

“80 Years young” – An Oration by W.Bro. Steve Howes

Brethren. It has become customary to celebrate milestone anniversaries, and eighty years old is ‘no mean achievement’. I for one, shall be pleased to achieve that ripe old age. But is our Lodge, the “Loyal Vacation Lodge No. 6209, that has, this month achieved that milestone.

It would of course be interesting to reflect on those eighty years, but it has been said by many, that the Lodge ‘feels’ a lot more established than a mere “eighty” years.

The reason for this potentially, is our heritage. If you look around the Lodge and robing rooms, there are items and exhibits clearly marked “Loyal Vacation” that actually pre-date our 1946 consecration:

A Loyal Vacation Lodge place card is discreetly but proudly displayed on the wall of the robing room and close inspection reveals that it is dated 26th November 1803, a date that precedes our consecration by some hundred and forty years. More investigation was required. . .

Our Lodge Banner bears, where the Lodge number would normally appear; the numerals 55, 76 and 67. The banner was therefore worthy of further examination and on doing so, revealed a deeper understanding of our history.

The banner appears to take its rise from the early 1700’s and is of paint on bordered cloth construction. . . (If you can’t see it), It comprises two slender animals ‘sinister’ and ‘dexter’ adorning a vert (or green) shield which has a horizontal argent (white) chevron upon which is an open pair of compasses.

Below the chevron is a castle turret and above two further turrets. Above the shield is a (*gules) red and argent (white) twisted roll of fabric (known as an AGAL) surmounted by a hand holding aloft a trowel.

A search began on the origins of this banner as there was no UGLE at that time dictating which regalia or symbolism was acceptable.

The three towers on the shield are identical to the coat of Arms of the City of Dublin and it is from Dublin that many of the labourers came during the 1700's to work in London in the cotton and weaving mills. These skilled labourers brought with them their own skills, traditions and customs, one of which was a dedication to Masonic membership. If you look at the register of trades at early consecrations they are populated with the terms "weaver from Ireland" or "Irish linen weaver".

The compasses upon the chevron are an acknowledgement of our square and compasses and the hand with a trowel was at that time indicative of charitable endeavours, but what about the rest of the banner?

Further researches indicate that the Loyal Vacation Lodge indeed owes its history to the "Vacation Lodge" which was known to be working in the Covent Garden area of London back as far as in 1729. This was a time when in the York Lodge declared itself the governing "Grand Lodge", the governing "Premier Grand Lodge" was the organisation referred to today as the "Moderns" who in the 1730's compiled a list of Masonic Lodges (initially around London) and placed them under the umbrella guidance of the Grand Master. The Vacation Lodge having already been in existence was granted a Warrant some eight years later in 1737 and numbered Lodge number 163.

Now, in 1738, Henry 2nd Duke of Chandos became Grand Master of Premier Grand Lodge and his family crest is two sable 'Sinister' and 'Dexter' supporting a shield upon which is a crown surmounted by a man dressed in sable wearing and supported upon an Agal. The Chandos family had an interest in a hugely profitable mink farm.

It appears therefore that the lodge banner in our temple is an adaption of the Coat of arms of the Chandos Family as a mark of respect to the then Grand Master. But why the different Lodge numbers?

It was customary, as Lodges failed to meet the requirements of the Premier Grand Lodge, for them to be dissolved or struck off, and as low numbers indicated a more original status for the surviving Lodges, it was customary to 'shuffle' the Lodge numbers down, reducing the lodge number at each reshuffle.

This was largely because each of the 'Grand' Lodges (York, Athol, Premier, Irish and Scottish) were desperate to establish any degree of history which might grant them the right to call themselves **THE** Grand Lodge over their competitors.

As a side note, John Desauglier who in 1719, created the common rituals, (drawn from the many variations in use at the time) and James Anderson who in 1723 drew up the Book of Constitutions that went on to form the constitutions of many major organisations (and in fact Countries) must BOTH have been affiliated to the Premier Grand Lodge as the Antient Grand Lodge did not even come into existence until 1751. It was thus through Royal patronage that the Antients or Atholl lodge gained them the upper hand during the 'merger'.

The Vacation Lodge continued to meet in and around London until 1801 which, due to Henry Sully treating the Duke of Cumberland for cataracts,

is when the Lodge was renamed from “Vacation Lodge” to the “Loyal Vacation Lodge”, and relocated to Wiveliscombe taking its Lodge number as 76 as per the dining card mentioned earlier, possibly increasing from No. 55 to 76 at the time when the Antients Lodge was being established, and other (even more antient) lodges were ‘shuffled’ into the stock of subscribing Craft lodges?

The Lodge met at Freemason’s Hall in Wiveliscombe and in 1854, relocated to Dulverton. Sadly, this was to be the demise of the Loyal Vacation Lodge (by then re-numbered 67!) and the Lodge handed in its warrant in 1862 while Queen Victoria was on the throne.

At that time, Joseph Lister advanced antiseptics, Disraeli increased the electorate allowing one third of males in Britain to vote, the Suez canal opened, the Tay bridge blew down, education of children under ten became compulsory, electric light was introduced, Marconi invented radio, the Boer war broke out, Victoria was succeeded by Edward VII and then George V, the old age pension was introduced (hooray), National Insurance was introduced (boo) and the Titanic sank (ahhh).

Then came the poorly orchestrated first World War, after which the construction of our Masonic Headquarters at Great Queen Street was completed in 1933. Women got the vote and working rights, television was invented, as was penicillin. The Jarrow men marched to London to highlight poverty and unemployment and George VI became king. The jet engine was invented and the second world war broke out, ending in 1945.

A number of servicemen having been through so much and now missing the comradery and support of their fellow man, looked for and

discovered this in in Freemasonry and thus began a golden era for Lodge membership around the world. Lodge attendance increased and membership blossomed exponentially.

That year, in 1945 a petition was lodged with the United Grand Lodge of England, by the members of the Lodge of St. George that a new Lodge be properly dedicated and duly constituted in the name of the “Loyal Vacation Lodge”, thus continuing the Vacation Lodge’s wonderful heritage and a number of artefacts belonging to the Vacation Lodge are on display around the centre. The petition was granted and the Lodge was consecrated in 1946 with our own, special gavel being returned to the Lodge in 1950.

For those of you perhaps newer to the vagaries of the Craft, New Lodges have to be sponsored by an existing Lodge. It may surprise you that this ‘sponsoring Lodge’, despite ours being a fundamentally male practice, becomes known as the New Lodge’s “Mother Lodge”, and our Mother Lodge is, as I previously alluded, the Lodge of St. George No. 3158.

The Lodge of St. George also ‘mothered’ the Vivary Lodge No. 8654, which adopting the vernacular becomes our sister Lodge.

The St. George has its Mother Lodge (and therefore our Grandmother Lodge) in the Lodge of Unanimity and Sincerity No. 261, the most antient of all in our story, and to whom we all owe our heritage.

Now, as with any family tree, the more closely you look, the more incestuous the relationships seem to be. We also have a number of 'aunty' lodges in :

Lodge of Virtue and Honor No. 494,
Ny-anza Lodge No. 1197,
Lodge of Fidelity and Sincerity No. 1966,
Exmoor Lodge No. 2390,
Taunton Deane Lodge No. 5221,
Queen's College Lodge No. 6988, and the
Emergency Services Lodge No. 9391

As well as these, we have many cousins, including:

Portcullis Lodge No. 2038,
Wellington School Somerset Lodge No. 7230,
Quantock Lodge No. 4446 and
Taunton School Lodge No. 8215

Many of whom, I am delighted to report are represented here today. Perhaps you might like to stand if you are associated with any of those Lodges?

Brethren, perhaps it's time for a proper 'Family Reunion'? Please be seated. . .

Anyone who is interested, can glean more background information on the relationships between our lodges on the 6209.co.uk website.

So. . . To conclude our story. . .

In 1960, the members of the Loyal Vacation Lodge clubbed together and purchased a large property in Church Street, in which we now reside, placing it in Trust for the members which reason is perhaps why our constitution is SO much more complex and difficult to unpick than any other Lodge in Somerset (or England), (or maybe in the world!) but our thanks must go, not only to those who had the foresight to purchase it but to those who continue to run and support it and here I am referring to the hardworking members of the LVL Events and Building Committees.

Now, I said that every milestone anniversary should be appropriately celebrated, and as back in 2021, whilst a certain unmentionable pandemic was rife, we unfortunately forfeited the opportunity to celebrate our Lodge's 75th birthday.

It is therefore perhaps appropriate that I hand over now to our Worshipful Master to say a few words and cut the lovely cake that Bro. Derek has commissioned, a piece of which will be available to everyone after the festive board to enjoy with a cup of coffee that we might remember our history and the bond the friendship that unites us all.