Frederick James Vickers

Celebrating 50 Years in Craft Masonry

A very good evening to you all Brethren.

Here we are at the start of a new year and a new decade and the celebrations continue to come thick and fast here on the Fylde, beginning with this one tonight in Spartan Lodge.

No matter how many there are, it is one of the greatest privileges and pleasure as an Assistant Provincial Grand Master to preside over such evenings and discover the fascinating stories of our celebrants.

I think to a man each one has said they never anticipated when they joined Freemasonry that celebrating 50 years membership would come to them.

Fortunately, many brethren are living long lives to enable them to reach that goal and tonight Fred Vickers joins that select band of brothers.

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

I hope you are nicely settled Fred so I can recount some of your life story to the brethren gathered here tonight to support you.

The story begins in 1935, Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister, Malcolm Campbell broke the 300-mph barrier to create a new land speed record and cats-eyes were used for the first time.

It was the year when Elvis Presley, Jimmy Armfield, Dudley Moore and Rohan Khanai (who I shall refer to again later) were born and they were joined in 1935 in Blackpool by Frederick James Vickers.

Fred, you were to be only child of parents Bessie and Frederick Vickers and dad worked as a joiner/cabinet maker for Cryers in Fleetwood.

The early years of your life saw the country heading to war and the family was moved to the Isle of Man where your father continued working.

Schooldays began in Ramsay until the war ended and the family moved back home to Blackpool.

You went straight to Grammar School and as you said, you ‘reasonably’ enjoyed your time there. Academically maths became a favourite subject due in no small part to the Deputy Headmaster who would give quick-fire questions to which he anticipated equally rapid replies and this certainly improved your mental arithmetic skills. You finished your time at Baines with six GCE’s.

You enjoyed sports and particularly cricket and became scorer at Blackpool Cricket Club.

After Baines you did go to sixth form college but that only lasted a few weeks. You wanted to try something different and as the scorer at Blackpool you came into contact on a regular basis with several journalists and you thought that would be an interesting occupation to go into.

Stage one was to learn shorthand so you joined a course which met at a house in Blackpool and it was there that you first set eyes on a young lady called Margaret. She certainly made an impact on the somewhat shy Fred Vickers who admired from a distance, without actually speaking to her.

Before your journalist career could really begin though the Blackpool Cricket Club Chairman, Jack Holden approached you. He was a Quantity Surveyor and his partner was retiring and he needed someone to come and work for him so he asked you if you were interested.

The prospect of 25 shillings a week appealed and so your new career as a trainee Quantity Surveyor began. You began a correspondence course, which took a little while to get through all the various required levels but you did eventually qualify becoming a Fellow of the Royal Institute of Chartered Quantity Surveyors.

The work was not as inspiring as you thought it might be as it seemed to be all based around refurbishing hotels.

Together with a couple of other employees you worked in offices above Dr. Maurice Heeney’s surgery. Certain days were spent during times of, shall we say, boredom with the work that you would all look out of the window at the passing female ‘talent’.

One day Margaret appeared as the new receptionist and your colleague apprentice remarked she was quite a ‘looker’, which of course you knew she was from the shorthand course.

Plucking up courage to ask her out, it was on a long walk back to Bispham, when you said she never stopped talking, when you realised you were smitten and there began a five year courtship.

In 1957 you saw an advert from a London based firm with an office in Preston and a successful application saw your wage rise from nine pounds to £14 a week.

Two years later and 1959 proved quite a significant year for you. In March you married Margaret and then in August you were called up for National Service. You went for a commission to Biggin Hill but whilst on exercisers, things didn’t quite work out.

Returning home, you started with headaches and you were diagnosed with encephalitis. You spent two weeks in hospital enduring lumber punctures and then several weeks off work. Your employers were very supportive and looked after you during this difficult time for which you were most grateful.

You were also fortunate that Margaret’s Aunt lived in Lytham with her second husband ‘Uncle Joe’ and being her only niece, they generously gave you £500 towards buying a bungalow in Penrose Avenue, Marton, for your first years together.

1961 saw the birth of your first son Simon John and he was followed in ‘62 by a brother, Howard Neil. It was the year of the severe winter and not only had you just had a new baby but also moved house to Poulton which, as you told me, was not quite what Margaret was used to having no central heating. That was soon on your ‘to do’ list.

Simon is now a Chartered Accountant and has two daughters, your grandchildren Laura Ellen and Alice Margaret and there is a wedding for you to look forward in 2021.

Howard became a Carpenter & Joiner, following in your Dad’s footsteps Fred. 16 years ago, after a few years of thinking about it, he moved to Australia and is now happily settled working out there.

Before I continue with your working career, I would just like to go back to your sporting background. After several years as scorer for Blackpool Cricket Club you started playing when you were 19.

The professional at the time was Australian Bill Alley and while he was there, he not only earned more than any other player in the world but also gave you little opportunity to play in the first team.

Your first game you remember was against Leyland when you nearly reached 50. Many well-known cricketers followed Alley as professional at the club including Garfield Sobers and the man I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation who was born in the same year as you, Rohan Kanhai.

On one particular occasion brethren, Fred was batting with Rohan and they were doing quite well with Fred keeping the bowlers out while Rohan kept the scoreboard rolling. In fact they ended with a stand of 215 together before Rohan was out for 152. It was certainly a newsworthy event and it indeed made the local press headlines.

Margaret used to come to the matches to give you support and on one occasion you remember you were batting against another West Indian bowler Claremont Depeiza whom you described as a ‘chucker’. One delivery saw you end up on your backside and a cry from one of the crowd of “Get up Vickers” saw Margaret stride over to him and give him a piece of her mind resulting in a very red faced spectator.

Your cricketing career continued until 1966 when you decided it was time to hang up your pads. In place of it, you took up golf and became a member of North Shore Golf Club achieving a handicap of 18 and a memorable hole in one!

There has been one other great sporting love in your life Fred and that has been snooker. Back in the early 50’s, the father of a friend of yours had a snooker table in an outbuilding so your snooker days began to flourish.

This coincided with the World Snooker Championships being held in the Tower Circus in 1950. Now your father was then working for Blackpool Billiard Works and they had the task of supplying the tables for the matches. This gave you an opportunity to bunk out of school when you could, to go and watch the matches which ended with Walter Donaldson beating Fred Davies 51 games to 46 in the final.

Your snooker experience however was to come to a temporary halt when you started courting Margaret in 1954, not sure why Fred?

It restarted when you were working and you joined St Annes Conservative Club playing many a lunchtime with Bill Clark, who was a very good player you recall and you became a member of the Club snooker team for many years. Later you joined Poulton Conservative Club playing there.

The mention of Bill Clark brings us back to your working life. In the early 60’s you had applied for positions with the firm you were with as a Manager in their Romford and Hampshire offices as well as trying for a job in Peterborough but you didn’t get them, which probably proved to be fortuitous.

In 1966 a Quantity surveyor friend Alan Jones suggested you start up on your own and he would be prepared to fund you. You did just that and for the next three years you continued working for yourself until the aforementioned Bill Clark, who had another practice, approached you.

His main man David Joyce, had decided to move to Australia and Bill asked if you would like to join together.

It was tough at times in the early days of the 70s with the three day week and miners’ strike but it eventually proved to be a successful partnership in Clifton Street as the business began to thrive. It continued until you closed in 1994 although you did carry on to do some work on your own for a time. You had enjoyed though all the experience of your working life.

Margaret meantime you described as somewhat of a home bird, a very good cook, who enjoyed her holidays.

After watching one of the many Cliff Michelmore holiday programmes on TV, you went with some friends to a holiday exhibition at the Imperial. They decided to buy a place in Spain and although you resisted at the time, later in 1979, you took the plunge for a one bedroom apartment in Fuengirola.

Restrictions between the UK and Europe that were in place then, meant you could only take out small amounts of money out of the country and certain travellers would stuff wads of cash in their shoes! It crossed your mind to do the same to buy the apartment but in the end you decided to play it straight and pay the Tax. A few months later, much to your frustration, with Margaret Thatcher now in office, they changed the rules.

In 1981 you sold that apartment and bought a two bedroom one which you had until 1992. You bought a flat a little closer to home in Windermere all of which Margaret thoroughly enjoyed.

Now what about your Freemasonry Fred?

Through your work, you knew Bill Clark and Bill Cowburn who were members of Fairhaven Lodge. The owner of the Blackpool Billiard Works, where your father had been employed, was another Bill – Bill Cartmell, who was also Chairman of Blackpool Football Club. In addition he was a very enthusiastic Freemason and Worshipful Master of his Lodge and he asked you if you would like to join.

With Bill Cartmell as your proposer and Frank Evans as seconder, on the ninth January 1970 you were initiated into Spartan Lodge No 8048.

I would normally now invite the secretary to read out a précis of the minutes of that meeting but as that is you Fred that may prove somewhat difficult.

1970 was quite a year. There was the Apollo 13 incident “Houston we have a problem”, Concorde made its first supersonic flight, Richard Branson started the Virgin Group and your old batting partner Rohan Khanai scored over 1900 runs in the season.

Remarkably in parallel with what is happening today, there were extensive wild fires in Australia killing 75 people and injuring over 800.

Most importantly though it was when Frederick James Vickers took his first steps into Freemasonry.

You took to it like the proverbial ‘duck to water’ although it is safe to say at the time Margaret was not of the same opinion wondering why you wanted to join this ‘secret society’ of men.

You recollect that night well, the lodge had only been going for 5 years and one of the highlights was Tommy Brennan giving the charge after Initiation.

Progress through to the chair was very rapid due to various circumstances and you became Worshipful Master in 1976.

You remember delivering the Traditional History and Charge, which for a brother who had only been a member for six years was quite an achievement.

There followed a period due to your work and family commitments where you took somewhat of a back seat.

You had always enjoyed the ritual though and helped out whenever you could.

In 1985 you received your first Provincial rank of PPrJGD and this was followed in 1994 with a promotion to PPrDepGSuptWks.

You had been helping out the Secretary with his work and then at the same time as your promotion you became director of ceremonies of the Lodge followed in 1996 by taking on Secretary duties full time until 2003.

A further promotion came in 2002 when you received the high rank you now hold of PPrJGW.

A year as stand in Treasurer from 2003-2004 allowed the incumbent Bro Barclay to take the chair as WM. You followed him and once again became Master of Spartan Lodge in 2004.

Your work didn’t stop there though and you were assistant director of ceremonies from 2006 until 2008.

In 2018 you took up one of your previous offices, that of Secretary, which you still hold.

Outside of your Craft masonry you were exalted into the Royal Arch in 1993 in Bispham with Norbreck Chapter No 4731. Although you have never progressed through the Principals chairs you have been Scribe E of the Chapter for over 25 years.

Your dedication to the office was recognised in Provincial Grand Chapter in 2016 with appointment to the rank of PPrGStdB.

You have in the past few years Fred faced up to some difficult personal challenges. Your beloved wife Margaret was also suffering her own health problems and she very sadly passed away in 2015.

In spite of these adversities, you continue to give your very best to everything you do.

Outside of Freemasonry you have been involved with St Chads Church in Poulton acting as an Administrative Assistant in the Registration of Baptisms, a Church Sidesman and you still organise the advertising in the church magazine.

50 years in any organisation is a remarkable achievement and your time in Freemasonry has been filled with dedication, commitment and enjoyment in all you have done.

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.

Fred, your determination to continue to do all you can for this Lodge in particular and Freemasonry in general is something each and every one of us looks on at in admiration and I hope you continue to have many, many more happy times in the Craft .

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

You are a gentleman and you have not only my respect and thanks for all you have done but I am sure that of the members and friends assembled here, delighted to see you reaching 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 hearty congratulations and appreciation in the usual West Lancashire way to Fred Vickers today celebrating 50 years as a Craft Freemason.

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