

## **WHY RESEARCH THE ROYAL ARCH?**

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The Centre which I run at Sheffield University has an advisory committee consisting of distinguished academics, whose responsibility is to ensure that the work of the Centre is of a suitable academic standard. The Chairman of the Committee is an eminent historian from the University of Sheffield, who specialises in medieval philosophy. The Chairman has no previous background in the study of freemasonry, but has taken a very keen interest in the work of the Centre and has been very game in coping with the arcane discussions which inevitably occur when we are discussing the history of freemasonry. However, one day I realised I had gone too far. We were discussing the history of freemasonry, and I mentioned the Royal Arch. The Chairman was completely baffled and was evidently finally defeated by this esoteric terminology. 'What on earth', he said, 'is the Royal Arch?'. I did my best briefly to explain, but I think failed to reassure him and I suspect he decided that my brain had finally been addled by excessive exposure to freemasons.

This story reflects the difficulties of trying to encourage the study of freemasonry at a university, but it also illustrates a more important point. Historians and other academics investigating freemasonry assume that it has a very simple structure. They think of it as being like a church or a large social club. There is a national organising committee and a number of local branches. You are either a member of freemasonry or not. The famous British social historian Peter Clark a few years ago published a book looking at the history of clubs and societies in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Professor Clark argued that one of the chief features of British society at that time was the great popularity of clubs and societies of all types. He used freemasonry as a case study. While Professor Clark discusses the differences between the two Grand Lodges in England, the Ancient Grand lodge and the Premier Grand Lodge, he does not discuss the significance of the emergence of the Royal Arch or of other masonic organisations.

Peter Clark's view is characteristic of many historians: freemasonry equals craft masonry. Other masonic orders are ignored. Yet in England, as you will know, from at least the time of the Union of the Grand Lodges in 1813, the Royal Arch has been an integral part of craft freemasonry. In a famous piece of gobbledegook, the constitutions promulgated in England after the union declare that 'Pure Ancient Masonry consists of three Degrees, and no more, viz. Those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch'. The Royal Arch is thus presented as the completion of the third degree. In Scotland of course the situation is different, but the Royal Arch, though organised separately, still has enormous prestige. Clearly a freemason wanting fully to understand his art will investigate the Royal Arch, and in England he is explicitly urged to do so. But for historians who are not masons, the question posed by the Chairman of my advisory committee remains: do historians and other researchers need to know about the Royal Arch, or is that something only of interest to masons? And if researchers need to take the Arch into account, what do they need to know, and what should they find out?

It goes without saying that a researcher who is ignorant of the Royal Arch will fail to understand a great deal in the letters and documents preserved in libraries such as those at the Grand Lodge of Scotland or Freemasons' Hall in London. For example, a researcher interested in Jewish involvement in freemasonry in the eighteenth century would be very interested in a letter from a lodge in Kent to the Grand Secretary of the Ancient Grand Lodge in London in 1799. This stated that while most members of the lodge had agreed that any good man could enter the various degrees, some had strenuously objected to allowing Jewish brethren to be exalted to the Royal Arch. The lodge secretary asked for guidance on this matter from London. Presumably the brethren who objected to Jewish companions of the Royal Arch interpreted the ceremonies of the Royal Arch as being exclusively christian. For freemasons, this reference is interesting because it raises the issue of the exact philosophical and ideological implications of the Royal Arch. For the historian, this reference is valuable not only as revealing something of the status of the Jewish community in the Medway Towns at the end of the eighteenth century, but because even more intriguingly it raises the idea of the Royal Arch as representing an inner

group within freemasonry, and this is one of the features which I would like to suggest that makes the Royal Arch of interest to historians.

This idea has been already developed in a sinister way by anti-masonic writers writing about Jack the Ripper. The anti-masonic journalist Stephen Knight wrote in 1984 a book called 'Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution'. He argued that there were parallels between the methods used to dispatch prostitutes by Jack the Ripper and penalties imposed by the obligations in the Royal Arch. He suggested that the phrase chalked on a wall near one of the murders, 'The Juwes are not the men that will be blamed for nothing' referred to the apprentices of Hiram Abiff, and was wiped off the wall by order of Sir Charles Warren, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, because Warren was himself a mason. Knight went on to propose a preposterous theory. This alleged that Queen Victoria's grandson, Prince Albert Victor or 'Prince Eddy', had secretly married a poor catholic shopgirl, who had told the prostitute victims of the Ripper about the marriage. The girls were supposedly murdered by freemasons so that the secret would never get out. Knight's theory doesn't stand examination and has been comprehensively trashed. Prince Eddy was not in England when the supposed marriage took place; Sir William Gull was not a freemason; and the Juwes do not occur in masonic ritual. The only reason I mention Knight's book here is that Knight argues that the cover-up was organised by freemasons belonging to the Royal Arch. In his view, the Royal Arch was an inner group. He cited an alleged Royal Arch obligation in his book, but, as John Hamill has pointed out, this was taken from an American exposure which never applied in England.

Misinformed and malicious though Stephen Knight's book is, he at least understood that freemasonry is not a single organisation with a simple structure. This unfortunately has not been true of his followers. Earlier this year, an article appeared in the newsletter of the Henry Irving Society, which is devoted to investigating the life and times of the famous Victorian actor. Henry Irving was a freemason, being initiated in the Jerusalem Lodge No. 197 in 1877, but was not raised and passed until five years later, apparently at the suggestion of a royal prince, the Duke of Albany. Irving was one of the founders of the Savage Club Lodge No. 2190 in 1887, formed at the suggestion of the Prince of Wales, and Irving was the lodge's first treasurer. Irving was afterwards after a member of the St Martin's Lodge No. 2455. Irving was a freemason and in his masonry encountered royalty. For the authors of the article in the

Irving Society Newsletter the implications of this were clear. Irving must have known about the masonic involvement in the Ripper murders, and went to his grave troubled by this dreadful knowledge.

This is all of course complete bunkum. Irving supported freemasonry and valued his membership, but he did not pursue his masonic career very energetically. He was preoccupied with his acting and rarely had time to attend lodge meetings or take his freemasonry much further. The only office he ever held was as Treasurer of the Savage Club Lodge, and he held this for just a year. This was evidently a gesture to help get the new lodge off the ground. Above all, Irving never joined the Royal Arch or any of the other additional degrees. It is not unusual for freemasons not to be exalted to the Royal Arch, but in Irving's case this fits in with the general impression that he simply did not have time to take his masonry very far. Above all, the fact that Irving was a companion of the Royal Arch means that, even by Stephen Knight's own analysis, Irving was never involved with that inner group which Knight alleges knew the truth about the Ripper. The case of Henry Irving illustrates how urgent and important it is for us to undertake research in the archives about individual freemasons and lodges to counter the kind of anti-masonic propaganda which is still widely disseminated. And in finding out about individual masons, looking at their involvement in the Royal Arch and other orders can tell us a great deal about their outlook on freemasonry. We are all familiar with the freemason who finds a certain order is particularly to his taste and concentrates his time on work with that order. This can tell us a lot about his personality and outlook on freemasonry. It's the sort of information no biographer can neglect.

For anybody studying English freemasonry, the importance of the Royal Arch is almost immediately evident, and it is obvious that a researcher neglecting the Royal Arch risks missing out a great deal. The Book of Constitutions includes the regulations of Royal Arch Masons, the yearbooks list royal arch chapters, and the directory of Grand Officers includes officers of Supreme Grand Chapter. Yet, even so, although English historians are gradually realising the importance of membership returns of craft lodges in understanding local society, very few use the parallel series of chapter returns. And, on top of this, English masonic scholars neglect the royal arch. We have none of the aids that we take for granted in studying craft freemasonry in England. There is for example no Royal Arch equivalent of John Lane's historical

directory of English masonic lodges. In Scotland, of course, the position is even more complicated, as Supreme Grand Chapter has been an entirely separate body, and it might be argued that in Scotland the Royal Arch is no different to the masonic Templars orders or Mark Masonry. But, paradoxically, this in itself provides a powerful reason for investigating the Royal Arch. Just as British history is all too often, and wrongly, identified with English history, so the history of freemasonry in Britain is all too often seen as simply the history of English freemasonry. The biggest gap in masonic research in Britain is simply that there isn't enough information available about Scottish freemasonry. Above all, the contrasts and comparisons between English and Scottish freemasonry urgently require further investigation, and of these one major area for further investigation is the different position of the Royal Arch (and by extension the other degrees) in each country.

In 1799, the British government was terrified that Britain would suffer a revolution like that which had taken place in France. It had already outlawed organisations which required its members to swear oaths. Now it proposed to make it a criminal offence to belong to any organisation with a national organising committee and which held its meetings behind closed doors. This would have outlawed freemasons' lodges, and the Grand Lodges of England and Scotland lobbied vigorously for special exemptions for freemasonry to be inserted in the act. Amendments were inserted in the bill whereby the Grand Lodges themselves would certify which were regular masonic lodges and would maintain a register of authorised freemasons in return for exemption from the penalties of transportation for offenders stipulated in the legislation. However, there was a constitutional problem in these amendments in that the Grand Lodges were effectively being given police powers, although they weren't bodies established by parliament. When the bill came to the House of Lords, the Lords were reluctant to allow the exemption for freemasonry because of this problem, and freemasonry came within an ace of being outlawed. The situation was saved by a rousing speech by the Duke of Atholl, and a new amendment was hastily cobbled together which allowed masonic lodges to continued meeting, providing they sent lists of their members to the clerk of the peace. This 1799 Unlawful Societies Act made the legal position of craft masonry clear, but, because the amendment had been drafted so quickly, created many difficulties for the Royal Arch and other degrees, and it was the different

interpretations of this legislation in England and Scotland which contributed to the different treatment of the Royal Arch in each country.

In England, the position of the Royal Arch chapters, which were mainly but not exclusively linked to lodges under the Ancients Grand Lodge, was prior to 1799 very unclear and had already given rise to a lot of confusion. Provincial Grand Masters were confused as to what authority they had over Royal Arch chapters. In 1794, the Union Lodge in Kingston, Jamaica, wrote asking whether they were entitled under their warrant to give degrees 'of the Knights of the Red Cross or Rose Croix or Royal Arch'. The Royal Arch provided something of a flashpoint between the two English Grand Lodges with Liverpool lodges complaining that the Ancients were admitting masons belonging to Premier Grand Lodge to the Royal Arch, and Thomas Dunkerley boasting that he 'jockeyed Dermot out' in forming Royal Arch Chapters in Canada. In this confusing situation, the possibility of legislative control caused consternation among Royal Arch Chapters. Were they covered by the proposed exemptions to the 1799 Act? It was decided that they would be, providing they attached themselves to a craft lodge, and it seems that it was this legislative pressure which led to the links being developed in England between craft lodges and Royal Arch chapters.

In England, Royal Arch Chapters were awarded exemption under the 1799 Act, and a number of chapters made returns to the clerk of the peace, such as the Caledonian Chapter No. 2 which met in Surrey Street Westminster. Nevertheless, the ambiguous position of Royal Arch chapters still sometimes caused problems even in England. In Bolton, a meeting of a Royal Arch Chapter held on a Sunday was broken up by the constables and the tavern where the meeting was held was fined. The chapter petitioned the local magistrates protesting that the lodge had followed the 1799 act to the letter and that the meeting involved 'the most solemn concerns and consisted of the explanation of sacred writ and adoration of the infinite architect of the universe'. The local magistrate said that this showed that their order was disgraceful to christianity and that they neglected the sabbath, and threatened to have the lodge closed altogether. Concern about this sort of pressure was evidently a major factor in drawing craft freemasonry and the Royal Arch closer together in England. Other masonic orders were evidently viewed with suspicion and the decline of the Grand

Conclave in England at this time was probably partly due to the fact that its meetings were strictly speaking illegal under the 1799 Act.

In Scotland, it appears that the 1799 Act was interpreted differently, but we badly need more research on this subject. Which Scottish lodges made returns? Did any Royal Arch Chapters or other Scottish masonic bodies attempt to register under the Act? We don't know – the answer lies in local record offices and needs digging out. It appears that the Grand Lodge in Scotland concluded that only craft freemasonry, consisting of the degrees of entered apprentice, fellow craft and master mason, was entitled to exemption under the act, and only craft lodges were registered. This difference in interpretation was to have fundamental implications for the future of freemasonry in Britain. In 1813, at the time of the Union of the English Grand Lodges, the Duke of Sussex expressed his hope that a single Grand Lodge would be established for the whole of the United Kingdom. It was doubtless for this reason that the Duke encouraged Alexander Leuchar, as First Grand Master of the grand Conclave in Scotland, to convene a national committee to exercise control over the Royal Arch in Scotland. The Duke urged Leuchar to persuade the Grand Lodge of Scotland to take the Royal Arch under its wing. If this move had been successful, it would certainly have facilitated an eventual union between the English and Scottish Grand Lodges but, as we know, this attempt was unsuccessful and in 1817 a separate Supreme Grand Chapter was formed in Scotland, and this major difference in the institutional structure of Scottish freemasonry made a major contribution to the continuation of a separate Grand Lodge in Scotland.

Thus, the Royal Arch was fundamental in determining the Anglo-Scottish relationship in freemasonry and here again is a story which has not yet been told in detail and which urgently requires further investigation. However, I think what can be seen is that the Arch is fundamental in understanding the way in which freemasonry relates to issues of national identity in Britain. And we can see that again if we make a further comparison, this time with Wales. Wales is remarkable because it is one of the few countries in Europe where freemasonry failed to gain a strong foothold in Europe during the eighteenth century. While freemasonry spread across Europe with great speed in the eighteenth century, in Wales lodges were few and far between, and by 1830, there were only two small lodges in the whole of Wales, both of which struggled to keep going. Why was this? The influence of the non-conformist churches

in Wales may have been one factor. Language was probably another – at a time when nearly all of Wales was Welsh-speaking, and a large part of the population spoke only Welsh, the Grand Lodge of England was strenuously opposed to the ritual being worked in Welsh. Freemasonry was only to find a firmer foothold in Wales as a greater policy of Anglicisation emerged from the 1860s onwards.

One very good indicator of the slow progress of freemasonry in Wales is the very late development of the Royal Arch. While craft lodges are viable, greater commitment is required to maintain Arch chapters, so the relatively limited character of Welsh freemasonry up to the end of the nineteenth century is particularly apparent in the development of the Royal Arch. This can be seen by looking at South Wales. The first Grand Superintendent for the Royal Arch in South Wales was not appointed until 1865. At that time there were just two chapters, one in Cardiff and one in Swansea. In the following ten years only another two chapters were consecrated, and when the Grand Superintendent died another one was not appointed for some years. Eventually in 1886 a drive to set up Royal Arch chapters was begun, and by 1915 there were 9 chapters with 658 members. From this point, however, industrial depression began to affect South Wales, and it was not really until after the Second World War that the Royal Arch began fully to develop in South Wales, with almost a third of craft membership joining the Royal Arch. So the Royal Arch provides a useful index of the state of Welsh freemasonry, but again there is useful research that can be done here. For example, comparative figures on the number of chapters and membership statistics from Scotland and England would enable the Welsh figures to be more fully interpreted.

One of the most determined early attempts to introduce freemasonry in Wales was undertaken by Benjamin Plummer, a Bristol merchant who was Grand Senior Warden of the Ancients. Plummer first visited Wales at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and he wrote that he found that there at this time ‘but two lodges, one of them in Swansea, which was very thinly attended, and the other at Brecon in a dormant state’. During a period of eight years from 1807, Plummer established eight new lodges in Wales and initiated more than two hundred masons. He planned his campaign like a military conquest. He selected Caerphilly as his starting point, then used a kind of swarming technique, with members of the Caerphilly lodge establishing lodges in nearby towns, whose members in turn formed further lodges

elsewhere. Members of the Caerphilly lodge set up new lodges in Cardiff, Newport and Merthyr. Members of the Newport lodge established lodges in Pontypool and Carmarthen. The Pontypool lodge helped set up a lodge in Abergavenny, and so on. This process was assisted by the masonic lodges of French prisoners of war billeted in towns like Abergavenny, with whom Plummer maintained close contacts. Plummer's energy in pursuing this strategy is evident in his breathless correspondence with Grand Lodge, dealing with dozens of detailed queries about the new lodges and issuing a stream of complicated instructions for forwarding his mail as he moved from place to place.

Plummer's attempts forcibly to implant freemasonry in Wales could create problems. A Modern lodge had been reestablished at Carmarthen in 1810, but disputes had arisen and Plummer saw a recruiting opportunity for the Antients, boasting to Grand Lodge that if an Antient lodge could be created in Carmarthen, thirty masons from the rival Grand Lodge would join it. An Antient lodge was duly consecrated by Plummer at Carmarthen, with masons from his Newport lodge as the senior officers. Returning to the lodge a few months later, Plummer found it in uproar because the Master had secretly taken the lodge warrant and equipment by boat to Tenby and illicitly created masons there. Plummer annulled these proceedings and claimed he had restored harmony to the lodge, but the Master wrote to Grand Lodge complaining about Plummer's overbearing manner. He alleged that Plummer had insisted that the lodge pass a vote of thanks to him and, when this was passed by only a small majority, had gone from house to house with a petition supporting his actions, which he had bullied members of the lodge into signing. Plummer countered by sending to Grand Lodge documentary evidence of the Master's dubious proceedings at Tenby, including an account of his expenses there which included an expensive box at the theatre and ten pounds for 'dinner bill and girls'.

In the course of these disputes at Carmarthen, the Master of the lodge repeatedly insisted that what was required to settle these disputes was a Royal Arch Chapter. He wrote that 'there appeared to myself and about 10 or 11 other members of both lodges no other chance of settling these disputes but by having a Royal Arch charter in order that those who conducted themselves improperly should be excluded for some months at least'. The expedition to Tenby seems to have been closely connected to this attempt to set up a Royal Arch Chapter. The Master had written to a

member of the lodge at Tenby asking him 'as a particular favour that you will sign your name as Royal Arch and get as many as you can of that order to do the same...but do not write anything else or say a word'. This was apparently an attempt to get the brethren at Tenby secretly to petition for a Royal Arch chapter. Instructing one member of the lodge to collect selected members of it to travel to Tenby, the Master instructed him to 'bring my black clothes, best apron, Royal Arch apron, Black apron to lend, sash and maltese cross, and your Royal Arch jewel in case we make you that order'. Now be alive, he urged him, for dinner is ordered for 10 gents. He also instructed him to make sure that the Tyler was 'alive and in prime order to show the natives what a Tyler we have'.

In this Carmarthen case, the formation of a Royal Arch chapter was explicitly linked to the creation of an inner group in order effectively to exclude brethren in the craft lodge from masonic activity. This case raises perhaps the central reason why we need to research the Royal Arch. Thirty years ago, social historians interpreted society through the prism of class. It was assumed that relations between people were determined primarily by their economic relations – you were a landowner or a tenant, a capitalist, a manager or a factory worker, and so on. In this context, it is not perhaps surprising that historians paid little attention to freemasonry, since it tended to be assumed (perhaps wrongly) that freemasons were generally drawn from the same class, and the study of freemasonry would not contribute much to understanding of class relations. Nowadays, reacting in particular to the criticisms of feminist scholars, who have pointed out that gender is just as important as class, social historians stress the multiplicity of social relations. We have contact with one another on a variety of different levels – as employees, as customers, as members of the same social club, as members of particular gender, race, or nationality, and so on. Consequently, historians have become more interested in social networks – the interconnections at many different levels between individuals. If one wants to understand social networks in a particular town or community, then clearly freemasonry, as one of the largest and most important social organisations, is of central importance. It is this awareness of the possible role of freemasonry in social networks that explains the current interest of historians in freemasonry.

But, as I said earlier, historians and other scholars who are not masons frequently have a naive view of freemasonry. They consider it to be a simple, single-

stranded institution. You are either a freemason or not. The case of the Carmarthen master and his expedition to Tenby to create a Royal arch chapter illustrates forcefully the social complexities of freemasonry. Within the social network of freemasonry itself, there are many different levels of contact and status – you may meet some people at a craft lodge, others in a Royal Arch chapter, others as Knights Templar, and so on. And the social interaction in each of these contexts may be different. In the Carmarthen case, the Royal Arch was clearly being used to create an inner group, and to try and exclude some members of the craft lodge who were found objectionable. Moreover, there is also a frequent assumption by historians who are interested in networks that these networks are usually harmonious, whereas the Carmarthen case shows how social organisations such as masonic lodges can also create social conflict. If we research freemasonry to investigate local social networks, then to get a full picture of these networks we also need to investigate the Royal Arch, as well as masonic orders. The masonic network is not the simple two-dimensional network which might be suggested by just looking at craft freemasonry. The Royal Arch shows how this network is complex and multi-dimensional.

Other speakers will I am sure explain why it is necessary in order to have a full and proper understanding of freemasonry, it is necessary to think about and reflect on the Royal Arch. What I have tried to do is to suggest why those of us who are investigating freemasonry for other reasons – for example to find out about social history – also need to consider the Royal Arch. If we are investigating the involvement in freemasonry of men like Henry Irving, their interest or otherwise about the Royal Arch can tell us a great deal about their overall attitude to freemasonry. If we are interested in the institutional development of freemasonry, and the way in which its institutional development in countries like Scotland, Wales and England relates to issues like national identity, then again the Royal Arch is an integral part of that story. If we are interested in the way in which freemasonry forms a part of local social networks, then the Royal Arch forms its own thread within those networks.

But above all the history of the Royal Arch is neglected in Scotland, England and Wales. There is a lot more basic information which needs gathering. We need lists of Royal Arch chapters similar to those compiled for craft lodges by John Lane and George Draffen. We need to know how many craft masons became Companions

of the Royal Arch, and what factors affected enthusiasm for the Royal Arch. While the contents of masonic minute books remained largely unexamined for historical purposes, even less exploration of the records of Royal Arch chapters has taken place. Who founded the chapters, when and why? The answer lies in Chapter petitions, another neglected source. In short, if the records of craft masonry are a resource little explored by historians, the records of the Royal Arch are largely *terra incognita*. We need to explore them.

The Royal Arch, in the English view, is about completion. And in order fully to complete historical researches into freemasonry, it is imperative to take into account the Royal Arch. The American early nineteenth-century poet James Gates Percival wrote a series of masonic songs, which included a Royal Arch Song. Let me conclude by giving you a snatch of it (not sung, I'm afraid):

Joy! the secret vault is found;  
Full the sunbeam falls within,  
Pointing, darkly underground,  
To the treasure we would win:  
They have brought it forth to light,  
And again it cheers the earth;  
All its leaves are purely bright,  
Shining in their newest worth.

The archives of the Royal Arch represent for historians just such a secret forgotten vault.