

## THE OLD RELICS

The Leslie Prestwich Memorial Lecture-2002

John Acaster, PProvJGW, Master, Manchester Lodge for Masonic Research, No 5502 Prepared for: Papyrean Lodge No 5771 & Association of Masonic Research, Bury

No doubt many brethren will have been examining each other closely to see whether they qualify to be the subject of this talk. And well they may, for in one real sense all brethren are definitely in the frame. Whether we like it or not, we all become, in course of time, old relics and it behoves us to recognise ourselves as such. That does not mean becoming less. It means becoming more. It means taking on that role, or allowing ourselves to fulfil that role, and to prepare ourselves, with the proper wisdom of age, to know our place and to live and act as proper exemplars of the best virtues that Freemasonry exists to promote. I guess Leslie Prestwich, one of your Founders, was one such man. In having his name attached to an annual Memorial Lecture your Lodge, he has obtained for itself a distinction, a tradition, which seeks to uphold a due remembrance of distinguished service by encouraging each generation of hearers to increase their understanding and enjoyment of the Craft. It must be particularly pleasing that members of the Prestwich family continue to serve the Lodge sixty years on.

What follows is a personal reflection on the subject of relics, and Masonic relics in particular. What are they? What significance should be ascribed to them? Do they represent mere sentiment, or living sensibility? Perhaps the fact and purpose of this Memorial Lecture provides in itself the answer. We shall see.

So what are relics? The primary dictionary definition is: that which remains after loss or decay of the rest. I think that bears some thinking about. When we are gone, what will remain? One's widow is, of course, in law, a relic, left behind. But our children are not, interestingly. They become heirs, hopefully those who inherit, those who are enabled to benefit by fresh possession. Hopefully those who are left are not encumbered by lumber. Masonically speaking, when we depart we should wish, if we care, to leave to our successors, not a burden but a bundle. It is in this spirit that the Leslie Prestwich tradition has transmitted an annual opportunity for light and instruction, that high duty of a Master, to be handed on to the brethren of his Lodge. The other proper meaning of the word relic is: an object religiously cherished through its association with a saint. We in England do not have too many of these objects nowadays, following the wholesale scattering of bones and smashing of images that took place in the Reformation, with further destruction of the remains of medieval devotion in the Civil War. Before those times such objects were often literally a tangible focus for the bundle of sensibilities and longings associated with human desire for self-improvement, social justice and spiritual salvation. At St Alban's Abbey, for example, a medieval pilgrim could stretch a limb through the surrounding canopy to touch the very tomb containing the saint himself. Go today and you can see the spot. The sense of awe and power gained from such proximity, such direct connection between the earthly and the divine, is largely lost to us. The psychological or spiritual power of such relics still exerts attraction in the pilgrimages made to such shrines as Santiago de Compostella and Lourdes, or even to our relatively local sanctuary of St Winifride's at Holywell. If you have never been there, go. It is a shimmering, brimming, Celtic, Catholic, jewel of a place, disgracefully unappreciated by most persons outside Wales. Visited by kings, and standing as refounded by one of the most remarkable of English medieval women, Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, the remains speak still. This evocative perpetual memorial of ever-fresh goodness is less than an hour from here. Do go, and see what I mean. So where do we go for such relics, tangible reminders, of Freemasonry? Where do we go for its connections between the heavenly and earthly worlds, and of its great men? Where would you head on a Masonic pilgrimage? Whom would you nominate and vote to be 'the greatest Freemason ever'?

As voting for 'the greatest' is currently rather topical, and should be easy, let's take the last one first: the greatest Freemason. Let's say, the most famous or gifted person who has also been a Freemason. In England, might that be Winston Churchill (last night's TV winner)? Or Baden-Powell? Or Rudyard Kipling? Or Hogarth? Or Wren? Or Samuel Sebastian Wesley? Or both Gilbert and Sullivan? In world terms, might it be George Washington? Or General Eisenhower? Or the Italian liberator Garibaldi? Or Simon Bolivar, who in a similar cause gave his name to a country? Or the Austrian virtuoso Mozart? Or the elemental Sibelius? Or the free-thinking Voltaire? A case could certainly be made out for each. But do we feel kinship with any of these, do they 'speak' to us as Freemasons? Almost certainly the most frequently toasted Freemason has been from Scotland. Yes, I refer to the toast to that most popular latter-day saint, whose Feast Day occurs annually round the world in January, the toast to the 'immortal memory' of a national hero, Robbie Burns. Robert Burns, by his life and works, walked, and still talks, the language of his fellow-countrymen. As Depute Master of his lodge at Tarbolton he participated vigorously in fraternal, and other, pleasures. Were we not Englishmen, and therefore of a slightly more refined disposition, we might also look to perpetuate his remembrance, for his personality does 'connect' across the centuries in a peculiarly Masonic way. I'm not sure I'd want to search out his last resting-place and touch his bones, however, even if I were a Scot!

Now let's search our minds for the active Freemason with the most influence on the Craft and, as such, able to claim the name of 'The Greatest Freemason'. Do we begin to scratch our heads? Well, in England, the name of the Frenchman, Jean Theophilus Desaguliers, must be on our lips. It is recognised that as a vigorous and gifted scientist, protege and friend of Newton (as far as anyone could be friendly with Newton), and the prime mover in the first two decades of the London premier Grand Lodge, he was the architect of much that we have inherited. Or do we give the palm to the Irishman, Laurence Dermott? He colourfully performed the same function for the Antients' Grand Lodge, from 1751 to his death more than thirty years later. Or should we not honour our own Thomas Dunckerley, a charming Englishman,

who bore the Royal Arms with a bend sinister, and spread his own style of Freemasonry, including the Royal Arch, influentially and widely across southern England and abroad? Each has left us potent relics of themselves surviving in what we do, and give breath to, today.

Looking abroad, whom else might we consider as 'The Greatest Freemason'? Might not Benjamin Franklin, first publisher of 'The Constitutions of Freemasonry' on the American continent, Grand Master of Pennsylvania, distinguished scientist, reformer, statesman, frequent visitor to London and American ambassador to France, take pride of place? He was present, for instance, on the occasion when Voltaire was admitted to the prestigious and cultured Loge des Neufs Soeurs in Paris in 1778. Yet he makes no mention of Freemasonry at all in his autobiography! Dr Brent Morris, that very distinguished Freemason in the Southern Jurisdiction of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in the United States, tells me this is because of political sensitivities arising from the dissensions of American Independence. Were, for instance, Masonic institutions originally formed under obedience to the Grand Lodges of Great Britain to remain as such, or were they to declare their own independence? Franklin might have tried to touch lightning by holding balloons aloft in his youth (to explore for himself the hidden mysteries of nature and science) but preferred a more lowly peace in his maturer years. Is his a quietly inspiring Masonic example?

And what of Frederick the Great of Prussia, protector of early Freemasonry in Germany? Or of Charles XIII of Sweden, most active proponent of the continually beautiful and spiritual Swedish Rite? In France, what of the Count de Clermont, whose embellished version of Freemasonry inspired the Swedes? Or of members of the Napoleonic elite: Bonaparte's brother Joachim, King of Naples and Sicily; Prince Lucien Murat, an active Grand Master of the Grand Orient in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; or of Napoleon's own wife, Josephine, who beautifully presented her own role model for 'la belle France' by presiding over a female lodge during the first Empire? If these figures may come as a surprise to you that is because our education in England about our own past, and the doings of others, has been horribly deficient (I speak as an inspector for OFSTED). Seek, and ye shall find: if ye do not seek, neither shall ye find.

And while we are on the subject, whom would you nominate as the greatest living Freemason? I would put forward the name of the Earl of Elgin, Past Master Mason of Scotland and traditional head of the Royal Order of Scotland. He has attracted considerable loyalty and respect, yes, love, wherever he has gone over a long lifetime. In England and Wales the matter is more open. Perhaps we do not know enough about everyone, because of our Provincial structure, and we might like to ponder on this. The present Provincial Grand Master of Derbyshire, David Law, would certainly need to be considered. He has been active, in his own quiet, friendly and unique way, on many fronts, and has set a brave example in his long struggle with Parkinson's disease. Or might we think of Neville Cryer, who has been a member of every English degree and Order, who is proficient in at least six languages, and who has stumped the length and breadth of the country for decades to learn, and to spread enlightenment. His Masonic fame is worldwide; his voice carries almost that far! Born in Lancashire, at Accrington, as he is proud to say, and now in supposed retirement near York, he is as keen and inspiring as ever. When will we ever see his like again? Don't visit his grave; read his words, pouring off his pen, and go to see him in action. You will have seen a piece of history, and by doing so learnt something more of the present!

In many ways, including the nature of its present predicament, English Freemasonry is like the Anglican Church. That is not surprising. Much of what makes up Freemasonry mirrors the Church. The elaborate ceremony of consecrating a lodge, for instance, follows the same practice as is used for the consecration of a new church. This was brought home to me when reading the account of the consecration of Sacred Trinity, the first ecclesiastical building in Salford, by the Bishop of Chester in May 1635. Interestingly, for those who may wonder at certain practices in old Chapters in the north of England, as Neville Cryer has done, after the consecration perambulations on the outside of the designated holy ground, the account, by the person of the Bishop, runs: ...and the people being excluded we shut the door and took possession in the name of God the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost and sitting in a certain seat prepared in the chancel of the said Chapel we read in our own person public prayers from the Book of Common Prayer and the 84<sup>th</sup>, 122<sup>nd</sup> and 132<sup>nd</sup> Psalms and the fifth Chapter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles and the 21<sup>st</sup> Revelations and at length Prayers being ended the 84<sup>th</sup> Hymn was sung... You may like to contemplate what has descended to us through such rituals and readings. In one way the Church is outwardly better placed. Dotted across the countryside, and even within towns and cities (where they have not been dwarfed by office ziggurats and shopping temples) church buildings call our attention to beauty, humble service, and the presence of an enduring spirituality bequeathed to us by those who walked a harder world before. Whether we notice them or not is up to us, just as is the turning of leaves in autumn, the freshness of an individual flower, or the delicacy of human relationships. But my point is that, for all the problems they may present, church buildings do, by and large, advertise the eternal values professed within. As remains, even as ruins, they speak. Can we say the same about Masonic halls? Looking at them from the outside, who can blame the public for taking the message they give! Old relics, indeed. And, I guess, too many to be supported into the future. What Grand Superintendent will draw designs and prioritise in this important matter? So, to which Masonic building would you make pilgrimage? A Past Grand Superintendent recently told us, on taking the chair of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, that the Temple at Great Queen Street was financed and built as a memorial to those who fell in the First World War (just as Manchester's Bridge Street building was). The Great Queen Street premises, which still present a towering exterior 70 years later, comprise apparently the largest war memorial building in the UK, possibly in Europe. Not a lot of people know that. Its library and museum are, masonically, the finest in the world, and open to the public. Not a lot of people know that. And you, and any woman you may care to take along, can get a superb cup of coffee or tea in club surroundings on the first floor. Not a lot of people know that. I'm always taking women there on pilgrimage, and they are impressed, old relics or not.

But when you go to York, and tour the Minster, breathing in beauty and light amid immensity, do try to get admittance to the nearby Masonic premises modestly close in Duncombe Place. Is York at the centre of the Masonic legend? Those premises, that Temple, speak York, and are worthy of that fame, in being successors of the ancient Grand Lodge of All England. And you may know of others. Neville Cryer made a brief survey of the main ones in his series of books on Masonic halls some years ago. Two other places in London are relics which speak tellingly for Freemasonry. One ought to be St Paul's; for the architect, Wren, I'm sure, was of the Craft. Certainly his chief masons engaged on that daring structure were. Another might be the Bank of England, whose original building had a Masonic foundation stone, and whose remodelling to what we see today was undertaken by Sir John Soane, later Grand Superintendent of Works for the United Grand Lodge. Incidentally, the Bank's museum (free admission) and Sir John Soane's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields (free admission) are two of London's hidden treasures; both leave lasting impressions.

But my votes go for two other sites. Who among masons go to them? One is completely unknown; the other, quite overwhelming, is simply not recognised for what it is, the grandest hall in the UK designed and decorated by Freemasons. I refer to the Banqueting Hall of Greenwich Hospital. It is where Nelson lay in state for a week before his huge public funeral and interment beneath the dome of St Paul's. If you go to no other place in London on your Masonic pilgrimage, go there, to Greenwich. Greenwich Hospital was designed by Wren, with much of the work carried out after his death by his lieutenants. The site is quite magnificent. The chapel is exquisite. The Banqueting Hall is glorious; enter, and you will see why. Examine its proportions, scrutinise its ceiling. The painting was carried out under the supervision of Sir James Thornhill, whose humorous portrait can be found in a modest corner of the royal tableau covering the west wall. Designed, built and decorated by masons, the Craft should take the utmost pride in this exceptional heritage site. Sir James, by the way, besides being Senior Grand Warden in 1729, was Master of the Lodge meeting at the Swan, East Street, Greenwich, close to the Greenwich site. This Lodge had among its members Edward Strong, one of Wren's principal lieutenants, named by Anderson as Junior Grand Warden in 1698; Joseph Highmore, painter, listed as Junior Grand Warden in 1728; and Alexander Choke, Esq., Deputy Grand Master in the same, and several other, years. It would be marvellous if that great hall could be used for Masonic state occasions.

The other site, neglected, visited by none but the sick, and pigeons, is situated in a garden opposite the Houses of Parliament. With an entrance off the southern end of Westminster Bridge, on the pilgrimage route for the London Eye, it is a statue in the grounds of St Thomas's Hospital. The statue is by Grinling Gibbons, one of the few from his workshop executed in stone (as distinct from the famous carvings in limewood). It stands lifesize, commemorating the life and works of Sir Robert Clayton. Sir Robert who? Sir Robert Clayton had one of the most remarkable careers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century but today, other than by St Thomas's Hospital, to whom he was a great leader and benefactor, he is quite forgotten. And why should he be remembered by us? Because a strong claim can be made out for him to have been the most effective Freemason of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (more so than Ashmole) and possibly among the greatest of all time. His statue, and his life, if known, should speak of the finest qualities of Freemasonry, from the meanest apprentice to the most eminent Master. But that is another story...

Brethren, I hope that this excursion along the subject of 'Old Relics' may have given you fresh thought. We need to sweep the dust off our history, here and abroad, and to make it meaningful. We need to find inspiration from the lives of great figures in the past, such as Benjamin Franklin, Charles XIII, or Sir Robert Clayton. We need to take inspiration from great figures still with us in the present. We need to find, understand, make live, and cherish, the buildings and other treasures that have been bequeathed to us. And as we ourselves inexorably become in danger of becoming merely old relics to our brethren, we must guard and guide, not doze and hide, so that our Masonic works and lives can be a potent legacy to those we leave behind.