

Address by Provincial Grand Master at Provincial Grand Lodge

on Saturday 17 May 2008

Brethren - a very warm welcome to you all.

My thanks to those Lodges who, in response to invitations, have brought their Banners to this morning's meeting.

In past years I have recognised different groups of those attending and this year is to be no exception. I particularly welcome all current Masters of our Lodges, the Brethren in the hot seat, and I ask them to stand and be recognised.

We have many guests today, including deputations from neighbouring Provinces who have already been introduced and welcomed. I would personally wish to introduce my fellow Provincial Grand Masters. From Cumberland & Westmorland, RWBro John Hale - welcome John.

And from Northumberland RWBro Peter Magnay - welcome Peter.

And then from the Royal Arch Chapter I am very pleased to have with us Past Grand Superintendent, Donald Davinson – Donald we missed you last year and I am delighted to welcome you today.

From the other Orders I am pleased to welcome the Head of the Mark Master Masons, their Provincial Grand Master Eric Gore-Brown - from the Ancient & Accepted Rite, the Inspector General, Michael Carr - from the Knights Templar, their Provincial Prior Geoffrey Salter.

Brethren, last year I suggested as something to be considered, that our failure to retain everybody is not necessarily due to our failure to care for them, but in fact because we fail to be selective at the outset.

I suggested that we fail both ourselves and potential new members by not telling them what we do and, more importantly, what we believe in.

Do not be afraid to be proud of our beliefs and demand them from every Brother.

I would like to consider that issue still further this morning.

Let me ask you a question - *Why do we feel the need to rush candidates through one ceremony after another without first ensuring that they have a level of understanding that will enable them to appreciate the basic tenets, never mind the finer points of Freemasonry?*

What should we put first?

The welfare of a new member starting out on what we hope will be a long and happy Masonic journey, or some misplaced view that the lodge has to have a ceremony?

I suggest to you that it is essential to have at least one clear meeting between the degrees if a candidate is to have any chance of understanding what he did last time and why; to allow his mentor to communicate with him and deal with his questions and for him to see his last ceremony performed for someone else in his own lodge or by visiting another Lodge.

I suggest the mentor should be the judge of when a candidate is ready to progress.

This approach naturally follows my request to Lodges to avoid initiating a candidate on the night of the ballot.

Brethren the ballot is a fundamental right of every member and it should never ever be assumed that it is a formality.

There are enough occasions to show that it is not.

Inviting a candidate to attend on the night of his ballot is I believe to denigrate the essential freedom of every member to vote as his conscience dictates, although we always hope that those with objections to a candidate, will have advised the

Secretary or Master of the Lodge, thus allowing the proposer and seconder to withdraw their candidate rather than risk disturbing the harmony of the Lodge.

There can be no serious reason not to separate ballots from admissions – if someone wants to join your Lodge he will wait for the next meeting.

If he will not, then I suggest that you are likely to be better off without him.

To show how much importance I attach to this issue I have decreed from today that neither Provincial Rulers nor my Representatives will attend any Lodge meeting in which there is to be a ballot followed by a first degree ceremony for that person.

I was delighted to be present at Grand Lodge three weeks ago when the Most Worshipful The Grand Master invested Bill Fisher and David Marsh as PJGDs, and David Burnett as PAGDC. Likewise, there was promotion for Stephen Till to PJGD and Geoffrey Salter to PAGDC.

Last year I stuck my neck out and indicated that there would be no increase in annual dues proposed at this meeting of Provincial Grand Lodge.

You must all by now be aware of the decision to dispense with a bricks and mortar office and set up a “virtual office”.

You can all read a ‘hot off the press’ progress report on the back page of the Provincial Newsletter distributed this morning. It says “We are virtually there”.

This is an exciting project which has required a lot of work and planning by the Project Team and I thank everyone who has been involved. I hope that by this time next year with our own communications network and our link to Adelphi, the Grand Lodge database, we can look back on having progressed with both enhanced email links across the Province to provide privacy of personal email addresses and a distribution method to get both Newsletters and I hope the Year Book direct to every member at an acceptable cost within the current level of dues.

I now want to ask for your support for a project launched by the Pro Grand Master to gather information and evidence from Lodges and Chapters in relation to our tercentenary in 2017.

It has been titled ‘The Historical Records Project’ and I have appointed Les Sinden to be our Provincial Co-ordinator.

He is arranging meetings across the Province and I would ask Secretaries and Scribe Es to attend if at all possible, or to send a deputy.

The process of gathering the information required has been standardised and can be done using a laptop and a formatted spreadsheet that will be made available.

Brethren, I would like to see this Province be among the leaders in this stage of the project. That is why a Provincial Ruler will attend each area meeting. Please support Les.

Brethren, there is one area in which we let ourselves down right across all our activities.

I call it “courtesy” or perhaps more appropriately, the lack of it.

With so many of the things that we do, both as Lodges and Province-wide organised by volunteers, our own members of course, I am appalled to learn of the number of people that do not respond to invitations, summonses, general correspondence, telephone calls etc, etc. Even when asked to send a reply slip, people turn up without responding with the comment “well you knew I would be here – I always come”.

If an invitation is sent to named individuals to attend an event, just over half will respond by the stated cut-off date.

When asked to send payment with the booking, about a quarter book by email, telephone or fax, but do not send the money.

So someone’s evening is spoilt having to go round and collect and the no-shows are always the ones that have not paid and have to be followed up.

To describe such behaviour, that I know is not unique to this Province or to freemasonry, as discourteous, is an understatement.

It is just plain rude.

Please brethren, if you are asked to respond to something, just remember a Brother somewhere is giving his time and effort and that I asked you to be courteous in your treatment of him.

It is just common courtesy.

Today we lose Gerald Gelder who took over from me in February 2003 as Provincial Director of Ceremonies and has given that role his own style of leadership, as well as inspiring many of you in your Lodges as the Provincial Teams go round the Province.

He has of course been my 'minder' on every visit that I have made and at every formal event. To you Gerald, we express our thanks for a job well done – we will miss you.

Now I congratulate all those whom I have appointed or promoted today.

Enjoy your new status, but please use it to help and guide – not dictate to - other Brethren who may seek your assistance.

Some of you will be aware that the Grand Lodge regulations relating to Provincial Honours have been changed and indeed the number of First Appointments that I am permitted to make has increased. Likewise, the number of Promotions is now left to my discretion.

Let me make it very clear Brethren that I do not expect to be making changes to the criteria I have adopted since my appointment.

Provincial Honours have to be earned, whether for past service or for expected future service either for the Province or exemplary service to Lodges or Masonic Centres.

Those who merit Honours will get them – those who do not, will not do so.

My thanks as always to the active Officers of the year, particularly the Wardens and Registrar who not only did their own visits but also came on many of my visits and those of the other Rulers - to those who have been out on team visits or who have worked as DCs – and of course the Past Senior Provincial Officers who have represented me this year. All have been great ambassadors for what I believe Freemasonry is about and I hope you will continue to act as such in future years.

Special thanks go to the Provincial Secretariat, particularly in the build-up to today's meeting, to Brian Baker the Provincial Secretary and to Linda and Marie.

Brethren, Clive Wood having organised the seating arrangements for us for many, many years (he reckons between 11 and 12 years) decided to retire after the Royal Arch Convocation last September and I wish to put on record to him and his PA, Joanne, the thanks of us all for a great job well done.

Last but by no means least, my and your thanks to our Provincial DC and his team and, coupled with them, the Brethren of the Stewards' Lodge who together so ably organise and run today's event.

Thank you for the warmth of the welcome that I receive as I travel round the Province visiting you in your Lodges.

It is a privilege to be your Provincial Grand Master.