

Freemasonry at Castle Lodge, No.6657



**A compilation of the most common questions.
By W.Bro. Ian Goolding**

Farnham Freemasonry



"In a room full of Masons there is no colour, no creed, nor religion; only masons".

What is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry is the UK's largest secular, fraternal and charitable organisation. It teaches moral lessons and self-knowledge through participation in a progression of allegorical two-part plays.

How many Freemasons are there?

Under the United Grand Lodge of England, there are 330,000 Freemasons, meeting in 8,644 lodges. There are separate Grand Lodges for Ireland (which covers north and south) and Scotland, with a combined membership of 150,000. Worldwide, there are probably 5 million members.

How and when did Freemasonry start?

It is not known. The earliest recorded 'making' of a Freemason in England is that of Elias Ashmole in 1646. Organised Freemasonry began with the founding of the Grand Lodge of England on 24 June 1717, the first Grand Lodge in the world. Ireland followed in 1725 and Scotland in 1736. All the regular Grand Lodges in the world trace themselves back to one or more of the Grand Lodges in the British Isles. There are two main theories of origin. According to one, the operative stonemasons who built the great cathedrals and castles had lodges in which they discussed trade affairs. They had simple initiation ceremonies and, as there were no City and Guilds certificates, dues cards or trade union membership cards, they adopted secret signs and words to demonstrate that they were trained masons when they moved from site to site. In the 1600s, these operative lodges began to accept non-operatives as "gentlemen masons". Gradually these non-operatives took over the lodges and turned them from operative to 'free and accepted' or 'speculative' lodges. The other theory is that in the late 1500s and early 1600s, there was a group which was interested in the promotion of religious and political tolerance in an age of great intolerance when differences of opinion on matters of religion and politics were to lead to bloody civil war. In forming Freemasonry, they were trying to make better men and build a better world. As the means of teaching in those days was by allegory and symbolism, they took the idea of building as the central allegory on which to form their system. The main source of allegory was the Bible, the contents of which were known to everyone even if they could not read, and the only building described in detail in the Bible was King Solomon's Temple, which became the basis of the ritual. The old trade guilds provided them with their basic administration

of a Master, Wardens, Treasurer and Secretary, and the operative mason's tools provided them with a wealth of symbols with which to illustrate the moral teachings of Freemasonry.

How many degrees are there in Freemasonry?

Basic Freemasonry consists of the three 'Craft' degrees (Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason) completed by the Royal Arch degree (Chapter). There are many other Masonic degrees and Orders which are called 'additional' because they add to the basis of the Craft and Royal Arch. They are not basic to Freemasonry but add to it by further expounding and illustrating the principles stated in the Craft and Royal Arch. Some of these additional degrees are numerically superior to the third degree but this does not affect the fact that they are additional to and not in any way superior to or higher than the Craft. The ranks that these additional degrees carry have no standing with the Craft or Royal Arch.

What happens at a lodge meeting?

The meeting is in two parts. As in any association there is a certain amount of administrative procedure - minutes of last meeting, proposing and balloting for new members, discussing and voting on financial matters, election of officers, news and correspondence. Then there are the ceremonies for admitting new Masons and the annual installation of the Master and appointment of officers. The three ceremonies for admitting a new Mason are in two parts - a slightly dramatic instruction in the principles and lessons taught in the Craft followed by a lecture in which the candidate's various duties are spelled out.

Isn't ritual out of place in modern society?

No. The ritual is a shared experience which binds the members together. Its use of drama, allegory and symbolism impresses the principles and teachings more firmly in the mind of each candidate than if they were simply passed on to him in matter-of-fact modern language.

Why do grown men run around with their trousers rolled up?

We are often asked why we roll up our trouser leg. The reason is entirely symbolic and simply shows the prospective member is a 'free man' with no marks of imprisonment (mark caused by a leg iron). Incidentally, a new member is only required to roll up his trouser leg on three

occasions and never thereafter. He does not, or certainly should not, feel self conscious about it in any way, for he knows that everyone present, without exception, has at some time been required to do the same. Admittedly, taken out of context, this can seem amusing, but like many other aspects of Freemasonry, it has a purely symbolic meaning.

Why do you wear regalia?

To symbolize the clothes of the early stonemasons, who wore leather aprons to protect themselves whilst at their work. This is just one of many legacies of the Operatives, continued by present day Freemasons. If you read the answer to this question in conjunction with the answers to two other questions frequently posed, namely ‘why is it necessary to adopt strange rituals?’ and ‘why do grown men run around with their trouser legs rolled up?’, you will hopefully appreciate that Freemasonry contains much symbolism, which applies as much to the way we dress as the words we use.

How much does it cost to be a Freemason?

It varies from lodge to lodge but anyone wishing to join can find a lodge to suit his pocket. On entry, there is an initiation fee and an apron to buy. A member pays an annual subscription to his lodge which covers his membership and the administrative cost of running the lodge. It is usual to have a meal after the meeting; the cost of this can be included either in the annual subscription or paid for at the time. It is entirely up to the individual member what he gives to Charity, but it should always be without detriment to his other responsibilities. Similarly, he may join as many lodges as his time and pocket can allow as long as it does not adversely affect his family life and responsibilities.

Why are you a secret society?

The prevailing impression of a secretive society is difficult to dispel. We are most certainly not a Secret Society. It would be a very curious Secret Society, which published as much about itself as Freemasonry and had its addresses and telephone numbers in every Directory. Truly “Secret Societies” would not think it appropriate to have their own website, like the one you are presently looking at. They would not publish and distribute a Yearbook containing names, addresses and photographs of its leading figures and the addresses of Secretaries of local Lodges. Freemasons have stands at many local and county Shows and our members are encouraged to speak openly about Freemasonry. Like

many other organisations, it is a private, member funded, voluntary association. Most voluntary associations do not share their modes of working with the rest of the World. Uniquely, Freemasonry is accused of sinister secretiveness if it does not share its modes of working with the rest of the World. We can do no better than quote The Home Affairs Select Committee, which in May 1998 reported on Freemasonry to Parliament. "We do not believe that there is anything sinister about Freemasonry, properly observed... it is obvious that there is a great deal of unjustified paranoia about Freemasonry".

What are the secrets of Freemasonry?

The secrets in Freemasonry are the traditional modes of recognition which are not used indiscriminately, but solely as a test of membership, e.g. when visiting a Lodge where you are not known.

Why do Freemasons take oaths?

New members make solemn promises concerning their conduct in Lodge and in society. Each member also promises to keep confidential the traditional methods of proving that he is a Freemason which he would use when visiting a lodge where he is not known. Freemasons do not swear allegiances to each other or to Freemasonry. Freemasons promise to support others in times of need, but only if that support does not conflict with their duties to God, the law, their family or with their responsibilities as a Citizen.

Why do your 'obligations' contain hideous penalties?

They no longer do. When Masonic ritual was developing in the late 1600s and 1700s it was quite common for legal and civil oaths to include physical penalties and Freemasonry simply followed the practice of the times. In Freemasonry, however, the physical penalties were always symbolic and were never carried out. After long discussion, they were removed from the promises in 1986.

Why is it necessary to adopt strange rituals?

Freemasonry endeavors to teach moral lessons and self-knowledge to new members, however, it is one thing to have aims and ideals and quite another to impress them upon the minds of the members. So, in our Lodge rooms we enact, for the benefit of the new member, what can be likened to the scenes from a play. The scenes are called degrees,

because Freemasonry is a progressive system. The play is centered on the building of King Solomon's Temple where every part of the building and every implement used is given a deeper moral or spiritual interpretation, which is explained to the new member.

Isn't it true that Freemasons only look after each other?

No. From its earliest days, Freemasonry has been involved in charitable activities. Since its inception, Freemasonry has provided support not only for widows and orphans of Freemasons, but also for many others within the community. Whilst some Masonic charities cater specifically but not exclusively for Masons or their dependants, others make significant grants to non-Masonic organisations. On a local level, lodges give substantial support to local causes.

Aren't you a religion or a rival to religion?

Emphatically not. Freemasonry requires a belief in God and its principles are common to many of the world's great religions. Freemasonry does not try to replace religion or substitute for it. Every candidate is exhorted to practice his religion and to regard its holy book as the unerring standard of truth. Freemasonry does not instruct its members in what their religious beliefs should be, nor does it offer sacraments. Freemasonry deals in relations between men; religion deals in a man's relationship with his God. In a world where there is presently such intolerance, we take great pride in our members who are able to meet together in friendship whatever their faith.

Why do you call it the VSL and not the Bible?

To the majority of Freemasons the Volume of the Sacred Law is the Bible. There are many in Freemasonry, however, who are not Christian and to them the Bible is not their sacred book and they will make their promises on the book which is regarded as sacred to their religion. The Bible will always be present in an English lodge, but as the organisation welcomes men of many different faiths, it is called the Volume of the Sacred Law. Thus, when the Volume of the Sacred Law is referred to in ceremonies, to a non-Christian it will be the holy book of his religion and to a Christian it will be the Bible.

Why do you call God the Great Architect?

Freemasonry embraces all men who believe in God. Its membership includes Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Parsees and others. The use of descriptions such as the Great Architect prevents disharmony. The Great Architect is not a specific Masonic god or an attempt to combine all gods into one. Thus, men of differing religions pray together without offence being given to any of them.

Why don't some churches like Freemasonry?

There are elements within certain churches that misunderstand Freemasonry and confuse secular rituals with religious liturgy. Although the Methodist Conference and the General Synod of the Anglican Church have occasionally criticised Freemasonry, in both Churches there are many Masons and indeed others who are dismayed that the Churches should attack Freemasonry, an organisation which has always encouraged its members to be active in their own religion.

Why will Freemasonry not accept Roman Catholics as members?

It does. The prime qualification for admission into Freemasonry has always been a belief in God. How that belief is expressed is entirely up to the individual. Four Grand Masters of English Freemasonry have been Roman Catholics. There are many Roman Catholic Freemasons.

Isn't Freemasonry just another political pressure group?

Emphatically not. Whilst individual Freemasons will have their own views on politics and state policy, Freemasonry as a body will never express a view on either. The discussion of politics at Masonic meetings has always been prohibited.

Are there not Masonic groups who are involved in politics?

There are groups in other countries who call themselves Freemasons and who involve themselves in political matters. They are not recognised or countenanced by the United Grand Lodge of England and other regular Grand Lodges who follow the basic principles of Freemasonry and ban the discussion of politics and religion at their meetings.

Why don't you have women members?

We are often asked 'why men only?' and if we wished to avoid the question, we would no doubt reply 'why is the WI only for Women?' Traditionally, Freemasonry under the United Grand Lodge of England has been restricted to men. The early stonemasons were all male, and when Freemasonry was organising, the position of women in society was different from today. However, Freemasonry these days, like most things, is not solely a male preserve. There are four Masonic Orders in the UK, two being exclusively female, one mixed and our own (admittedly much the largest) which is exclusively male.

What is the relationship between Freemasonry and groups like the Orange Order, Odd Fellows etc?

None. There are numerous fraternal orders and Friendly Societies whose rituals, regalia and organisation are similar in some respects to those of Freemasonry. They have no formal or informal connections with Freemasonry.

Is Freemasonry an international Order?

Only in the sense that Freemasonry exists throughout the free world and is a multi-racial and multi-cultural organisation recognising no constraints relating to colour, creed or language that may be experienced in some other parts of our communities. Each Grand Lodge is however sovereign and independent, and whilst following the same basic principles, may have differing ways of passing them on. There is no international governing body for Freemasonry.



**If you would like to know more about Freemasonry in general or especially in Farnham then please feel free to enquire to W.Bro.
Ian Goolding;
shoestring@ntlworld.com**