

Penwortham Chapter No.5874

A.D. 1965-2023

A Eulogy or a Celebration?

However titled I am assured that my short paper should in the best traditions include a beginning, a middle and a conclusion!

“In the beginning---”

Three rather poignant words in the English language, the first words of the volume of the sacred law revealed to each of the 103 companions exalted into Penwortham Chapter, words found inscribed upon that well-worn scroll of velum or parchment.

“In the beginning”, a group of Royal Arch Masons primarily encouraged by Ronnie Hawkes and largely hailing from Penwortham Lodge No 5874 and Priory Lodge No 6027 together with companions from other Preston, Chorley and Leyland chapters met at the old St Mary's Hall in Priory Lane Penwortham seeking to petition that a charter might be granted to consecrate a new chapter catering for the growing needs of brethren from amongst the multiplicity of local lodges which had developed in this area around the middle of the 20th century.

Their prayer was answered and the chapter was duly consecrated at Preston Masonic Hall on 6 October 1965 by L E Rutherford the Grand Superintendent. It was initially a constituent part of the then Chorley and Leyland Group despite meeting in Preston before being allocated to the Preston Group as early as 1973, where it remained until 2006 when a very pleasant sojourn at Wellington Park caused it to become part of the then Leyland Group, eventually returning to the fold of the newly amalgamated Chorley, Leyland and District Group thereby retaining links with Penwortham Lodge which had amalgamated with Whitehills Lodge No 5209.

I am honoured to be asked to present a short paper in celebration of the chapter, having been proud to be a member for some 52 of its 58 years existence and having known all but a few of its companions. I am also distinctly honoured to act as second principal this evening when we meet as true companions to “share bread” for the very last time. I shall endeavour to highlight particularly those earlier companions whose impact was significant upon the chapter with profound apologies to the many, many, worthies omitted.

The pre-eminent guiding force, Ronnie Hawkes (a master printer), with his endearing habit of addressing all and sundry as “luv”, suddenly was called to higher service in 1971 leaving a legacy of many capable companions to fill the breach.

Amongst our founders was George Herbert Bath, a retired clerk of works for Lancashire County Council, the “Grand Old Man of Preston Masonry”, after whom the smaller lodge room is named. He still graced our assemblies while nearing his 99th year and showed a keen interest despite not proceeding through the chairs of this chapter. Amongst the earlier companions of distinction were Percy Frearson and Ernest Pickering, Frank Young CBE, the first exalte and Austin Waterhouse who ensured that anyone suitably qualified upon purchasing a newspaper from his newsagent's shop was also furnished with an application form for the Royal Arch.

5874 attained an admirable standard of ritual under its early directors of ceremonies maintained throughout its history, accepting of many major changes imposed by Supreme Grand Chapter, especially in 1989 when we were invited to join selected teams touring the Province to demonstrate significant changes leading to the “Altar” becoming “The Pedestal”, the removal of one of the two words found on “that plate of gold” and modifications to the Mystical and other lectures. Hindsight might allow us the luxury to query the necessity for, and efficacy of, such changes?

Ian Puleston Jones MBE (Danny, NOT to be confused with a latter-day Jones) was an unassuming, scholarly individual: as well as continuing the line of directors of ceremonies he attracted many companions from Salwick Atomic Energy facility many of whom under his guidance were inspired to found a successful daughter chapter Salwick Chapter No 7993, (latterly 9115), which thrived for many years eventually agreeing to transfer its charter rather appropriately via a Welsh chapter for onward transmission to Romania. Danny was instrumental in developing a series of enjoyable fraternal visits to Welchpool Chapter No 998 his mother chapter in the Province of North Wales, where he served as Provincial Junior Grand Warden in the Craft. Under his influence and ability sprang the next generation of DC's who inherited his velvet glove approach to guide our companions (*with the exception of our current DC. Who prefers the iron fist approach especially directed towards ritually rusty PAPrGP's acting as second principal*). Foremost amongst these paragons of ritual being Richard Jackson Harrison a Police Chief Inspector in forensics, whose thespian proclivities honed with St Mary's Amateur Dramatics Group greatly added to our convocations and undoubtedly inspired his successors.

Norman Allen a quietly spoken, capable and reflective pipe smoking individual rightly assumed the role of Father of the Chapter and the 15ct.gold jewel (known as the J N Allen Jewel) he so generously presented was proudly worn by successive immediate past first principals. It will shortly reside in perpetuity in the museum at Preston Masonic Hall as a memorial to his beneficence and a lasting reminder of this chapters existence. Norman incurred the undying gratitude of later Principal guests by delivering the address to the companions faultlessly and effortlessly for many years.

No chapter could possibly thrive without dedicated companions taking on the not inconsiderable mantle of scribe Ezra and this chapter has been fortunate in recent years in securing the services of Alan Crossley who also served as treasurer, Malcolm Barnes and several others. The incumbent of this office for many years being the inimitable Reginald (Rex) Caunce whose punctilious attention to detail greatly benefitted the chapter and who attained 104 years of age. One recalls his entertaining even vitriolic verbal duels with errant directors of ceremonies.

**The scribe Ezra with undoubtedly the most difficult task in the chapter's history and to whom we must be everlastingly grateful is Paul Boardman, whose task with a reducing membership has been difficult in the extreme. He has continued to uphold the high standards required whilst serving with quiet yet unbounded enthusiasm and without whom the chapter might have closed some years ago.**

Financial probity is of the utmost importance and this chapter has been blessed with capable treasurers throughout, especially in more recent years although it would be remiss not to especially mention Leslie Howarth, a generous, talented local estate agent and surveyor mentioned in despatches in WW2. although not many companions are aware of that. He so freely gave of his time to many charitable causes both local and national and although he never aspired to the chairs, he harvested the chapters finances for 23 years and stewarded its charities for 31 years. He was deservedly awarded Provincial rank for his bountiful and selfless efforts. (**Look up** and remark "*Leslie if you're watching we remember you with pride*"). In recent years the introduction of the office of almoner has assumed a greater significance and the chapter has been indebted to John Sidgreaves, Aaron Beavor and others who have increasingly shown pastoral care towards the companions.

The finances of the chapter were enhanced considerably by a generous bequest from one of its most beloved and modest companions Richard Holding, (retired local butcher), who was elected to honorary membership and lived to the ripe old age of 100 years.

Naturally the disbursement of the financial assets held by the chapter has been given careful consideration and take account of the address given by the Rev T L Walsh at the consecration, rightly

suggesting that a lodge or chapter based in a community should try to benefit that community. It is anticipated that both Masonic and local charities will so benefit in these rather straightened times.

Music long aided the harmony in our chapter thanks mainly to Frank Rogerson and Frank Ellison, the latter's talents have been sorely missed in recent years especially at the Christmas festive board when the companions were heartily regaled with carols. More light hearted entertainment being provided for by Douglas Bush, an extremely amusing entertainer and raconteur. Who could forget his references to the local "rag and bone man's plight" on Fishergate Hill with his mount named Shergar, and his rather irreverent asides directed at Judge Francis Raleigh Batt, Chief Constable Captain Sir Archibald Horden now residing in St Marys Churchyard and after-hours lock-ins at the Stags Head Goosnargh.

For many years one of the prime events of the Preston Royal Arch year was the Combined Chapters Social, an extravaganza which raised considerable charitable funds through a fulsome raffle of bottles of various and indeterminate alcoholic vintage and which attracted capacity attendances, indeed partly organised and compered by several members of Penwortham Chapter. A reduction in support eventually caused it to discontinue some years ago.

The chapter has played a fulsome part in the wider Masonic world providing Supreme Grand Chapter Officers, an Assistant to the Grand Superintendent and to the Provincial Grand Principals, a Provincial Grand Scribe Nehemiah, an Assistant Provincial Grand Master in the Craft and many chairmen and group officials of several Masonic groups. For preservation of their modesty I decline to mention them by name.

Our hearty thanks must be accorded to those who in recent years have so valiantly striven to keep the chapter extant particularly our thanks go to its more recent principals and all those who manfully accepted major offices including John Howard, Arthur Marshall and Aaron Beavor.

We must now in passing consider the question "What caused the chapter to close?" It has become clear that in an increasingly secular society faced with the socio-economic challenges of today there is a reduced eagerness to participate in Freemasonry together with many similar societies. The number of Freemasons within the Preston Group alone can now be counted in the low 100s rather than 1,000s. The number of recruits has fallen, the age profile has increased considerably (although the author claims exemption), many lodges have returned their warrants and with a decreasing number of Craft brethren there is a consequential reduction in the number of potential exaltees. Nationally membership has declined 30% in the last 15 years. On the positive side (do?) I detect a growing need within Freemasonry to massively review some of its practices and to self-examine its role.

Alan Fletcher Ferris the Grand Superintendent "par excellence" who I remember so well, as early as the 1980s anticipated a choppy sea for Masonic recruitment from its zenith and his observations proved well founded.

At the turn of the century, it became apparent that a dearth of exaltees was being faced by this chapter from the brief heydays of double exaltations. Serious debate ensued regarding our future including possible amalgamation with other chapters. A number of arguably false dawns ensued and the lockdown, unprecedented due to the COVID pandemic which especially afflicted the membership of a "certain age" lent more urgency to our discussions.

Positively, a number of our companions have indicated a desire to join chapters of their choice continuing the sojourn along their individual Masonic pathways and in doing so to utilise some of our regalia. They will proceed with the good wishes of us all. We have "read the runes" and rather than await an eventual, possibly certain demise, metaphorically we have decided to grasp the nettle.

Robust standard of debate in committee, numerous kindly acts between companions (of which I've often been the recipient), decorum of the highest standard and disciplined ritual par excellence (or else) have long been the hallmarks of Penwortham Chapter to which we have all proudly contributed. "The exercise and management of this sublime degree of Masonry in this chapter hitherto has been so highly appreciated and its good reputation so well established." beyond doubt!

This companions albeit the end of my "Celebration" heralds a "new beginning". We open a new chapter in the knowledge of ourselves. We raise our "HALF FULL" glasses to celebrate times past and we look forward to sojourns anew. We shall not forget the happiness and "bonhomie" we've enjoyed and the worrying chasms of amnesia during ritual which have afflicted us all from time to time.

To conclude, Penwortham Chapter No 5874 will never lose its lustre in our heart's companions.

Happy to meet,  
Sorry to part, and wherever our paths might take us we shall surely be,  
Happy to meet again!

Ian Cuerden 5 April 2023