

MEGS, YE, EC, C all

To condense over 70 years of history into a short delivery has been a definite challenge. What follows certainly covers all of those 70 years but concentrates on the more interesting events and contemporary observations taken from two quite excellent and detailed histories and then, for the last 20 years, from the Minutes, right up to November of last year.

The two publications were firstly 'Key of the Door' not unsurprisingly covering the first 21 years and written by E Comp Jim Redgrove followed by 'A Golden Jubilee History' by E Comp Roger Jago.

The Chapter was consecrated on 8th July 1952, fourteen years after that of the Old Tauntonian Lodge. The ceremony was conducted by the Grand Scribe E, E Comp Sir Sydney White. Amongst the founders and first officers were Claude Oakley as MEZ, Jim Redgrove as H and Oswald Anderson as J, the Scribe E was John Went.

In the early fifties accommodation for new Lodges and Chapters at FMH was virtually non-existent and so our first meeting place was at 10 Duke Street, St James'. The rent at that time was 9 guineas per annum which included the services of a Janitor! Equally remarkable, would you believe, was the £4 covering 3 dinners at L'Ecu de France in Jermyn Street. As the result of an early decision to separate the basic subscription from the cost of dining it is noted that the subscription remained constant for the next 21 years!

It was in 1966 following a visit from the President of the Committee of General Purposes, who was at that time also Chairman of the Public School Lodges' Council that we received an invitation to apply for membership, an honour which was subsequently given to the Lodge and Chapter by that distinguished body. Taunton, then and now is one of only 3 PSLC Lodges which have their own RA Chapter.

The November 1967 meeting saw a double visit of Grand Superintendents with E Comp Henry Frampton (Somerset) who brought with him E Comp Kneel (from Devon). The rather impertinent if humorous minute recorded that these distinguished visitors had later addressed the Companions 'in their native tongues'!

Such was the standing of the Chapter by 1968 that 5 members were serving on the Committee of Management of the RMBI.

Early in 1972, somewhat startled by a rise of over 100% in accommodation costs at 10 Duke Street coming on the heels of a further increase in dining costs, the decision was taken to reduce the number of regular meetings from 3 to 2.

In 1973 we became of age! During the 21 year period 26 candidates were Exalted, 255 visitors (some duplication there no doubt) were welcomed including 7 Grand Superintendents. Ten members were honoured with Grand Rank and the membership stood at 33.

We decided to celebrate our 'Masonic Majority' rather than wait for the more usual Silver Jubilee and thus the 'coming of age' was celebrated in style. The principal guests were E Comp the Rev FJ Dove, the consecrating J and E Comp Henry Frampton the Grand Superintendent in and over Somerset. The founding H and J (Jim Redgrove and Oswald Anderson together with the senior joining member, Bernard Taylor) accepted the Principals chairs. Afterwards the members entertained their guests to a special banquet at their favourite old dining haunt, L'Ecu de France.

This rather earlier than customary celebration proved a wise move since the Silver Jubilee Installation convocation in November 1977 was held in darkness due to a power cut that blackened the meeting. It is written that the Minutes and Accounts were taken as read as for the want of light the members were unable to discover their contents!

In 1978 we learned that the Old Union Club in St James' Street had been purchased by the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons. Following renovation the Chapter moved to the now Mark Masons Hall with the opportunity to meet and dine under the same roof. There we stayed right up until the Covid pandemic struck in early 2020.

April '83 saw the first rise in the Annual subscription in the 31 years since Consecration from 5 guineas to £10. In the same year Jim stood down as Scribe E after 24 years in post and the Companions were elevated by the announcement that John Went had been appointed as 2nd Provincial Grand Principal of Somerset.

In 1985 Jim Redgrove was back in the Z chair during his 80th year and April 1987 saw the 4th double Exaltation with two senior OT masons in the persons of W Bros Richard Taylor and Michael Griffin being welcomed into the Royal Arch with E Comp Tom Hughes, the new Grand Superintendent in and over Somerset being elected an Honorary Member.

It was in November 1988 during my year in the Z Chair that I invited Tom to take over the Chair in order to Exalt his son David. I always remember Tom, the epitome of the perfect English gentleman, asking me if it might be possible for him to either conduct the ceremony or at least play a part. He saw it as a sacrifice on my part. I have to admit that I saw it at that time as a gift from Heaven! Needless to say the ceremony was as perfect as we had expected it to be. David Jenkins was the PS and we were treated to a feast of Somerset working.

It was later that year that Jim Redgrove died. A man that had been a Colossus in Old Tauntonian Freemasonry, a magnificent ritualist and tireless in all administrative aspects of both the Craft and Royal Arch. He had held high office, yet never lost the common touch and always enriched meetings with his ready wit and delightful charm.

April 1992 saw the Chapter's 100th Convocation and in '94 the new Grand Superintendent in and over Somerset, E Comp Ted Mear was elected an Honorary Member. A year later Tom Hughes was delighted to be able to present David for Installation.

In 1992, due to a dearth of candidates coming forward for Exaltation, the suggestion that the Chapter should move to Somerset in order to avail itself of the goodly number of Brethren being raised in the Taunton School Lodge, who had no natural Royal Arch home into which to graduate was first discussed. However most of the active members did not wish to move permanently to the West Country but they did agree to consider holding an Emergency Convocation by dispensation in Somerset. The subject did not return for a further 26 years!

During Roger Jago's second time as 1st Principal in 1996 we mourned the death of Cliff Taylor whose entertaining line in inaccurate prompts had livened up many a ceremony!

At that time Harold Wilson (no, not the pipe smoking one) the last surviving Founder was elected an Honorary member. In June Roger led us to the West where he worked the first Old Tauntonian RA ceremony in this Temple. The Chapter was graced by no less than 31 visitors that evening, including the 2nd and 3rd Provincial Grand Principals and a Past Grand Superintendent.

Returning to familiar ground in London in November E Comp Denis Calderley the new Grand Superintendent in and over Somerset was elected an Honorary member. Like Tom Hughes, Denis was to prove an active participant in the work of the Chapter and frequently entertained the Companions with his mellifluous organ music. Following the indisposition of MEZ our ubiquitous Roger again stepped up to the mark on the 25th anniversary of his Exaltation into the Chapter, occupying the Chair to Exalt Bro John Gibson who at 78 was the oldest candidate ever exalted into this Chapter.

In November 1999 the Chapter mourned the death of its oldest Founder, Harold Wilson, thereafter Teddy Tucker was delighted to present his son Ted to be installed as 1st Principal.

In the November of the millennium year Michael Griffin was again Installed as 1st Principal and the following April came the death of Robbie Robinson, a former MEZ and Scribe E, just 4 months after he had been elected an Honorary member when Michael gave a moving eulogy.

November 2001 saw Graham Bowerman Installed as 1st Principal and the appointment of Dr Roger Jago as the new Grand Superintendent in and over Hampshire & Isle of Wight was announced to the delight of all.

The following Spring the MEZ, Graham Bowerman was devastated not to be able to attend the April Convocation, as it fell just two days before the Somerset Provincial Craft meeting at which David Jenkins was to be installed as PGM. Graham had been appointed as David's Provincial Secretary, a post that demanded his undivided attention in the days before the meeting.

It was decided to wait until November before celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Chapter's Consecration. At this stage there had been 56 Exaltations and 11 Joining members since Consecration.

It was in 2002 that we welcomed E Comp Tony Wood, the Provincial 2nd Grand Principal and Headmaster of Taunton Junior School as a Joining member.

It was agreed that the Chapter would subscribe to become a Founding member of the proposed Metropolitan Grand Chapter and the Companions were encouraged to subscribe for individual Founder membership.

November 2003 was our Jubilee celebration meeting. We were blessed with a plethora of high ranking visitors including the 3rd Grand Principal, Rev Peter Hemingway along with a further 23 guests. A replicated Consecration menu was enjoyed at MMH by an impressive 43 Companions.

2007 saw the passing to the Grand Chapter above of E Comp Tony Wood with a wonderful eulogy given by Michael Griffin and David Jenkins was congratulated on his promotion to PDepGSwdB.

2008 saw Derick Burlingham Johnson back in the 1st Principal's Chair for the second time. It was noted that E Comp Michael Button was to be appointed to Active Rank as Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies. The sad death of Michael Redgrove was marked in 2011 by a moving eulogy given by Michael Button and an equally moving account of the funeral which took place in China by his brother Chris. The same year David Jenkins was promoted to GSwdB.

A bit of a landmark occurred in November 2012 when it was agreed that membership of the Chapter be extended to embrace parents of present and past pupils of TS.

In 2012 Roger Jago became MEZ for the 3rd time (already a record) and in 2014 Malcolm Wicks received his 50th year certificate which was presented by the Assistant Metropolitan Grand Superintendent E Comp Chris Clark.

In the April of 2016 we congratulated David Hughes on his appointment as a Met Grand Inspector and in November we were pleased to welcome E Comp John Bennett the Grand Superintendent in and over Somerset. A year later in 2017 Michael Button was likewise congratulated on his promotion to PAGSoj. That evening no less than 3 eulogies were given for departed Companions - Michael Webb, Derick Burlingham Johnson and our erstwhile Visiting Officer Paul Rutter.

It was at this point in our history that the Covid pandemic struck and we were unable to meet for the next 3 meeting dates.

After what seemed like an eternity our November 2021 meeting was held in Taunton and it was confirmed that as the Chapter hadn't met since the Installation Convocation on 5 November 2019 that the offices of the Principals and the other officers be appointed for a further year.

At this meeting the majority of the Companions of the Chapter were now in favour of re-locating to the Taunton Masonic Hall. A petition in favour of the move was to be sent to the Metropolitan Grand Scribe E and a vote held at the next Convocation on 12 April 2022. Needless to say the motion was passed at that meeting confirming the move to Taunton under the authority of the Provincial Grand Chapter of Somerset to meet on the second Tuesdays in April and November.

Sadly although the November 2022 meeting was supported by a goodly number of Somerset RA Companions the Acting Z, E Comp David Hughes was the bearer of bad news. Not only did we observe a period of silence in memory of our late Sovereign, HM Queen Elizabeth II who had reigned during the whole existence of the Chapter but there was further sad news when it was announced that E Comp Roger Jago, the current MEZ, had passed to the Grand Chapter above some 3 weeks earlier.

Roger had been our second Colossus and the leading light in the Chapter for many years and had set the seed for its re-generation as a West Country Chapter.

In conclusion, we have all been grateful for the way the formalities of the transfer to our new home have been handled and for the support and encouragement we have received from the Provincial team.

We hope that in time we will regain numbers, currently only 19, and be worthy of our place in this Provincial Grand Chapter of Somerset.