temple, and a reader meeting that for the first time usually wants to know why. The answer is that it was the one story available to everybody

in the room. In those days, a gathering that held Christians of every denomination, Jews and men of no settled denomination needed a common frame of reference, and the Temple was known to all of them without belonging to any one of them. It also did the work the argument required. The debate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was whether society should be rebuilt on religious foundations or on the new sciences, and an allegory about building together let both sides use the same vocabulary. The Temple is not a doctrine. It is the ground on which a disagreement could be conducted civilly, which is why it has lasted.

Signs and tokens, and why they survive

The grip (colloquially referred to as 'the Masonic handshake') and other tokens of Freemasonry's ceremonial belong to the same period and have a plainer explanation than the one usually offered for them. Several of the ideas discussed in early lodges were revolutionary for their time, and if a member visited a lodge where nobody knew them, then the members of that lodge needed some way of satisfying themselves that the person in front of them was who they said they were. The grip and token were a way to establish recognition and trust. The old stonemasons' trade had such methods already, and Freemasonry adopted them. Later, as English Freemasonry became closely associated with established society, the practical need for these methods of identification declined. What remains is a link with the past, used only in ceremonial and not to be used outside the lodge room.

Equal in the room

The settlement had one further consequence, and it is the one most easily missed. For most of the eighteenth century there were very few rooms in England where a person's religion, their politics, their trade



and their income did not decide where they sat and what they were permitted to say. A lodge was one such place. People of different faiths, different nationalities, different occupations and very different means met on terms the lodge itself set, and the ceremonies said plainly that none of those distinctions travelled through the door. That was an unusual thing to build in 1723 and it remains the cornerstone of the organisation. A business leader of 60 and a 21-year-old university student can sit in the same lodge, and if they cannot meet each other as equals then neither of them belongs there. Everything in the chapters that follow rests on that.

Freemasonry is one of the few places where people who would disagree about almost everything still meet as equals.

300 years, in brief

1717 On St John's Day, 24 June, four London lodges that have existed for some time meet at the Goose and Gridiron ale-house in St Paul's Churchyard, declare themselves a Grand Lodge and elect Anthony Sayer as their first Grand Master. It is the first Grand Lodge in the world, and the origin of the United Grand Lodge of England.

1723 The Grand Lodge publishes its first book of Constitutions, setting out who may join, what a member owes to their lodge and to the civil authority and the rule that religion and politics stay outside the room. Its meetings are minuted from this year, and the Constitutions remain the basis of the rules lodges follow today.

1736 The Grand Lodge of Scotland is founded in Edinburgh.

1751 Scottish and Irish Freemasons in London form a second Grand Lodge with different practices, calling themselves the 'Antients' and the original Grand Lodge the 'Moderns'. The two exist side by side, at home and abroad, neither recognising the other as regular.

1813 → After 62 years apart, the two Grand Lodges unite on 27 December to form the United Grand Lodge of England. The Union brings a single form of ceremony, procedure and regalia.

1908 → The Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry, today the Order of Women Freemasons, is formed.

1913 → The Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons is formed.

1914 → 1914–18, The First World War. Heavy losses, and a shock that changes what the organisation is.

1920s → Both women's orders cease to admit men. The Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons is wholly female from 1933 and the Order of Women Freemasons from 1935.

1933 → The Masonic Peace Memorial opens at Great Queen Street, in memory of the members who lost their lives in the First World War.

1939 → 1939–45, Freemasonry is proscribed as an enemy of the state by fascist dictatorships across occupied Europe. The organisation here turns inward.

1945 → 1945–60, Men returning from the war join in large numbers, wanting companionship and a structure to contribute through.

1958 → The Order of Women Freemasons takes its present name.

1967 → HRH The Duke of Kent becomes Grand Master, succeeding the Earl of Scarbrough.

2017 → The tercentenary is celebrated throughout the year, culminating in a special meeting of Grand Lodge at the Royal Albert Hall, presided over by the Grand Master, HRH The Duke of Kent, and attended by representatives of sovereign Grand Lodges from around the world.

2024 → The Council for Freemasonry is established, under the presidency of Zuzanka Penn, Grand Master of the Order of Women Freemasons.

2025 → The Grand Lodge of Scotland joins, expanding the Council still further across Great Britain.



Chapter Three

The ethical underpinning of Freemasonry



The ethical underpinning of Freemasonry

One question, asked once

Freemasonry asks a person who wishes to join whether they believe in a supreme being. It does not ask what they call it, how they worship, whether they attend anywhere or what they believe about anything else. The question comes once and never comes again. In a lodge there are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and members whose belief has no denomination at all, and the ceremonies let each of them mean what they say. Whilst belief is a core part of Freemasonry, it is a secular organisation that is not and does not purport to be a religion.

That single requirement is the part of Freemasonry hardest to explain to a modern reader. It was introduced so that meetings would not be exclusionary on the basis of any particular religion, while keeping the commitments members make in their obligations directed to a higher power beyond themselves, and we have inherited that commitment today. A Freemason gives their word, and somebody who acknowledges nothing greater than themselves gives their word to nobody. It is not a test of faith and nobody has ever used it as one.

Freemasonry is not a religion, and is not a substitute for one

It has no theology, no clergy, no sacraments and nothing to say about salvation. It does not compete with a church, a synagogue, a mosque or a temple, and it has never asked anybody to choose. A devout member finds nothing that contradicts their faith, and a member whose belief is quieter finds nothing that interrogates it.

Freemasonry is a secular organisation, it is neither a religion nor a substitute for a religion.

The distinction matters more than it appears. Religion is denominational by nature. It does some of what Freemasonry does socially, and does it within a particular set of divisions. Freemasonry works the other way round. It is one of the few places where people of different faiths sit together, take the same obligations, and nobody asks them to reconcile their differences, because they leave the differences outside on purpose.

Why faith stays outside the conversation

Lodges have kept two subjects out of the conversation for three centuries, which are religion and politics. Read quickly, the rule looks evasive. Read properly, it is the mechanism that makes everything else possible.

Religion and politics have stayed outside the lodge for 300 years, so that everything else can happen inside it.

A lodge is one of very few rooms left in this country where nobody will ask a person how they voted or what they believe. Nobody has to defend a position, and nobody arrives braced for an argument. That is not squeamishness. It is a decision, taken early and kept since, that the room is for what its members hold in common rather than what divides them. It is why an 18-year-old and an 80-year-old can sit either side of the same person and all three have a good evening.



Chapter Four

What happens when Freemasons meet?



What happens when Freemasons meet?

What the ceremonies are for

A lodge meeting divides roughly in half. The first part is ceremony and the second is dinner, and members will tell you that to enjoy Freemasonry you need both and need to understand what each is for. Freemasonry is a community with ceremonial traditions, and those traditions are a great deal of what makes its culture distinct. They are not a performance, and the point of them was never the performance. It is the message beneath them that matters.

The ceremonies should be delivered from memory, for the benefit of the candidate(s). The strength of a good lodge lies in not just how well it performs them, but how it also supports its members delivering something many of them may find challenging. By dividing the ceremony between several members, rehearsing it together beforehand and sitting down one-to-one with whoever is most unsure, this challenge is overcome. It is in those moments when friendships are formed and support is most visible. It is not only the outcome that matters but the process of getting there. Ceremonial is meant to benefit the candidate and the members delivering it alike, and it is a continuous process of learning, whether somebody is hearing it, delivering it or helping another member to do so.

It also follows that doing the ceremonies well is not how members are judged. Somebody may struggle with learning the words and yet be an excellent treasurer. Another may never be comfortable delivering a

ceremony and be the best secretary a lodge has had in 20 years, or the almoner who puts their arm around a brother in a time of need. What is asked is that a member contributes. Where and what they contribute is for them and their lodge to settle between them.

The ceremonies are not a performance.
They are how a lodge teaches its members to
carry something on somebody else's behalf.

The four ceremonies

Pure Antient Masonry, as practised by the United Grand Lodge of England, consists of four ceremonies: Initiation (First Degree), Passing (Second Degree), Raising (Third Degree) and Exaltation into the Royal Arch. Below is a brief summary of each.

Learn something by heart, rehearse it,
then stand up and deliver it.
Not much in adult life asks that of you.

When a person is initiated into Freemasonry, they complete the First Degree and become an Entered Apprentice. The First Degree ceremony reminds us that all are equal, and that it is the responsibility of those who do well to look after those less fortunate.

Upon completion of the Second Degree, a member becomes a Fellow Craft. This encourages members to better themselves through education and focuses on self-development.

After this, the member will then undertake the Third Degree. This

ceremony teaches them how to use their life wisely, and to contemplate their own mortality, so that they are remembered for the right reasons. On completion, they become a Master Mason.

The Ceremony of Exaltation sees members follow the story begun in the Third Degree to complete what Freemasons call Pure Antient Masonry, in a spectacular and unforgettable ceremony. Through ongoing participation, members will work together with old friends and new Companions, as Royal Arch members are known, to build on the principles of the Craft, and unlock fresh perspectives on the meaning and value of Freemasonry.

Members move through the offices of a lodge, each one carrying more to learn and more to organise on other people's behalf, and the year as Master of a lodge is the point of it for many. The Master runs the lodge for 12 months. It is responsibility rather than rank, and members are told early and often that none of it is for personal gain.



After the meeting

After the ceremony, everybody eats together. The Festive Board is often a formal dinner with toasts, a few speeches and a charitable collection. It is also where the friendships made in the lodge are reinforced. After the formal part of the evening has ended it is common for many members to share a drink or two and continue to enjoy each other's company.

These events are not restricted to just members, and are often used as an opportunity by lodges to include family and friends, or introduce potential new joiners. These are complemented by regular social events organised by many lodges throughout the year.

The experience is the same
whether you belong to the lodge
or have walked in from 200 miles away.

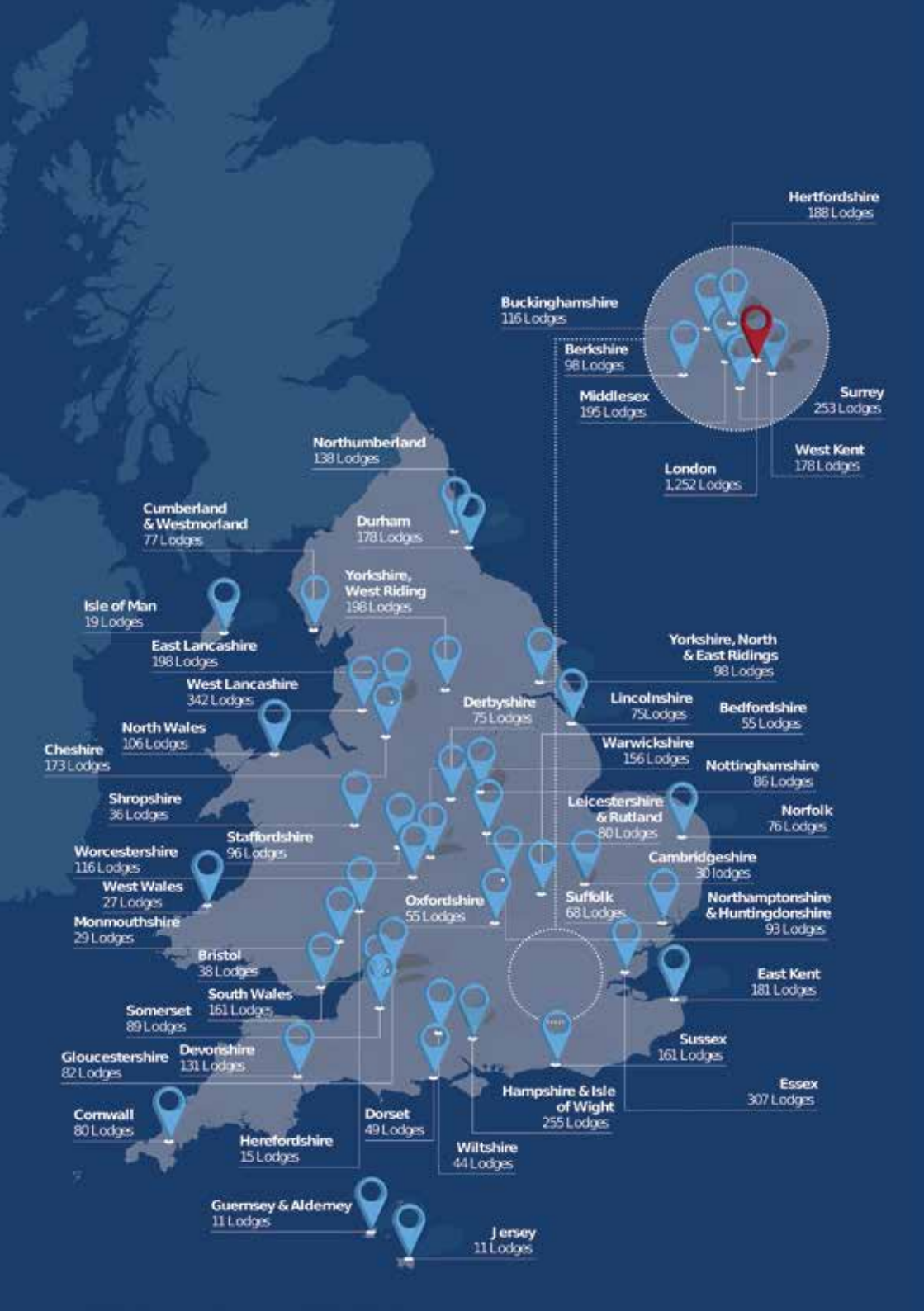
Visiting

A key part of being a Freemason is the opportunity to visit other lodges. The experience should be the same for a visitor as for any lodge member. Any Freemason who attends a lodge meeting anywhere in the country can find the bar, and somebody will come over and introduce themselves. A Freemason working away from home can find a lodge meeting that evening, be given a seat, be fed and drawn into friendly conversation by people who have never met them before.



Chapter Five

Structure and governance


Hertfordshire
188 Lodges
Buckinghamshire
116 Lodges
Berkshire
98 Lodges
Middlesex
195 Lodges
Surrey
253 Lodges
West Kent
178 Lodges
London
1,252 Lodges
Northumberland
138 Lodges
Cumberland
& Westmorland
77 Lodges
Durham
178 Lodges
Yorkshire,
West Riding
198 Lodges
Isle of Man
19 Lodges
East Lancashire
198 Lodges
Yorkshire, North
& East Ridings
98 Lodges
West Lancashire
342 Lodges
Derbyshire
75 Lodges
Lincolnshire
75Lodges
Bedfordshire
55 Lodges
North Wales
106 Lodges
Cheshire
173 Lodges
Warwickshire
156 Lodges
Nottinghamshire
86 Lodges
Shropshire
36 Lodges
Leicestershire
& Rutland
80 Lodges
Norfolk
76 Lodges
Staffordshire
96 Lodges
Worcestershire
116 Lodges
Cambridgeshire
30 lodges
West Wales
27 Lodges
Oxfordshire
55 Lodges
Suffolk
68 Lodges
Northamptonshire
& Huntingdonshire
93 Lodges
Monmouthshire
29 Lodges
Bristol
38 Lodges
East Kent
181 Lodges
South Wales
161 Lodges
Somerset
89 Lodges
Sussex
161 Lodges
Gloucestershire
82 Lodges
Devonshire
131 Lodges
Essex
307 Lodges
Hampshire & Isle
of Wight
255 Lodges
Cornwall
80 Lodges
Dorset
49 Lodges
Herefordshire
15 Lodges
Wiltshire
44 Lodges
Guernsey & Alderney
11 Lodges
Jersey
11 Lodges

Structure and governance

From the outside, Freemasonry can appear to have a bewildering hierarchy. There are Grand Lodges, Metropolitan and Provincial Grand Lodges, Districts, Worshipful Masters, Grand Officers, Metropolitan and Provincial Grand Officers, and an assortment of titles that can sound decidedly grand. The reality is both more ordinary and more interesting.

Freemasonry was not designed from the top down. It grew from the bottom up.

The basic unit of Freemasonry is the lodge. It is the lodge that a Freemason actually joins, and for most members it is where their experience of Freemasonry begins and remains centred. Each warranted lodge has its own name and number, elects or appoints its own officers, manages its own finances and develops its own character and traditions.

The lodge is what a Freemason joins.
Everything above it exists to support the lodge.

A lodge is led by its Worshipful Master, elected by its members and normally serving for a year. "Worshipful" can sound peculiar to modern ears, but it is simply an old English term meaning worthy of respect, still encountered elsewhere in civic life. Alongside the Master there are officers whose jobs would be recognisable in almost any voluntary



organisation: a Secretary keeps the records, a Treasurer looks after the finances and an Almoner keeps in touch with members and their families during illness, bereavement or hardship. Other officers have particular ceremonial or administrative responsibilities.

Some lodge offices are progressive, allowing members gradually to gain experience before potentially serving as Master. Others are filled according to the needs and wishes of the lodge. The purpose is not to create a ladder of power but to share responsibility and give members experience of leadership, organisation and service.

From the lodge upwards

Individual lodges are supported by a regional structure. England and

Wales is divided into Provinces, broadly corresponding to historic counties. London, because of its size, is administered by Metropolitan Grand Lodge. Overseas lodges under the United Grand Lodge of England are organised principally into Districts.

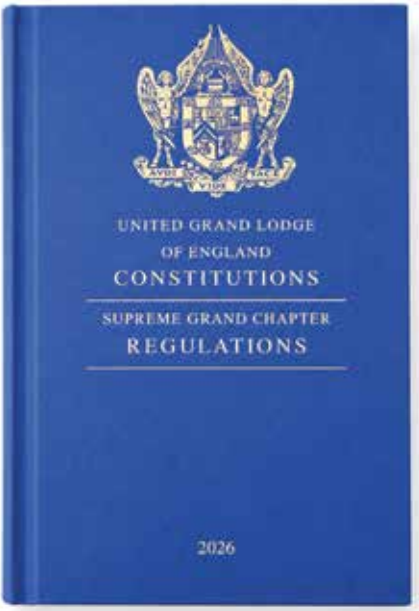
Above these sits the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE), the governing body for the Freemasonry described in this book. The present UGLE was formed in 1813 when two earlier English Grand Lodges united, although organised Grand Lodge Freemasonry in England dates back to 1717.

At its head is the Grand Master, supported by the Pro Grand Master and other senior officers, known as rulers. The Grand Secretary is the organisation's senior executive officer and leads its professional staff.

Governance also includes the Board of General Purposes, whose elected members oversee much of the standing business of Grand Lodge between its formal meetings.

But this is not a corporate pyramid in which everybody towards the top can give orders to everybody below. Considerable autonomy remains with individual lodges. Grand and Provincial ranks recognise service a member has already given, and the Grand Master is careful to say that they look forward as well, to the service still to come. Neither gives its holder the right to walk into a lodge and start running it.

That distinction matters. The structure exists primarily to support and regulate lodges rather than to manage their affairs.



Rules, accountability and checks and balances

For an organisation sometimes portrayed as mysterious, the machinery of Freemasonry is remarkably conventional.

Its rules are set out in the Book of Constitutions, which explains how lodges are formed and governed, the responsibilities of their officers, how rules may be changed and what happens when standards of conduct are breached.

Financial accountability begins at lodge level. A Treasurer does not simply produce a set of figures and ask members to take them on trust. Lodge accounts are examined by other members before being presented for approval, and there are further reporting requirements within the wider structure of the organisation.

At national level, UGLE publishes accounts, membership information and the names of those holding senior office. Changes to the rules are considered at Quarterly Communication, the formal meeting of Grand Lodge held four times a year. Proposals can be put before the meeting, debated and voted upon.

In other words, beneath some unusual titles lies something quite familiar: constitutions, elections, minutes, accounts, audits, committees, votes and defined responsibilities.

Indeed, Freemasonry is in many respects more formally governed than numerous clubs, associations and voluntary organisations of comparable size.

Membership is not immunity.
Members can be expelled
and rank can be taken away.

What happens when things go wrong?

Good governance also means having a way of dealing with people who fail to meet the standards expected of them. Freemasonry has a formal disciplinary system. Membership does not provide immunity from consequences; quite the opposite. Members can be suspended or expelled for misconduct within Freemasonry, or civil or criminal misconduct, and honours or rank can be removed. There are procedures for hearing cases and mechanisms for appeal and clemency.

Membership carries obligations freely adopted. Freemasonry talks a great deal about integrity, fairness and personal responsibility. Those

ideas mean little unless an organisation is prepared to act when a member falls seriously short of them. And Freemasonry does act.

Open to scrutiny

There is a broader point here about transparency, which the organisation now treats as a priority.

An organisation seeking to hide itself would not publish its constitution, accounts, senior office-holders and rules. Nor would it hold public open days, maintain a public museum and library in the heart of London or allow its ceremonies to have been available in printed books for generations. Freemasonry does all of those things.

Certain details of ceremonies are traditionally kept private. That preserves the experience for somebody encountering them for the first time, but does not conceal how the organisation is governed.

Nothing about how Freemasonry is governed is hidden. The constitution, the accounts and the rules are all published.

Nor is Freemasonry a single worldwide organisation controlled from London. Grand Lodges around the world are independent. UGLE governs its own jurisdiction and recognises other Grand Lodges with which it shares established principles.

There are also a number of associated organisations within England and Wales, the companion orders, of which membership of the United Grand Lodge of England is a requirement. They are many and varied, and this

book does not go into them. The Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons, whose Grand Master is Prince Michael of Kent, is one such example.

The result is an overall organisation that is certainly traditional and occasionally complicated, but much less mysterious than its terminology can make it appear.

At heart, its governance rests on a straightforward principle: lodges govern themselves within a common framework of rules, regional organisations support them, and Grand Lodge maintains the standards that allow thousands of individual lodges to remain part of one coherent institution.

The aprons worn by members and titles conferred on individuals may be distinctive. The underlying principles (elected officers, accountable finances, published rules, collective decision-making and consequences when standards are breached) are not.

The United Grand Lodge of England overseas

Freemasonry under this Grand Lodge is not confined to England and Wales. 32 District Grand Lodges and a number of groups work overseas, from the Caribbean to West Africa, and from the Indian sub-continent to the Far East.

Between them they hold 696 lodges, 313 chapters and nearly 20,000 of our members. A District is organised much as a Province is at home, with its own District Grand Master, its own officers and a good deal of its own character, all proudly under the banner of the United Grand Lodge of England.

This Grand Lodge is not responsible for other Freemasons, and the distinction matters. There are millions of Freemasons worldwide, Grand Lodges are sovereign in their own jurisdictions and the common factor between them is recognition rather than control. We recognise a Grand Lodge where it holds the principles we hold, which is what allows a member of one to visit the other and be received as a brother. Where those principles are not held there is no recognition. Where a Grand Lodge we have recognised departs from them, that recognition can be suspended or withdrawn, and it has been. The mechanism exists so that the association means something.

Freemasonry and the Armed Forces

Freemasonry has long shared a close and enduring relationship with the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom. Throughout its history, generations of Freemasons have served with distinction in the Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force, while countless others have continued their commitment to public service as Reservists, Cadet Force Adult Volunteers (CFAVs) and leaders within their local communities. This shared ethos of duty, integrity and service naturally aligns with the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant and has become an increasingly important part of Freemasonry's wider social impact.

UGLE's Armed Forces Committee, which coordinates that support, benefits from representation from the Council for Freemasonry. This provides an important opportunity to share experience, coordinate activity and develop a more united Masonic contribution to the Armed Forces community across the United Kingdom.

Freemasons' Hall in London's Covent Garden stands as a lasting

testament to Freemasonry's connection with the Armed Forces. Built between 1927 and 1933, the present building was originally known as the Masonic Peace Memorial, commemorating the more than 3,000 Freemasons who lost their lives in the First World War. Funded by donations from Freemasons, it remains a powerful symbol of remembrance, service and sacrifice. This historic connection continues today through Freemasonry's support for serving personnel, veterans and their families, reflecting a shared commitment to duty, camaraderie and service to others.



Chapter Six

Brotherhood and benevolence



Brotherhood, benevolence and putting others first

Brotherly love and relief reflect the friendship we share and the care we show for the welfare of our members and their families. We do not look after each other's interests; we look after each other. The distinction matters.

The friendships formed through Freemasonry can become some of the strongest and most enduring of our lives. Like any true friendship, they are built on mutual respect, shared experiences and a genuine concern for one another, never an expectation of preferential treatment, commercial advantage, influence or personal advancement.

The friendship matters more than the membership alone.

Brotherhood is not a promise that another Freemason will advance your interests. It is a promise that, when life becomes difficult, you should not have to face it alone. That is brotherly love in practice.

It is found in the telephone call to someone we have not seen for a while. Taking time to listen when somebody is struggling. Visiting a brother who is unwell. Supporting a family through bereavement. Sometimes it is simply recognising that somebody is no longer themselves and asking whether everything is all right.

Some of the most meaningful acts of brotherly love cost nothing at all.

Perhaps nowhere is this spirit of care more evident than in the role of lodge almoner. Quietly and often without recognition, almoners keep in touch with members who may need support, check on those who are unwell or absent and help identify where practical or financial assistance may be needed.

That care does not necessarily end with the member. It extends to families and the widows of departed members, maintaining friendships built over many years. A telephone call, card, visit or invitation to remain part of the wider family of Freemasonry may seem a small gesture, but it says something important: our concern for people does not simply disappear when circumstances change.



There is something equally important about the place of older members within Freemasonry. In a society where advancing age can sometimes bring isolation, Freemasonry remains a place where experience is valued, friendship endures and people continue to matter. Whether celebrating 50, 60 or 70 years of membership, visiting someone no longer able to attend their lodge or simply sitting together sharing memories, every brother remains part of our story.

Brotherly love is the principle. Relief is that principle put into action. Relief may on occasion involve financial assistance, but more often it is human: practical help, emotional support, friendship through illness or bereavement or simply being there during a difficult period of life.

There should be boundaries. Freemasonry is not an insurance or welfare policy, and membership does not create an automatic entitlement to financial support. Resources must be directed responsibly towards genuine need. But rules alone cannot define compassion. Good almoners and good leadership understand the individual behind the circumstances and recognise when an exceptional situation may require an exceptional response.

In most of life, getting older
means mattering less. Not here.

One of the most powerful lessons about relief occurs at the very beginning of a Freemason's journey. During initiation, a candidate is invited to contribute to charity.

For a brief moment, the roles are reversed. Before they are able to help anybody, they are shown what it means to be in need of help. The person able to help today may be the person who needs help tomorrow.

It is a simple but powerful lesson in empathy, connecting our ceremonies with real life and reminding us that understanding need is the beginning of genuine benevolence.

That responsibility also reaches beyond our lodge rooms. Through volunteering, charitable partnerships and practical service, Freemasons support people and communities from whom they expect absolutely nothing in return. Brotherly love may begin with the relationships between members, but the instinct to care for others should never stop there.

Membership is not a promise
that anyone will advance your interests.
It is a promise that you will not face the hard years
on your own.

A Freemason does not expect a fellow Freemason to favour their business, secure them a job or influence a decision. Our values of integrity, friendship, respect and service demand fairness in our dealings with everyone.

We do not look after each other's interests. We look after each other.



Chapter Seven

Service in our communities



Service in our communities

Freemasonry has a habit of answering the question about service with a number. The number is large and it is real, but leading with it is still a mistake. Asked in 2026 which contributions were most valuable to a community, the public put direct financial grants sixth. Support for elderly and vulnerable people came first, then mental health and loneliness, medical research, help for young people and members giving professional expertise. What people want is presence rather than a cheque.

Begin where the work happens, and begin with how the need is found. Lodges and Provinces work with the bodies that already know what a community is short of, which is usually a hospital trust, an ambulance service, a school or a council, and the ask comes from them rather than from us. In Gloucestershire that meant imaging equipment for three NHS hospitals, 16 units of it, delivered inside 18 months of a planned 24. In North Wales it meant a response vehicle for the ambulance co-responders at RAF Valley. Elsewhere it has meant a playground put back into use, a community centre renovated or members giving for free the trade they practise for a living. None of it began in a committee. Each began with somebody deciding that something near them needed doing.

Sometimes money is exactly what is required and speed is the only thing that matters. After the Manchester Arena bombing, Freemasons in East Lancashire moved funds within a day to the organisations providing

immediate relief to victims and their families. The money mattered there because somebody had already worked out who could use it that morning.

Time, skills and a building

Service is one of Freemasonry's four values, and the word was chosen deliberately in place of charity. Charity describes money. Service describes time, skills and willingness, and it is the more demanding of the two. Members who give an evening a month to a local group give something they cannot get back.

The buildings matter here too. A Freemasons' centre sits in the middle of a town, is usually in use for a fraction of the week, and belongs to people who live nearby. Centres around the country now host CPR training, teas for older residents, school events and civic meetings, hired at cost. A centre used this way stops being a private facility and becomes what it should have been all along, which is a room the town can borrow.

Why it is invisible

When told that Freemasons contribute around £50m a year to charitable causes, 59% of the public said they had no idea, and that figure rose among those who were sceptical of the Freemasons already. That is a striking gap in public recognition, and the temptation it creates is to correct it loudly. The evidence says loudness is not appropriate. Announcing generosity invites the question of motive, and the question of motive is already being asked.

But Freemasonry is not asking for anything. Freemasonry brings people together because we think that is our place, we can do it, and we should

do it, and so we do. There is nothing to argue with in that, which is precisely why it works.

How the money actually moves

Most giving starts in a lodge. Members put money in over years rather than in one gesture, often through a relief chest, the lodge's own charitable fund, and Provinces run festivals, multi-year appeals that build a fund before it is handed on. It is unglamorous and it is why the totals are large. Nobody is asked for a great deal. Everybody is asked regularly.

Lodges are told what their money did and which local group it reached. Some of it comes back. Freemasons give readily and ask reluctantly, so a member in difficulty often goes to the Province rather than tell their own lodge, and the approach is held in confidence.

Service is one of our four values, not the last of them. Charity describes money. Service describes time and skill, which are harder to give.

The things that are not money

The most valuable contributions members make are frequently the ones that never appear in an account. A solicitor gives an evening to a community group that cannot afford advice. A retired nurse runs a first aid session. Members drive people to hospital appointments, sit with the recently widowed and turn up with a van when a charity needs one.

The public ranks exactly this kind of help above cash, and members are already doing it. What has been missing is any account of it.

More than 160,000 people, many of them with a working life behind them, represent a great deal of expertise sitting in rooms one evening a month, and the organisation has barely begun to think of that as an asset.

What we should say, and how

So here we describe rather than assert. Name the hospital, the equipment and the town, and let the reader do the arithmetic. An organisation confident about what it does has no need to grade its own performance, and takes its assurance from the practical results of its efforts.




ROYAL
NAVY







& South Essex Hospitals CHARITY


DR KATHRYN
16






Masonic Trout & Salmon Fishing Club
MTSFC


London Freemaso



Chapter Eight

Why Freemasonry matters today:

For the individual



Why Freemasonry matters today: For the individual

After exploring Freemasonry from so many different perspectives in this narrative, we return ultimately to the place where its meaning is most personal: the individual.

For all its history, ceremony and tradition, Freemasonry is experienced by one member at a time. Every Freemason brings with them a different background, different experiences and different expectations. Each will therefore have their own answer to the question of why Freemasonry matters.

Some will speak immediately of friendship. Others will point to confidence, belonging, tradition or a sense of purpose. That is perhaps because the particular strength of Freemasonry lies not in one benefit, but in the combination of everything it offers. That combination has particular relevance to modern life.

Face to face

We live in an age in which it has never been easier to communicate, yet meaningful human connection can sometimes be harder to find. Lives can become fragmented between work, home, responsibilities and screens. Loneliness does not necessarily mean being physically alone, and anxiety and uncertainty can exist even within outwardly busy and successful lives.

Freemasonry cannot solve those problems, and nor should it claim to. But it can be part of the solution, because it does provide something increasingly valuable: regular, face-to-face human connection and a genuine sense of belonging.

Friendships that last

At the heart of that are friendships. Freemasonry brings together people whose paths might otherwise never have crossed. Differences in age, occupation, background and experience become less important than the shared experience of membership. Acquaintances become friends and, over the years, some of those friendships become among the most enduring of our lives.

It is not a formal system, but something more instinctive. Members notice when somebody is absent. They make the telephone call, send the message or arrange the visit. They celebrate one another's successes and provide companionship when life becomes difficult. During bereavement, retirement, illness, redundancy or simply a difficult period, the knowledge that other people have noticed, and care, can be enormously important.

Members notice when somebody is absent. They make the telephone call, send the message or arrange the visit.

Personal development

Freemasonry also provides opportunities for personal development, often in ways that members might never have anticipated when they first joined.



Someone who would never have considered themselves a public speaker can find themselves confidently addressing a room. Someone with little experience of leadership can take responsibility for a lodge. Members learn, organise, mentor and work alongside people of different ages, professions and experiences. Confidence grows through participation and responsibility, frequently without the individual quite realising how much they have changed.

A shared sense of purpose

Underpinning all of this is a shared sense of purpose.

The principles explored throughout this book are not intended to remain within the lodge room. They invite the individual to reflect on their own character: how they treat others, how they respond to

adversity, what responsibilities they have to those around them and, ultimately, what kind of person they want to be.

Freemasonry does not suggest that membership automatically makes someone a better person. It offers something more realistic: a framework within which a person can continually try to become one.

Why the individual experience matters

And perhaps, as we reach the end of our exploration of contemporary Freemasonry, that is why the individual experience matters so much.

Friendship can be found elsewhere. So can personal development, companionship, tradition and purpose. Freemasonry claims no monopoly on any of them. Its strength is that it brings them together, within a shared experience that can accompany a person throughout their life.

Ask Freemasons why they joined
and their answers will vary.
Ask why they stayed, and the answers
become much more personal.

And when thousands of individuals carry those friendships, principles and sense of responsibility beyond the lodge room, the question naturally becomes a wider one: why does Freemasonry matter not only to the individual, but to society?



Chapter Nine

Why Freemasonry matters today:

Our place in society



Why Freemasonry matters today: Our place in society

Freemasonry from its very foundation was designed as a model to benefit society. It is engrained in our very Constitutions, which were adopted as the model for both the first French Republic and the Constitution of the United States of America.

The Antient Charges

At the beginning of the Book of Constitutions are the Antient Charges & Regulations to be entered into by the Master of any lodge, the first four of which are:

"*You agree to be a good Man and true, and strictly to obey the moral law*"

"*You are to be a peaceable Subject, and cheerfully to conform to the laws of the country in which you reside*"

"*You promise not to be concerned in plots or Conspiracies against Government, but patiently to submit to the decisions of the Supreme Legislature*"

"*You agree to pay a proper respect to the Civil Magistrate, to work diligently, live creditably, and act honourably by all Men*"

These Charges codify Freemasonry's commitment to civil society: how we expect our members to behave. Not only do they establish a baseline

of support for the law of the land, but go further to encourage them to do more, working diligently and living creditably, for the betterment of society.

They also set out the duality of Freemasonry's civic mission: through our members' constant improvement, they individually can contribute more to society, but also by bringing people together, who by their very nature are the types of individual who are broadly civic-minded, we as an organisation are able to have a bigger collective impact than the sum of our individual parts.

It gives people a reason to contribute, and somewhere to do it.

Impact at every level

This impact comes at many levels: from coordinating support for charitable activity within a lodge, to the civic contribution made to local communities by each of our 48 Provinces and 32 Districts, and finally by the national impact we have, either as UGLE or through the Freemasons' Charity. As we have set out earlier, our contributions are not just made through money, but also time and skills. Our multi-tiered structure, coupled with our national spread, allows us to be truly impactful, wherever the need is greatest.

Where we fell short

It is true that we have not always advertised this impact widely. It is also true that we have not always been as open and engaged with society as we should have been. After the Second World War, we let a culture of insularity be perceived as a culture of secrecy and self-promotion,

and it is true to say we became inward looking. Yet throughout all that time, the good works we did as an organisation continued, through our national charitable arms and the local impact of our lodges. However, that period stained the reputation of an organisation that should, and now very much does, have wider society at its heart. The Grand Master, himself a highly public figure as a member of the Royal Family, has been encouraging a policy of visibility, transparency and openness since the 1980s and, for the last 20 years, UGLE has been committed to this.

The purpose of this book

When asked "what is the purpose of this book?", the answer is simple: to be the next step in that policy of openness. To set out who we are, what we stand for and where we see our place in civil society.

But it is not just so that our lodge, Provincial or national leaders are able to stand openly and proudly beside their peers representing our organisation in its contribution to the national fabric. It is just as important for our members to be able to be open and honest about their membership with their family, friends, colleagues and even strangers.

We acknowledge that goal will take some time, but we are wholly committed to achieving it.

This book is written for members and for people who are not members, and it serves the second by serving the first. If a member can hand it to a guest or a colleague and say, read that, then it has done what it was written to do. An organisation whose members can explain it will be explained accurately by other people, and one whose members cannot

will be described by somebody else. What we ask is modest: to be seen as a natural and valued part of the life of this country, in the way any other national voluntary organisation is seen, and to be judged on what our members actually do.

> There was a time when the criticism was fair. It is not fair now, and we are still living with the consequences of the years when it was.

In increasingly divisive times, we genuinely believe it is important to have civic organisations whose members look out not just for one another, but for their friends and neighbours and even strangers they may never meet. In a simple phrase: putting others first.


Advanced
Trauma
Team
Stage 6

Glossary

How Freemasonry is organised

Lodge

The local unit into which a member is initiated. A lodge has its own name and number, its own officers, its own funds and its own character. Most members belong to one or two, and would describe that lodge rather than the organisation above it as their Freemasonry.

Province and District

A Province is a region of England and Wales, usually following the historic counties. A District is the equivalent overseas. There are 48 Provinces and 32 Districts, and each exists to support the lodges within it rather than to direct them.

Metropolitan Grand Lodge

London's equivalent of a Province, formed in 2003 and the largest of the 48. It holds 1,252 lodges and 498 Royal Arch Chapters.

United Grand Lodge of England

The governing body, formed in 1813 by the union of two earlier Grand Lodges. It keeps the rules, holds the register of members and lodges and publishes the accounts.

Quarterly Communication

The meeting of United Grand Lodge of England held four times a year. Rule changes are put there, debated and voted on.

Board of General Purposes

The body that carries out the standing work between Quarterly Communications and reports to Grand Lodge. Its members are elected.

Royal Arch and Chapter

The Royal Arch completes the journey members begin in their lodge. It meets as a chapter rather than as a lodge, and it is open to any Master Mason.

Pure Antient Masonry

A term used in English Freemasonry to describe the three degrees of Craft Freemasonry, Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, together with the ceremony of Exaltation into the Royal Arch, as established by the Articles of Union in 1813.

Companion orders

Associated organisations in England and Wales whose members must first be members of the United Grand Lodge of England. There are many of them and they are not described in this book. The Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons, whose Grand Master is Prince Michael of Kent, is one example.

The Freemasons' Charity

The national charity of the United Grand Lodge of England, funded by its members. It makes grants to charities and communities, and to Freemasons and their families in need and runs the Relief Chest Scheme through which lodges and Provinces give to charities of their own choosing

Who is who, and what the words mean

The titles explained

Grand Master

The head of the organisation. The holder is also First Grand Principal of the Supreme Grand Chapter, which governs the Royal Arch.

Pro Grand Master

Appointed to act for the Grand Master. In practice the Pro Grand Master leads the organisation day to day and speaks for it.

Grand Secretary

The senior executive officer, responsible for the running of the organisation and for its staff. Unlike the other offices described here, it is a full-time salaried position as well as a Masonic office.

Provincial Grand Master

The member who leads a Province. They are not an employee, and like almost everyone who holds an office in Freemasonry they do the job alongside their working life.

Worshipful Master

The member who leads a lodge, elected by it and serving for a year. It passes on when they stand down, and chapter five explains the word.

Officers of a lodge

A lodge appoints a secretary to keep its records, a treasurer to keep its money, a charity steward and several others. Most members hold one of these at some point.

Almoner

The officer who organises support for members and their families when something goes wrong. They are usually the reason a lodge notices illness, bereavement or hardship before anybody else does.

Grand and Provincial rank

Members who have given long service may be appointed to rank by the Grand Master or by a Provincial Grand Master. It recognises what somebody has done and carries no authority over any lodge.



What is published, and where to find it

What is on the record

The rules

The Book of Constitutions sets out, among other things, how lodges are formed and governed, how a member may be suspended or expelled and how the rules themselves are changed. It is published free online and anybody may buy a hard copy.

The accounts

The annual report carries income, expenditure and the audited accounts for the year, alongside membership figures and the names of those holding senior office.

The ceremonies

The ceremonies have been in print for well over a century and are sold openly. Nothing in this book depends on any of it being difficult to obtain.

Who holds office

The Year Book names those holding senior national office, and each Province publishes its own.

How the rules get changed

At the Quarterly Communication, four times a year.
Proposals are put, debated and voted on there.

Where to look

ugle.org.uk holds the annual reports, the Year Book and the current rules. The Museum of Freemasonry and its library at Great Queen Street are open to the public.

Freemasonry around the world

The United Grand Lodge of England

The United Grand Lodge of England: England, Wales, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, 32 Districts overseas and four Groups of lodges. That is the organisation these chapters describe.

Freemasonry elsewhere

Grand Lodges exist in most countries and they are independent of one another. There is no international body and no central authority.

What recognition means

Grand Lodges recognise one another where they hold the same principles, and a member of one may visit another after receiving appropriate permissions. Where those principles are not shared there is no recognition.

The Council for Freemasonry in Great Britain

Four Grand Lodges: the United Grand Lodge of England, the two women's Grand Lodges and the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

Freemasonry in culture

Freemasons' Hall is not only the headquarters of the United Grand Lodge of England, but also a vibrant cultural landmark in the heart of London. Its striking Art Deco architecture and magnificent interiors have made it a sought-after filming location for major film and television productions, while its impressive spaces regularly host concerts, performances and a wide range of cultural events. By opening its doors to the creative industries and wider public, Freemasons' Hall continues to play an active role in London's cultural life, bringing people together and showcasing a historic building in new and exciting ways.

What is not attempted here

This page does not describe bodies overseas that do not share these principles.



www.ugle.org.uk

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WHAT IS FREEMASONRY, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FREEMASON IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

'THE FREEMASONS' OFFERS AN ACCESSIBLE AND ENGAGING INSIGHT INTO ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST MEMBERSHIP ORGANISATIONS, EXPLORING ITS HISTORY, TRADITIONS AND VALUES, WHILE REVEALING THE IMPORTANT ROLE IT CONTINUES TO PLAY IN MODERN SOCIETY.

UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND

SUPREME GRAND CHAPTER OF ROYAL ARCH MASONS OF ENGLAND