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An Historical Perspective on The Holy Royal Arch

Issue 5 – 30th March 2012

Introduction

In this lecture I intend to summarise the historical and spiritual context of the Holy Royal Arch. I hope to explain why the Order is so important and what it means to me and many others. Also I do hope that you will find it interesting and informative.

First of all some questions:

- For many years, The Holy Royal Arch was said to be the completion of the Third Degree. Why was this so and is this the case now?
- Similarly, The Holy Royal Arch has often been described as the “root, heart and marrow” of Freemasonry. Why? - and is this still the case?
- What do we actually mean by the words “Holy Royal Arch”?
- What is the difference between a Brother and a Companion?

To answer these and other questions I would like to look first at the historical context of the Holy Royal Arch.

Historical Context.

Let me ask you another question. Would you join a new Masonic Order created by a Lodge? Would you join if it was not recognised by the UGL of E? Would it make any difference to your decision if I told you that the Grand Master of the UGL of E had joined this Order and that he had automatically become its head, even though it was still not recognised by the UGL of E? Unlikely? Well this is similar to the situation in 1766 with the Royal Arch – but we are ahead of ourselves. Let us go back a little further.

We are well aware of the quarrel between the original Premier Grand Lodge founded in 1717 (the so called “Moderns”) and that of their rivals, The Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons (the self styled “Antients”). Members of the Antients, believed to have been formed in 1751, accused the Moderns of violating the ancient landmarks of the order. This was because (they alleged) that the Moderns had altered the modes of recognition. In the early part of this century there had been a number of exposures of the secrets of Freemasonry; the most famous of these by Samuel Pritchard in *Masonry Dissected* in 1730, causing the Moderns to make certain changes to the ritual. The members of the Ancients, many of whom were from Ireland and not privy to the consequent changes, were probably frustrated at being excluded from the secrets when the Moderns changed the modes of recognition. As a result of this, Freemasonry in England was split into two warring camps for the rest of the century. ¹

It is not clear how or when the Royal Arch came into existence, although Revd Neville Barker Cryer's book *The Royal Arch Journey*¹² postulates that in the 16th and 17th centuries Masonic ritual was practiced in catechism form. The catechisms covered Old and New Testament biblical stories from Adam, Cain and Able to Pilate, Caiaphas and Christ, in eleven sections of three. The catechisms covered what we now know as the Royal Arch and were an inclusive part of what was practised as the three Craft degrees. He suggests that the catechisms have since been subject to many changes and adaptations and that some of the ritual derived from them now resides in other Masonic orders, or is no longer practised.

One view² is that the concept of an Arch evolved from ancient operative practice where there were two parallel lines of progress, a career in square or straight work, or a career in arch or curved work. At least two groups of Masons who followed this operative practice were the "Old York" working and the Grand Lodge of the Antients who stressed that the Craft ceremonies were not complete unless there was an Arch Component. Many of the Antients' members were initially almost all from an Irish background.

Revd Neville Barker Cryer quotes² from a book by Dr Fifield D'Assigny that in 1744 there were *Arch* Masons in York who were so organised that this step was only possible for those who had passed the Chair and were *Excellent Masons*. He goes on to quote Anderson (1723) and Pennel (1730) who both include a well known exhortation which ended "... Let the *Cement* of the Brotherhood be so well preserv'd that the whole Body may remain as a *well-built Arch*." In these works, there is a reference to an Arch degree, comprising the setting up of a well built and completed Arch, which was a *component part* of the three degree system. A distinct *Arch* Ceremony followed those of the Fellow Craft and Mark Man, the Master Mason and Mark Master and the Past Master (or Excellent Master). These anticipated the Super Excellent (or Veils ceremony) and the Royal Arch. There are, in the Grand Lodge Library in London, examples of five Arch stages before the Royal Arch.

When in 1751 the Antients established their Grand Lodge aimed at expunging innovations from the system, they were already supporting the Royal Arch; claiming to be the "Grand Lodge of the Four Degrees" and deriding the Moderns as being a Grand Lodge presiding over only three degrees.¹

After 1751 the Antients Grand Lodge was to urge^{1&3} that the Holy Royal Arch was the essential step for every true Mason and Laurence Dermott, the Antients' second Grand Secretary, described the Royal Arch as the "root, heart and marrow of Freemasonry." It was a requirement until 1823 that only those who were elected ruling Masters of Lodges could apply to be exalted. In this sense it was a super or supreme step. An extract from the regulations of the Antients' Grand Lodge stated:

"This degree is certainly more august, sublime and important than those which precede it and it is the summit and perfection of Antient Masonry. It impresses on our minds a more firm belief of the existence of a Supreme Deity. (Our aim is) That this Supreme Degree may be conducted with that regularity, order and solemnity becoming the sublime intention with which from time immemorial it has been held."

The Moderns came out resolutely against the Royal Arch and in 1759 their Grand Secretary, Samuel Spencer, wrote ^{1&2} a letter replying to William Carroll a petitioner for charity from Ireland, stating that “Our Society is neither Arch, Royal Arch or Antient, so that you have no right to partake of our charity ...” Note here the distinction between Arch and Royal Arch, possibly made because the petitioner stated that he was a qualified Arch and Royal Arch Mason, as well as being a member of the Antients’ lodge in England. This, for a long time remained the official Moderns’ view, even though many of their Grand Officers were exalted into the order, including their own Grand Master.

In 1764 the way was prepared for a major change in the position of the Moderns with respect to the Royal Arch, when Caledonian Lodge in London left the Antients (the Grand Lodge of the Four Degrees) and joined the Moderns (who only practised three degrees). A year later, with the help of this Lodge, 29 Modern Freemasons formed a new Royal Arch Chapter, called “The Excellent Grand and Royal Chapter.” This may have been the founding of a Grand Chapter, as even today all warrants and patents sealed by Supreme Grand Chapter refer to “Our Excellent Grand and Royal Chapter.” ¹

In 1766 Lord Blaney, who was Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge (The Moderns), was exalted into this Chapter and became automatically and forthwith First Principal of the Chapter, taking the title “Head of the Royal Arch.” This was in the same year that the Grand Secretary of the “Moderns” wrote officially to a brother in Frankfurt that “the Royal Arch is a society which we do not acknowledge and which we hold to be an invention to introduce innovation and to seduce the Brethren.” It certainly seduced his Grand Master! ¹

On 22nd July 1766 a “Charter of Compact” was executed, converting the Modern’s first chapter into the Most Excellent Grand and Royal Chapter. Lord Blaney then described himself as “Grand Master of Free and Accepted Masons and also Most Excellent Grand Master of the Royal Arch of Jerusalem,” even though the Royal Arch was still not recognised by the Moderns. Some time later the date on this charter was altered to make it appear that it had been executed a year later in 1767, when Lord Blaney’s term of office as Grand Master had expired. ¹ This was not discovered until 1949 when J.R. Dashwood, a Masonic historian, was preparing a paper on the original Grand Chapter. He noticed that changes had been made at the top of the document, where a “P” had been inserted to designate Lord Blaney as a Past Grand Master and at the foot of the document, where the final digit of the year had been scraped off and changed to that of the following year. Dashwood described the Charter of Compact as a “pious fraud” since of the original twenty one signatories, only Lord Anglesey was present on the 22nd July 1766, having been exalted that evening. Of the remainder, more than two thirds had not been exalted at that date. The majority of them were exalted between 1767 and 1769. ¹³

The initiative had, however, now passed to the Moderns who were no longer presiding over only three degrees and the Antients were unable to react effectively because they had made great capital out of their claim to be the “Grand Lodge of the Four Degrees.” They did, however, create their own Grand Chapter in 1771 but it never became a truly independent Masonic authority. ¹

At the second meeting of the Moderns' new Chapter, James Heseltine, Grand Steward of the Moderns' Grand Lodge was exalted. Eight years later, by which time he was the Grand Secretary, James Heseltine wrote to a foreign correspondent that he had the honour of belonging to the Royal Arch "but it is not acknowledged by Grand Lodge and all its emblems and jewels are forbidden to be worn there... You will see that the Royal Arch is a private and distinct society. It is part of Masonry, but has no connection with Grand Lodge." The claim that the Royal Arch "has no connection with Grand Lodge" implies that Lord Blaney's action in executing the "Charter of Compact" was unconstitutional. However, the Premier Grand Lodge and the Grand and Royal Chapter continued in a state of wary co-existence until the time that negotiations for the union of the two Grand Lodges were nearing the fruition achieved in 1813.¹

In 1813, HRH the Duke of Sussex as Grand Master of the Moderns' Premier Grand Lodge and his brother HRH the Duke of Kent as Grand Master of the rival Antients' Grand Lodge presided over the union of the two to form the United Grand Lodge of Antient Freemasons of England. The Act of Union specifically accepted that the Royal Arch was genuinely part of Freemasonry but its actual status was not defined. It was not until March 1817 that the Excellent Grand and Royal Chapter (the Moderns) and the Grand Chapter (the Antients) met in separate rooms before proceeding into a third room, where the Duke of Sussex received them and formally joined them as one.

Six months later the United Grand Lodge formally advised that it was "Resolved unanimously that the Grand Lodge will at all times be disposed to acknowledge the proceedings of the Grand Chapter, and, so long as their arrangements do not interfere with the Regulations of the Grand Lodge, and are in conformity with the Act of Union, they will be ready to recognise, facilitate and uphold the same."¹

The next step in the story took place in 1853 when the Preamble to the Craft Constitutions stated:

"By the solemn Act of Union between the two Grand Lodges of Free-Masons of England in December 1813, it was 'declared and pronounced that pure Antient 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."⁴

Thus, for many years afterwards, exaltation into the Holy Royal Arch was considered to be the culmination of Craft Freemasonry and was described as the completion of the Master Mason's Degree.

This situation continued until 2003 when the UGL of E added a second paragraph to the definition of the Holy Royal Arch:

"At the Quarterly Communication of 10th December 2003 the United Grand Lodge of England acknowledged and pronounced the status of the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch to be "an extension to, but neither a superior nor a subordinate part of the Degrees which precede it."⁴

The declaration clarified that “the Royal Arch is not the completion of the Third Degree. It is an extension of all that has been taught in the three Degrees preceding it.”⁴

However, this caused great consternation among many Royal Arch Masons who were unhappy with the definition and the situation changed shortly afterwards. Freemasonry Today reported in its winter 2007/8 Edition that:

“A fresh definition of the status of the Royal Arch is to be considered by Grand Lodge, following the report of the working group set up last year under the chairmanship of the Second Grand Principal George Francis.”⁹

The announcement was made by Lord Northampton who commented:

“There is no doubt that the Royal Arch is not the completion of just the third degree, but the 2003 declaration has not been entirely satisfactory.” “I am minded to request Grand Lodge to give careful consideration to replacing the 2003 paragraph with a fresh definition. We should all seek to describe the Royal Arch as the next step in Freemasonry after the Craft degrees and the final step in pure Ancient Masonry. It is of course both an integral part of Craft Masonry as well as being its’ completion.”^{9 & 10}

It was later announced in July 2009¹¹ that:

“The Board has considered the wording of the Preliminary Declaration to the *Book of Constitutions* and has taken advice from the Committee of General Purposes of Supreme Grand Chapter. In December 2003 the second paragraph was added to the Declaration. The additional words, which were intended to reinforce the link between the Craft and the Royal Arch, have not achieved the objective to which they were directed. Indeed some Brethren gained the impression that the aim was the very opposite of what was intended. The Board accordingly recommends that the second paragraph be removed and the Declaration restored to its earlier form..... A Notice of Motion to amend the *Book of Constitutions* accordingly has been put forward.”¹¹

This has since been done and we have, therefore, reverted to just the single paragraph quoted earlier:

“By the solemn Act of Union between the two Grand Lodges of Free-Masons of England in December 1813, it was ‘declared and pronounced that pure Antient 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.”⁴

Happily the Holy Royal Arch has been restored to its rightful position within the three degrees of Pure Antient Masonry.

The Supreme Degree of Holy Royal Arch

The Royal Arch ceremony follows on naturally from the Third Degree Ceremony in Craft Masonry. The Third Degree ceremony concludes with the Master Mason being informed that the genuine secrets of a Master Mason have been lost and that substituted secrets have been found, until time or circumstances shall restore the genuine. Whilst contemplating the death of Hiram Abif, the Master Mason is encouraged to contemplate his own inevitable destiny. The Royal Arch ceremony looks beyond this mortal life, into the prospect of eternity.

Dr Roger Hugh Jago, Past M.E. Grand Superintendent of the Province of Hampshire and Isle of Wight, states that “The Craft ceremonies reach their climax in the Royal Arch, so truly denominated the essence of Freemasonry, at once the foundation and keystone of the whole Masonic structure. The ceremony of exaltation emphasises the Glory of the Almighty and the power of His Holy Name. It teaches the whole duty of man to his Creator, stressing our total dependence on the Almighty, the beginning and end of all things.”⁵ For that is what this Order is about. It puts Craft Masonry into a framework of eternity. It demands a sense of wonder and commitment, and it gives us to build upon, one of the loveliest visions a candidate for any Masonic degree ever sees.¹

Lt. Col. D.A.M. Phipps, Past Provincial Grand Master of Surrey goes on to say that⁶ “...a Master Mason who does not choose to be exalted in the Royal Arch has not attained all that Pure Antient Masonry has to offer. He may go on to practise and progress in his Craft Masonry, but he will do so without the benefit of the extended knowledge and understanding of the whole system of Pure Antient Masonry which the Royal Arch can give him, and his appreciation of Craft Masonry is unlikely to be as great as it would have been if he had been exalted.”

Revd Neville Barker Cryer points out³ that the Holy Royal Arch degree is considered the “supreme” attainment for a “Craft” Mason, as without it he cannot enter the knightly and purely Christian orders. To this day membership of the Royal Arch is a prerequisite for membership of Knights Templar, Knights of Malta and Holy Royal Arch Knight Templar Priests.

In another publication⁷ Revd Neville Barker Cryer goes on to point out that it was only after 1936, that Third Degree Masons could proceed to exaltation in the Holy Royal Arch and that the Craft degrees in England are deemed incomplete without at least the exaltation into, and occupying the Chairs of the Holy Royal Arch. He then proceeds to show the relationship, through six stages of Speculative Freemasonry, between Craft and other higher non-Craft degrees, including the Holy Royal Arch.

When in 1813 in England and shortly afterwards in Scotland and Ireland, Grand Lodges sought to limit their activities to what **they deemed** to be the Craft Degrees, it was bound to look as if everything else was simply an addition. Looking at the historical perspective we see that in these so called non-Craft degrees we have the fuller parts of what was originally the “whole Craft working.” If you do not participate in these non-Craft degrees then you are actually missing out on some of the original Freemasonry.⁷

Companions of the Holy Royal Arch

So why do we call the order “The Holy Royal Arch” and what is the significance of being a Companion?

One view ¹ is that the Arch is the strongest bond in masonry, that which in speculative Freemasonry welds Brothers into Companions. It is Royal because it looks to the legendary royal Grand Masters who built the first Temple and it is Holy because the Arch of the vault concealed the Holy secrets contained therein and the emblem of eternity.

The word “Companion” referred originally to soldiers who shared their bread together and who lived, fought and died together. A Companion was a man on whom your very life might depend. To be a Companion was and is much more than to be a Brother. ¹

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Acknowledgements

- ¹ Understanding The Royal Arch by Richard Sandbach. Published by Lewis Masonic.
- ² Did You Know This, Too? Discovering the “Arch” Degree. By Revd Neville Barker Cryer. Published by Lewis Masonic.
- ³ What do you know about the Royal Arch? Is Royal Arch the Supreme Degree? By Revd Neville Barker Cryer. Published by Lewis Masonic.
- ⁴ United Grand Lodge of England Constitutions, Supreme Grand Chapter Regulations.
- ⁵ The Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch. A personal Message from the M.E. Grand Superintendent of Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Dr. Roger Hugh Jago.
- ⁶ The Origins and Development of the Royal Arch by Lt. Col. D.A.M. Phipps – November 2003.
- ⁷ I Just didn’t know that. What is the point of other than Craft Degrees? by Revd Neville Barker Cryer. Published by Lewis Masonic.
- ⁸ Beyond the Craft by Keith B Jackson. Published by Lewis Masonic.
- ⁹ Freemasonry Today Number 1 Winter 2007/8.
- ¹⁰ Repeated in the Pro First Grand Principal’s Address to Supreme Grand Chapter on 14th November 2007.
- ¹¹ Preliminary Declaration to the Book of Constitutions, Freemasonry Today, Summer 2009, Page 7.
- ¹² The Royal Arch Journey by Revd Neville Barker Cryer. Published by Lewis Masonic.
- ¹³ John Hamill, Freemasonry Today, United Grand Lodge of England, Number 17 – Spring 2012