

Norcliffe Lodge No. 7371 Closure – 10th May 2022

Good Evening Brethren and welcome to this the last meeting of Norcliffe Lodge No 7371. It is, indeed, a sad occasion but by no means a one off and tonight is an opportunity to celebrate the contribution that Norcliffe Lodge has made to Freemasonry, and indeed the Fylde Coast, over the past sixty seven years.

This Lodge has practised its Freemasonry with pride, dignity and a generosity of spirit which has endeared it to everyone whom it has come in contact, and, in the process, has brought together diverse men of very different backgrounds and introduced them to the fellowship that the Craft has to offer, and as a consequence, has produced and nurtured a long succession of masons who have proved to be a credit both to the Lodge and to themselves.

The occasion of a Lodge surrendering its Warrant is not a new thing Brethren and has happened throughout the whole of the history of Freemasonry. There are many and varied reasons why a Lodge surrenders its Warrant and the members of Norcliffe Lodge are aware of the reasons in this particular instance. What is evident across the constitution is that the number of members is in decline.

Following the Second World War there was a large increase in candidates wanting to join Masonry which resulted in waiting lists of several years within Lodges. The solution to that problem, of course, was to consecrate new Lodges to accommodate the extra numbers and decrease the time candidates had to wait to join. Norcliffe Lodge fits that timeline perfectly and has been a valuable member of the Masonic circle on the Fylde Coast for the past sixty seven years.

In the '50s, '60s and '70s we were obliged to cater for 20,000 new masons every year, hence the creation of so many new Lodges, but by the early 90's statistics were to reveal that our annual intake had contracted to just 8,000 per annum. Simply stated, those thousands of brethren who joined all those years ago and have since passed away have not been replaced in equivalent numbers, which means that there are too many Lodges.

This is in fact the fifth Lodge closure I have presided over in the relatively short time I have been an Assistant Provincial Grand Master. Biscopham and Normos Round Table Lodge handed their Warrant back in July, Lytham Lodge in August and Spartan in September. One thing that particularly struck my attention regarding these closures was the average age of those Lodges, which was around sixty years.

However, Brethren, happy reflections and warm reminiscences sadly cannot mask the reality of the situation in which we now find ourselves, for we now exist in a totally different Masonic environment. INEVITABLY there was a price to be paid, a day of reckoning perhaps, but that was to come some 50 years later and is sadly reflected in our proceedings here this evening.

With the number of deaths and the reduction in numbers throughout the years, it was clear to see that the future of the Lodge was going to be challenging, and finding members to fill the non progressive offices was becoming more and more difficult. So the members of Norcliffe Lodge have had to make the sad, but understandable decision, to surrender their Warrant.

Lodges have been encouraged to look five, ten and even twenty years into the future to reach realistic conclusions with regard to their future viability and it is to the credit of so many that they have done so. Amalgamation became the preferred option for the majority of those for whom it could clearly be seen that the prognosis was bleak. However, Norcliffe has embraced the opportunity of merging which seems to me to be the more sensible option of the two.

So how did Norcliffe Lodge come into existence? Sixty eight years ago, on Friday nights, a few men relaxed and played snooker together in the same corner of Bispham Conservative Club and, as you would expect, a whole number of different topics were discussed over time. Eventually the subject of Freemasonry raised its head. Lawrence Lee was the Worshipful Master of Poulton-le-Fylde Lodge, 4040, Ted Gillibrand was a member of a Lodge in Manchester and Charles Taylor was unattached. Tubby Lee, Reverend SG McLennan and S Gazey all lived in Norbreck but were not practising masons at that time so the conversation eventually centred on the formation of a new Lodge in Norbreck.

Waiting lists to join Lodges around the area were, on average, five years which was disappointing for potential candidates. So Harry Brown, a local Grand Officer and Managing Director of the Norbreck Hydro, was approached with the idea of consecrating a new Lodge which received a positive response from him, and he agreed to assist. A retired schoolmaster, CB Taylor took on the role of founding secretary, no easy task in the days before computers, and along with eighteen Founders, they set out to obtain a Warrant.

The original name selected by the Founders was "VICTORIA LODGE" but this was rejected and "NORCLIFFE LODGE" was proposed and approved. The new Lodge was sponsored by 4040 Lodge in Poulton who incidentally have recently celebrated their Centenary, albeit two years late due to the pandemic.

Suitable rooms were found and provided by WBro Harry Brown on the ground floor of the Victoria Hotel on Norbreck Road, which later would become 'The Mariners', and these were decorated by the founders with early records showing that the Lodge furniture was borrowed from Fylde Lodge at an annual rent of five guineas. As the middle and top floors were used for staff accommodation, this kept the Tyler active for the early meetings, as you can imagine!

The Lodge was Consecrated on 23rd March 1955 by the Provincial Grand Master Rt WBro WSS Hannay, now well known for the Trust which bears his name. The Lodge meetings were held on the first Wednesday of each month.

Brother Secretary, will you please read a précis of the minutes of the Consecration meeting.

The fees in 1955, as recorded in the Minute Book, were as follows:

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| Founders Fees | 20 Guineas |
| Initiation Fee | 35 Guineas |
| Joining Fee | 20 Guineas |
| and | |
| Annual Subscription | 6 Guineas |

One Guinea is equivalent to £1.05 today, so that's £6.30 Subscriptions, and that included seven Festive Boards!

The Ladies Evening that year was held at the Norbreck Hydro and started at 3:15 in the afternoon with a Whist Drive, followed by the Banquet, Dancing and, in those days, the obligatory early morning breakfast. Carriages was at 2:30am and all for the price of one pound and 10 shillings (£1.10.00d).

As time went by, the rooms at the Victoria became too cramped and as other Lodges started to meet there, dining arrangements became more difficult. The popularity of the venue prompted Harry Brown to arrange for a purpose built Lodge room to be created within the main Hotel in order to cater for Masonic functions and to improve the general facilities. The last ceremony to be held at the Victoria Rooms was the initiation of Brother Jack Smith who later became the mayor of Blackpool and was, of course, the father of Neville and Roger Smith who have both given great service to the Lodge over the years.

The new Masonic Temple at the Norbreck Hydro Hotel was called the Connaught Suite and was completed in the summer of 1961. It was described as "FIRST CLASS" and the dimensions were said to be those of the original Temple as described in the book of Kings. Norcliffe Lodge held their first meeting there in October 1961 and spent six happy years until the Hotel was sold and the Lodges had to find an alternative venue to meet.

During that time a nomination was made to sponsor a new Lodge to be named "OLYMPIAD", which was later to be called "SPARTAN". Spartan was the only daughter Lodge of Norcliffe, and a Lodge with which you held close links right up until it handed its Warrant back on the 7th September last year.

Your next move was to the Imperial Hotel Blackpool where a new Lodge Room had been created and your first meeting was on the 4th January 1967 at which a ballot was taken for Mr Norman James Hayes who was initiated on the 1st March 1967. For the newer members, Norman was a much loved and well respected long serving member of the Lodge, sadly no longer with us. At the third meeting of the lodge the meeting day was changed to the second Monday of each month, from October to May.

In 2003 the Imperial Hotel management made things difficult by increasing rents and dining fees for all Lodges prompting your final move to Cleveleys Masonic Hall where you have been for the past nineteen years.

During the Mastership of Bro Streule in 1972, the wives of Brethren were asked to form a group to assist in raising funds for Masonic Charities, which became known as the Ladies Committee. In the first eighteen months they handed over the magnificent sum of £3000 to the Lodge and over the next thirty three years they raised thousands for charity, which was greatly appreciated by the charities concerned, but the committee sadly ceased to exist during your 50th year in 2005.

Probably the most flamboyant member of the Lodge was JE Warburton, Ted, who served as Master in 1980 and again in 1995. There are a number of incidents linked to him:

Whilst at an event at the Imperial Hotel, the music from another event was accidentally piped through the Tannoy system. Ted decided enough was enough and turned off what he thought was the tannoy. In fact it was the fire alarm switch! So a couple of hundred people were evacuated outside into the rain.

At their First Ladies Evening, his wife lost her false teeth! And Ted offered £50 to whoever found them. A member of staff was the lucky winner.

One night two ballots were taken together, one for Honorary Membership of Jack Humphrey, the then AsstPGM, and the other for a candidate. Ted did his usual trick of putting in a black ball! Unfortunately, somebody else put-in a black ball for the other candidate so separate ballots had to be taken.

And on another occasion, Ted was given a personalised number plate for a special anniversary by his wife. He thought this was a bit ostentatious so quickly sold it on to no other than the Chief Rabbi of England. The plate was 'JEW 1', worth a few bob these days Brethren.

There was also a long serving Director of Ceremonies, Don Pears, who was quite formidable and ran the practice with fine precision, you wouldn't dare appear without knowing your lines! At one Ladies Evening the sister of the First Lady stood up to take a photo of the special couple. "Sit down" came Don's booming voice. "I'm only taking a picture of my sister" came the timid reply. To which he said "You will sit down and not stand up without my permission. Enough pictures have been taken by the official photographer". The couple concerned never received a copy of that particular picture.

In 1981, the Installation was still being held in December, and Bernard Carter was to be installed. On the day it snowed quite hard and Bernard arrived in heavy duty Wellington's. Unfortunately, he had forgotten to bring his shoes, so he was installed in dinner suit and wellington's.

It snowed again in 1987, when Peter Greathead was installed, and once again the fire alarm was activated, not by Ted this time. The Brethren were left out in the freezing weather for forty minutes.

This particular section doesn't seem complete without a story regarding WBro Bill Salthouse so here is one particular memory from a senior member of the Lodge. A junior Brother was attending an Installation meeting and the visiting Assistant Provincial Grand Master was WBro William Salthouse. At the Festive Board, the time came for the raffle with the proceeds going to Masonic Charities. In a very loud voice, WBro Salthouse shouted "Stop! There will be no raffles in any Lodges in this Province. All monies for charity will come from the Brethren without the nonsense of such trivia". And during his term of office, raffles were stopped in every Lodge throughout the area.

In a similar vein, on retiring from the Lodge, Assistant Provincial Grand Master Bill Foster, to his horror, found a lady in the Bar adjoining the Lodge. "Madam" he cried "This Bar is for Masonic gentlemen only, you will leave at once". "But I have come to collect my husband, the new Master". "Out" came the quick retort "You can wait upstairs".

On a very sad note, Bro Stan Evans served in the Far East and had been a Prisoner of War held by the Japanese, and he subsequently became the chairman of the Japanese prisoner of war group on the Fylde Coast. At Carleton, on the day of his funeral, it was announced that he had been awarded the MBE. Unfortunately he never knew.

The Lodge has had two masters die in office, Phil Smith who was a senior fire officer, and Derek Wakelam who left the lodge a generous legacy.

Bob Leonard is the longest serving member and was initiated on the 10th February 1969. He was Worshipful Master in 1978 and since starting on the floor of the Lodge his name has been on the summons ever since, in one capacity or another.

Another long standing member of the Lodge is, of course, WBro Peter Greathead who was initiated in 1978 and is your only home grown Grand Officer. A wonderful servant to Freemasonry having been Group Secretary of the North Blackpool Group, Group Treasurer, Vice Chairman and Chairman of the North Fylde Group etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Wonderful to have you with us Peter tonight, and thank you for your assistance with some of your memories of past members of the Lodge.

Over the years Norcliffe Lodge has proved to be very popular boasting over sixty members at its peak, and thirty five at your Golden Jubilee in 2005. The Lodge is still in good shape with a good number of light blues in office, but there is a shortage of senior members available to take on some of the non-progressive offices which many of your Past Masters have held multiple times in the past, and have certainly earned a rest. So you have made the wise decision to merge with the Lodge of Good Hope to form the "NORCLIFFE LODGE OF GOOD HOPE" which will alleviate the shortage of personnel you currently have. The new meeting date will be the second Thursday of the month at 7pm, and the first joint meeting will be held here at Cleveleys on the 8th September 2022.

Brethren I wish you every success for the future and if you look at the current success of Wyre Lodge, whom Biscopham and Normoss Round Table Lodge recently merged with, the possibilities are endless.

In preparing my address for this evening I would like to acknowledge the assistance of your Secretary WBro Peter Clay for providing me with the information required, and for the work he has put in during the process of the merger.

As your Assistant Provincial Grand Master, may I say I have been impressed by the manner in which the two Lodges have conducted themselves leading up to this evening's proceedings, from which, in my view, you all emerge with great credit and the future looks bright.

Brethren, may I conclude by thanking you all for the kind and patient attention you have given to my address. And now, WM, will you please resume your rightful place in the Chair of Norcliffe No. 7371, albeit for the last time.

WBro Dr Robert Duncan Smith **PSGD**, APGM