

A Brief History of Freemasonry in Cheadle

Introduction

The town of Cheadle is rich in Masonic symbolism. The lofty stonework of the two churches exemplifies the skills of the operative mason. Taken together the tower and spire suggest two pillars through which the Masonic hall is approached. Tape Street has structural elements dating from 1790 the year whose ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in their purest forms, embody the essence of masonry. The smooth Ashlar portals of the police station suggest perfection whilst the Doric pillars of The Wheatsheaf Hotel bespeak strength. Cumberland House is a reminder of the passage through the area of the Duke of Cumberland who had been installed as Grand Master in 1742. He was pursuing the perpetrators of Bonnie Prince Charlie's rebellion, a revolt, which, it popularly alleged, had been inspired by freemasons!

It is tempting to believe that the freemasons who meet regularly in the Masonic Hall have absorbed the Masonic ambience of the town and by doing so bring to freemasonry in Cheadle its unique and special flavour.

Early Days

One of the earliest references to freemasonry in Staffordshire occurs in Robert Plot's '*Natural History of Staffordshire*', published in 1686. In it he observed that;

'To these add the customs relating to the County whereof they have one, of admitting men into the society of freemasons, that in the moorlands of this County seems to be of greater request than anywhere else, tho' I find the custom spread more or less over all the country for here I found persons of the most eminent quality that did not disdain to belong to this fellowship' (Plot, Chapter 8, Para 85)

Between 1686 and the beginning of the nineteenth century freemasonry underwent a series of structural and organisational changes and was subjected to a variety of critical attacks. These attacks took various forms including scurrilous articles in newspapers, attempts to ridicule the order with shops displaying signs saying 'Masons made here for 2/6d', allegations that members used fairies to carry messages to and from the devil and suspicions that freemasons were direct descendants of the medieval alchemists. Many masons worried by the public criticism should cherish the thought that as early as 1730 a commentator observed that;

'The subject of freemasonry has, in Dearth of News, filled up many a paper' (EMP 28)

Such nonsensical allegations can still be encountered in public life or on the internet although in the 21st Century they tend to have an economic base (favouritism in appointments, promotions, contracts and so forth), criminal implications (interference with the due process of the law) or a political basis. In the political world critics base their opposition on untested mythologies and spurious beliefs about class and social status whilst the major churches appear to resent any organisation with a world standing that welcomes all races, colours and creeds.

Like all human organisations the size, shape and nature of freemasonry has changed over the years. Some lodges were formed and flourished, others flowered and died, those that exist today are the survivors of that process. The 'Masonic year Book' and Calendar for the Province of Staffordshire records only 101 active lodges in the Province, inevitably the following observations are almost certainly inaccurate in terms of absolute numbers and the overall historical picture. Nevertheless using information drawn from the Provincial Calendar it is possible to fashion some tentative conclusions about the growth of freemasonry in Staffordshire and the size of the Masonic population that the area can sustain.

Between 1805 and 1850, 11 new lodges were formed and survived (an average of roughly one lodge every four years). The use of 'survived' is necessary, for example, from 1811 to its erasure in 1829, a lodge, the Lodge of Unity, existed in Longnor. That lodge does not figure in this analysis, nor do others that were similarly short-lived, like the Jedidiah Lodge of Leek that existed in 1833 and the Atholl Lodge that was erased in 1866. Between 1851 and 1900, 22 lodges were formed and survived, on average, or roughly one every two years. Between 1951 and 1990 that average fell slightly to one new lodge every 18 months. A closer analysis of decades suggests that post-war euphoria may well have contributed to the consecration of 12 Staffordshire lodges during the 1920's and to the consecration of 14 lodges during the late 1940's. With the exception of these two post-war periods of rapid growth the rate of expansion was steady, between 4 and 7 lodges being consecrated in each decade. Is there, hidden somewhere within this pattern, a quest for the type of companionship and commitment that service life offers? Was society in those two periods seeking opportunities to share a commitment to fellowship and good works that other aspects of life could not offer? Beyond that shallow interpretation, lie more profound influences. Were the founders motivated by a genuine sense of relief that the war was over, the feeling that society was on the brink of a new world and a belief that the vision and practices of freemasonry had a contribution to make to that world? And what of numbers; might not the 4 to 7 lodges in a decade offer a better pattern for growth and stability than sudden explosions of newly founded lodges?

The history of the second half of the nineteenth century teaches that there were other factors at work in society and some of those had a direct bearing of the development of freemasonry in Cheadle. In the early nineteenth century the burgeoning prosperity of the surrounding area with its copper, brass, lead, tin, iron-ore and coal resources brought together practical craftsmen eager to profit from the riches of the area and to share their knowledge and skills. Some of these men came from outside the region and it is quite possible that a number came from areas like Scandinavia with long traditions of excellent work in copper and brass. A number of these 'incomers' were already freemasons. It was they who, dismayed by the distances they had to cover to reach the nearest meeting place and concerned by the lack of adequate facilities for travel, pressed for a centre in Cheadle. Their action resulted in the foundation and consecration of St. Giles Lodge No: 1587 (its Charter is dated December 1875).

The Formation of St. Giles Lodge

Formal proceedings began at 6.00pm on Thursday 04th November 1875. Those present were:

- Bro. I. P. Hall (Chair)
- Bro. R. Plant
- Bro. B. Thacker
- Bro. I. Williamson, and
- Bro. H. Wardle

They agreed a proposition that the brethren of Forrester's Lodge No:456 of Uttoxeter, be asked to sign a recommendation for a new lodge to be held at The Royal Oak in Cheadle and that it should be called St. Giles Lodge. Why the name of St. Giles was chosen is something a mystery.

The use of the name already borne by both of the churches in the town might have served to deflect sectarian criticism, something that was particularly rife at the time. The opposition to freemasonry through the final decades of the nineteenth century stemmed from a changing world order which led to the publication by Pope Leo XIII of the notorious Papal Bull '*Humanum Genus*'.

This document contained an injunction to '*root out this poison*' (freemasonry). The Bull contained a number of criticisms of freemasonry among which were the claims that it was a secret society, that it belonged to the kingdom of Satan as did all sectors of society which lay outside the catholic church, that it believed in the sovereignty of the individual and most heinous of all, that it supported non-church based schooling.

The name may have been chosen because the traditional compassion and kindness of St. Giles and his concern for lepers and cripples struck a particular chord in the hearts, minds and vision of the founders. The name St. Giles may have been adopted simply because of the existence of two churches bearing that name and a feeling that St. Giles was, in some way, Cheadle's own saint. The Catholic Church dates from 1841-46, the present Anglican church from 1837-39. The Anglican Church replaced an earlier building dedicated to St. Giles suggesting that the choice of name possibly has its roots in the middle ages and reflects perhaps, a link with the abbey of Croxden giving it a local significance.

This latter thought is pure speculation since none of the saints associated with the abbey bears the name of St. Giles. Those saints identified as having been commemorated in the abbey are saints Benedict, Thomas of Canterbury, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist and Martin. Also acknowledged were The Holy trinity and the Blessed Virgin Mary. By an interesting coincidence the name of the last abbot (1531-1538) was Thomas Chawner. In 2002 the provincial grand Master, who presided over the 2002 Festival was Kevin Chawner.

Whatever the reasons behind the choice of name, the legal and formal niceties were duly completed, and St. Giles Lodge was consecrated on Wednesday 17th May 1876. The meeting took place at The Royal Oak Hotel in the presence of the Provincial Grand Master, the Deputy Provincial Grand Master, the Grand Chaplain and 76 visitors from across the province.

The first officers of St. Giles Lodge to be invested at the consecration were;

- W. M. Wor. Bro. H. Wardle
- S. W. Bro. R. Plant
- J. W. Bro. H. Wilson
- J. D. Bro. W. Vernon
- I. P. M. Bro. I. Hall
- Treasurer Bro. B. Thacker
- Secretary Bro. J. Williamson

Isolation and Accessibility

Isolation had long been a problem in all aspects of life in Cheadle. In 1831 Royal Assent to an Act of Parliament to improve roads and consolidate turnpike trusts in and around Cheadle encouraged significant improvements to the road links with Froghall and Oakamoor. These improvements helped to ease movement between the industrial communities at Oakamoor and Froghall and Cheadle, their nearest market town. In 1857 the Staffordshire Agricultural Association was supposed to hold one of its meetings in Cheadle but did not do so because there was no rail link and travel was difficult.

The first sod of the line that linked Cheadle to Uttoxeter to Stoke-on-Trent line was not cut until June 1880. It was the existence of this rail link that encouraged Provincial Grand Lodge to meet in Cheadle on 20th May 1903 an event celebrated in worthy manner by the citizens of the town. However the scale of the public celebration, involving peals of bells from St. Giles Church, streets bedecked with flags and bunting, pupils given a day's holiday from school and the subsequent reports in local newspapers prompted an item in a subsequent quarterly communication to the effect that future reports of Masonic meetings should carry the approval of the Grand Master!

The difficulty of travelling to meetings in Cheadle before the rail link was completed is illustrated by the arrangements made for the installation meeting of ST. Giles Lodge in May 1880. Information circulated with the summons informed members that the banquet would commence at 4.00pm and the tickets, including dessert, would cost 5/6d each (£14.50 in terms of 'purchasing power' in 2004). The information then went on to advise members and guests of the travelling arrangements;

'For the convenience of brethren residing in the Potteries a conveyance will meet the train arriving at Blythe Bridge from Stoke at 12:40pm, and also the train will leave Blythe Bridge for Stoke at 9:25pm in the evening for the return journey. The charge for the double journey will be 2/- each (£5.28 in 2004).'

The report of the installation ceremony of 1903 at St. Giles Lodge states that;

'it was a very enjoyable evening, and, as the large company of visitors from the Potteries wended their way to the station by the field path, the moon was bringing into picturesque outline the old church tower and beautiful modern spire and the sweet pastoral and woodland country which surrounds the ancient town of Cheadle'

The mental image conjured up by those words is an entrancing one and illustrates the importance of improved communications to the widening and strengthening of the bonds of Masonic friendship.

At that time St. Giles Lodge was holding its meetings in a room in the town hall. Using the modern concept of 'equivalent purchasing power' as a guide, it is thought-provoking to note that, the 1877 installation meal which cost members 4/- each for a *'banquet of unusual excellence'* represents a cost to a modern mason of £10.56 and that provided for 5/6d at the installation in 1880, £14.50. It was Cheadle's unique blend of local prosperity, increasing mobility, geographical isolation and an evolving township serving an area that was part rural and part industrial that created the sense of shared purpose, common identity and social harmony that was and is the special characteristic of freemasonry in Cheadle.

The Meeting Place

The Masonic Hall in Cheadle is a substantial grey-stuccoed building standing near the end of The Terrace at the Western edge of the town. It is home to St. Giles Lodge No; 1587, its 'daughter' Churnet Valley Lodge No: 8092 and the St. Giles Chapter No: 1587. It's plain, uncompromising bulk is eloquent testimony to its original use. It served as the Cheadle Police Station from 1847 until 1915. In that year it was purchased at auction for £275 (£12,946 in 2004) and was used for the first time for a meeting of St. Giles Lodge in February 1916.

The existing building retains the basic pattern dictated by its original use. The main door, at the front of the building, is no longer used, much to the confusion of first time visitors. The dining room now occupies what was the front office and reception area of the police station. Toilets and a central heating chamber have replaced the cells but the original structure of that area remains unchanged. A stone staircase leads up to the changing rooms and the Lodge Room. This second floor area housed the courtroom, a jury room and robing room and is now the changing room for provincial officers a door led into the courtroom. Traces of that doorway can still be seen in the wall opposite the door into the changing room. To the right of that door is a staircase leading up to the third floor. This floor was the off-duty area for police officers; a line of coat pegs serves as a reminder of the days when the constables hung up their cloaks, helmets, truncheons and possibly cutlasses when off-duty.

During the early years of its existence St. Giles Lodge had various homes including accommodation in the Royal Oak Hotel, a room in the Savings Bank in Bank Street and the use of facilities in the Town Hall. This nomadic lifestyle came to an end in 1916 when St. Giles Lodge held its 405th meeting in the new Masonic Hall. The new premises were sufficient to the needs of the Lodge in those early days, but the decision to hold Installation Meetings elsewhere following the installation of Wor. Bro. John Brindley as Master of St. Giles in May 1932 when 76 Brethren and visitors were present was a foretaste of things to come and an experience never to be repeated.

Throughout its use as a Masonic Hall the building has been repaired, refurbished, redecorated and maintained by the Brethren of the Management Committee. The Lodge Room contains much evidence of the pride in their new accommodation taken by the Members of St. Giles Lodge and generosity of individual members.

Behind the Master's Chair and usually concealed by a Lodge Banner is a finely worked interpretation of the All-Seeing Eye motif. This was executed on high quality oilskin by Bro. J. E. Dean who, at the time, was Director of Ceremonies of St. Giles Lodge. For many years this painting served as the banner of St. Giles Lodge. The present banner depicts the legend of St. Giles with a surround rich in Masonic symbolism. The banner bears the Latin word '*Aegidius*' which may be freely translated as '*In the name of St. Giles*'. The design appears to have been in use on the Lodge Summons since 1916 but there is no record of the Designer. Wor. Bro. J. A. Hurst the 100th Master of St. Giles Lodge presented this banner to the Lodge.

The banner of Churnet Valley Lodge was a more definite pedigree. It depicts the part of the Valley of the River Churnet that lies below Alton Castle, together with the stepping stones used by early travellers to cross the river; the whole is surrounded by Stafford Knots. The designer was Wor. Bro. W. A. 'Bill' Allen a founder and First Master of Churnet Valley Lodge when it was consecrated on 2nd May 1966. Wor. Bro. V. R. 'Rex' Gibson was responsible for the actual production of the banner.

The chairs of the Master and Wardens were purchased in 1909 after an agreement was reached in 1908 that they should be made to a design submitted by Bro. J. W. Wadsworth. The chairs were first used in April 1909. The finally worked cushions on those chairs were the gift of Mrs. Kathleen Rogers in 2000.

The oak sockets for the wands of the Deacons were presented to St. Giles Lodge by Bro. G. Child and the Oakamoor Brethren in 1914; the year in which Bro. Child became Master.

Bro. T. W. Cooper presented the honours boards of St. Giles Lodge to mark his success in the becoming a fully qualified practising Solicitor.

The floor of the Lodge Room was originally enriched by a tessellated pattern of linoleum tiles that were laid painstakingly by six members of St. Giles Lodge. The carpet that now covers those tiles was made to order and supplied by Bro. W. N. Davies at a cost of almost £1,000. The tassels in the corner of the carpet were the inspiration of Wor. Bro. J. A. Hurst and represent the Masonic virtues of Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. Wor. Bro. Hurst also provided the vision that led to the representation on the ceiling of the seven stars with their wealth of Masonic symbolism.

The present organ was provided through the good offices of Wor. Bro. George Shaw and Wor. Bro. John Wilcox. It replaced an instrument purchased in 1895 for the apparently princely sum of £10. A Mr. Hurst had offered it for sale at £12: the Lodge offered £8. After much hard bargaining a mutually acceptable price of £10 (£640 in 2004) was agreed. This action put an end to protracted agitation within the Lodge by those members who believed the addition of music would enhance the meetings and enrich the ceremonies.

From 1915 to 1930 the only source of heating in the Lodge Room was the warm air that made its way upwards from the fires in the grates in the rooms below. In October 1930 the decision to install an anthracite stove in the Lodge Room was taken. This much needed blessing was less popular on days when the wind was in the wrong quarter and smoke was forced back into the Lodge Room. In 1939 the original gas lighting was replaced by electric lighting and the Lodge Room redecorated.

From the 1940's onwards the building deteriorated steadily until, in 1969, it was decided to establish a building fund to finance major efforts to alter and improve the premises. Three members of St. Giles Lodge played a leading role in organising the work that needed to be undertaken. They were Wor. Bro. R. Comley, Wor. Bro. J. C. Ratcliffe and Wor. Bro. E. Hemmings. Despite their best efforts and those of the Management Committee matters came to a head in the summer of 1972 when one of the floors in what is now the dining room collapsed. A major renovation was embarked upon and on 9th May 1975 The Provincial Grand Master Rt. Wor. Bro. J. E. V. Toney presided over the official reopening of the premises. For the first time since 1876 Lodge Members were able to meet and dine in their own premises.

One year later St. Giles Lodge produced a booklet outlining some of the highlights of its first 100 years. Some of incidents recorded in that booklet illustrate the triumphs, trials and tribulations; they might almost be called 'birth pangs' faced by a newly consecrated Lodge striving to find its feet in the Masonic world.

In August 1877 the 14 Members of St. Giles Lodge received a letter from John Joules and Son of Stone expressing pleasure at the Lodge's use of a room in its premises at the Royal Oak but suggesting that the company was entitled to enter a charge for the '*gas and coals consumed for lighting and heating in the room*'. The Members accepted the principle of the charge and offered to pay either annually or half yearly if the company could identify an appropriate sum. The settlement must have been acceptable to both parties because St. Giles remained the Royal Oak Hotel until 1886.

There were occasional hiccups among the Members. In 1883 an enquiry from a Lodge in another part of the country as to whether a particular Brother was in good standing elicited a response which read, in part:

'whilst the member was fully paid up as far as his dues were concerned, it had to be recorded that during the period of his membership the harmony of the Lodge was not what it ought to have been'

In 1883 the Secretary of the Lodge reported the special circumstances that had caused him to have one of the Brethren arrested for obtaining money under false pretences. After hearing an account of the situation the Lodge approved the action of the Secretary. As ever there seems to have been some dissatisfaction with cost and quality of the meals being served at the Festive Board of the Installation Meetings.

The minutes for the 1877 Installation Meeting record that the meeting was held in a room at the savings bank and the Festive Board at the Wheatsheaf Hotel at a 'cost of 4/- each' (£10.56 in 2004) where a 'banquet of unusual excellence' was enjoyed. How else, other than as a sharp riposte to criticisms, can that entry be explained?

Cheadle Masonry gained its first Provincial Grand Lodge officer in 1891 when Wor. Bro. T. B. Cull was appointed Past Provincial Grand Pursuivant. Seven years later he was promoted to Past provincial Senior Grand Warden an honour that marked a membership of 45 years, work as Secretary for 41 years, two periods as Master and attendance at over 400 Lodge meetings.

The tradition of charitable giving has a long and honourable tradition in St. Giles. In 1895 a ball held *under the banner of the lodge* at which members wore their Masonic regalia, raised £10 (£640 in 2004). That profit was used to provide 79 new books for the library at the Cheadle Mechanics Institute. Two years later when the Worshipful Master of St. Giles, Wor. Bro. W. Brickell attended the laying of the foundation stone of the Sutherland Institute at Longton he was able to present to the then Grand Master, H.R.H. the Prince of Wales a purse containing £5.5s.0d (£336 in 2004) for use in connection with Masonic charities. That record of 'raising and giving' has been sustained up the present day. Both St. Giles and Churnet Valley earned silver plates for their charitable endeavours during the 2002 festival. In addition substantial donations are regularly made to a number of local charities and worthy causes.

In 1898 Wor. Bro. Vernon, a founder member, presented the Lodge with a banner largely to commemorate the *long and glories reign of H.R.H. Queen Victoria*. Wor. Bro. Vernon, an industrialist then living in Macclesfield, was created a Baronet in 1914.

The presentation of a Past Masters Jewel in St. Giles Lodge took place in May 1927.

Both St. Giles Lodge and Churnet Valley have their own volumes of the Sacred Law. The Bible used by St. Giles Lodge dates from before 1761 and is believed to have been a gift from Wor. Bro. W. A. Allen who inherited it was from Great Grandfather John Candlish who has been Mayor and Member of Parliament for Durham in the middle of the 19th Century.

An alternative theory is that the Earl of Shrewsbury who was the Provincial Grand Master who officiated at its consecration donated it to the Lodge. The cushion upon which it rests was presented to St. Giles Lodge by Wor. Bro. Allen following his attendance in Westminster Abbey for Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second.

Wor. Bro. M. J. W. Rogers donated the Churnet Valley Bible to mark his year as Master: the cushion and frontal upon which it rests were given by Wor. Bro. J. E. Horton I.P.M. at the same meeting.

The paintings of the Churnet Valley and the pastel of Cheadle High Street that hang in the Dining room were given to the Lodge by the Caverswall artist Wor. Bro. Tom Hinks. His generosity in donating paintings as prizes in fund raising activities contributed significantly to Churnet Valley's effectiveness in raising funds for charitable and other purposes. The dining room also contains a selection of memorabilia commemorating events in the history of St. Giles Lodge.

The two Lodges and the Chapter who now share the premises have added a number of other items to the stock of Lodge furniture to create what is now a small, but welcoming environment, which, despite a continuing need for repairs and improvements, an occasional lack of space and indifferent parking provides a congenial and historic ambience for the Freemasons who therein practise their art.

The Formation of St. Giles Chapter

The Senior Members of St. Giles Lodge realised that the Masonic cycle could not be completed without the creation of a Royal Arch Chapter and began to explore the possibility that such a Chapter could be identified with St. Giles Lodge. They found willing sponsors within the Membership of the Dove Chapter 456 whose base was in Uttoxeter.

Following these discussions Wor. Bro. J. Finnikin initiated the actions that led to the formation of a Royal Arch Chapter under the banner of St. Giles in April 1946. The consecration took place on 2nd April 1947. The honours board records the names of the founders: E. Burrows, J. Brindley, J. Finnikin, Gordon W. Taylor, R. S. Bagnall, C. Hodgkinson, J. Kent, J. Wain, L. P. Orme, C. E. Goodwin, J. C. Cowcill, P. L. Webster and W. Rhead.

Lesley Orme provided an important element of Chapter furniture, the Dome; it was fashioned from a solid block of timber. Len Bloomer provided a set of new robes during his year in office whilst Brian Savage became the first member of the Chapter to achieve Grand rank.

The Formation of Churnet Valley Lodge No. 8092

Throughout the 1950's the membership of most Lodges rose steadily, however in some cases, it was taking a new member some 15 or 20 years to reach the Worshipful Masters Chair. This became a particular problem in St. Giles when, after much deliberation, it was decided to form a daughter Lodge, destined to become Churnet Valley Lodge.

Wor. Bro. M. A. Charlesworth led the Founders, strongly supported by Wor. Bro. G. E. Critchlow, Wor. Bro. J. Brindley and Wor. Bro. J. C. Ratcliffe of St. Giles. Wor. Bro. C. J. Beeston of Ceramic Lodge and a long time visitor to St. Giles joined the Founders bringing with him Bro. J. E. Horton and Bro. M. J. W. Rogers. Later declarations of interest in the new Lodge came from Wor. Bro. Group Captain W. S. Allen P.P.D. G.R. (Durham) and Wor. Bro. F. J. Hall (London). 'Fred' Hall could claim the unusual distinction of having been one of the schoolchildren granted a day's holiday to mark the meeting of Provincial Grand Lodge held in Cheadle on 20th May 1903.

Churnet Valley Lodge was consecrated on Monday, 2nd May 1966. The chosen venue was the Masonic Hall in Leek. The ceremony took place on what was one of the hottest days of the year. It was conducted by the Provincial Grand Master the Right Worthy Brother Major H. Wilson Keys M.C.T.D. who was assisted by the Deputy Provincial Grand Master Wor. Bro. John L. Brockhouse M.A.D.G.D. and the Assistant Provincial Grand Master Wor. Bro. James E. V. Tony P.A.G.D.C.

Despite the number of persons present which put a strain on the accommodation, the heat, the pervasive smell of incense and the inescapable tension of the occasion the Ceremony was a moving and evocative experience for everyone present. In particular it made a lasting impression upon the minds of the Founders many of whom realised, perhaps for the first time, the massive responsibility they had undertaken.

The first officers of Churnet Valley Lodge were:

- I. P. M. Wor. Bro. J. R. Brindley P. P. G. W.
 - W. M. Wor. Bro. W. S. Allen P. P. D. G. R.
 - S. W. Wor. Bro. J. W. Forbes
 - J. W. Wor. Bro. F. J. Hall
 - Chaplain Bro. B. Stanier
 - Treasurer Wor. Bro. G. E. Critchlow P. P. G. D.
 - Secretary Wor. Bro. M. A. Charlesworth
 - D. C. Wor. Bro. C. J. Beeston P. P. A. G. D. C.
 - S. D. Bro. J. R. Brindley
 - J. D. Bro. C. H. Loane
 - A. D. C. Wor. Bro. G. T. Walker P. P. A. G. D. C.
 - Almoner Bro. M. J. W. Rogers
 - Organist Bro. H. Bolton
 - Assist. Sec. Bro. D. Clarke
 - I. G. Bro. V. R. Gibson
 - Tyler Bro. J. A. Hurst
 - Steward Bro. W. N. Davies
 - Steward Bro. J. E. Horton
- Wor. Bro. J. C. Ratcliffe P. P. G. D.

In 1991 the Lodge published a modest booklet giving an account of its first 25 years containing brief pen portraits of its founders and the first 25 masters. Whilst not boasting a pedigree to match that of its mother lodge Churnet Valley is slowly amassing its own archive of events, incidents and personalities.

Early in 2003 the Lodge was honoured by the presence of the Provincial Grand Master, The Right Worthy Brother Kevin Chawner and Mrs Chawner when a banner commemorating the 2002 Festival was presented to the Province on behalf of the Management Committee of the Masonic Hall. The banner depicts Masonic meeting places in Staffordshire and the names of all Lodges in existence at the time of the 2002 Festival. The banner was designed and created by Wor. Bro. B. M. Savage P. Pr. J. G. W. and his wife Mrs Sheila Savage. Following the presentation of the banner those present were entertained with a 'Masonic Musicale' in which the place of song in the lodges of the 18th Century were explored.

At the regular meeting held on the 2nd February 2004 the Lodge received a visit from a group of Brethren from Bretby Lodge in the Province of Derbyshire bearing a 'Travelling Gavel'. This was one of a number of exquisitely hand-crafted gavels created by an Australian Freemason being sent 'round the world' to encourage a universality of brotherhood and to promote visiting on the widest possible scale.

Among the lighter moments in the short life of the Lodge are:

The occasion when the Brethren arrived late, once too often, at the Royal Oak for dinner to be faced with mashed potato and a poached egg served on a plate: a clear, colourless indication that the Lodge might like to look elsewhere for refreshment.

The evening when an initiation ceremony was disrupted by an incessant pounding on the door accompanied by peremptory demands from a member of the local constabulary that members adjourn immediately and move their cars to a safer location or risk penal sanctions. It took some time to convince a bemused candidate that this was not part of the ceremony.

An evening during the first year in the life of the Lodge when 'the knocks' became so confused and abundant that one Brother tactlessly observed that 'if we go on like this we shall have the death watch beetles complaining.

Even funerals provided brief flashes of humanity. Wor. Bro. George Shaw insisted that his coffin should be escorted to the grave by a brass band playing 'Colonel Bogey'. On another occasion, on a bitterly cold day, the bearers had to carry a coffin containing the body of Bro. Doug Phillips, a respected local bookmaker, down a steep, untreated, ice-covered pathway. At a particular difficult moment as the bearers struggled desperately to negotiate an exceedingly slippery section one of the bearers was heard to whisper, 'Anyone care to take a bet that at this moment Doug is up there running a book on which of us is going to slip first?'

The Lodge can also boast a member whose proclivity to malapropisms gave the Brethren 'pillows' for pillars, 'chastity' for charity and 'suppository' for repository. The last even reduced the candidate to helpless laughter.

On a sadder note Churnet Valley Lodge had a very bad patch less than 15 years after its formation during which it lost no fewer than six able and expert members all of whom died untimely deaths. That the Lodge was able to weather these losses and maintain the excellence of its work despite this blow was due in no small measure to the work of Wor. Bro. Arthur Hurst as Director of Ceremonies.

St. Giles and Churnet Valley may be 'country lodges' but their Masonic commitment is of a high order and over the years they have developed one special characteristic, a sense of warmth, unity and brotherhood in which they stand second to none.

Prospect

At the opening of the 21st Century the Cheadle Lodges and Freemasonry in general face challenging times. A general decline in public willingness to participate in charitable groups demanding a measure of personal time and commitment is threatening the health and well-being of a number of organisations, Freemasonry among them. Freemasons have to face some hard choices relating to membership, funding, and premises and even, in some areas, perish the thought, amalgamation. Cheadle Masons are no strangers to this problem. Throughout the 1940's, 50's and 60's there were discussions about the costs of maintaining the building and the savings that could be achieved by moving to leek or Shelton. The advent of Churnet Valley Lodge and the determination of a number of Brethren that more would be lost than gained by such a move ensured the survival of Freemasonry in Cheadle.

The Craft will weather these storms as effectively as it has surmounted other difficulties in the past. Perhaps the secret to future growth, security and triumph lies in the words:

'The true Freemason is not a lone philosopher wrapped in a mysterious dream but a man of common humanity whose Masonry shines through his deeds'