

Raymond Thomas Bird

Celebrating 50 Years in Craft Masonry

A very good evening to you all Brethren.

It is my great pleasure and privilege to be here in West Lancs Century Lodge to preside over this meeting for a respected brother's 50th celebration, Raymond Thomas Bird

I'm also delighted that after his recent operation our celebrant is able to be here, it would have been a very short evening without him!

When I visited his home a few weeks ago to have a chat with him, his wife Val said he wakes up with a smile on his face and goes to bed with one and that is the mark of the man he is and his approach to life as we shall discover.

We celebrate more and more 50ths and even 60ths and 70ths in Freemasonry than we ever used to do. To hear a little of their life stories and their time in the Craft over so many years never ceases to amaze me, everyone different but all of them worthy celebrants of the service and support they and their wives and partners have given to the order we all enjoy being a member of.

Jason Dell, will you please place our celebrant in a comfortable chair before me.

Well brethren, we begin in the year 1942. It was three years into the Second World War and all the tragedies and hardships that brought. Milk rations were cut to just two and half pints a week. Desert Island Discs was first broadcast on BBC radio with Roy Plumley as its host. Stephen Hawking, Paul McCartney and Billy Connolly were born and in that same year, in Burnley so was Raymond Thomas Bird.

Mum was Margery and Dad Tom, a plumber by trade and who was also to become a member of this Lodge.

When you were two your sister Muriel came along and at three years old the family moved to Blackpool when Dad bought a plumber's shop opposite the Welcome Pub and you all lived above the shop.

Dad started getting involved in building work and alterations and you moved to another shop in Lytham Road. Unfortunately, a rather unscrupulous hotel owner left him with no alternative but to close down and he went to work for Lancashire Aircraft refitting Dakotas after the war.

The family moved to Bispham sharing a house with some friends and Mum went to work as a presser in the Co-op laundry.

The building trade though was in Tom's blood and he started in business again in St Annes. You remember him vividly on many occasions setting off to work on his trusty BSA motorbike with the engine on the back wheel.

Business began to grow and he built a lot of properties in St Annes including 2 houses on Heyhouses Lane and several on St Thomas' Road and Blackpool Road including one where Stuart Thornber used to live.

Your early schooldays began in Bispham when you lived there and then in Lytham when the family moved. But in all fairness schooldays were not your favourite experience. Sports were OK as you enjoyed running and football but the academic side was not for you. In later years your sporting activities would turn to golf and you have been a member of North Shore Golf Club since the 1960s.

You did join the Lytham Sea cadets for a couple of years from the age of 15 to 17.

It was hardly surprising as a result of your school experiences that at 16 you left to go work with Dad in the building business, starting out as a labourer before learning your trade as bricklayer.

It was also when you were 16 that little brother Phillip appeared on the scene and I am delighted to say he is with us today as a member of this lodge.

From starting out in the building trade at 16 you worked with your father for the next 28 years until 1984. The last building job he worked on was replacing the top floors of the Doric Hotel when the roof blew off.

During this time a change of career beckoned for you when he asked you if you would like to go into the hotel business. He bought the Skye Hotel and for the next 15 years you became a hotelier, running it for him. You also went on to manage the South Shore Hotel, which is well known now as The Viking.

From there you had 10 years out of the hotel trade when you went to work for Exponet Standard Metal Group as a Technical Rep which involved travelling all over the country. Your background in the building trade stood you in good stead when faced with the varied challenges of your customers.

Unfortunately, health problems were to force you into early retirement and back into the hotel trade. You bought the Beaucliffe Hotel and then the Brooklands Hotel.

When you finished at the hotels you went into the taxi business working for Black Tax and after purchasing a specialist disabled minibus you were kept very busy for the next six years. You were making regular trips to Yorkshire bringing visitors to the town and then taking them home. With such a specialist vehicle though your services were required in all parts of the country so once again many miles covered but you were used to it after your experiences from before as a Sales Rep.

An unfortunate accident forced you into finishing work completely seven years ago and you think it may be a result of that accident that may have caused your recent spine problems requiring the operation you have just undergone.

You told me that all the various jobs you have been involved with have been enjoyable and I am sure you tackled each of them with that smile on your face.

That was a taste of your working life Ray but what of family life?

Well you first met Val at Church Road Methodist Youth Club in St Annes. She was born and bred in St Annes but definitely her upbringing was at St Pauls' Church – not Methodist and indeed the meeting at the Youth Club when she was 16 was about the first experience she had of going out.

Val's family were also in the building trade and her grandfather built Albany Road and Fylde Road where she was born. Her father was a Freemason, Harry Rothwell, headmaster at Warton School and member of Triumph Lodge in St Annes.

From the age of 16 she went to work for Harry Haslam Solicitors. You both joined Lytham Operatic Society, not on the vocal side for you Ray though, you looked after the lighting but Val was in the chorus.

You were to marry in 1966. It was the same year your father had bought the Skye Hotel so together you took up the reins of running it in your first years of marriage.

In 1970 the family grew when you adopted baby Nigel in Carlisle who was just five weeks old.

When he was 15 he was diagnosed with spondylitis and although the long term prognosis wasn't good, being told he would be in a wheelchair at 40, it has not prevented him having a successful career working at the Premium Bonds and now he is in charge of a division at National Savings. He has battled on, keeping the wheelchair at bay with cycling and exercise.

The only downside might be that he is a Blackpool supporter but he's battled through their challenges over recent years too.

You have a grandson Tom and now delighted to have a great grandson Oscar.

Val was to become a magistrate and served for many years on the bench before being forced to retire when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001. This also resulted in you putting the hotels up for sale to allow you to concentrate on Val's recovery.

More recently she has had the misfortune to suffer heart problems but through all the trials and tribulations you have stood side by side in support of each other and you celebrated 50 years of marriage in 2016. That love at first sight in the youth club still burns strongly.

Earlier I mentioned the masonic connections in both yours and Val's family. Your father originally became a mason as a member of a Scottish Lodge. When you were younger you remember attending Ladies Evenings and many social functions and that continued when you met Val. The seed had been sewn with the family connections and your experiences at the social events so in the year 1969 you made the decision that you would become a freemason.

I'm not sure Ray whether the year was as memorable as Bryan Adams sings about in his 'Summer of 69' classic but there were certainly some key events in the year.

Barbara Castle introduced the breathalyser into law, the first UK built Concorde flew its maiden flight, Australian Rod Laver won the Wimbledon Men's Singles and Britain's Anne Jones won the Ladies.

Apollo 11 was launched and on the 20th July the lunar module 'Eagle' landed on the moon and after Neil Armstrong it was Buzz Aldrin, a freemason, who stepped off with his left foot in a completely new environment.

Neil Armstrong's father was a Grand Officer but Buzz Aldrin was an active mason, a member of Clear Lake Lodge No 1417 in Seabrook, Texas. There were many connections with freemasonry in the space programme including Vice President Lyndon B Johnson who was a great advocate of space travel. There was even a masonic authority assigned to hold lodges on the moon, the Grand Lodge of Texas.

From your point of view though Ray the most important step was your very own as on the 17th November 1969 you were initiated in to West Lancs Century Lodge No 2349.

I will now like to invite the Secretary to read a précis of the minutes of that meeting.

Your father being a Scottish Mason it was Alan Blood and Albert Ashworth a former Mayor who were to propose and second you. As we have heard, WM George Stephenson carried out the ceremony and another former Mayor Hessey guided you around the lodge as Junior Deacon.

You subsequently were passed to the second degree on the 2nd January 1970 by Roger Lee's father and raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason on the 3rd March 1970.

It wasn't long before you became an active member of this thriving lodge when appointed as a Steward in 1971. The Lodge met at the Imperial Hotel so the position of Steward was very much an active role and you carried out these duties until 1978 when you became Tyler and progress on the floor began.

In those days, with high membership in Lodges it took you some 15 years, serving in every office of the Lodge before eventually arriving in the Master's chair in October 1984.

You enjoyed a very good year both in the Lodge and at many social events before installing your successor S.A. Keeler in the following year.

Your father was already a joining member of the Lodge and your brother was also to join along with a number of your friends although your little brother did drift away for a while before coming back into the fold.

Before the role of Charity Steward was officially recognised you were in charge of what the Lodge termed the 'Samaritan Fund'. For over ten years you looked after the pastoral needs of the Brethren and widows and also served as the treasurer of the fund for many years. Many functions were

organised which raised a considerable amount of money and it was used in the main for consultations to be organised at the Masonic Hospital for those in need.

The value of your work was recognised by province in May 1994 when you were appointed to the Acting Rank of PrAGSuptWks. It was I understand in the same year Harry Cox received his first rank as acting PrGStwd.

You have always been recognised for the high standard of ritual and support of not only the Lodge Socials but also encouraging and proposing new members.

Val's illness in the early 2000's forced you into taking a back seat in the Lodge to look after her but you did act as Tyler from 2005 to 2007 and never lost your desire to help the Lodge whenever you could.

In 2013 you began acting as an assistant to the then Almoner Glen Jackson and in October 2015 took over as Lodge Almoner. This is a position in which you have thoroughly enjoyed and excelled at, looking after the Lodge Widows and the pastoral care of the members and dependants.

You have in recent years become the "Father Figure" in the Lodge being the longest serving active member and the brother who the members turn to for advice particularly when it comes to the history, ritual and ceremonial of the Lodge.

You are very proud that you have still attended practices and being involved in many ceremonies particularly of the five recent initiates taking both Deacons and Wardens positions and also seeing the present Master Bro Scott Coxey being presented by his son Niall.

The Lodge did invite you to take the chair once again in your 50th year but being unsure of your health and pending operation you decided it was more prudent to decline the offer.

Your father was to become a founder of Saturnian Chapter in 1962 and subsequently you were exalted on 22nd November 1983 progressing through to become First Principal in 1999, Second Principal in 2000 and First Principal in January 2001.

You were recognised in Provincial Grand Chapter in 2008 with appointment to the rank of PPrAGDC and subsequently received promotion to the rank of PPrGSoj in 2018. This was undoubtedly due in no small part to the work you have done as Almoner in the Chapter since 2015 together with that of Treasurer from 2016 to the present.

In the words of that Bryan Adams song, "And now times are changing, look at everything that has come and gone.

You have witnessed many changes in life and in Freemasonry Ray, different characters you have seen, Dr Edward Priestly for one, Brian Stephenson and certainly a character in the guise of none other than Glen Jackson. I may hear called other things too Ray!

Throughout your 50 years in this, your only lodge, you have experienced many happy times and continued to enjoy and show dedication and commitment to Freemasonry whenever you could.

Our Provincial Grand Master James Anthony Harrison is well aware of your celebration this evening and I believe you may have spoken with him already today.

He has also sent his congratulations in the form of a certificate, which I will now ask the Group Chairman, Peter Greathead to read out.

Ray, may I wish you and Val the best of good health to enjoy many more years together and with your family and I hope, as a Freemason, that you continue to have many more happy times in the Craft.

My thanks to you and Val for your kind hospitality when I visited you to hear a little of your life and masonic story.

You have, as Val described, that smile on your face from the moment you get up until you go to bed, somewhat annoyingly at times according to her

but long may that continue. Your attitude to life is take it as it comes and you have not only my respect and admiration for all you have done but I am sure that of all the many members and friends assembled here, delighted to see you celebrating this milestone today.

It has been my great fortune and pleasure to be able to preside over your Golden Jubilee and now Brethren, will you please join with me in showing our congratulations and appreciation in the usual West Lancashire way to Raymond Thomas Bird, today celebrating 50 years as a Craft Freemason.

David Randerson P.S.G.D., A.Pr.G.M.