

Freemasonry in England

In the period of the 1700's and 1800's

George B. Yeates

Virginia Research Lodge #1777

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Why is it that Freemasonry grew so greatly in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

There was no increase in cathedral and temple buildings, the type of buildings upon which the lodges had been predicated.

What happened in England?

Well, the social structure changed. Not all at once but slowly and surely it changed.

In recent times in our own country, we have seen somewhat drastic changes in the mores and social attitudes. "Things just aren't way now as they were when I was a boy." Since the early 1960's society in the United States has changed.

In England in the 1700's and 1800's there arose a well-defined, better-educated, and well-heeled middle class. A large segment of the population was becoming exceedingly unhappy with the political domination of the country by those of the aristocracy.

George I, who reigned from 1714 to 1727, and George II, who reigned from 1727 to 1760, were both Germans. George I never did learn to speak English. Neither monarch was interested in art and literature. George II would have nothing to do with art. He was extremely unappreciative of the new art that centered on the common man and the

events of everyday life. An art which depicted among other things the lives of the peasant and the working man. The engravings and paintings of William Hogarth were particularly repulsive to him. When told that one of Hogarth's paintings was a burlesque of George's soldiers, old George would have had him tied up and whipped. Many of Hogarth's etchings depicted the common man in his daily activities and showed the aristocracy in very unflattering situations.

As an aside: Hogarth could have had a field day with Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski. But Hogarth died long, long ago.

People who became the merchants, educators, and civil servants were born of families which had a very high regard for thrift, work, temperance, sentimentalism, religion, nationalism (especially as regards a hatred of the French), and humanitarianism.

England had undergone a revolution commencing in 1642 and ending with the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Oliver Cromwell served as Lord Protector from 1651 and England suffered under the pangs of Puritan philosophy and requirements of strict moral behavior until another revolution in 1660 restored Charles II to the throne.

But years of Presbyterianism and Puritan religion had left a distinct mark on England. `Tis true that the Anglican Church — the Church of England — was the dominant faith. But, the teachings concerning humanitarianism, benevolence, and a deep concern for the poor and downtrodden had become deeply ingrained in the minds of the English people. People cared about their fellow men and by the revolutions that had transpired, showed they were willing to fight to preserve what was rightly theirs. This is not to say that life in England in the 1700's and early 1800's was any bed of roses for the poor bloke who must work for a living. Life was hard, conditions were miserable. People set about to develop some way to make life better. Old Karl Marx, the German philosopher turned communist, did most of his research and writing in the libraries of London. He would have liked to turn England into a communist society but could not find fertile ground for the

establishment of his beliefs in merry old England. Nevertheless, social changes were afoot.

Nestled in that surge of changes coming about were the Masonic Lodges.

What was it that Masons had? What was it that would cause men to want to join and participate?

You know, for thousands of years religions have grown and prospered. Of course, there are some religions that did not prosper and many died out. However, the big attraction to any religion is mystery. The Dionysians in the times of the Greek heyday worshiped a god, Dionysus (the god of wine). Anyone who was found spying on their worship activities was summarily put to death (often torn to pieces). People joined because of the mystery. I feel very few joined because of a sincere desire for a religious experience. Mystery. Mystery. Some thing, some knowledge that others do not have. Moses went up on a mountain and came down with a set of rules for the Hebrew people to live by. Did anyone see this God that Moses claimed gave him the Commandments? They have a name for him — "I am that I am." You who are Royal Arch Masons are familiar with that name. Then too, the Christians have a mystery in their religion. They have a feast wherein wine is changed to blood.

Mystery. Yes, we all like to be a member of an organization wherein the members know something that outsiders do not know.

You have to admit that the Freemasons do have some mystery about them. They meet behind closed doors, none can be admitted to a meeting unless he be a Mason, and the Lodge has a man armed with a sword guarding the entrance. Then, too, the Freemason had some philosophies and teachings that provided those facets of life for which the middle class Englishman was looking. We still have those same cardinal virtues today: temperance, fortitude, prudence, and justice. Coupled with them are the tenets of

Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. These are the very things for which the Englishman was seeking.

Freemasonry was espousing the very cause to which the Englishman could cling to with fervency and zeal. It was what he most desired.

To accommodate the desire of non-working-at-the-trade men to enter into the Lodge, some changes, had to be made. There needed to be a new class of membership so other men could be eligible to become a Freemason. Thus, the Speculative Mason was born. A man who was not a craftsman, did not work with his hands for daily wages, but who was essentially interested in his fellowmen. So, the gates were opened and the influx of non-craftsmen was made possible and did occur.

At the same times there also arose in England what are known as the Friendly Societies. These were organizations of a beneficial and protective nature. They paid benefits to widows and families of deceased members. Paid old age benefits. Provided hostels and homes for the sick and ailing members. There simply were no welfare programs in those days such as we have in modern America. If one became sick and could not work or if one lost a job and could not find another, well, those persons starved to death. If your friends and relatives did not support you, then it was just a matter of time until you died. Not at all a pleasant situation. And so, the Friendly Societies were formed by concerned workers to care for themselves and their companions.

The Friendlies were not Masonically related. One did not have to be a Mason in order to join. However, the organizations were built upon plans that aped the Masonic Lodge. They had secret words and grips, initiations, pledges, closed meetings. Often the officers of a Friendly Society would communicate with a Masonic Lodge on the worthiness of an applicant and if the Masonic recommendation was not good, that person was turned down. Some of the Friendlies admitted women into their ranks. The Poor Law returns of 1803 showed better than 9,550 organizations with over 700,000 members. In the early

1700's there had been only 2,500 members. By 1924 there were over 30,000 societies with membership of more than 32,000,000.

The Oddfellows was one of the Friendly Societies. We have Oddfellow Lodges here in the United States. In England there were the Ancient Order of Foresters, Order of Druids, Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds, Royal Standard, and Hearts of Oak to name a few. In our country we have the Oddfellows and others including the Moose, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the Woodmen of the World, the Pythians — to name a few of ours. One doesn't see an "elks tooth" any more but most of you probably remember seeing an elk's tooth dangling from a watch chain that your father's friend wore.

An article in the Oddfellows Magazine for 1829 stated that "The Order of Oddfellows was originally instituted on Masonic Principles, the object of which is to cement more firmly the bonds of social feeling and sympathetic intercourse between man and man. The Masons appeared to do two things, to enjoy a fair measure of prosperity and to stick together, surrounding their activities and contacts with good deal of secrecy."

P. H. J. H. Gosden writing about the Friendly Societies says that there was a close connection with the Masons in the early years of Manchester Unity [a Friendly Society]. The Grand Committee of the Unity in March 1815 resolved that in consequences of information received from the Masonic Grand Lodge, John Wood never be admitted into our Order, The Committee had contacted other Masons and was of the opinion that he was not worthy of membership in any society.

Now, I don't know what balloting system was used but somebody dropped in a black ball on John Wood that was about two feet square!

It appears that the Friendlies and the Masons grew, not together, but in close proximity to each other. The Masons were not benevolent and protective organizations. So, one

may assume that many Masons were also a member of some Friendly Society. We have many Masons today who are members of Elks, Moose, and Oddfellows.

There is a Past Grand Commander of the Knights Templar in Virginia who lives in Lexington who is also a Past Grand Master of the Oddfellows.

Dorothy Lipson in her history of Freemasonry says, "Although the fraternity tended to emphasize the brotherhood of masons and kings, it was not equality they were extolling. Their goal was a Masonic meritocracy."

Reflecting upon the moral straight jacket into which the Victorians endeavored to publicly lace themselves, a comment by Lipson provides some interesting insights as to why membership in the fraternity was sought by middle class and upper class men. She remarks: "There is another dimension of Freemasonry that should be only mentioned here, and then not quite forgotten. Masonry was an expression of the 'play element' — which John Hunzinger has described as a distinct and fundamental function of life in all societies. Ultimately incapable of exact definition, play is a free and voluntary activity, which Hunzinger suggests, adorns life because of its 'expressive value' and its 'spiritual and social associations.' In play people create 'temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.' Play proceeds by its own regular duties and it 'promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world.'" Ideas of magic, litany, sacrament, and mystery are all rooted in play. It may appear that these characteristics also define Masonry: a game, most seriously and solemnly played by most of its members, until or unless, the social stakes of Masonic membership became too high and spoiled the fun, or other uses of the fraternity made it mundane.

The idea of "play" that Lipson and Hunzinger espouse is very interesting. Think back about your own involvement in Freemasonry. What keeps you coming to lodge meetings? Many of you display a fifty-year Masonic emblem in the lapel of your coat. Why do you join the

Royal Arch Chapter, the Commandery, the Scottish Rite, the Shriners, the Knights of the York Cross of Honor, the Holy Royal Arch Knight Templar Priests, the Red Cross of Constantine, the Rosicrucian Society? Is it because of the mystery — they all have something that you do not have until you get in. Is it because of a title of High Priest, or wearing a white hat, or occupying a seat on the Divan? Isn't it often, that one gets to do something different from what he does in everyday life in home, at the workplace, or in church? You can be King Solomon. You can be present when Hiram Abif is slain. We all enjoy entering into the "play" aspect of Masonry. We get to do something different. Even so minor a part as the seafaring man has plenty of takers and Ahishar is played enthusiastically in the Select Master degree. Although we do insist on calling the poor fellow AHUSHER because that is what he is supposed to do — hush the workers.

During the period 1826-1838 there was a very strong anti-Masonic feeling in the United States. William Morgan was writing and planned to publish an exposé of Freemasonry. He lived in Batavia, New York, and he disappeared — not to be found again. A hue and cry went up that the Masons had murdered Morgan. It was never proven that the Masons had anything to do with his disappearance. But Kenneth Stan must have been alive and well in 1826 and a persecution of all things Masonic was set loose, especially in the northeastern United States. Men deserted their Lodges. Civil servants, educators, the clergy, merchants, physicians, all left the fraternity in droves. To succeed in business, in politics, and/or in church you had better not be a Mason. The Anti-Mason Party (political party) was formed and ran a candidate for the Presidency. The candidate did not win, but he garnered in a lot of votes. By 1838 it was all over and Masonry began a successful comeback.

But, let us look at it from the English point of view. You can search the London Times for the years 1828 through 1838 and not find any reference to anti-Masonic activities. Neither in England nor in the United States. The Times does not even report on the anti-Masonic activities in the United States and the Times has reporters and correspondents in New York. I surmise that a Masonic exposé was just "old hat" to the British. After all there had

been exposés published in England since the early 1700's. Samuel Prichard published his detailed account of Masonic mysteries in 1730! The Englishman could read all he wanted to about Freemasonry. One more account was certainly nothing to get upset about. He did not understand why his American cousins were so upset. Frankly, I too, cannot see what were the concerns except for political expediency. An opportunity for some politicians to cash in on an event that was minimal in nature but which could be stirred up to serve some political desire. We see the same thing today in our newspapers and on the TV.

Lorman Ratner, speaking of anti-Masonry says:

"Though Americans of the late 1790's experienced what seems to be the kind of extreme anxiety that so often provides fertile ground on which movements aimed at countering supposed subversion grow, no such movement took root. One may conclude from this that although a high level of anxiety may increase the likelihood of a society's being attracted to simplistic explanations of and solutions for the problems of the time, such a development is not automatic. The crusade apparently must be sparked by some dramatic event to capture the public attention. It must be well directed, and its leaders must offer some plausible grounds for the public to accept crusade as a cure-all. Finally, the crusaders must have a sufficient organization to channel toward some specific objectives the excitement of those their cause attracts. The Anti-Masons of the 1790's had an anxious people to whom they could appeal. So, too, did the Anti-Masons of the 1820's. But unlike their eighteenth century predecessors, that later group succeeded in promoting a crusade against the Fraternity. Anxiety appears to have been a prerequisite for an anti-Masonic crusade but not the only, or perhaps even the primary, cause of it."

Asa Briggs says of the Victorian men: "Amid the broad ranks of the 'middle class,' independent small men were the dominant group, not only in retailing, but in commerce and manufacturing. The virtues they prized were those to be acclaimed by Samuel Smiles — self-help, perseverance, duty, thrift, and character. They conceived of self-dependence

not only as a ladder to individual success but as the mainspring of social improvement. All men could profit from it."

No account of English Masonry of the 1700 to 1900 era would be in the least bit complete without depicting some of the more colorful leaders of the craft during that period.

Foremost would be the Duke of Sussex. He was installed as Grand Master of Masons in 1813 and served until his death in 1843. His Royal Highness, Augustus Frederick, was the sixth son of King George III. George III was the king that Patrick Henry referred to in his famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech. George would have hung him if he could get his hands on Patrick. But that is a different tale.

Augustus fell in love with Lady Augusta Murray, second daughter of Lord Dunmore. This Lord Dunmore was John Murray, the Royal Governor of Virginia who destroyed Norfolk during our war of Revolution in 1776. The problem lies in that the young couple was married in Rome in a Roman Catholic ceremony. The Royal Family Act of 1782 expressly forbids the royal family from marrying a person of the Catholic religion. Harken back to the times of Henry VIII and the Jacobite movement from 1688 to 1745. The Parliament and the British people were leery of the power of the Roman Church and strove mightily to suppress any events that could possibly enhance Catholic power in England. Augustus had not secured permission from his father, George III, to marry Augusta and the marriage was never recognized by the throne even though the couple subsequently was married again in England in a Protestant ceremony. Augusta was never given the title of Duchess.

When the Duke of Sussex passed away in 1843, a great funeral service was held in Winchester cathedral. Great numbers of Kings, Queens, Princes, Dukes, and assorted nobles were present. Augustus was permitted to attend his father's funeral but his coach was the last coach in the procession. One might think that he would have had a front row seat at his father's funeral but not so! He was seated in a section with the peerage in a

section reserved for "personal friends" of the Duke. Boy, the British really know how to cut one down when they set their mind to it. The newspaper accounts of the funeral did not mention that Sir Augustus D'Este was the first son of the Duke of Sussex. Among those seated in this special section were Alexander Murray, 6th Earl of Dunmore, the grandson of Virginia's Lord Dunmore and Thomas Dundas, 2nd Earl of Zetland, who was destined to become the next Grand Master of Masons in England.

A reader of the accounts of the funeral in The Times of London of the death of the Duke of Sussex had to be diligent to find that he had been a Masonic Official. Near the end of the account, on an inside page, is reported: "By the death of the Duke several offices become vacant: His Royal Highness was President of the Society of Arts, Acting Grand Master of the Order of the Bath, Ranger of St. James and Hyde Parks, High-Steward of Plymouth, Colonel of the Honorable Artillery Company, Grand Master of Freemasons, Governor and Constable of Windsor Castle, and a Knight of the Garter."

England continues to have a member of the nobility as Grand Master of Masons. Currently, the Grand Master is His Royal Highness, The Duke of Kent.

Having a nobleman as head of the Masonic Lodges fits in well with the theory of "play" and "mystery." The British care greatly for the pomp and circumstance provided by the royal family. They like the stability and the symbols of British power that the royalty demonstrates. They are proud of the tenacity and fortitude shown by England and Scotland in resisting the onslaughts of would be conquerors. They point with pride to a long line of British monarchs.

How good it is to be a member of an organization that is headed by a royal person. It bolsters one's ego to be a member of an organization that says all men are equal and brothers — the king and the craftsman, the physician and the patient, the boss and the worker.

The Englishman revels in the knowledge that he is following in the footsteps of men of very high caliber. He loves his Lodge and is proud to be a member of it. The association with the nobility set the Masonic Lodges apart from the Friendly Societies. However, inasmuch as both espoused the cause of friendship and brotherly love and strongly adhered to the elements of truth, thrift, kindness, caring for fellows, concern for the indigent, both organizations prospered and grew. They fitted in, almost exactly, with what the Englishman sought in life.

Changes in social conditions in England in the 1700's and 1800's improved slowly but surely. Whether the changes were brought about by the Freemasons or whether the Freemasons incorporated into their philosophies those developing changes we shall never know. Who caused what we can't determine. What we do know is that the Freemasons of England developed and incorporated into their Lodges a set of moral and humanitarian principles that have stood the test of time and which the world would do well to adopt.

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