THE FUTURE OF FREEMASONRY

A REPORT BY

THE SOCIAL ISSUES RESEARCH CENTRE

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THE COMMON FACTOR IS AND SHOULD BE ABOUT FUN AND ENJOYMENT

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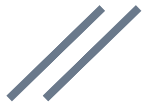
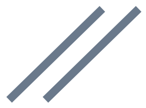


MODERN FREEMASONS ARE KEEN TO DISPEL THE MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS THAT HAVE LONG SURROUNDED THE ORGANISATION



FOREWORD

As the tercentenary of the United Grand Lodge of England approaches, we felt it important to mark the occasion with a robust and open debate into what it means to be a Freemason in contemporary society, and what it will mean for future generations to come. As the oldest fraternal organisation in the world, Freemasonry is founded upon principles of kindness, honesty and fairness – timeless values that are as relevant to the world today as they were three hundred years ago when we were established. These ideals have remained unchanged throughout the history of Freemasonry and will, we hope, continue to do so as long as the organisation thrives. Yet it is important to note that while it maintains these central ideals, Freemasonry in the twenty-first century has become an amalgamation of the old and the new, of tradition and innovation, and therefore fits comfortably into the modern world.

Modern Freemasons are keen to dispel the myths and misconceptions that have long surrounded the organisation. In order to do this, it was clear we needed to enlist the help of an independent body to embark upon an impartial assessment. In doing so, we anticipated shaping a discussion that would not only offer an open and transparent account of Freemasonry to those outside the organisation, but also provide a fresh viewpoint to those within it.

It was with these goals in mind that we approached the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) to undertake this research. As well as offering the anthropological expertise that forms the backdrop of much of this report, they set about compiling the views and opinions of a cross-section of Freemasons and non-masons alike. As a result, The Future of Freemasonry provides an insightful and timely commentary, not just on the organisation it set out to examine, but also on the complex interactions, perceptions and values of modern society itself.

As we look to the next three hundred years, this report will form an intrinsic part of our discussions into how best Freemasonry can evolve whilst retaining the distinctive character and ideals that have attracted members for centuries, and will hopefully do so for centuries to come.

Nigel Brown

Grand Secretary
The United Grand Lodge of England

1 INTRODUCTION

The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) was pleased to receive an approach from the Grand Secretary of the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) to explore the role and relevance of Freemasonry in society today and in the future.

In our preliminary research we consulted some modern texts on Freemasonry as well as online resources to help us identify the central themes of the research. One thing that immediately became apparent was that the notion of Freemasonry as a 'secret society' was clearly inappropriate. In Tobias Churton's *Freemasonry: The Reality*, for example, we found more or less all one needed to know about the central tenets of the movement and the rituals associated with it. We were also struck by his conclusion that:

> *'Freemasonry cannot forever be associated with the secret society syndrome. It is not a secret society, though when persecuted it has been sensible to be discreet. But a healthy society will promote greater openness and understanding for all. It is not good for Freemasonry to hide itself; it has no more trade secrets to defend.'*

A number of other books opened up the world of Freemasonry to inspection, including the details of initiation ceremonies. John Hamill's *The Craft* provided a very useful account of the origins and history of English Freemasonry, dispelling a number of myths in the process, while *Freemasonry: A Celebration of the Craft*, edited by Hamill and Robert Gilbert, illustrated the 'ideals' and 'virtues' of Freemasonry. In addition to this background reading we also examined the content of UGLE's own website (www.ugle.org.uk), which hosts a range of information and opinion pieces penned by senior masons.

A response to the Grand Secretary's enquiry began to form. We proposed to examine the relevance of two of Freemasonry's main tenets in twenty-first century Britain – those of 'brotherly love' and 'relief' – translated into the more familiar social science terms of 'affiliation' and 'altruism' – and the surrounding issues of male bonding and charity. We would also explore whether there is a desire for a degree of ritual in our modern lives. We would speak with lodge members across the country and the discussions would be forward looking – to what extent, in their view, can/should Freemasonry evolve in the twenty-first century? For these discussions to take place we would need to test Freemasonry's claims for openness and transparency.

In addition, we would examine the connection between Freemasonry and the wider community in focus groups with participants who, to the best of our knowledge, were not masons. In these we would be concerned with the same issues as in the interviews with Freemasons. We would, for example, examine the presence of, or the need for, an element of ritual in our lives, our need to belong, the ways we express our generosity towards others and the extent to which our everyday lives involve ritual behaviours. How different are masons from other people in these contexts? To what extent does Freemasonry meet timeless needs and wants that we all, to one degree or another, share?

This report is, as far as we know, an account of the first ever study that has been commissioned by Freemasons from a non-masonic body. None of the SIRC members involved in the project are Freemasons, a fact that evoked surprise and welcome in equal measure from the lodge members we met. Many saw it as an opportunity to communicate 'what the Craft is really all about' to a wider audience and provided proof, if it were needed, of the prevailing openness among the Freemasonry fraternity.

As outsiders, of course, we have not experienced at first-hand what it is really like to be

a mason in today's pluralistic society that is, in fundamental ways, very different from that which prevailed in the late eighteenth century when Freemasonry was first formed. We have faced the dilemma of the social anthropologist who, as one mason put it, can only 'scratch the surface' of the tribal *mores* (norms and values) that are the focus of his or her study.

1.1 METHODS

The methods that we have employed, while recognising the limitations of all ethnographic research of this nature, have been designed to provide what is known in anthropology as an 'emic' perspective – an account that is expressed within the frames of reference employed by insiders, as opposed to an 'etic' framework of understanding that is imposed from the standpoint of the outsider. Interviews and less formal discussions with around fifty masons at varying stages of their journey through Freemasonry were held. Transcripts and summaries of these have been produced that, as in all of SIRC's qualitative research, have been 'signed off' by the participants as accurately reflecting their views and insights.

Analysis of the transcripts has been conducted using MAXQDA – software for the treatment of qualitative data that allows efficient identification of the major themes within the accounts offered and areas of consensus and divergence. Transcripts of the two focus groups with non-masons have been subjected to similar analysis. Extracts from both sets of summaries have been used liberally in this report to provide our reading of the balance of views within Freemasonry that relate to the key issues under investigation.

1.2 REPORTING

In presenting these perspectives we have also been guided by discussions with the Grand Secretary, Nigel Brown, about his vision – one that is shared with senior members within the organisation – of the direction in which Freemasonry should now be moving in order to demonstrate its true role and relevance in contemporary society. Dispelling myths, effectively challenging commonplace misconceptions and demonstrating its genuine openness have been just a few aspects of the transition that are already evidently in progress.

In the final section of this report we have, on the basis of the available evidence, attempted to identify the specific changes that have already occurred within Freemasonry in recent times and where opportunities to demonstrate the openness and transparency on which the organisation now prides itself might best lie. We have done this from a neutral and detached 'outsider's' perspective, but one that has been very much guided by our understanding of the views from within, so as to provide a conclusion to the task with which we have been presented.

2

BONDING

2.1 THE NEED TO BELONG

There is a timeless and universal need for people to establish a sense of belonging – to feel rooted in a community of others. In Abraham Maslow's influential hierarchy of human needs our requirement for social contact comes after only those of physiological need (air, water, nourishment and sleep) and for safety. Without social bonding, according to his model, a sense of personal esteem and what he terms 'self actualisation – reaching our full potential' – are impossible.[1]

Since Maslow's time the study of group belonging and the centrality it plays in our lives has formed a major part of social psychology. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary, for example, stress that 'The need for social belonging, for seeing oneself as socially connected, is a basic human motivation.'[2] They go on to note that 'a sense of social connectedness predicts favourable outcomes … perceived availability of social support buffers mental and physical health.' Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen[3] take a similar line, examining the ways in which a strong sense of group identity improves performance and well-being in a range of contexts. Many others in the field have fleshed out in more detail the ways in which social bonds are established and the negative consequences that arise from social alienation or simple loneliness.

In truth, though, we do not really need psychologists to tell us how important a sense of belonging really is. We all know this – and we have all probably experienced the sense of personal doubt and low social worth when close social bonds are disrupted or weakened. The phrase 'Man is a social animal' may sound rather trite, but it is, nonetheless, true.

Like many other fundamental aspects of the human condition, it is likely that our need for social affiliation is wired-in to our brains – we do not have to learn from scratch to seek out a sense of belonging, we do it naturally. As Mary Ainsworth[4] and many other researchers stress, this innate propensity towards establishing social bonds had distinct survival and reproductive benefits – e.g. sharing of food, provision of potential mates, help and care for offspring, protection from rivals and greater effectiveness in hunting.

In Freemasonry, of course, the potential for strong affiliations and lasting friendships is one of the principal attractions that all masons identify. Such bonding, however, is an all-male affair[5], encapsulated in the concept of brotherly love[6]. In contemporary society, where single-gender institutions have largely disappeared, the fact that lodge membership is restricted to men, and that masonic bonds are to do with 'brothers' only, may seem anachronistic. 'Male bonding', however, has its roots in an earlier period of human evolution – the Upper Palaeolithic or Late Stone Age period some forty thousand to one hundred thousand or more years ago.

The Late Stone Age was the era of the hunter-gatherer tribes and during this period much of the formative processes that shaped the ways in which our brains evolved and our consequent behaviours were evident. This period, prior to the development of agriculture, is often referred to as that of 'behavioural modernity', for we see in it evidence for the development of patterns of behaviour that are strikingly similar to those of today. We may think that we are now very different from what we were when we survived and prospered by hunting and gathering, but in truth we have evolved very little as a species since those times.

The role of women (mainly) as gatherers of wild fruits, nuts, etc., and men (mainly) as hunters of animal protein, laid the basis for gender role separation that still shapes our lives. Men became hunters because of their (slight)

1 **Maslow, A. (1943)**
2 **Baumeister, R. F. & Leary, M. R. (1995)**
3 **Walton, G. M. & Cohen, G. L. (2007)**

4 **Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1989)**
5 Or all-female affair in the case of women's lodges – see below.
6 The precept of brotherly love is defined as: 'Every true Freemason will show tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behave with kindness and understanding to his fellow creatures.'

IN FREEMASONRY THE POTENTIAL FOR STRONG AFFILIATIONS AND LASTING FRIENDSHIPS IS ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL ATTRACTIONS THAT ALL MASONS IDENTIFY

physiological advantage over women in terms of physical strength and speed of running. Through natural selection these differences were reinforced and reflected in the ways in which Late Stone Age communities organised themselves.

In Lionel Tiger's book, *Men in Groups – A controversial look at all-male societies,*[7] he notes:

> *'My proposition is that specialization for hunting widened the gap between the behaviour of males and females. It favoured those 'genetic packages' which arranged matters so the males hunted co-operatively in groups while females engaged in maternal and some gathering activity.'*

It is this long-standing legacy of male bonding, Tiger and others argue, that lives on in modern times in many shapes and forms.

This is not to say that bonds between females were, and are, any less strong. Male fraternities are mirrored by female sororities of all kinds – from the Women's Institute to less formal female social networks. It is also the case that while UGLE does not admit women, there are two orders of women Freemasons that follow largely unadapted male ceremonies and traditions – even referring to each other as 'brother'. Additionally, while membership of lodges is restricted to men, women are far from excluded from visiting them, as we see in Section 2.3.

7 Tiger, L. (1970)

2.2 BELONGING – THE PUBLIC VIEW

In the focus groups we explored participants' notions of where they felt a sense of belonging and the importance that they attached to it. There were few surprises in any of the discussions. Earlier work by SIRC[8] had already established the major sources of a sense of social identity stemming from families and friends to professional affiliations and team sports. Such notions were reinforced in the more recent group sessions.

There was an overwhelming consensus among other participants, however, that they had a strong need to belong somewhere or with definable others. For some, a sense of identity was mostly driven by the feeling of family belonging while for others, and the majority, it was their social networks of friends that were most dominant in this context. The following participant stressed that her social networks provided more than just the opportunity to get together and socialise; they were more complex than that, instead providing a two-way process of self-enrichment:

> *'Something that comes from having a social network, people you see regularly, you will become part of that with your own set of "I am good at that, I like this" and from getting to know people better your own vision of what you might be interested in expands vastly. You might find yourself catapulted over various steps of knowing a little bit about something by suddenly finding yourself knowing a lot about something. Depending on how you treat your friendships. It is not just about the support network, they will enrich you and you will hopefully enrich them by sharing what [you know or enjoy].'*

The concept of core friends is one with which many of us are familiar, and one that certainly chimed with many of the masons with whom we spoke. Core friends, it would seem, are those special relationships that are secure enough not to require daily contact. They are built on a foundation of shared experiences, shared values and circumstance. To meet up with one's core friends was described by members of the focus groups as akin to 'coming home'.

> *'... more important for me is this group of core friends. It doesn't matter if I don't speak to them for a year; whenever I do it is exactly the same. There are only five or six of them, but I know that I will always know these people and I will always have something in common with those people for the rest of my life.'*

Others stressed the role of the local community as well as specific networks of friends as being central to their feelings of belonging:

> *'What defines it are the support network as well as friends and good times. If I go into a local shop and I am ten pence down he will let me have it and will say "Don't worry bring it next week." It is that idea that people know each other and can support each other a little bit.'*

As we expected, there was a clear divide between the 'joiners' and the 'non-joiners'. While some actively joined organisations, clubs and societies with the intent of broadening their social networks, others clearly preferred to remain among the informal networks of existing friends, family members and neighbours. One male 'joiner' commented:

> *'I am definitely a joiner. I have moved around quite a bit and everywhere I have gone I have always joined sports clubs, especially football teams. It has been a real life-saver at times because you meet people who are into the same things and that then leads on to other things. With the football teams you join ... you have a ready-made social scene; you get invited to gigs, to the*

8 See the SIRC report *Belonging* – available at www.sirc.org/publik/belonging.shtml

pub, dinner, cinema and it snowballs and you meet other people.'

A female participant also said:

'I have always joined groups, I like meeting people and people from different backgrounds. I quite like being among people who are not from the same socio-economic or education background. I have always liked different groups of people because they give you, and you give them, different things in life.'

In contrast, another female participant relied much more on her network of work colleagues and was unwilling to join other groups that might reduce the time she spent with them.

'I'm not a joiner … I spend so much time at work that I just don't want to. It is really bad, [as] I like meeting new people, I like different things and I do want to go out there and do different things. But I spend so much time at work that I feel that I would be cheating myself out of my own free time. I do have a good social network at work and I really do get on with the people I work with. Two or three of them are starting to get into my core group of people. People join the team and leave the team and there are a lot of different personalities there.'

All of this was familiar territory. It was, however, when we moved the conversation on to the subject of single-sex groups that issues arose. Among some of the men in the groups in particular, there was a strong reluctance to believe in (or admit to) the attraction of all-male groups. One commented:

'It's bravado and that is not necessarily the bond that you are looking for.'

Others agreed and suggested that this need for 'being with just lads' was outdated. One participant said:

'I have always had really close female friends as well as male friends so I have never thought about [male-only groups]. I don't change my behaviour between the two ...'

There was a distinct sense of political correctness at work in the groups with men fearing, perhaps, being labelled as chauvinist if they claimed to want to be more in the company of men rather than mixed-sex groups. When this 'correctness was challenged', however, some rather more revealing sentiments were expressed. One said:

'I don't think I consciously do it [seek out male-only groups] it just seems to work out that way.'

Another spoke of his bonds with other players in his hockey team:

'That is exactly what we have in the hockey club, really. I guess it serves some sort of purpose. You play sport, you go off and socialise and drink together and have this slightly exclusive overtly masculine bond. The idea is that you do that so when you come to play you give a bit more for each other because you have been doing whatever it is the night before.'

There was much less reluctance, however, among the women participants to recognise the value of all-female bonds:

'It is not just a case of all liking the same things, it is not about that. It is really the core values in those people that you respect and you like and the characteristics. These are all women. I have a lot of male friends as well as a lot of female friends, but this core is female.'

2.3 AFFILIATION – THE MASONS' VIEW

While the sentiments expressed in the focus groups reflected the strong continuing need in human societies for a sense of belonging and social identity, there was considerable divergence concerning how this could best be achieved. Among the masons we interviewed, however, there were far fewer doubts.

The Grand Secretary of UGLE, Nigel Brown, stressed that Freemasonry is primarily a *social* organisation:

> *'The key thing is that [Freemasonry] is not prescriptive and that most people will join because a friend or somebody they trust has asked if they are interested. It's no deeper than: "I think you will enjoy the company of the people … you will meet."'*

This principal reason for joining Freemasonry in the first place was echoed by other masons all over the country. They were attracted by the potential for a widened friendship network and a strong sense of social bonding which, they believed, the lodges would provide. The ritual aspects that distinguish Freemasonry from most other societies were also seen by many as enhancing the social bonding potential:

> *'It is the sense of just belonging to something. At school you have your mates. After school I joined the [Forces]; you have got the guys around you and you have this sense of belonging. Then after the [Forces] I joined the bike club. Then I came out of that and I didn't have anything I felt belonging to. This [the opportunity to join the masons] came along and I thought: "perfect". I suppose my sense of ritual is that I need to belong to some sort of group. The ritual aspect increases that sense of belonging. Of course it does. You are part of the drive train. I am not one for sitting on the side lines, I get bored too easily and I have to get involved.'*

Others emphasised the degree of trust that being in a group of fellow masons provided:

> *'There is something special about the bonds you develop within the lodge, absolutely. From my point of view it is the trust. In Freemasonry people are not there to take things away from you, the reverse in fact. Freemasonry is out there by itself [in this respect]. I fly, I play golf – these are quite individual [activities]. In golf [and other competitive sports] you find that people will put you down; your etiquette or the way you dress, but in masonry you don't get that. In ninety-nine per cent of cases they are there to help you … It is something very special.'*

This sense of trust within the lodge, other masons thought, extended beyond its physical boundaries into the wider community. One said:

> *'What it means to me is that I don't believe everyone is a villain like I did before … I used to mistrust people and now I don't. Especially if they are a mason I know they are not there to do me any harm. The room is full of friends, some you have not met before, but they are all your friends. That is the relaxation I get and I am prepared to do anything for anybody now, not just other Freemasons and it has woken me up over the last few years. When I was in business I was a very ambitious person and all the faults that go with that, now I realise that other people are more important than me. I don't know if that comes with age or with masonry, but I am going to credit masonry with that and I have changed my views.'*

This kind of 'transformation' through Freemasonry also extended, as we note elsewhere, into increased confidence and the ability to stand up before groups of people and speak without nerves or embarrassment.

One mason spoke in this context of the increased sense of tolerance he had developed after joining the lodge:

> *'I am far more tolerant of other people than I used to be. If someone is angry or is upset about something I will try and calm them down and tell them: "Is it really important enough to get worried about?" Certainly within the lodge there have been certain people who have needed a little bit of help, or even guidance. If you can show them that they are valued ... as long as you adopt the same policy for brethren as those who are not in Freemasonry, you will go far. Brotherly love is not just for those within Freemasonry, you have got to put it out to other people as well. It has got to be a part of you as opposed to something that you just practice within the lodge.'*

Others emphasised the ways in which their social skills and confidence had developed through being a lodge member:

> *'Obviously the social life is very good and you meet people. Another thing I have found is that it helps you to talk to people. I used to be a bit shy and talking to people is so much easier when you are in Freemasonry. You have to do a lot of speaking ... that helps an awful lot with self-confidence and that type of thing.'*

It is the case, of course, that the amount of time masons spend in their lodges, or even in the company of other masons, can be relatively limited. For some, it is a matter of only three to six meetings a year, while others who hold particular offices within a lodge will devote considerably more of their time. It is this flexibility that is seen by many masons as an attractive proposition, accommodating both those with limited spare time alongside those with considerably more.

The sense of personal development expressed by masons was particularly striking.

> *'… you look at people differently after a while. I think you tend to look at their good points rather than their bad … Some of the people that you disliked you suddenly find that they have got their good points. You have to help people along and you have to be tolerant. Freemasonry does teach you patience.'*

In our interviews with masons we raised the specific issues of male bonding. Was there something special about the fact that 'brotherly love' was, it seemed, about groups of men rather than about men and women?

> *'Freemasonry is a blokes' thing. If you are looking for something which is for both sexes then there are other things out there. For me definitely and I think I can speak for pretty much every other bloke. I think you need those opportunities for all-male groups out there.'*

Most masons felt there was a strong need for men to be able, for a small minority of their time, to be exclusively in the company of other men. This, combined with the shared ritual behaviours that characterise Freemasonry, is what deepens the bonds. Such occasional bonding, however, did not appear to detract from masons' motivations and abilities to interact with women – in their families, their workplace or the wider community. In all of the lodges that we visited there were regular occasions on which members were accompanied by their partners and female family members to social functions and 'white table'. The regular open days organised by many lodges were similarly open to both genders.

One further aspect of the bonds established in the lodges was that they transcended traditional demarcations of social status and wealth. Masons saw lodges as great 'levellers'. One noted that when they were all standing in dark suits wearing aprons and white gloves, one would be hard pressed to tell who did what. This

observation is interesting, and one of the main reasons why members are required to leave their 'day jobs' (and also their political points of view) at the door, before entering the lodge. Discussion of politics is not allowed at lodge meetings or elsewhere within Freemasonry, and nor is business networking – masons are prohibited from using membership to promote their own, or anyone else's business, professional or personal interests.

The Grand Secretary also stressed the levelling nature of masonry:

> *'We live in a very diverse society. The joy of Freemasonry is that members come from all races, religions, all social economic levels of society. So actually you get a complete mix of people sitting next to each other in harmony and equality. And I would say to you, what other organisations can do that in a world that is full of conflict?'*

The reasons offered for becoming a lodge member in the first place were as varied as the masons themselves. For some it was the fact that somebody in their family was, or had been, a member. For others it was a chance encounter with an existing Freemason who articulated the benefits of becoming a member. And, for the most part, it was the emphasis placed on the network of friendships into which they would be initiated that was the deciding factor.

The Freemasons do not undertake any proactive recruitment, although they welcome opportunities to champion their organisation to outsiders. And while most new members pass through informal processes of admission, some lodges operate more formal procedures. The Grand Secretary explained:

> *'Some people join through a much more official [process]. They may have been met by a committee and wives or partners would have been met. But essentially, when you come in, like in any club you need a proposer and a seconder. At the meeting before you're initiated there would be a notice of motion, fairly short, but if the proposer and the seconder are respected people that's pretty much passed. Then at the next meeting there's a ballot ... And then the guy is initiated.'*

A rather less formal route, however, is more typical, even if one has to be approved somewhere along the line by a committee. As one lodge member recalled:

> *'I asked a couple of questions: "What is it? Why do you do it? What do you get out of it?" It was explained to me that you meet up with a group of people. You all meet up on the same premise that you get together to have a good time. You do a bit of ritual. This was explained to me at the time as like a Shakespearean play; it can appear a bit convoluted until someone explains some of the meaning to it and [that at first] you may not fully appreciate the true underlying message.'*

Another moved into Freemasonry through existing social networks:

> *'I knew a few Freemasons, but it wasn't something I really wanted to do or something I wanted to pick up on. It was just that they were friends and we went down to ladies' weekends and ... they hinted that I would make a good Freemason and one day I said: "Ok chaps, let's just do it." It was a spur of the moment decision and I think I can honestly say that I have never looked back.'*

Other masons have joined the organisation after doing some homework:

> *'There were some fairly specific things about Freemasonry that attracted me: charity, [and] the ability to open up your social network. A lot of people seem to find barriers to meeting people out of their own*

MASONS ARE PROHIBITED FROM USING MEMBERSHIP TO PROMOTE THEIR OWN, OR ANYONE ELSE'S BUSINESS, PROFESSIONAL OR PERSONAL INTERESTS

socio-economic groups and Freemasonry completely knocks that away. Very early on, before I was initiated, the behaviour I saw of Freemasons was one of acceptance and trust. I made some very good friends here and it allowed me to socialise more.'

The emphasis then, for most masons, is the sociable nature of the organisation. While some may emphasise the attraction of the charitable aspects of being a mason and others the draw of enacting one-act plays in the rituals, the overriding pull is what they anticipate will be an atmosphere of congenial sociability that transcends the usual social class barriers. The issue of 'fun' and its immediate appeal was also mentioned by several of the masons we interviewed – especially in the context of the rituals. While to outsiders these may appear rather serious, the masons themselves see it very differently.

'Yes we enjoy ourselves hugely with our play-acting. If it wasn't enjoyable we wouldn't be doing it. It has got to be fun and I make sure it is fun.'

This issue was also something that was very much stressed by the Grand Secretary:

'The common factor is, and should be, about fun and enjoyment. We don't want people coming in who take themselves too seriously or who take Freemasonry too seriously.'

The idea that Freemasonry is something that shouldn't be taken too seriously may strike outsiders as surprising – after all this is an organisation that dates back to the eighteenth century and is surrounded by tradition, regalia and ceremonial behaviours that are associated with strong moral imperatives. Such a view is also a little at odds with the few masons who take their Craft rather more seriously, as we note in Section 4.2.

A CONSEQUENCE OF WHAT WE MIGHT DESCRIBE AS THE ‘GIVING INSTINCT’ IS THAT SOME MEMBERS WILL HAVE, IN CRUDE TERMS, MORE OF THE ALTRUISTIC GENE THAN OTHERS

3

GIVING

3.1 THE 'PROBLEM' OF ALTRUISM

The fact that, universally, people are prepared to act in ways that benefit others at a cost to themselves has long posed a problem for the social and biological sciences – and particularly for theories of evolution. The fundamental premise of evolutionary biology, for example, is that costs and benefits are measured in terms of 'reproductive fitness' – an animal's ability to mate and to produce offspring, thereby ensuring the future of its genes. This applies to humans as much as any other species on the planet. The difficult issue here, however, is that this form of natural selection operates at the individual rather than group level. It is the ability to spread *my* genes, or those of my close relatives who share my genes, rather than those of unrelated members of my tribe or social group.

It is true that we are most willing to make the greatest sacrifice for the benefit or survival of our closest kin. If I save the life of, say, my son while losing my own I have ensured that the part of me that is my son (my genes) will survive into a future generation. But why should we help our neighbours or those in parts of the world that we have never met, and never will?

We may, of course, argue that evolutionary theory no longer applies to the human race, that we have gone beyond forces that shape the lives of lower animals. We are conscious beings whose lives are directed more by moral codes than by basic instincts. And yet, perhaps uncomfortably, altruism is as much in evidence in birds and mammals as it is in us. Many species sound the alarm to their fellows when they identify a predator nearby, exposing themselves to quite considerable risk by making themselves more visible. Such types of altruistic behaviour are the same as those that we see as fundamental characteristics of a 'civilised' human race.

Charles Darwin was himself puzzled by this – his theory of natural selection – often inappropriately described as 'survival of the fittest' – with its emphasis on the individual, did not quite work. On the one hand he argued that 'He who was ready to sacrifice his life, as many a savage has been … would leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature.'[1] Undeterred, however, and almost by sleight of hand, he introduced a substantial qualification:

> *'A tribe including many members who, from possessing, in a high degree, the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.'*[2]

What we have here is now a focus on group, rather than individual, interest. Such an emphasis is not without its critics, among them Richard Dawkins.[3] Current perspectives, however, generally support the view that the genes which prompt us to be generous to our kin can also prompt us to express altruism in a more generalised way, so long as it does not reduce our personal fitness to a damaging degree. An advantageous product of this is the increased fitness of the tribe, community or society in which we live which, in turn, increases what is known as 'inclusive' fitness – a notion that embraces one's personal fitness *plus* the fitness of every other member of the species in the population.[4]

A consequence of what we might describe as the 'giving instinct' is that some members will have, in crude terms, more of the altruistic gene than others. We, as in the animal kingdom, will always have 'free riders' – those who benefit from the altruism of others while giving little or nothing back in exchange. But this, in itself, does not pose a serious problem until the givers are outnumbered by the takers. Natural selection, it seems, is geared towards the prevention of this state of affairs.

1 Darwin, C. (1871) The Descent of Man. P.1635
2 Darwin, C. (1871) The Descent of Man. P.166
3 Dawkins, R. (1979) The Selfish Gene
4 See Boyd, R. & McIlreath, R. (2007) Mathematical Models of Social Evolution. Chicago University Press

While our predisposition to give to others, and to our families in particular, would seem to have a biological basis, there are many other ways of explaining individual altruistic acts. One obvious one is the sense of moral rectitude that comes from charitable acts – we feel better about ourselves after 'doing good' in this way and it enables us to confirm our positive self-perceptions. This 'feel good' factor, however, may also have biological roots. Recent studies indicate that charitable acts trigger the reward centres of the brain and those associated with emotions and social behaviour.[5] There are also increases in the secretion of the neurochemical dopamine, again leading to rewarding sensations, at these times. These, in turn, are responsible for the 'warm glow' that we experience – it is not something that we 'invent', it is already wired in to our brains.

3.2 CHARITY – THE PUBLIC VIEW

The British in general are, it seems, a generous people when it comes to charitable giving compared with many other nationalities – we come eighth out of one hundred and fifty-three countries and are joint third with Thailand in terms of giving money rather than time. We are seen by foreigners, including Americans, Canadians, French and five other nationalities, as being the most generous people in the world.[6] In 2009, seventy-three per cent of the British population made a donation to charity. Direct debit donations in 2009 amounted to £26 million with the average individual contribution in 2008 being £12.26. In spite of the recent recession this level of giving fell only slightly to £11.95. Charities actually experienced an increase in income in that year. Those working with children, young people and families have the highest levels of average gift at £13.11.

Scott Gray, the Managing Director of Rapidata Services who collect this information, commented on the observed trends:

> *'We might see this donor behaviour in collectivist terms as generous and empathetic. Key findings … showed that happier nations, not necessarily wealthier ones, are likely to donate greater amounts to charity, that helping strangers was the main way in which the world as a whole (forty-five per cent) gives to charity and that globally, the older we get, the more likely we are to give to charity.'*

Such forms of generosity by British people, both in terms of monetary donations and the giving of time for voluntary work, were reflected in the comments of our focus group participants. One stressed that his busy working life meant that he was unable to devote time to voluntary work but was happy to contribute money:

> *'For me I give financially rather than in terms of time. I have got a lot on at work and with college and everything else it would be too much. I would like to do stuff, but at the moment it is just not practical.'*

In contrast, a retired female participant said:

> *'It is easier for me to give in time now because I am retired. I work two afternoons a week in an Oxfam shop and I value their collectible books for them at home sometimes. I have always believed in – I am not sure "giving something back" is the right phrase … giving in terms of time, effort and money. One of the nicest things I did recently was to sponsor a guide dog for the blind. It didn't cost that much and you get updates on this puppy … I think that is part of life, being concerned about things and being concerned about people outside yourself. The eighties were very "me, me, me" and I grew up in a time when you did think about what else was happening in the world and about*

5 See, for example, **Mol et al, 2006; Tankersley, et al, 2007**
6 World Giving Index, 2010

// I THINK THAT IS PART OF LIFE, BEING CONCERNED ABOUT THINGS AND BEING CONCERNED ABOUT PEOPLE OUTSIDE YOURSELF //

people who were less fortunate than yourself in a variety of ways. I have always been interested in that and I have got a lot from it as well.'

Others, and women in particular, stressed more the obligation to provide help at a local and familial level:

'I do really believe that charity begins at home. I think it is pointless giving money if you are not decent and helpful to people around you, especially with your time.'

'I'd rather sit with an old person for an hour than give five quid to the home they are living in. I know for a fact that that person wants to tell their stories to me and wants to have a chat. And actually I get a lot out of that. The older people that I know like having those conversations with people.'

Taking a rather different line, the men talked more about the direct debits they had taken out in order to support large charities:

'I have got two direct debits that go out for every month; one to Cancer Research and one to Amnesty.'

'I have got a [direct] debit to Marie Curie and give a little bit every month. I don't feel like I have got an awful lot of time, whereas ten years ago I used to do some numeracy tuition, which was unpaid, helping people who have some difficulty with numbers. Hopefully in the future I will have more time to give.'

There were also concerns expressed in the focus groups about how much of the monetary donations actually reached the intended recipients of aid, as opposed to being swallowed up in administration and salary costs:

'Half the battle with people is the apathy: "What's the point in doing that because

you know half of it is going to go somewhere else?" If it was absolutely visible that say eighty per cent was going to a good cause then people would actually give more.'

The rewards that come from engaging in charitable acts were understated in the group. The emphasis was on the benefits to the recipients of altruism whether in monetary terms or as a result of active assistance through donated time and effort. One participant, however, had mentioned that he had done 'some woodwork for the local preschool and … saved them from the expense of hiring someone else to do it'. Another participant asked: 'Did you feel better for doing that for them?' 'Yes', he replied, 'you are right, I probably did – maybe some "philanthropic gain"'. This notion of 'philanthropic gain' is an interesting one that confirms much of psychological theory that addresses the issue of altruism.

3.3 CHARITY – THE MASONS' VIEW

In our early discussions with the Grand Secretary he made what seemed to us to be an interesting observation on the role of charity within Freemasonry:

'To be absolutely clear, it's not Freemasonry that is doing any good in the community, because … it's not a political movement and it has no influence. I'd rather you looked at it the other way around. Is a person in their community playing a full part? Whether in a big city or a rural community, is that decent person playing a full part in his community? [You are likely to get quite a range of responses] from absolutely zero contribution to quite big ones because you have got the full gamut. He may be a church warden, run committees, or be in the parish council and that sort of thing. Generally speaking we have got these decent persons living amongst their communities, and … amongst the many things they belong to, they happen to be a mason.'

This gentle underplaying of the role of Freemasonry as a 'charitable' organisation is understandable, even though one of its central tenets or 'virtues' is the notion of 'relief' – 'charitable giving and activities to assist the welfare of Freemasons and the community as a whole'. The emphasis is placed on the role and moral responsibility of the individual, rather than on the organisation per se.

The Freemasons' Grand Charity, which receives little attention in the popular media, donates roughly half of its income to non-masonic causes at international, national and local community levels. It is, depending on who you listen to, either the second or third biggest contributor to charity after the National Lottery. The important factor here, however, is that the money comes 'out of masons' own pockets' and not from 'tin-rattling' or other fund-raising activities. And they appear to benefit from knowing how their own money is spent.

Some masons took the view that this opportunity to have a direct and personal hand in philanthropic causes was one of the reasons that they had joined the organisation in the first place. The Grand Secretary, however, thought that the issue was a little more complex:

'You will find that talking to members, the easiest thing [for them to] talk about is charity. Yet they didn't join to give to charity … one of the main things is that we are looking for people who are gentlemen (that is not a social grading) who consider the needs of others. And therefore when you join you have a natural progress in that thought process – thinking of the needs of others you would then think of charitable things, both

GIVING MONEY IS EASY, BUT GIVING IT TO THE RIGHT PERSON CAN BE A LITTLE MORE DIFFICULT. WHAT I DO NOT WANT IS THE PROBLEM OF MAKING THAT CHOICE. IF I GIVE IT TO THE MASONS THEN I KNOW WHERE IT IS GOING

> *in the sense of physical money, which comes out of their own pocket because we don't do any fund-raising, as well as giving time and expertise.'*

The issue of charity, then, is seen as being one that is developed by Freemasonry and its emphasis on moral codes and 'truth and integrity', rather than being the uppermost attraction of the organisation from the outset. One mason commented:

> *'I didn't come across the charitable side until after I joined.'*

Another, however, had recognised the attraction of the charitable side of being a mason, but in a broader context:

> *'And [charity] is another thing that attracted me to [Freemasonry]. It is easy to give in Freemasonry because we enjoy ourselves at the same time.'*

In our interviews with masons across the country members frequently referred to the opportunities that the organisation provided not only to give but, at the same time, know where their money was going. One commented:

> *'Giving money to charity – giving money is easy, but giving it to the right person can be a little more difficult. What I do not want is the problem of making that choice. If I give it to the masons then I know where it is going. They publish every year who they donate to and they don't charge for that; there is no administration fee.'*

Another emphasised:

> *'The nice thing about giving to charity through Freemasonry is that it's very well run, it's very well organised and you know that any money you give, even small amounts, is more likely to have a greater impact at the end of the line than it*

might be if you give it to a collection box on the street, which has all the associated administration costs.'

Some masons also emphasised the speed of delivery of their contributions to the recipients:

'The other powerful thing about it is the speed with which the money can be applied. Everything is done on the basis of trust. Because we trust each other in the way that we apply the money, we were able to deliver £75,000 the day after the tsunami hit and to the worst affected area.'

Others put the whole issue of charity in a much broader perspective:

'I also have the belief that you need to give back to society as well. Freemasonry is a way in which you can give back to society ... To be honest, I like going to [lodge name]; we eat well, we dine well, we drink well and there is a good bunch of people. It makes that whole part of the process more enjoyable. It is a combination of these factors which "rolled up" makes it a good path for me to choose and in which to give to society. I know, like all the people that have come through [school name], that we have all come from extremely privileged backgrounds and I was always brought up, way before Freemasonry was a part of my life, with the philosophy that it is important to give back to society. I find it a good way to fulfil that.'

Other masons sought to challenge the notion that 'masons only look after themselves', pointing to their increasing involvement in the wider community. One noted:

'This has been happening more in the past ten to fifteen years where non-masonic causes have been supported. From the centre we run about a dozen mobility scooters. What we are doing now is offering these to people in real need outside of Freemasonry.'

'I am also involved with Freemasonry in the Community ... we do functions and projects for senior citizens, Christmas parties. We also take disabled children to the railway centre. It is all funded by the Province and we have been doing it for some years. People are getting to hear about this and … all of a sudden people are coming up to me and thanking me for giving their mum a good day out. Slowly it is going out, not just through the media but through people talking. You get a bit of a buzz out of it.'

Many masons, of course, felt that their charitable activities were largely unrecognised by the general public:

'The problem with Freemasonry and the bad press, in my opinion, is that nobody tells anybody anything about it … You take the Round Table, every day you hear something about somebody giving something to charity from the Round Table. The Freemasons give far more, but we keep quiet about it and we don't raise money from other people, it is our own money. I have never sold a raffle ticket to any one of my friends outside … Freemasonry to raise money. The good publicity that Round Table gets for raising money for charity we don't benefit from because we don't advertise the fact.'

There was a general consensus that 'boasting' about charitable work was not the Freemasons' way:

'I think it [giving to charity] is one of the most important parts of Freemasonry. Another thing about it is that it is not advertised charity giving … We give second only to the National Lottery. It is highly important because you are practising aid to your brothers in life and you are helping other people. It is one of the key principles ... I think they have got the balance about right. Freemasonry has opened sufficiently, let's say, to allay some people's fears as to what

it is there for, but has kept enough humility behind it not to shout from the rooftops.'

The Grand Secretary also stressed the need for an element of modesty surrounding masons' charitable activities …

'… as a mason you don't do anything for personal gain or for praise; you don't give to anyone to receive a knighthood or anything like that.'

Other masons, however, would like greater recognition of the organisations' philanthropic role, while not advocating 'shouting it from the rooftops':

'The people that I have been involved with in masonry would not like to go down the street shaking a can. We are proud of the money that we raise among our own ranks. I think it is better now that we are telling the outside [about] money that we are raising … I get the Grand Charity report every year and … they list each and every one and I think it was nearly £6-7 million. When there is an earthquake or a disaster we are among the first to send money and nobody knows it. Half a million [went] to Haiti … [and] not a word is said and I would like to see more of that in the newspapers: "United Grand Lodge of England sent..." That doesn't happen.'

WITHOUT AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANINGS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL ACTS WE CAN NEVER EXPLAIN SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR OR CAPTURE THE TRUE ESSENCE OF WHAT IT IS TO BE A SOCIAL BEING

4 RITUAL

One element that distinguishes Freemasonry from almost all other social groups in Britain, with the exception of organised religious services, is ritual. For many non-masons this dominates their perception of Freemasonry. But masonic rituals extend much further than in most other contexts; symbolic behaviours and texts characterise each step through which a novice will pass in his *rites de passage* to becoming a Master Mason. He will learn by heart and be required to recite quite lengthy allegorical tales and acquire full knowledge of the symbolic exchanges in which he will engage with his brothers.[1] All of which may seem out of place in our 'modern' twenty-first century society – a relic of former times, perhaps even simple superstition.

Such a view, however, fails to acknowledge the extent to which everyday life involves repeated symbolic exchanges and the extent to which it is, in essence, ritualised. This is now, by and large, recognised as a truism in the social sciences. Without an understanding of the meanings associated with social acts we can never explain social behaviour or capture the true nature of what it is to be a social being. The strand of social science known as symbolic interactionism first developed in the 1930s in the work of Herbert Blumer[2] who placed great emphasis on the notion that 'human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of merely reacting to them. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning that they attach to such actions.'

This focus on the meaning of behaviours, rather than on the physical acts themselves, led others, most significantly Erving Goffman, to recapture a sentiment expressed so eloquently by William Shakespeare in *As You Like It* three and a half centuries earlier:

> *'All the world's a stage,*
> *And all the men and women merely players:*
> *They have their exits and their entrances;*
> *And one man in his time plays many parts.'*

Goffman's most significant book in this context is appropriately titled *Interaction Ritual* – a collection of essays that begins with *On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction*. Here he argues:

> *'Every person lives in a world of social encounters involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants. In each of these contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a line – that is a pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself.'*

There is much emphasis in Goffman's work on the notion of 'face' – in terms of the personas that we present to other people with whom we interact and the need to 'save face' in various encounters. But at the heart of his perspective is the recognition of the ritualised nature of the taken-for-granted, seemingly trivial elements of social interaction that are, in reality, anything but trivial. Take, for example, the familiar rituals of greeting. We say 'good morning' without an expectation of the judgement of 'good' being challenged by the person to whom we have addressed the phrase. Similarly a 'how are you' is not a question – a serious enquiry into one's medical condition – but one form of greeting that is an essential precursor for other exchanges and interactions.

We can see other rituals in almost all aspects of our everyday social behaviour. The ways in which we express status, deference and demeanour through subtle non-verbal behaviours ranging from posture to the direction of eye gaze are symbolic exchanges that are tacitly understood rather than consciously recognised. We are aware of the tightly defined rules that underlie the rituals only when we or others are in breach of them – situations in which emotions ranging from

1 We do not intend to describe in any detail the masonic rituals associated with initiation and progress through the Degrees. There are, however, numerous accounts of precisely what happens in these ceremonies, including Tobias Churton's *Freemasonry: The Reality*.

2 Blumer's most significant work, however, came later in the 1960s with the publication of his *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*.

embarrassment to anger are likely to result. People who are unable or unwilling to engage in the prescribed symbolic exchanges are those who become outcasts – either seen as asocial or just 'peculiar'.

The ubiquity of ritual in everyday life is even more apparent in the social occasions and ceremonies with which we mark the transitions of those around us – marriages, births, achievements, death and so on. They are also writ large in the calendrical rituals of organised religion – Easter, Christmas and, in keeping with the multi-cultural world in which we now live, Eid and Diwali. While the majority of British people increasingly lack a strong commitment towards church attendance or even towards a formal religious belief, we still feel a need to engage in the rituals associated with what are, ostensibly, hallmarks of Christianity, although in many cases a remodelling of earlier pre-Christian, pagan ceremonies. In each of these we reaffirm our social and familial bonds through symbolic exchanges of gifts and tokens, shared foods and time out from the equally routine and ritualised life of work or formal education.

Elsewhere in the world ritual ceremonies stand out more visibly because of their strangeness to Western eyes. The Japanese Tea Ceremony, or *Way of Tea*, is for us an almost impenetrable series of ritual acts centred around aching knees from crouching and the consumption of powdered green tea. In fact it is a collective celebration of *Wabi* – humility and restraint, quiet and sober refinement, subdued taste and the recognition of beauty in the simplicity of unadorned objects.

The initiation rituals and those that mark the rites of passage of young men in traditional societies from the status of child to that of adult similarly strike us as 'primitive' and 'foreign'. And yet the baptisms, christenings, bar mitzvahs, weddings and funeral occasions with which we are more familiar have not only similar symbolic roots (although less dramatic) but also similar functions. Even in many forms of common registry office weddings the question is asked, 'Who gives this woman?' – it is normally the bride's father who declares 'I do' – and in the most formal ceremonies the couple recite the rehearsed phrase: 'To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.' Like all rituals, however, the marriage vows have evolved to accord with modern-day notions of correctness. It is now very rare, for example, for a bride to promise to 'honour and obey' her husband.

4.1 RITUALS AND ROUTINES – THE PUBLIC VIEW

On top of all these kinds of ceremonial rituals there are 'private' rituals – seemingly little things that we do in order, sometimes to achieve a specific end result, but often because of the sense of security that it brings. We explored some of these types of ritual in our focus groups. One man said:

> *'I was in the Royal Navy and going to the bathroom on a ship, in a confined space, you more or less had to carry out your bathing and shaving, cleaning your teeth in a certain order. It was almost like a process, a line which allowed the maximum number of people to pass through this process. I still clean my teeth, shave and shower in the same order although it fulfils no function.'*

Another emphasised the sense of comfort that rituals provided:

> *'To some extent it makes us feel more comfortable if we are able to keep a ritual. I feel very uncomfortable if rituals are disrupted.'*

A female participant offered a rather more superstitious example:

'Like an interview procedure, you might think that unless you do something or wear a particular pair of shoes it will not go well if you are not doing that. That is a ritual thing that you may have created. There is an assumption that your ritual is going to serve you better.'

Others in the group referred to their experiences of previous religious rituals and the links that these had with their present-day activities:

'I do have a Christian background, though I am not a practising Christian now, but I do remember very fondly worship lessons and the euphoria and the unity you get from that experience, of shared experience, of just that action ... I go to Tottenham Hotspur and I get a similar feeling of euphoria.'

For a number of other focus group participants it was getting to sleep easily at night that required ritualistic preparations. One man said:

'I think it is to do with getting a regular pattern because I have problems sometimes not sleeping; maybe my mind doesn't shut down so easily sometimes. I would do everything in the same order. I would go upstairs, get a water bottle. While I was getting the water bottle I would switch the bed-side light and the radio on. Then I will go back downstairs, come back up and read. It is roughly the same time [every night] I am in. I will try to do things at the same time and in the same order to get into the right frame of mind for sleep. I think it is a ritual and I recognise it as such.'

A woman said she had similar routines:

'Mine is similar. I have sleep apnoea, which I discovered a few years ago. The ritual is the going to sleep part. Mine is that I turn the radio on; it always has to be talk radio because music I concentrate on. Then I turn it down and I read [until] I just start nodding off. Then I put the book down and then I turn the radio up a bit and go to sleep with the radio on. Once I was abroad in a hotel and I had forgotten to bring something to read and I actually couldn't fall asleep. In desperation I actually got the Chicago phone book and I opened it, trying to be very calm and started reading entries.'

Rituals associated with sleeping seem to be surprisingly common across all walks of life and seem to indicate the need for a sense of security, provided by repeated actions, before the element of tranquillity required for proper sleep is achieved.

There are, however, many other aspects of our lives where fixed routines – though perhaps lacking the symbolism of true rituals – are seen as being essential to the performance of seemingly trivial tasks. One female focus group participant recounted:

'I have loads of rituals; everything. At work, as soon as I get through the door. I have rituals before I go out at night. I usually have them going through my head ... I am quite forgetful, so doing things in a certain order – it helps me remember things. Like when I go swimming I have a certain way of packing my rucksack, which to me is a ritual. I count everything as I am putting it into the bag. I have a little purse that is only used for the ten pence for the locker. Before I go out I always have an espresso in a certain little cup before I leave the house. Then you obviously have the ritual of your make-up, which all goes on in a certain order. Doing your hair, laying out your clothes before you get into the shower ...'

For others in the groups, and men in particular, it was engagement in sport that was surrounded by the most ritualistic aspects of their lives:

> *'When I go to the gym I dress in a particular order all the time. When I play sport I approach things in the same way ... I have got a lot of superstitions about sport; a certain way of doing things. You see it on TV, people talking about superstitions and it just gets into your head that if you break that cycle then it is going to come back at you. It is just silly little things like tying your shoelaces, or putting on your shin pads.'*

There is, of course, a distinction to be drawn here between ritual and superstition. A ritual is a form of behaviour or set of actions that a sportsman or sportswoman performs in the belief that they have a specific purpose or power to influence their performance. A superstition, on the other hand, is something that is mostly gained through hindsight – a favourable result was obtained after a certain action or set of actions were performed – and these are repeated in the expectation that these too will result in a similarly favourable outcome. Despite these distinctions, however, most people, including our focus group participants, use the terms more or less interchangeably.

There is also a distinction to be made between rituals and routines, even though many people again merge the two together. As Barbara Fiese[3] and her colleagues argue, routines lack the emotional elements of rituals and, once they are completed, there is little or nothing in the way of afterthought or emotional residue. After the performance of rituals, on the other hand, people tend to replay the actions in their minds and relive the emotions that they have experienced. Routines, however, have the potential to become rituals when they move from being purely functional behaviours to largely symbolic acts. In the sports example above, this would seem to be the case since the routines are often performed when they have failed to achieve the functional outcomes associated with them – e.g. tying shoelaces in a particular way to achieve a win. At this stage they are purely symbolic of the individuals' belief in themselves as effective players.

The association of sport and rituals, of course, extends beyond the players to the far more numerous supporters, especially in Britain in the context of football. Here the repeated symbolic actions of the fans – in the form of chants, gestures, etc. – serve to create a highly emotional atmosphere in which the bonds between those involved are further strengthened. The collective clapping to a specific rhythm is often synchronised to a remarkable degree – to within one sixty-fourth of a second – and symbolically communicates the strength of bonds within the group to opposing fans.[4]

Many more mundane rituals, of course, have a similarly deep social characteristic, as in the case of the weddings and the calendrical ceremonies we have mentioned earlier. We have also noted the seminal work of Erving Goffman who draws attention to the ritualistic nature of everyday encounters. Focus group participants also referred to these Goffman-esque elements of our lives:

> *'Your dress, whatever you do, you always think about what you are going to wear. There are rituals now which we didn't use to have. When you meet someone who you don't necessarily know that well there is the double kissing. That is interesting and quite nice in a way. There are some rituals which I would probably just call tact; not jumping in when you first meet somebody, holding back until you get to know people and getting into a rhythm which seems right.'*

One participant referred to the more visible example of ritual in Japanese society:

> *'There are those rituals in Japanese business where they come to work in the morning, do some yoga or whatever it is, kick off their day motivated together.'*

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3 **Fiese, B. et al (2001); Fiese, B. et al (2002)**
4 See for example, **Marsh, P. et al (1978)**

// EVEN AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, OUR NEED FOR SYMBOLIC EXCHANGES THAT REINFORCE SOCIAL BONDS REMAIN AS EVIDENT AS EVER //

Others commented on those situations where the social rules are less clear and where ritualistic behaviours serve to clarify them:

> *'There are rituals around uneasiness, where you go around to people's houses and stand around and wait to be offered a seat or a drink. You stand there not entirely sure what they think is appropriate.'*

It is clear, then, that symbolic action, rather than purely functional behaviour, is deeply entrenched in both everyday life and what we might term 'special occasions'. Through childhood socialisation and transition towards adulthood we learn the meaning and significance of forms of interaction without which we cannot survive in any society as competent social beings. The calendrical rituals that are the hallmarks of all known societies, both traditional and modern, serve to reinforce family and friendship bonds and reinforce notions of social identity in a very precise and concrete way.

Today, of course, we also have Facebook and other forms of online social networking where equally formalised exchanges are evident – even the coded language of texting and tweeting that largely excludes those who stubbornly cling to technophobia. But social network sites do not *replace* more traditional face-to-face encounters. Nor has the mobile phone, despite cries to the contrary, destroyed the art of conversation. Rather, both, in their own ritualised ways, serve to *facilitate* social interaction and a sense of belonging. The most common form of text message, for example, is along the lines of 'Will u b in kings arms at 8.30ish?'

Even at the cutting edge of twenty-first century information and communication technologies, our need for symbolic exchanges that reinforce social bonds remains as evident as ever. The rituals of everyday life as well as the more visible symbolism of 'special occasions' live

on through additional media and forms of communication. At heart is the same fundamental human need – just expressed a little differently.

If rituals are so evident in all walks of human life, to what extent, then, are masonic rituals different from those in which we all engage? Are they just extensions of a basic human, social and cultural need for symbolic exchange or somehow different?

4.2 RITUAL – THE MASONS' VIEW

Most people are familiar with the composition of at least some aspects of masonic ritual. Rarely, however, do they have much insight into their symbolic functions and meanings. But why are these rituals present and what purpose do they serve?

In the Grand Secretary's words:

> *'The ceremonial side is really one of our great differentiators, but … they are just plays … and they are rather nice plays … they are parables …'*

He added:

> *'… they are completely open to the public. You can have copies of them. You can go across the road and buy them. There's nothing secret [about them].'*

In a real sense the masonic rituals are theatrical versions of initiation rites that have always characterised our societies and continue into the present day. In traditional societies, even those that have achieved a degree of acculturation to Western norms, initiations marking the transitions from boyhood to manhood are still enacted.

In our interviews with masons all over the country we focused on the ritual aspects of life within the lodges. To what extent did their previous perceptions of masonic ritual attract them into the Craft in the first place? Or was the potential for increased social networking and bonding a more significant reason for their joining?

Perhaps surprisingly, it was the younger masons who put the greatest emphasis on the rituals, seeing them as a distinct pull of Freemasonry from the beginning. One made a comment that was typical of many:

> *'What I was aware of was a little bit of pomp, theatrics going on. My life was very casual; open-neck shirts, jeans, t-shirts. The simple fact of the matter is that people like getting dressed up. There are people in this lodge that really don't like the pomp and ceremony, but I am completely the opposite, I like that. It probably was, at one point, a factor that was driving me towards the armed forces and one of the reasons that I went into one of the cadet corps. If I am going out for a night and I can get away with wearing black tie then I will. I like the pomp and ceremony, turning out looking smart and making the effort.'*

For at least some youngish men there is a perceived need for a degree of formality or 'pomp' in the otherwise informal and casual worlds that they inhabit. As the more formal rituals of British life decay – think of the church, dressing for dinner, putting on one's 'Sunday best', etc. – the opportunities to meet in a group, dress up and act out what are essentially allegorical stories and moral tales become, for some, a distinct attraction.

The emphasis on the role of ritual and its value to many of them was expressed very clearly:

'Rituals, where do we start? The language of the rituals is very old fashioned and, to an extent, you have to have an educated mind to investigate the language and make sense of what [it is] saying. They use words that are not common English … We have got this two hour ritual which you sit and you watch time and again and you start to learn what the ritual is trying to tell you. If you were to meet someone who had come into the lodge six months ago they would probably tell you that they have no idea what is going on … You listen to the words over and over again and a keen mind will analyse them. The rituals, as they were explained to me, are more of a teaching about how you can lead a good life and how you can learn more about yourself.'

This point about the underlying purpose of the ritual – the transmission of moral codes – was highlighted by many other masons. Within a form of play-acting that may seem unusual to outsiders, there was a meaning that made the whole business worthwhile and rewarding. Above all, there was a sense of 'becoming a better person':

'The ritual changes you. You hear the story, and the first time maybe you don't understand it, then you go behind it. You listen to the story over and over again and there is the whole symbolism of Freemasonry; the words that are spoken, the reasons why people do certain things and say certain things. They all have a purpose … central to all that is to make you a better man. It brings up the good things in you.'

It was in this section of the interviews that masons tended to become the most articulate. Perhaps their experience of learning by rote complex and rather arcane phrases and dialogues was responsible for this and a number said that the experience of engaging in masonic ritual had given them a greater sense of confidence in, for example, business presentations or public speaking.

The transformation into a 'better man' or 'more confident speaker' was not, however, something that happened overnight – nor indeed from simple passage through the Degrees. It tended to come after the dramaturgical aspects and on later reflection on what the antique phrases that they had learned to utter actually meant:

'Once the words have sunk in then maybe people will start looking for the meaning and actually get something out of the meaning. That certainly happened in my case. I studied the ritual and I looked for words and phrases and even now there are things coming out that you were unaware of, or you didn't know the real definition. You think: "I've said that so many times but I didn't realise it meant that." People [who] think they might be bored by the "same old ritual" are obviously not looking into it.'

Another commented:

'There is an amazing sense of accomplishment when you have done your part. You have been able to impart your knowledge to the candidate and equally, everyone else will have played their part in the ceremony … Equally, the ritual still teaches you things every time you are involved. I don't think there is a single meeting from which I have come away without thinking: "I am sure I have heard that before, but not quite in that light." Or it has been explained in a different way. You are constantly thinking about what each part of the ritual means. The ritual is there because it is supposed to teach us, using various allegories and stories, a moral code. There is always an underlying current of what it is trying to teach you and what can you learn from it.'

For others, however, while acknowledging the meanings and moral components of the ritual,

the reward came more from the drama aspects:

'... there's a sort of enjoyable, dramatical side to ritual. In terms of substance, it's serious and it's teaching serious elements of morality, but it's also got an enjoyable aspect in the sense that it is allegorical, it's a form of entertainment almost; it's even more enjoyable because you can actually get involved, touch and feel ...'

Another mason, who holds a senior office in a university lodge, also highlighted the sense of drama in masonic ritual and emphasised its appeal to younger members:

'The ritual is a strange, seductive thing. As an outsider you would wonder at this. As an intelligent man you would say, "This is extraordinary!" And yet I see these [undergraduates] come into masonry and they love it. And they compete with each other in a sort of serious game. They throw in stray words in the ritual to catch each other out. And then the other will come back with another one. It is like going to a West End play with an eminent cast ... because they play with the script without spoiling it for the audience.'

Supporting this view, but pointing out the meanings behind the dramaturgical elements, another mason said:

'The drama in ritual is instructive and it is unique ... I think also that with any type of new learning it can often be the way that it is delivered as much as what is delivered that is important. With any initiation rites in any society there is the actual "carrying out" of the initiation rite which is the main thing; it is not the content of the initiation rite, it is the joining in together and all sharing that experience – and having the confidence to know that every single person in the room, or in the group, has been through that experience. And what a wonderful ice-breaker as well.'

Such comments often led to wider discussions about what, if anything, in Freemasonry needed to change if it is to have broader appeal in the twenty-first century, an issue to which we return in Section 5 of this report.

While it was clear that for some masons the ritual and the rote learning it required were a bit of a chore, and that the main attraction of the Craft lay elsewhere, some emphasised pride in their lodge's competence in conducting the rituals. They referred to other lodges that they had visited as being a bit 'sloppy' in this context.

'I go to some [other] lodge meetings and there they are with a book. They are carrying out the ceremony and they are reading it all! They are saying: "I've got too many other things that I need to concentrate on so I just haven't got the time to spend learning the actual words." Hopefully they are, at least, learning what is behind the words.'

It is important to note that throughout its nearly three hundred years of organised history, Freemasonry has welcomed into membership men of all faiths, and that religious discussion is prohibited during meetings. It is quietly proud that in times when non-Christians were discriminated against in public and social life Freemasonry welcomed them into its lodges.

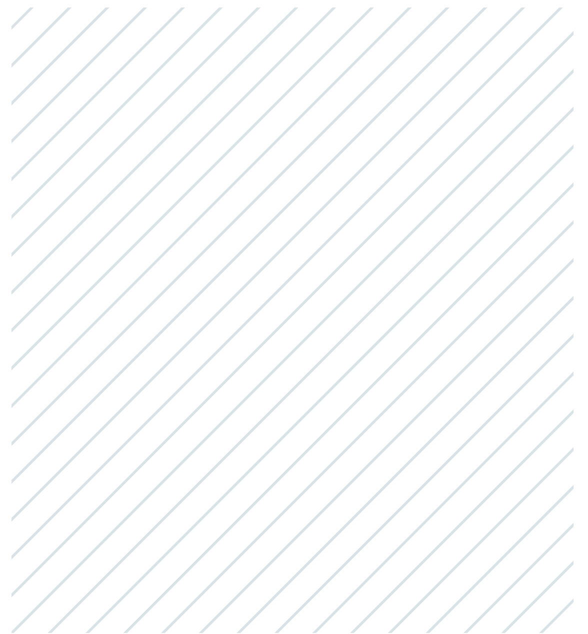
For most of its history Freemasonry claims to have enjoyed good relations with organised religion, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, which first banned its members from joining Freemasonry by a Papal Bull issued in 1737. The basis of that ban was the supposed secrecy of Freemasonry and the existence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of many quasi-masonic groups which were anti-clerical but, in fact, had no connections with regular Freemasonry.

In the twentieth century there was a growing movement against Freemasonry within the Evangelical wings of the Anglican and non-

THROUGHOUT ITS NEARLY THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF ORGANISED HISTORY, FREEMASONRY HAS WELCOMED INTO MEMBERSHIP MEN OF ALL FAITHS

conformist churches. By selectively quoting, and occasionally misquoting, sections of ritual out of their proper context they claimed that Freemasonry was a religion offering salvation by 'good works', that in not referring to Jesus Christ it was anti-Christian, that using vocatives such as the Great Architect of the Universe to refer to God is evidence that Freemasons worshiped a separate masonic god.

Freemasonry vehemently denies such charges, pointing out that it lacks the basic elements of religion. It has no theological doctrine. It offers no sacraments. Nonetheless, it is a requirement for entering Freemasonry that one subscribes to a belief in a 'divine being'. While a number of masons are active members of religious congregations from a number of faiths – the majority expressed little strong commitment in this context. They recognised that much masonic ritual involves quasi-religious teachings and the Volume of the Sacred Law (VSL) that features prominently in the Degrees is, in England, most often referred to as the King James Bible. They also drew a sharp distinction between lodge and church.



5 THE FUTURE OF FREEMASONRY

We have seen that Freemasonry has, at its root, moral precepts and modes of conduct that are far from being at odds with mainstream society. Few would question the organisation's emphasis on fellowship and affiliation and the desire of individual masons to be 'the best people they can be' – a desire which often manifests itself through the voluntary work that many undertake, supporting the less advantaged members of their communities. We have also seen that the ritual and ceremonial aspects of Freemasonry that distinguish it from organisations such as the Round Table are also not so detached from everyday life as they may at first appear. Routine social interactions, the way we address people, the manner in which we express deference and demeanour and present our personas are, in all human societies, highly ritualised. The masonic rituals are perhaps more elaborate than we experience in everyday social and family life. They take the form of one act plays – each of which allegorically relates moral precepts and ways of behaving in relation to others. They are, in a very real sense, akin to parables – largely fictitious stories that highlight important issues such as the need for forgiveness or using money wisely.

What then, is the future of Freemasonry and what else might it do to finally put to rest the myths that have persisted for so long, and to ensure that its relevance in contemporary society is more easily recognised and understood? We put these questions to the masons that we interviewed.

An area of consensus was evident that highlighted the organisation's new chapter of openness and transparency that was being championed at the very highest levels of the organisation. There was also strong evidence that this spirit of openness was filtering down to 'ordinary' masons across the country who are increasingly happy to declare their membership when they feel that it is relevant to do so. They also stressed that they were equally motivated to introduce local communities to their lodges and to play a wider role in their neighbourhoods.

> *'Freemasonry needs to open itself to the wider community, to be more transparent about why we exist. We need to accept that there are certain things that some might regard as peculiar or different about Freemasons. The key is to make people aware that we bring good to society … we need to highlight the things that are happening in Freemasonry today ... all the good things we do for society and all the help we offer the local communities. We have started to open up, but we have to do more and it has to be more present.'*

Such sentiments were emphasised by other masons, but with reservations about changing too much too fast. This comment was very typical:

> *'I think that we should be slightly more open and try and get people to understand what we do and perhaps maybe encourage some to join. There are some good people out there … some of them would make jolly good masons. That's something I think we could look [at] in the future. Apart from that I am reasonably happy with it the way it is.'*

There was some concern expressed about losing Freemasonry's distinctive character as the organisation 'modernises' and in particular the need to preserve its unique rituals and traditions:

> *'It gives a feeling of timelessness to it. It is something that is a little more substantial than some of the fashions and the fads that you see around.'*

> *'One of the strengths of Freemasonry is the maintenance of its traditions and the fact that it doesn't change too fast. That provides an order.'*

FREEMASONRY HAS, AT ITS ROOT, MORAL PRECEPTS AND MODES OF CONDUCT THAT ARE FAR FROM BEING AT ODDS WITH MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

'I was enthralled by [lodge name], its history and its ritual. It has got an extremely rich history.'

'I would not like to change the ritual.'

'I think there is definite merit in retaining some of the mystique.'

There was a similarly strong consensus regarding the retention of the core tenets of Freemasonry in order to preserve its distinctiveness:

'Brotherly love, relief and truth is about honesty ... you can't compromise over the central tenets of Freemasonry. That's its strength.'

On the other hand, there was equal concern about the relevance and attractiveness of Freemasonry to today's younger generation of men:

'The only concern I have got … is that some of the other lodges have got a lot of older members and they are not getting the new recruits.'

Some masons thought that the problem with time commitments could be overcome:

'A fellow member and I were having a discussion at our last meeting and I think he was talking about trying to get lodge meetings to [occur] at lunchtime to give the young people, particularly those who are working, the ability to attend – to give them more opportunities to turn up on a regular basis.'

To help overcome this particular issue, a nationwide mentoring scheme was introduced two years ago, a key part of what senior masons see as the organisation's 'quiet revolution' of modernisation, designed to encourage the progression and participation of new members. In the scheme younger members are provided with continuing support and guidance from more experienced masons acting as dedicated mentors as they progress through the various degree stages. There was evidence of the success of the scheme from the reduction in new members leaving within the first two or three years. There was also evidence of the mentoring scheme's value coming from the members themselves.

As we consider the broader future of Freemasonry, it is perhaps useful to take a look back to the early eighteenth century, in which UGLE was formed. British society, of course, was very different. This was the Age of Reason – a time when the superstitions of the Middle Ages were being replaced by more rational forms of argument and debate and consideration of religious tenets. It was also a time of rapid progress in the natural sciences. The field of astrology, for example, was being gradually replaced by that of astronomy – a genuinely scientific approach to understanding the workings of the cosmos that went far beyond religious and secular dogmas. Isaac Newton, said by many to be a mason himself, was still alive and his influential *Principia Mathematica* was in wide circulation. The new spirit of scientific enquiry would shortly be evident in the works of leading scholars such as Henry Cavendish and Michael Faraday. Similar moves away from 'old school thinking' were evident in philosophy which became almost synonymous with 'scientific' thought in the Age of Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century. Central to this school were notions of freedom, democracy and, above all, *reason* that stood as challenges to literal biblical interpretations and notions such as the 'Divine Right of Kings'. Notions of true morality were now, perhaps for the first time, open to genuine debate.

Today, of course, we take science and rationalism for granted in a new age of unprecedented technological innovation

THE MASONIC LODGE WAS A REFUGE OF PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY AT A TIME OF POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY, WHEN THE MEMORY OF RELIGIOUS WARFARE WAS FRESH IN THE MEMORY OF ALL MEN

and development. In the eighteenth century, however, the turmoil that accompanied the new order, following the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century, and at a time when the United Kingdom was barely a decade old, was more strongly felt. The 'modern' Freemasonry that was established by the UGLE, in which the 'Antients' who had initially rejected its authority were soon to be integrated, provided what some historians see as a 'safe haven' for free thinkers. For example, the Chilean/Israeli masonic historian Leon Zeldis concludes:

> *'The masonic lodge was a refuge of peace and tranquillity at a time of political uncertainty, when the memory of religious warfare was fresh in the memory of all men, when the first discoveries and inventions were transforming the economy, and opening new perspectives of progress, when the hope that rationality and humanism would banish from the hearts of men the evils of fanaticism and intolerance.'*

These sentiments have clear – and perhaps even greater – resonance in the present day. Sadly, examples of 'fanaticism and intolerance' are all around us, in the form of extremist and sectarian acts of violence around the world, highlighted all too frequently by the international media. Events too throughout much of the Middle East remind us on a daily basis of the fragility of political orders based on dogma and elitism rather than notions of freedom, democracy and reason. Transformations in our own economic order – some positive, others quite disastrous – are even more directly felt. All of which may lead us back to the role and relevance of Freemasonry, in the modern context.

As we noted earlier the Grand Secretary, Nigel Brown, emphasises:

> *'The joy of Freemasonry is that members come from all races, religions, all social*

economic levels of society. So actually you get a complete mix of people sitting next to each other in harmony and equality ... what other organisations can do that in a world that is full of conflict? The level of conflict in today's rapidly changing world is clear to see, and one can only hope the current turmoil will lead to a new, more stable and more peaceful world order.'

Such sentiments chime well with those of the Roosevelt Center for the study of Civil Society and Freemasonry in the United States:

'In the absence of noble public goals, respected leaders, and the respectful competition of ideas, there is concern of a fast eroding civil society or at least a civil society and public sphere changing in ways that need to be better understood.'

Looking at the past as a useful guide to explaining the present, the Center points out that:

'Freemasonry was there at the origins of modern civil society often as the only organization where there could be free discussion without fear of censorship and authoritarian control.'

The point is echoed by the UGLE Grand Secretary who argues that by avoiding discussion of politics, religion and business at lodge meetings, Freemasonry is a great leveller and can provide what he sees as being a valuable forum for open and honest discussion between friends, with no risk of recrimination. The Roosevelt Center goes further, suggesting Freemasonry can be a force for good in the context of societal development, insisting it can help lead discussion and debate – as well as listening – in participation with so many others around the world. It goes on to conclude:

'Freemasonry's traditional concern with comparative philosophy and thought, tolerance of others, philanthropy and good will, have a contribution to make in what has become a global dialogue, just as it made important contributions in the eighteenth century. At the same time Freemasonry has much to learn in engaging wider civil society as it did so well in the age of Enlightenment; drawing in and advancing ideas concerning print culture and the free and open flow of information.'

The organisation's continuing commitment to openness and transparency, an area in which there is evidence of significant progress, is as much key to its continuing relevance and value in the twenty-first century as it was in the eighteenth.

As we have seen elsewhere in this report, at an individual level, Freemasonry meets the timeless needs of people for a sense of affiliation and belonging. Masons argue strongly that this in itself makes the organisation more relevant than ever before, as it provides a unique combination of friendship and structure in our currently competitive and fragmented society. Being akin to a 'hobby', as the Grand Secretary describes it, rather than a vocation, it does not inhibit similarly strong bonds and a sense of belonging away from the lodges. And like any other membership organisation, its members are encouraged to place other needs – such as family, work and their community – above those of Freemasonry.

The relevance of Freemasonry's role – or rather that of the Freemasons themselves – in helping others through voluntary and charitable work, is equally strong. As the Grand Secretary points out:

'It is not Freemasonry itself that is doing good in the community, rather it is the individual "decent" members who are motivated to be concerned with the welfare of others, and who also happen to be masons.'

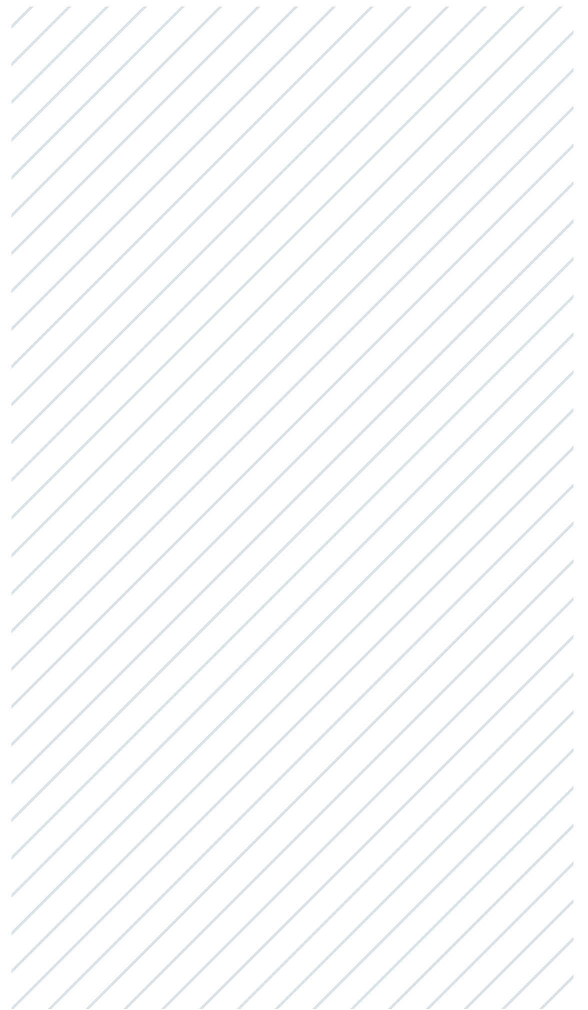
FREEMASONRY WAS THERE AT THE ORIGINS OF MODERN CIVIL SOCIETY OFTEN AS THE ONLY ORGANISATION WHERE THERE COULD BE FREE DISCUSSION WITHOUT FEAR OF CENSORSHIP AND AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL

It is, of course, possible that becoming a mason heightens awareness of those in need and encourages a more active role in the community, as many masons have reported. At a collective, rather than individual, level, Freemasonry makes very sizeable contributions to charity, with masons stressing that all the money raised comes straight from their own pockets rather than street collections or any other type of external fund-raising. Of the money raised by The Freemasons' Grand Charity, around half is donated to non-masonic causes at local, national and international levels.

The relevance and impact of such continuing benevolent activity needs to be viewed in the context of the current 'Big Society' initiative being pursued by the coalition government. Irrespective of one's political stance here, it is clear that this will result in a shrinking of the contribution of the state in many areas of people's lives, and a correspondingly increasing focus on the provision of services by third-sector organisations and through citizens being obliged to provide assistance to each other. This transformation is already being felt. An individual's sense of 'duty' or willingness to give time or money to help less advantaged people is not, however, something that can be socially engineered or achieved through political manipulation or legislation. It is something that emerges naturally through strong social or familial bonds with like-minded people who share common moral codes. It is in this sense that Freemasonry and its historical roots in humanistic benevolence and the rejection of intolerance arguably makes it more relevant in today's uncertain economic and social times, than it has ever been before.

What attracts masons to Freemasonry varies greatly, as we have seen earlier in this report. Some are attracted by the friendships they form and the sense of belonging it instils, others by the 'nudge' that Freemasonry provides towards living a more altruistic life. Others still will be attracted by the rituals of Freemasonry.

Much like the rituals themselves, however, Freemasonry may deserve a closer look in order to understand and appreciate it more fully, and its relevance and role today. If Freemasonry is able successfully to conclude its 'quiet revolution', while at the same time ensuring that its central features are retained to preserve the true 'spirit' of Freemasonry, then its future may well be assured – for the next century or two at least.



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