A History of British Freemasonry 1425-2000

Farewell lecture by Andrew Prescott to the Centre for Research into Freemasonry
20 February 2006

Let me begin with a confession. I trained as a historian, but I am not sure that I ever really was a historian. My career is defined by libraries and archives. As a postgraduate, in studying the records of the rising of 1381 at the National Archives, I was fascinated not so much by the event itself but rather by the way it seemed to shift, change and ultimately disappear in the textual gaps and interstices of the documentary record. During twenty years at the British Library, I was struck as much as anything by the way in which our understanding of history is profoundly shaped by the intervention of librarians and curators. The most fascinating aspect of the past six years for me has been the further exploration of another remarkable and completely different library, the Library and Museum of Freemasonry at Great Queen Street, and I have been entranced by the unexpected intersections between that collection with those I have previously known, through figures such as the masonic artist and British Museum facsimilist, John Harris, the Secretary of the Records Commission and Provincial Grand Master of Kent, Charles Purton Cooper, and the benefactor of the British Library and Provincial Grand Master of Shropshire and North Wales, Thomas Egerton. And now I am about to have a different type of engagement with another remarkable library at Lampeter. This is a path of exploration which would be unfamiliar, perhaps unwelcome, to many academic historians. And increasingly it is path unfamiliar to librarians. What it represents in intellectual terms I am not sure – if it is history, it is a very different sort of history from that commonly practised in many universities today. Perhaps it is something closer to the archivists' history of which the medievalist V. H. Galbraith dreamed.

When I gave the inaugural lecture for the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, I began by describing one of the countless significant bibliographical discoveries that await the assiduous user of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry. The approach to the history of Freemasonry I espoused in that lecture is one that reflects my training as a documentary-based historian, namely that the route to understanding the history of British Freemasonry lies through the energetic exploration of the neglected boxes of correspondence and other primary materials in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry and in other major collections such as those of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. These documentary researches need to be framed within a broader engagement with historical debates, but the engine house of the research lies in that documentary investigation. The neglect of the history of Freemasonry, I suggested, was in large part the result of the failure of researchers to get their hands dirty in those unopened boxes at Great Queen Street.

Since that time, I have learnt an important and salutory lesson. The records do not speak unbidden. We can look time and time again at the second edition of Anderson's *Book of Constitutions*, but it is only if we consider wider political history that we can understand why this new edition of the *Book of Constitutions* was published in 1738. The initiation of Frederick Lewis, Prince of Wales, as a freemason took place in 1737, at precisely the time Frederick moved into overt political opposition to his father George II. Supporters of the Prince of Wales were ostracised by the royal court. The celebration by the freemasons of their initiation of the Prince of Wales could hardly

have been a more politically charged act and the publication of the new edition of the *Book of Constitutions*, which described the initiation of the Prince in fulsome terms, was equally provocative. Likewise, the attacks on Lord Zetland as Grand Master during the period from 1854, leading for example to the formation of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons, are a direct expression of the profound but brief political crisis precipitated by the disastrous conduct of the Crimean War. Just as the middle classes more widely attacked the elderly and ineffectual aristocrats in charge of the War Office, so younger influential freemasons rounded on the Whig aristocrat Zetland who, it was claimed, would much rather spend a day at the races than attend Grand Lodge.

In short, the history of British Freemasonry will only begin to make sense if we interpret it in the light of wider history. Freemasonry cannot be explained by Freemasonry. For that reason, it is perhaps more urgent that we establish a framework of interpretation for the history of Freemasonry than that we continue to explore those neglected documentary materials. Documentary historians such as me are often dismissive of historians who focus on the wider shape of history, but it is only when we contemplate an institution where no such shape has been proposed that we realise the fundamental importance of such frameworks for all aspects of historical study. A historian attempts to describe changes of societies, cultures and institutions in time. Freemasons are often anxious to establish that they are the guardians of an esoteric truth, a pure and accepted masonry, that has passed down unchanged through time. There is a fundamental conflict here which means that, in a masonic context, too often history does not happen.

Galbraith proposed an archivists' history marked, not by artificial chronological distinctions, but rather by the succession of documents. In such a view, the division of history by centuries is artificial and meaningless. Years such as 1500 or 1550 are unremarkable. More meaningful is perhaps the year 1559 which saw the inception of the tellers' views of accounts, the first attempt to draw up a kind of balance sheet of the public finances. One might certainly agree that the orthodox division of history into centuries is unhelpful, and that other systems of chronological division more valid, but it is only in contemplating a history without such chronological distinctions that the importance of these divisions is realised – a history without chronology is moribund and lifeless. Historians now refer to many baffling chronological distinctions, such as the long eighteenth century or the short twentieth century, but these reflect vigorous debates as to the shape and pattern of history. It may seem that debating the shape and structure of the apparently random succession of the history of events is, as Foucault suggested, futile. But again it is only in contemplating the sterility of a historical discussion which has largely ceased to search for such patterns that one realises why such frameworks are indispensable.

This sterility it seems to me characterises the discussion of the history of British Freemasonry. When I began to research the history of Freemasonry, I was told that one of the great attractions of the subject was that it was only necessary to know two dates, namely 1717, the foundation of the Grand Lodge in London, and 1813, the formation of the United Grand Lodge. The more sophisticated might wish to add to this 1751, the date of the foundation of the Ancients Grand Lodge. So, three dates: 1717, 1751 and 1813. There, it was thought, you had the history of British Freemasonry. The existing standard reference works on the history of British

Freemasonry reflect this chronological structure: pre-history to 1717; early years of the Premier Grand Lodge to 1751; the period of the two Grand Lodges from 1751 to 1813; and the rest. Regardless of anything else, you will see how this treatment of the nineteenth century is particularly unsatisfactory – clearly, Freemasonry in 1890, with its multiplicity of orders, its lavish masonic halls, its newspapers and burgeoning professional membership, was very different from Freemasonry immediately after the Union. Yet our accepted chronological structure for the history of British Freemasonry implies the appearance of modern Freemasonry, fully formed, in 1813. When did the change between the situation in 1813 and that in 1890 take place? No one says, and nobody appears to be interested – a far livelier source of concern is whether antient masonry was mangled in the course of the Union. Likewise, how did the commercialised mass-membership Freemasonry of the 1930s emerge from that of the 1890s? Was the First World War a dividing line? We do not know. Without debates about where these dividing lines are placed, without more dates and without more chronology, we do not have history. What I want to do this afternoon is to try and kick-start such a debate and propose a chronological framework for the history of British Freemasonry. At this stage, any proposed framework is bound to be arbitrary and will certainly be wrong, but unless we have such a hypothesis to react against, the history of British Freemasonry will continue not to be written.

I propose that the major divisions of the history of British Freemasonry are as follows. First, from 1425, the approximate date of the composition of the Regius Manuscript, to 1583, the date of the copying of Grand Lodge MS. 1 and the appointment of William Schaw as Master of Works to James VI of Scotland (possibly not coincidental events). The second period would then run from 1583 until the foundation of Grand Lodge in 1717. The next lasts from 1717 to 1736-7, the dates of the foundation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland and of the initiation of Frederick Lewis respectively. I'm not entirely happy about whether this forms a distinct period, or is simply the first part of a longer period which runs to 1763, the beginning of the dispute about the incorporation of the Premier Grand Lodge. From 1763, there is definitely a major change which continues until 1797-8, the dates of the publication of the works by Barruel and Robison alleging masonic complicity in the French Revolution. The ensuing loyalist anxiety engulfed British Freemasonry until long after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and perhaps still casts a shadow over Freemasonry today. However, there can be no doubt that 1834 marked a further sea change in British Freemasonry, encapsulated by the publication of the first number of the *Freemasons Quarterly Review*. A further cataclysmic change occurred with the secession of a group of Canadian lodges from the United Grand Lodge in 1855 and the formation of the Mark Grand Lodge in 1856. The eventual emergence of a late Victorian consensus was marked by the appointment of Edward Prince of Wales as Grand Master in 1874. The subsequent period marked a plateau of English masonic history. I have agonised over whether one might see the 1930s as a further turning point, but I feel that the Freemasonry which emerged in 1874 remained in essence unchanged right the way through until the 1960s, which marked the beginning of the latest and current phase of masonic history.

So I am proposing a ten fold division: 1425-1583; 1583-1717; 1717-1736/7; 1737-1763; 1763-1797-8; 1798-1834; 1834-1855-6; 1856-1874; 1874-(say) 1967; and 1967 to the present day. There are two important points I should make here in proposing this framework. First, while this periodisation relates to major events in masonic

history, it is not completely driven by them. The early 1830s, for example, are a watershed in political, social and cultural history, as well as in the history of Freemasonry. The history of Freemasonry does not exist in isolation, so its periodisation should reflect wider historical periodisation. Second, while, in drawing up this framework, it is necessary to nominate specific years as dividing lines, of course the transition from one period to another was more gradual than this framework suggests. What I will attempt to do for the remainder of my time this afternoon is to try and justify this framework, and briefly review why these particular periods seem to me distinctive.

1425-1583

The first British freemason we know about was Nicholas le Freemason who in 1325 was accused of helping prisoners escape from Newgate gaol in London. However, this is simply the earliest known use of the word in English, and there is a reference in Latin to *sculptores lapidum liberorum* (sculptors of freestone) in London as early as 1212. The origins of modern Freemasonry as a social movement lie in the religious fraternities which flourished particularly after the Black Death of 1349. These fraternities existed primarily to pay for prayers for the souls of their members, but increasingly, particular fraternities were favoured by certain groups of craftsmen, and they began to assume responsibility for trade regulation. These emergent craft gilds began to be dominated by elite groups within individual trades, frequently creating class-based tension. A suggestion that this happened within the craft of stonemasonry occurs in London in 1376, where there is a reference to the gild of ‘freemasons’ which was afterwards struck out and replaced with the word ‘mason’, suggesting that the term freemason was a contentious one. There are other indications that from the late fourteenth century the term freemason was increasingly being applied to the more prosperous masons who contracted for individual jobs.

The Black Death had caused a shortage of skilled artisans, and the government struggled to try and keep wages down. Wage pressure was particularly acute in the building trades. In 1425, a statute was passed forbidding masons from holding assemblies to demand higher wages. It is in this event that we can find the beginnings of the myths of Freemasonry. Groups of junior masons developed a legend that they had been given ancient charters allowing them to hold their assemblies. They also reacted against the increasing stratification of their trade by developing legends which sought to demonstrate that all masons were brethren of equal status. The two manuscripts recording these legends, preserved in the British Library and known as the Regius and Cooke manuscripts, were apparently used by these illicit gatherings. The core legends of Regius and Cooke, and in particular the claim that the masons received a charter from the non-existent Prince Edwin, an alleged son of the Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan, remain of fundamental importance to modern Freemasonry. Freemasons have long hoped that these legends embody some kind of ancient legend handed down by word of mouth, but the evident manipulation of these legends in Regius and Cooke indicates that the legends were in 1425 of recent invention and primarily intended to protect stonemasons from the effects of recent labour legislation. These legends were to achieve a new impetus in the middle of the sixteenth century, when renewed inflation led to further attempts to restrict the wages of craftsmen. In 1552, the leaders of a strike of building workers at York were imprisoned. In response, there was a further substantial elaboration of the legends

originating in Regius and Cooke, with Edwin's grant of a charter to the masons being placed specifically at York, a new detail apparently intended to bolster the position of the York building workers. This first phase of the history of Freemasonry could, I think, be called the syndicalist phase.

1583-1717

In 1583, the syndicalist phase succeeded to what David Stevenson aptly called 'Scotland's Century'. On 21 December 1583, William Schaw was appointed Master of Works to King James VI of Scotland. Two days later, a new manuscript was copied out containing copies of the legends first recorded in the Regius and Cooke manuscripts, which is now Grand Lodge MS 1. Whether it was actually copied for Schaw we cannot say, but we do know that, from this point, copies of these texts, now known as the Old Charges, began to circulate among Scottish masons. Schaw radically reformed the organisation of Scottish stonemasons in two sets of statutes approved at assemblies of Scottish masons in 1598 and 1599. There is no need here to detail the main characteristics of Schaw's reforms, which have been lucidly described by Stevenson. They include the establishment of separate lodges, organised on a territorial basis, answerable directly to the General Warden, holding regular meetings and keeping regular minutes. There are hints that Schaw also sought to interest members of these lodges in the new esoteric and philosophical developments, such as the 'art of memory'. The lodges of masons established by Schaw began to prove attractive to members who were not working stonemasons, such as Sir Robert Moray, who became profoundly interested in the legends and symbolism of the craft of stonemasonry.

While the organisation of English masons remained more informal and ad hoc, some of the features evident in Scotland can also be seen in England from the middle of the seventeenth century. In particular, meetings of stonemasons also became of interest to those who were not working stonemasons, the most celebrated examples being the scientist and antiquary Elias Ashmole and the Chester Herald Randle Holme. To some extent, this may reflect Scottish influence, as Scottish masons such as Moray spread awareness of the features of masonic organisation in the northern kingdom. However, the interest of figures such as Ashmole and Holme in Freemasonry probably also reflects more local conditions. The membership of lodges in York suggest that local stonemasons may have encouraged influential townsfolk, who helped set their wages, to join the lodges to help create awareness of the traditional claims of the stonemasons to a fair wage, set, it was said, by St Alban and with a lineage dating back to biblical times.

In London, this process of creating an elite group with organisations of stonemasons in order to bolster the claims and prestige of the trade led to the emergence during the seventeenth century of an inner group within the London Company of Masons known as the Acception, which included some of the most prosperous architect-masons as well as men such as Ashmole. However, there were tensions within the London Company of Masons. These may have been intensified by attacks on the London companies by James II. The London company became increasingly impoverished and responded by trying to extend its control of the trade and by allowing the Acception to fall into abeyance. Increasingly, the London Masons' company seems to have concentrated on bolstering the position of its junior members. These shifts in

emphasis within the London company seem to be reflected in a change of name from the Company of Freemasons to the Company of Masons.

1717-1736/7

It is in the context of the crisis within the London Company of Masons that the creation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 must be viewed. If the Grand Lodge was indeed a revival, as was afterwards claimed, it was perhaps a revival of the Acception. Within the city of London, the formation of the Grand Lodge was by no means an uncontentious act. While other groups, such as the Society of Ancient Britons, organised regular processions in the city, the institution of an annual procession and feast by an organisation which claimed jurisdiction over building operations in London and its environs was clearly a challenge to the city companies. At this level, one feature of the first twenty years after the formation of the Grand Lodge was the articulation of an administrative structure which would have caused some degree of tension within the city of London and beyond. This was most vividly expressed in the insistence of the Grand Lodge that individual lodges should be controlled by it, holding warrants from the Grand Lodge and obeying its rules. This was by no means accepted by all those connected with the Grand Lodge, as is apparent in William Stukeley's formation of a lodge in Grantham without authorisation of the Grand Lodge. But connected with this administrative articulation was the development of an extended cultural and social agenda. This was at one level political, in its extravagant insistence of its support of the Hanoverian succession. At another level, it was scientific, with a stress on geometry and measurement which was explicitly connected to new developments in scientific thought. But an even more important thread was aesthetic. The early activities of the Grand Lodge were explicitly linked to aesthetic propaganda in support of Vitruvian architecture and opposed to Gothic traditions, seen as monkish and ignorant.

In many ways, this innovative metropolitan Freemasonry was inclusive, as is evident from the prominence of Jewish and Huguenot membership of early lodges. But the increasing insistence of the Grand Lodge on a distinct political, cultural and social agenda proved contentious. This is expressed in the alienation of William Hogarth who was a member in 1730 but had apparently become disillusioned with the social and cultural agenda of Freemasonry by 1736. Likewise, the metropolitan emphasis of this phase of the history of Freemasonry created tension with other towns, as for example at York where its historian Francis Drake eloquently articulated the claims of York to be regarded as the true seat of Freemasonry. The emergence of Grand Lodges in Scotland and Ireland was also likewise a reaction to the growing pretensions of this Hanoverian and Whig London Freemasonry. The tensions created by the emergence of metropolitan Freemasonry came to ahead with the initiation of Frederick Lewis in 1737. This overtly political act by the London Grand Lodge inaugurated a period of tension and fractiousness.

1737-1763

The crisis precipitated by the support of the Grand Lodge for the Prince of Wales culminated in a bout of violent boisterousness in 1741 when the Grand Lodge's dignified procession in London was disrupted by the mock procession of Scald Miserable Masons. Andrew Pink has recently explored how the mock processions of

the Scald Miserable Masons may be linked to the emergence of the Patriot opposition to Walpole, centred around Frederick Lewis. By 1747, the Grand Lodge felt unable any longer to parade in public. The extent to which the formation of the Ancients Grand Lodge in 1751 was linked to these events requires further exploration, but certainly the creation of a separate Grand Lodge in London reflects the increasing splintering of the masonic world.

Within England, this crisis in the authority of the Premier Grand Lodge evidently led to the loss of many members. However, at the same time Freemasonry was spreading beyond the British Isles. Benjamin Franklin had printed an American edition of the Book of Constitutions in 1734, and by 1749 he had been warranted as Provincial Grand Master of Philadelphia. Yet as Freemasonry spread abroad it became more contentious. The Premier Grand Lodge stumbled in its administration of foreign lodges, as is reflected in its confusion over Franklin's appointment. The differences between French and English Freemasonry, sometimes reflecting explicit Jacobite involvement, created tension between the French and English Grand Lodges. Above all, papal suspicion of Freemasonry, resulting in a series of papal bulls against masonic meetings from 1738, made Freemasonry a more contentious activity on continental Europe. The English best-selling book describing the sufferings of the mason John Coustos at the hands of the Portuguese inquisition contributed to a view of Britishness which emphasised anti-catholicism, and also illustrated how Freemasonry had become a politically and socially charged institution.

1763-1797/8

1763 not only marked the beginning of the dispute about the incorporation of the Premier Grand Lodge, but was also the end of the Seven Years War, an important stage in the emergence of Britain as a world power. It appears as if the Premier Grand Lodge was determined that it should create a social organisation worthy of a new imperial power. In Sweden, for example, the Premier Grand Lodge worked closely with British diplomats to try and drive out a French-controlled form of Freemasonry. This formed part of a wider attack on French political influence in northern Europe. The Premier Grand Lodge claimed to be the Supreme Grand Lodge of the world, and energetically promoted its influence through the new British Empire, for example through such events as the initiation of the Indian Prince Omdit-ul-Omrah Bahauder at Madras in 1779. The Premier Grand Lodge marked this occasion by sending a letter of congratulation written in gold accompanied by a copy of the Book of Constitutions, 'superbly bound'.

Yet, just at the time that Premier Grand Lodge was expressing the most lofty international ambitions, its influence within Britain was being undermined by the success of the Ancients Grand Lodge in recruiting lower class members in the English provinces. Moreover, the Ancients Grand Lodge forged far closer relations than the Premier Grand Lodge with the Grand Lodges in Scotland and Ireland. Thanks to Laurence Dermott, the Ancients Grand Lodge fostered a form of Freemasonry which contrasted profoundly with the highly Whig and rationalist Freemasonry of the early years of the Premier Grand Lodge. Robert Peter has recently argued that this reflects counter-enlightenment tendencies, and certainly the success of the Ancients needs to be seen in the light of the same kind of religious and class tensions which underpinned the success of Methodism.

The reaction of some of the leading personalities associated with the Premier Grand Lodge was to seek to enhance the respectability and prestige of their form of Freemasonry. A characteristic figure here is William Preston, the Master of the Lodge of Antiquity, one of the four lodges which had formed the first Grand Lodge. Through successive editions of his *Illustrations of Masonry*, Preston sought to promote a reformation of Freemasonry which would place less emphasis on lively sociability, would stress the spiritual and philosophical benefits of Freemasonry, and, above all, present Freemasonry as a highly respectable and elevated form of social activity. A similar approach is evident in the energetic wok of Thomas Dunkerley in promoting the Premier Grand Lodge in the provinces. Like Preston, Dunkerley also sought to enhance the spiritual content of Freemasonry by introducing to the Premier Grand Lodge a whole host of other masonic orders ranging from the Royal Arch to Mark Masonry. Both Preston and Dunkerley also sought to encourage Freemasonry to enhance its respectability by moving out of taverns into specially built masonic halls. The success of Preston and Dunkerley in enhancing the social character of Premier Grand Lodge Freemasonry was patchy. While a lodge such as the Lodge of Nine Muses in London contained a glittering array of fashionable artists, architects and musicians, a few miles away, a lodge under the Premier Grand Lodge in Wandsworth comprised chiefly market gardeners and tradesmen.

1797-1834

This drive to enhance the social prestige of English Freemasonry received a body blow in 1797-8 with the publication of works alleging that Freemasonry had been used as a cover organisation by Jacobin elements promoting the French revolution. William Preston was prompted to write at length to the Gentleman’s Magazine protesting the loyalty of English freemasons and their attachment to the established constitution. But the tensions buffeted British Freemasonry. In Sheffield, masonic lodges split following disputes over the use of the masonic hall by the Sheffield Society for Consitutional Information. Spies reported to the Home Office on proceedings in masonic lodges in Leeds. A lodge in Brentford was accused of plotting to assassinate the King. The reaction of masonic lodges was energetically to protest their loyalty. The Lodge of Lights in Warrington turned itself into a branch of the local militia. Many lodges changed their name to emphasise their loyalty and attachment to the crown.
But Freemasonry received a further body blow with the realisation that Irish rebels had used forms of masonic organisation in organising the Irish rebellion in 1797. The government proposed banning all meetings behind closed doors, which would have outlawed Freemasonry. Eventually, following a dramatic debate in parliament, an exemption for masonic lodges from the Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 was hastily patched up. This legislation drove a wedge between Freemasonry and other forms of fraternal society. The Oddfellows, for example, suffered from restrictions on their use of ritual. While freemasons were proud of their exemption under the Act, the privileged legislative position of Freemasonry caused it to become increasingly estranged from other forms of fraternal organisation.

These social and political pressures underpinned the Union between the two Grand Lodges in 1813. Freemasons in other parts of Europe were anxious as to whether the Grand Lodges in England really had the degree of control of their members that they

claimed. The Swedish Grand Lodge for example felt that English lodges too readily admitted lower class sailors and mariners, who created problems when they returned home and tried to join lodges there. The British government remained concerned as well – the Home Office put pressure on the Ancients Grand Lodge to ban meals after masonic meetings, as too much loose talk might take place there. In negotiating the Union of the two English Grand Lodges, the Duke of Sussex had a variety of concerns. At one level, he wanted to ensure that there was no danger that Freemasonry could be used by seditious elements. At another level, he sought to make Freemasonry fit for the Empire and sought a uniformity of practice across the British Empire. He hoped that the Union of the English Grand Lodges would be followed by union with the Grand Lodges of Scotland and Ireland, and this probably explains some of the detail of the resulting reform of masonic ritual and practice. The Duke also had wider ambitions from his reform. He hoped that, in achieving the Union, he would also perform a greater service for humanity as a whole. He was fascinated by the idea that Freemasonry embodied remnants of an ancient sun religion which predated christianity, and employed Godfrey Higgins, who had pioneered such theories in his publications, to investigate further the origins of Freemasonry. Higgins claimed to have found evidence to support this case. Aided by Higgins, Sussex dreamed of using Freemasonry to give a new religion to the world which he felt would be a boon to civilisation.

Despite this religious radicalism, Sussex showed a less assured touch in dealing with social and economic change. He insisted that freed slaves could not become freemasons, creating chaos in the organisation of Freemasonry in the Caribbean which lasted until the 1850s. Despite Sussex's interest in the work of Robert Owen, he was unsympathetic to the needs of the new industrial cities, which perhaps underpinned the secession of groups of lodges in the north-west of England following the Union. On the whole, the new class of industrialists seem to have taken little interest in promoting Freemasonry in the industrial towns. A characteristic situation appears to have been that in Bradford, where the masonic lodge continued to be chiefly populated by artisans who apparently sought to use the lodge to retain a sense of that community which the industrial development of the town had shattered for ever.

1834-1855/6

The increasing social cleavage between Freemasonry and other forms of fraternal organisation was vividly expressed in 1834, when the Tolpuddle Martyrs were arrested and tried under the Unlawful Societies Act, an event which was toasted by officers of the Grand Lodge who urged masonic lodges to check that their exemption was in order. Yet social change was beginning to pose greater challenges for the Grand Lodge. To Sussex, the capacity of Freemasonry to reform society was best expressed in its ability to help transcend christianity. For others, such as the physician Robert Crucefix, Freemasonry needed to undertake more direct social action. Crucefix promoted a scheme for the creation of a home for elderly and impoverished freemasons, to which Sussex was opposed. The passing of the New Poor Law in 1834 gave an added urgency to Crucefix's campaign; there was now a serious possibility that freemasons could be consigned to the workhouse.

Crucefix launched the *Freemasons Quarterly Review* to help promote his campaign for the masonic asylum. The *Freemasons Quarterly Review* quickly became a vehicle

for a new type of Freemasonry, which may be linked to wider demands for reform at this time. Crucefix argued for a Freemasonry which was more evangelistic and more committed to social reform. Above all, he argued that Freemasonry should be more explicitly christian. In this, Crucefix's great ally was the clergyman George Oliver who, reacting directly to the ideas of Higgins and his populariser Richard Carlile, developed a christian theology of Freemasonry which was to be enormously influential for the rest of the nineteenth century. Crucefix saw the promotion of masonic charity as linked to wider provision for self-help and security – at one point he renamed his magazine the *Freemasons Quarterly Review and General Assurance Advocate*.

For Crucefix, Freemasonry was intended for the respectable middle classes. The *Freemasons Quarterly Review* carried anxious reports about masonic beggars, usually members of lodges in Ireland and Scotland, who were thought to be illicitly using masonic lodges as part of the system of tramping in search of work – the kind of distinctly unrespectable practice to which Crucefix was opposed. Crucefix's success in promoting this reformed middle class Freemasonry was distinctly patchy – while his influence on the resurgence of lodges run by his followers such as Birmingham was enthusiastically reported in the pages of the *Freemasons Quarterly Review*, in other industrial towns such as Bradford or indeed Sheffield, his impact was more limited.
There is no need here to go into the details of Crucefix's titanic dispute with the Duke of Sussex. For the historian, it was a boon insofar as allegations that discussions in the Grand Lodge were misreported in the *Freemasons Quarterly Review* led to the detailed minuting of debates in Grand Lodge. The important point is that the cleavage evident during Crucefix's lifetime continued after his death in 1850, with the Whig Grand Master Lord Zetland subject to ferocious attacks for his complacent administration of the craft in the pages of the *Freemasons Magazine*, the successor to the *Freemasons Quarterly Review*. Crucefix had marked out lines of division within Freemasonry whose influence is still apparent

1856-1874

Discontent with Zetland's administration of Freemasonry came to a head in 1855 with the secession of a group of Canadian masons to form their own Grand Lodge. This was followed shortly afterwards by the formation of a Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons. I have discussed the context of these events recently in my contribution to the book *Marking Well*, so I will not dwell on them here. The important point is that they formed an integral part of a short-lived but profound social and political crisis precipitated by the inglorious conduct of the Crimea War. The attacks on Zetland were spearheaded by a masonic journal called the *Masonic Observer*, written by a group of radical young Tories including Canon George Portal and the Earl of Carnarvon. This argued for a greater role for the provinces in masonic organisation. These demands were linked with such reforms to provincial organisation as the introduction of provincial yearbooks, more frequent meetings of the province and a more active role for Provincial Grand Masters.

This can be seen as part of a wider demand for greater access to political and social authority for the social leaders of the new industrial cities. This is vividly expressed in Birmingham, where a number of wealthy factory owners and members of the social

elite sought to institute a lodge to be called the Lodge of Progress, which would meet in a masonic hall, avoid alcohol at masonic meals and stress the virtues of charity, temperance and respectability. Similar shifts can be seen in many other industrial towns. To cite again the example of Bradford, the Lodge of Hope was taken over by a new group of wealthy immigrant entrepreneurs, who earnestly debated how masonic virtue could best be achieved.

It is at this point that Freemasonry becomes an overwhelmingly middle class vehicle. It is worth noting that this appears to be a largely English phenomenon. In Scotland and Ireland, significant working class membership was retained to the present day. In England, the importance of Freemasonry for the cohesion of the social elites in provincial towns and cities was expressed in the building of masonic halls (facilitated by the new availability of limited liability companies) as an integral part of new civic centres – in towns such as Manchester and Sheffield, immediately adjacent to new city halls and other public buildings.

One of the many further points for investigation in this pivotal period in the history of Freemasonry is how these changes were expressed in the role of Freemasonry in the British Empire. Some of the pressures within imperial Freemasonry were different and distinctive – for example, Indian districts were reluctant to allow non-Christians to join masonic lodges and only did so following explicit instructions from London. The reluctance of colonial freemasons in India to share their lodges with natives prompted a particular enthusiasm for the works of George Oliver and for the development of Christian orders – Indians might join a craft lodge, but only christians could fully appreciate the glories of Freemasonry, it was declared from the pulpits of churches in Bombay and elsewhere.

1874-1967

From this contentious period, a consensus emerged by the 1870s, as indeed it did in British society more widely. This late Victorian consensus is reflected in the fact that when the Prince of Wales became Grand Master in 1874, the former firebrand Carnarvon became his suave and accomplished Pro Grand Master, while the other rebel of the 1850s, Portal, was at the same time busy bringing order and harmony to the many other masonic orders which had proliferated from 1856. Another epitome of this consensus can be found in the north-east of England, where the Mark Provincial Grand Master, the clergyman Canon Tristram, had as his indispensable lieutenant and deputy the former Chartist turned newspaper editor, Richard Bagnall Reed.

Late Victorian Freemasonry was settled in its position in society. The ins and outs of proceedings in various Grand Lodges were earnestly debated in *The Times*, while the freemason George Grossmith mocked the clerk Charles Pooter for his inability to understand masonic allusions. In towns and cities throughout the country, local masonic lodges formed an indispensable part of civic processions such as those organised for the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria. Freemasonry was supported by a formidable commercial infrastructure, most visibly expressed in the firm of George Kenning which produced the expensive jewels and regalia which allowed the late Victorian middle class male a rare opportunity for conspicuous consumption. Kenning also published one of the weekly newspapers, available on

railway bookstalls, which debated leading issues in Freemasonry and reported on masonic personalities and events. This period also marked the emergence of Freemasonry as one of the most well-resourced and well-organised philanthropic bodies in the country.

Two features should perhaps be emphasised within this picture of prosperity, stability and growth. First, Freemasonry was not alone in this social landscape. It formed part of what has been described as 'competitive fraternalism'. The growth of new more rational forms of recreation and leisure from the 1860s had been in part a reaction to a crisis of identity for the inhabitants of the large new industrial towns. How were they to maintain the old sense of community and, in the case of the middle classes, affirm their civic leadership? One answer was to choose from a bewildering variety of new social activities. A fervent teetotaler could live out a life that was wholly supported by a variety of temperance organisations, commercial enterprises and publications. A committed freemason could likewise fill his week with a variety of masonic meetings, take in *The Freemason* for his weekly reading, read in the masonic library, and fill his house with a variety of masonic objects. Freemasonry was just one of many means by which the late Victorian middle classes could affirm their respectability and social prestige and feel a vicarious sense of community.

An aspect of this use of Freemasonry to express identity in the late Victorian period was the emergence of class lodges. Reluctant to enter pubs and taverns, the establishment of a masonic lodge provided a means by which the new professional classes could socialise in a neutral atmosphere after work. Thus, members of the London School Board petitioned for the establishment of a masonic lodge so that they could relax after committee meetings were finished. Similar lodges were established for many other professional groups. Particularly noteworthy among these are the lodges established for members of new public sector professions such as policemen and teachers. The class position of these groups was often ambiguous; Freemasonry provided one means by which they could claim to be middle class.

As part of this stress on respectability, religiosity proved to be increasingly important. With the adoption of popular hymn tunes, the prominence of the role of the chaplain and the pseudo-ecclesiastical atmosphere of many of the new masonic halls, attendance at a lodge meeting seemed almost like going to a religious service. The ecclesiastical atmosphere of English Freemasonry increasingly set it apart from Freemasonry elsewhere, most notably from the French Grand Orient which was by the 1870s increasingly atheist and secularist in outlook and was becoming the keeper of the flame of the Third Republic. These tensions came to a head with the dispute over the decision of the French Grand Orient to dispense with the requirement for belief in a supreme being, which resulted in the effective excommunication of members of that Grand Lodge by the British Grand Lodges. The two major power blocs of the masonic world which emerged in the 1870s still nervously look at each other over the masonic equivalent of the Berlin Wall. This schism cannot be entirely blamed on the French. As has been noted, while France moved in one direction, British Freemasonry was becoming more and more religious in tone.

Envoi

It is for this reason that I am inclined to regard the late Victorian consensus in Freemasonry as persisting until the 1960s, with perhaps the celebrations for the 275th anniversary of the English Grand Lodge in 1967 marking its last gasp. Here, I have been influenced by the recent work of Callum Brown, who has argued that the late Victorian period saw in Britain a deepening of popular religious sentiment, which he suggests persisted until the cultural shifts of the 1960s. It seems to me that you can see something of the same process in Freemasonry. Despite its claim not to require belief in any particular religion, from at least the 1870s Freemasonry became a very effective expression of the wider moral, cultural and political consensus which underpinned the British Empire. Regardless of whether they were non-conformist, Anglican, Jewish or Hindu, there was a strong understanding of what constituted proper behaviour for a loyal British subject, and this was underpinned by a kind of instinctive religious and moral discourse of precisely the kind that Callum Brown argues characterised the religioisity of British society through the 1960s.

The work of John Belton and others has established without any doubt the way in which the 1960s inaugurated a period of decline from the previous high levels of membership. The complete collapse of the friendly societies after the Second World War seems to offer a chilling warning as to what might await Freemasonry. John Belton in particular has stressed here the relevance of the work of the sociologist Robert Putnam who has argued that the decline of group-based social activities in America represent a profound crisis for modern American society. John and others have argued that a similar crisis can be seen in Britain, first in the collapse of the friendly societies after the establishment of the Welfare State and second in the fall in masonic membership.

However, there are some objections to the thesis that from the 1960s what we see in British Freemasonry is an expression of the process described in Putnam. First, fraternalism appears historically to have been more important in America than in Britain. While fraternal organisations were an important, and neglected, part of late Victorian British society, they were by no means such an all-pervasive feature of male sociability in Britain as they were in America. Moreover, the leading case in support of the thesis of a crisis in fraternity is the friendly society, but these collapsed for precisely the reason that legislative pressure had turned them into little more than insurance societies and had undermined the fraternal aspects of their organisation. When the Welfare State replaced their benefit function, they had little else to offer. In contemplating the present challenges to Freemasonry, I wonder if the work of historians of religion like Callum Brown is not more helpful than that of sociologists. Brown argues that Britain was characterised by a profound religiosity which was not effectively challenged until the 1960s. He suggests that the process of secularisation, placed by most historians in the Victorian period, actually did not get underway until the 1960s. I wonder if it is that challenge to religion, and the emergence of asecular society, which is at the root of the current uncertainties of British Freemasonry. Freemasonry in Britain had become so firmly yoked from the 1870s onwards to a broadly expressed religious culture in Britain that it was bound to be shaken to its roots by the sudden decline of that culture. In this context, the major features of the present period of the history of Freemasonry would be not so much the attacks of anti-masonic writers such as Stephen Knight as the inquiries into Freemasonry and

religion by the Anglican and Methodist churches, which proposed that membership of Freemasonry was incompatible with membership of these churches.

Indeed, it could be argued that Freemasonry itself provides a major objection to the Putnam thesis. If fraternalism is in such a profound crisis, then why does Freemasonry remain in such a rude state of health? If nothing else the history of British Freemasonry demonstrates its durability, and I am sure it will not easily go away. The university to which I am moving was established as a theological college by the church of Wales. When the church of Wales was disestablished, it must have seemed as if its days were numbered. Yet its primary theological training college is now a University and a former Archbishop of Wales is now the Archbishop of Canterbury (and a Druid). The church of Wales demonstrates the tractability of cultural institutions in away which must give Freemasonry heart.

I hope I have said enough to show that, in considering the history of British Freemasonry, an important preliminary requirement is to consider its periodisation. And, in considering its periodisation, perhaps we might think about where it fits in subject and discipline terms. My suggestion that the work of Callum Brown might help in understanding the last two periods of British masonic history raises a broader question – namely that in studying the history of Freemasonry, it is to the history of religion that we should look for a disciplinary context.

One of the attractions of the study of Freemasonry is its inherently inter-disciplinary character – to study fully Freemasonry we need the skills of the historian, the literary specialist, the museum curator, the art historian, the sociologist and so on. However, if the study of Freemasonry does not have a home disciplinary base, it again runs the risk of becoming sterile. The subject field in which the study of Freemasonry sits most comfortably is that of the history of religion (and this is one reason why I am delighted that Professor Luscombe, a distinguished historian of religion and religious thought, has chaired our session today). Freemasons, anxious to stress that their craft is a moral and not a religious system, have fought shy of admitting that the history of Freemasonry forms part of the history of religion, but I would suggest that the tools of the historian of religion are precisely those which the historian of Freemasonry requires. So, in presenting a periodisation of the history of British Freemasonry, I would draw your attention to the ways in which a lot of the features of this periodisation correspond to the periodisation of the history of religion in Britain. Freemasonry might not be a religion, but it is a spiritual journey, and the paths along which that journey are directed are those that also shape religions and religious history.

Following this lecture, six of the most loyal supporters of the work of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry at the University of Sheffield presented Andrew Prescott with a square inscribed 'Prof Andrew Prescott. We met on the level and parted on the square'. The presenters of this beautifully-made memento (whose names are also inscribed on it) are shown here with Andrew Prescott. They are from left to right: Alan Turton, John Wade, Tony Lever, Andrew Prescott, Jack Thompson, John Belton and John Acaster.