

## THOSE MISSING MASTER MASONS

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There is scarcely a Lodge in the land that does not suffer from the syndrome of the Missing Master Mason. It is the new(ish) Brother who no longer appears at meetings, junior brethren who do not turn up for practices, decline to take office and it reflects in the Lodge as a whole in recycled Past Masters going into the East again and increasing difficulty in finding a full list of officers or any candidates. The question is what to do about it, indeed if anything can be done. Most importantly it is essential to understand what is happening before deciding what to do. After all if you went to the doctors and he wrote you a prescription without asking any questions you would think he was doing a bad job. I think we all owe the Craft a bit of time to understand what is happening before leaping to conclusions and actions.

Some 15 years ago when I was Master of my English Mother Lodge I found no master mason who had been a warden to follow me. The Brethren all had different thoughts as to why but nobody had any facts - so I set out to find them.

Before I tell the tale there are sadly no Scottish figures because of the difficulty in getting good data from lodges with life members. It is however clear that across the English speaking world the number of men becoming masons has been falling since 1947-1950 and the decline has been slow and relentless. In England it is falling by 30% every decade.

There is a masonic urban myth that men joined in large numbers after the war to recapture the camaraderie of the armed forces. Not true! Numbers of initiates climbed from 1900 in a straight line to peak in 1920. It then decline till 1933 when it started growing in a straight line to around 1950. The figures shows no change in the rate of growth either during or just after the war. I grant you that total membership of the Craft grew and peaked in 1960 but that was simply the accumulation of 17 years of plenty of initiates. To make any assumption that "things will get back to normal" once those men have died is a conclusion without any basis in fact.

When I analysed figures for individual lodges by looking at how long men who became masons remained in the Craft before leaving or being excluded (forget about deaths as that is a pretty extreme was to decide to leave the Craft, rather more an act of god) I found that was over 20 years in 1950, by 1980 had fallen to just under 10 years and by the mid 1990s fallen to about 5 years. This same rate of attrition is taking place in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in fact across the English speaking world!

So we are getting a double whammy, fewer initiates and when we are less able to keep them for more than a few years. If it sounds bad in reality it is worse, just ask any member of a struggling lodge! We all have to accept that society has changed, is continuing to change and it is common knowledge that as members of society we are not joining as we used to - less going to church, less joining Rotary, school PTAs,

Womens Institutes and on and on. Freemasonry is no exception, indeed its members are all part of the same society.

The fact that we are increasingly unable to retain master masons means that they are not finding their masonry to be “value for a brothers time and money”. So it is that men come to masonry with ideas and expectations of what they will find or maybe having joined they find what lodge does is less than satisfying. Partly this is our fault but also it reflects a changed society. Anyone interested in learning more about just how society has changed would do far worse that read Prof. Robert Putnam’s book “Bowling Alone”. While the data is all from the USA one can see those changes being mirrored in this country and it provides useful food for thought.

It is true that joining is less popular than it used to be, but there are still men out there who are interested - we just have find them and then set out our stall with an attractive proposition. To be honest I don't think we do that at all well and it may be that many of those who might join are looking for things we might not tell them about. Also in general terms the level of knowledge of a majority of masons is far poorer than it ought to be. Let us be in no doubt that in the search for new men it is a harsh market driven world out there and if we do not perform then others organisations will grab potential candidates from under our noses. We are not only in competition with other organisations for men, but also the pleasures of going to the pub, watching television, helping kids with homework and doing those things that today’s partners expect of modern man.

When we get a new member what do we do to keep them? Even a decade ago men might have come to masonry almost blind but in the age of the Internet information is only a Google search away and they may have read, and been excited by the Hiram Key and Da Vinci Code or visited Rosslyn Chapel. Will they find what they sought or expected?, can the members of the Lodge help them towards light? Or will they find the treadmill of twice a month meetings (and the odd outward visiting delegation) too much. Will they feel the meetings are too long, or the pie and peas a bit yesteryear? Whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not, the average 35 year old feels the pressure of “work / life balance” and the expectations of his partner as very real and that should really give us food for thought. Todays 35 year old does not think as a current 70 year old thought when he was 35 - it is a different world, and we should not forget that!

When I visit Lodges both north and south of the border I find the old “sausage machine” of candidate after candidate being churned through the system and then being abandoned to his own devices in favour of the next candidate in line. I think we all accept that some new masons may not find the Craft to their liking but I do believe that many leave because we ceased to “care” about them, failed to explain anything about the masonry we value, and failed to make them feel part of the Lodge.

If you have been a mason for twenty or more years you may not agree with these views. If so then I suggest you get your Secretary to get out his register of candidates and the Past Masters can go through the list. The list of Missing Master Masons will horrify you and you will be amazed at just how many there are whose faces nobody can remember! Just think how much healthier the Lodge would be if

even a quarter of the missing were still members. Consider what lessons might be learnt from that list.

Few will disagree that society is changing at a fast pace today. We probably all agree that it is not largely for the better but like it or not it has changed and will never go back to what it was but will evolve into something different.

There can be little doubt that Lodges will have to change what they do and how they operate. Change, I hear you cry, “if we change then masonry as we know it will not be the same and we must never lower our standards”. And yet over the decades and centuries freemasonry has changed, has adapted to the needs of each age. We have moved from two degrees to three, gone from meeting in pubs to masonic halls, changed the content of the ritual and much more. We now need to move on from the nineteenth (or more charitably the twentieth) century into the twenty-first, making changes to adapt the delivery of the masonic message, just as those in past centuries changed to adapt to their times.

Where does the salvation of lodges lie? Clearly it does not lie with Grand Lodges, nor with Provinces. Their purpose is mainly administrative and organisational, they do not have the staff to actually DO much for any individual lodge. Whatever the future is it lies within each lodge, or to be more precise it lies with the body of brothers in each lodge. It relies upon their joint desire not to see the lodge fade and die and to invest their own energy and enthusiasm in the enterprise. Certainly this takes effort and time but there is the reward of renewal to compensate. No change in a struggling lodge also offers little but hard work, with past masters being recycled from office to office and the burden of lodge and building overheads being shared between ever fewer members. There is no escape from labour in the quarries!

Each lodge should start the process of change by asking its members, especially the newer younger members, what they like or don't like about the way the lodge meeting or the harmony is organised. Does the lodge really need to meet every two weeks, does it take too long on the administrative activities, are the meetings too long or even boring at times. Is the quality of the food at harmony in line with today's expectations? Maybe pie and peas or sandwiches need to be replaced with pizza and green salad and balsamic vinegar dressing? Such issues and indeed any other raised are all worthy of consideration by the membership of the lodge. If new masons your lodge has initiated have drifted away then it will be because in some way coming to lodge was “not value for their time and money”.

It may also be that for far too many that what masonry really is remains a mystery. It seems to me that it is the responsibility of all the members of each lodge to educate the junior brethren, to answer their questions frankly, to ensure that occasional meetings have a talk to inform, even encourage and support new masons in maybe giving a short talk on something they have discovered about masonry and then to have a discussion afterwards. I believe that whether a man drives buses or is a manager in a large company, if we have chosen him with thought, then he should be able to gain new experience and knowledge from being a mason and be able to tell his fellow brethren about that knowledge.

Freemasonry after all is more than learning ritual and reciting it in lodge, more than doing degree after degree. It is about that uplifting experience, indeed we can even call it a spiritual one, of making a mason. For if we are honest that is why we all work so hard to make the experience for the candidate and those present so special. I am convinced that there are many men in the outside world seeking an uplifting, spiritual experience and a way of living in today's world and that freemasonry can offer that; we need to consider tapping into that need of men in the twenty first century.

For around 300 years we have been making men into masons. Such practices only last because they contain something very special, that is what we need to rediscover. To make it happen what we have to find is the self-belief and energy to implement the changes to make it happen. Or will most lodges simply vanish into the pages of history. The jury is out!

### **Reading list**

If you want to read more about falling numbers then my papers 'The Missing Master Mason', Freemasons - An Endangered Species (first published in *Ars Quatuor Coronatum*), and 'Masonic Membership Myths Debunked' (first published in *Heredom*) can all be found at <http://internet.lodge.org.uk> in the library. Any questions can be sent to [john.belton@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:john.belton@dsl.pipex.com)

The changes within society, albeit in the USA, are well detailed in Robert Putnam's book 'Bowling Alone'.

To explore the more esoteric aspects of masonry there is a wealth of material at <http://www.cornerstonesociety.org>

There are some trailblazing work being done in the USA and the Masonic Restoration Foundation [www.masonicrestoration.com](http://www.masonicrestoration.com) and Lodge Vitruvian [www.vitruvian.org](http://www.vitruvian.org) who work to those ideals are worth a visit. The principle of European Concept Lodges was developed in Australia and can be found at <http://home.iprimus.com.au/danny55/masonic/>