Family and friends join Les celebrating 50 years - Derek Parkinson’s presentation

Firstly WM, may I thank you and the brethren of Excelsior Lodge for inviting me to this special meeting this evening to share with you the jubilee celebration of one of your members. It’s one of the benefits of holding a senior position in the Province, to celebrate with a brother as he reaches a milestone in his Masonic career and tonight it’s to pay tribute to Leslie Garner, Past Provincial Junior Grand Warden of the Province of West Lancashire. I’ll be looking back at what happened 50 or 60 years ago and I’m usually surprised to see how often there is a parallel between those events and the things going on in the world today. And so, to begin tonight’s tribute I would be grateful if our Assistant to the PrDGDC would place our celebrant before me. Leslie, or Les as you’re known to all, I begin your story tonight in 1934, the year that you were born, and take it through to the year of your initiation.

You were born in Frodsham, and being the second born you were born at home, or rather in your grandma’s house in Belmont Road. Looking back to the 1930’s, this was the first time a car had travelled at more than 300 mph. It was driven by Malcolm Campbell who went on to hold many speed records on land and water, eventually costing him his life. In the same year the Hoover Dam was completed and dedicated by President Roosevelt; the Sydney Harbour Bridge opened after almost 10 years in construction and Al Capone was convicted for tax evasion.

Amelia Earhart made the first flight across the Atlantic by a woman and only the second ever solo flight. It took her 15 hours and 18 minutes - compare that to today’s time of just under six hours.

The BBC began its first experimental public television programming. The early programmes showed performances by dancers and musicians, athletic demonstrations and art showcases, not something that would keep your attention today with the 100s of channels available to suit every taste. You were only five years old when the war started but as you were living in Frodsham you escaped the ravages of the Blitz and in fact some of the children from Liverpool were evacuated to that area. We’ve heard a lot recently about equality in the workplace for women, particularly that they should be paid the same amount as a man for doing the same job, but there were other differences in terms of employment between men and women. In the 1940’s women teachers were not allowed to marry, and if they did so they had to leave the profession, but this changed with the Education Act of 1944, the same year that the Pay-as-you-earn tax system came into being.

As a doctor I usually try to find some medical development that has happened and made a significant impact on the healthcare and in 1944 Willem Kolf, invented the first dialysis machine for treating patients with kidney failure. It was made from orange juice cans, spare car parts and sausage casings, but it worked and since then that treatment has saved the lives of 1,000,000s of people worldwide.

Moving forward to the 1950’s and 1960’s, this signalled a big change in various aspects of life in this country and worldwide. In 1955 the first polio vaccine was developed by Jonas Salk, and four years later the microchip was invented. In the early 60s the Beatles released their first single, Spiderman made his first appearance in the fantasy comics and the BBC broadcast the first episode of Dr Who with William Hartnell in the title role. Just before the end of the decade, in 1969, there were several historical events that I’m sure will bring back memories for most of you.

Buzz Aldrin, Michael Collins, and Neil Armstrong, flew to the moon in Apollo 11 and Neil Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the moon; Dwight D Eisenhower, a former United States General and President, died in the Walter Reed Army Medical Centre, after a long illness, and Richard Nixon, became the 37th President of the United States.

The British-built Anglo-French supersonic airliner 'Concorde 002', made her maiden flight, piloted by Captain Brian Trubshaw and the world's largest aeroplane, the Jumbo Jet or more correctly called the Boeing 747, made its first-ever commercial flight.

Robin Knox-Johnston became the first person to sail solo around the world without stopping, Prince Charles was invested as’Prince of Wales at Caernarfon in a televised ceremony, and for us this evening the most important event was that on 8 November 1969 Mr Leslie Garner was initiated as a Freemason and took his place in Stanley Priory Lodge No 6741 and we are here with Les to celebrate that anniversary.

Going back to the mid 1920’s your father, George Fletcher Garner met a young woman, a Miss Constance Beautyman and they fell in love and married in 1929. They set up home in Frodsham and in fact the only places you have lived are Frodsham and Llandudno, which raises the question why did you join a lodge in Liverpool, as Stanley Priory met in Hope Street from it’s Consecration in 1948 until it moved to Garston in 1996, but more about that later. Your father George had his own building company, which you were destined to join after your time at school. You attended Frodsham Primary School and then having passed your ‘11 plus’ exam went to the nearest grammar school, Runcorn Grammar for four years until Helsby Grammar opened and you moved there. You were one of the last students to take the School Certificate as it was replaced in 1951 with the General Certificate of Education system, at ‘O’ and ‘A’ level. Following school, you started work in the family building contractor business, but continued your studies at Warrington Technical College and then Liverpool College of Building, gaining the Higher National Building Certificate.

National Service then called you up and you had planned to join the army but when you attended the selection office you were told that because of your good level of mathematics you could be suitable for pilot training in the Royal Air Force. Unfortunately the selection officer mustn’t have had a tape measure as when you went to Hornchurch in Essex for air crew selection you were told the first day during your medical that your legs were too long for you to fit into a jet pilot’s seat and that if you did get in you’d get stuck if you tried to eject. So back to plan ‘A’ of going into the army and as you had relatives in the Grenadier and Coldstream Guards you fancied that. Your hopes were to be dashed again as the officer suggested that as the Guards had to wear uniform all day every day you might as well join the RAF Police who also were always in uniform. In hindsight you found out that the Guards spent most of their time in denims apart from ceremonial duties but you were stuck in uniform every day.

You never managed to get a posting overseas during your two years and moved between bases in the UK. After that you returned to the family company until you left to work for other companies such as Gilbert Ash, Trentham’s at the Ford Factory and then with City of Liverpool Works Department as Chief Assistant for Maintenance and Services. That was a very busy job as the department was responsible for over 100,000 council houses as well as all the other civil buildings such as schools and fire stations, and in total employed about 3,500 people. You continued to advance your career and went to Runcorn Development Corporation and then to Wrexham Maelor Council as Principal Building Services Officer where you stayed until retirement.

During this time, you regularly socialised at weekends, often going to the dances at Mersey View above Helsby. There would be many popular bands of the 1950’s playing there and often around 500 people would go. On one occasion you met a young girl Beryl Rathbone who had come from Runcorn and you started going out. It was quite a while before you proposed and married as you were trying to sort out a house to live in but eventually after eight years of courtship you were married in 1963 and four weeks ago celebrated 56 years of marriage. You have two children, Lee who has three children, your two granddaughters and one grandson, who live not too far away from you in Colwyn Bay, and your daughter Helen who lives in Llandudno. Lee works in the Nuclear Inspectorate and Helen is a legal advisor to the courts and lives near you. During your time in Frodsham you wanted to join Probus but although there were four clubs in the town, they were all full and so a member of one of them suggested you start another one. This you did and you rapidly got plenty of members. In a similar way when your son Lee was wanting to join Scouts there weren’t any places and so again you started another Scout troop, the 4th Frodsham.

But turning back to your celebration of 50 years as a Freemason. That all started when you were working at the City of Liverpool Works Department which in those days was in the old Dingle tram sheds. Your admin officer, Reg Ormsby, seemed to be going to a lot of funerals in an afternoon, or so Les thought but when he questioned it was told about his Masonic membership. This led to chatting about Freemasonry and you found that the Electrical Department Manager, Gordon Hunter, was also a member. These two proposed you for initiation into Stanley Priory Lodge where they were members and it met here at Garston. You were duly initiated on 11 November 1969 and when the blindfold came off you saw about a dozen of your Depot Superintendents and General Foremen in the room, proving the saying ‘a society with secrets’!

You progressed through the regular lodge offices and were installed as WM in 1980. After that you held many offices including DC, charity steward, chaplain and almoner and this contribution to the lodge work was recognised when you received Provincial appointment as Past Provincial Senior Grand Deacon in 1991, a very high first rank. You were the Garston Group representative for the 1997 Festival and as a result you were promoted to Past Provincial Junior Grand Warden in 1999, the rank you wear tonight.

Whilst a member of Stanley Priory you were a regular attender at Excelsior Lodge and joined this lodge in November fifteen years ago, just before Stanley Priory closed the following month. When you moved to Llandudno you joined Great Orme Lodge No 7703 and Cambrian Lodge of Installed Masters, and you are currently chaplain of that lodge. Brethren, that is a daytime lodge meeting at 11am and ending after lunch at about 3pm and has a very thriving membership.

You were also exalted into Froda Chapter and advanced into Corinthian Lodge of Mark Master Masons.

I would now be grateful if our group chairman John Murphy would read the Jubilee certificate.

Les, you have been an active member of lodges and chapters in West Lancashire and North Wales and have made significant contributions to Freemasonry in those areas and to the wider community by your contribution to scouting. I know you’ve derived a great deal of pleasure from Freemasonry, telling me that it’s been one of the best things you’ve ever done, and so I have the greatest pleasure in congratulating you on achieving 50 years as a Freemason and wish you many more happy years as a Freemason both in West Lancashire and North Wales.