

ADDRESS BY PROVINCIAL GRAND MASTER – June 2024

Thank you all for your patience on this busy and warm morning.

Firstly, congratulations to all the Brethen who have been appointed and invested today. These honours are not given lightly; each one is the result of careful consideration and recognition of your deserving contributions. I hope you have enjoyed today's proceedings and that you will continue to support your Lodges, your Masonic Halls, and our Province with the same enthusiasm and dedication. Embrace and enjoy the new responsibilities that come with these honours.

In April, we had the pleasure of visiting Grand Lodge to support our Brethen from this Province who received Grand Rank honours. I'd like to recognise these outstanding individuals. If your name is called, please stand up, and everyone else, please hold your rapturous applause until all the names have been announced.

The MW Grand Master was pleased to appoint to and promote in Grand Lodge the following Durham Brethen:

First Appointments to Grand Rank:

David John Atkinson	PAGDC
Roderick Andrew Scott	PAGDC
David Dorward	PGStB

Promotions in Grand Rank:

DR Rakesh Bhalla	promoted to SGD (Acting)
Martin Rankin	promoted to AsstGDC (Acting)
John David Watts	promoted to PGSwdB
Thomas Fred Gittins	promoted to PJGD
Hearl Roger LENTON	PJGD.

Brethen, we return to United Grand Lodge on Sept 11th to visit the Quarterly Communication and I hope as many of you can join us on that date, already we have 100 signed up. So if you want to be a part of the Durham day out, get in touch.

Ties

Brethen it's wonderful to see so many supporting the new Provincial tie today, Can I thank WBro Jamie Campbell of Tees Lodge for his stunning designs and to WBro Simon Atkinson and our hard-working merchandising team. The merchandising website is open today and you will find full details on the provincial website.

Retiring Officers

Today we have some senior members of our team who are stepping down and I would like to pay tribute to the support they have given to our Province.

Our Deputy DC WBro David John Atkinson today stands down with distinction after 4 years. David, thank you for your dedication on the DC team and we wish you all the best in your recently appointed role as Deputy DC in our Chapter team.

WBro Ian Turnbull steps down after six years as our Provincial Grand Superintendent of Works, Brethen if you don't know this role involves the responsibility for the Provincial office building and advice and support to our masonic building teams. Thank you, Ian.

WBro Paul O'Doherty steps down today as our Communication Officer. Paul, you have been the heart and soul of our Provincial Communications for the past 10 years in various capacities, working tirelessly across both Craft and Chapter. The way we consume news has changed a lot during this time, and your efforts have kept us all connected and informed. Thank you, Paul, for everything you've done.

And to WBro Tom Gittins who stands down today after eight and a half years as Provincial Secretary. The work at the Secretariat can be demanding at times and the support you have given to me, and my two predecessors is gratefully appreciated. Tom is respected at the highest levels of Freemasonry as being a very competent and professional Provincial Secretary and Scribe Ezra. I hope this will not be the last we see of Tom, and we wish Richard Scott every success in this role going forward.

Brethen, can you join me in showing our appreciation to those leaving office today.

Today I have appointed WBro Gavin Rowell as our New Provincial Charity Steward, Gavin who will be known to many as our task master on many a provincial bike ride and has with his riders raised in excess of £120,000 with this role I have given him the additional responsibility as Festival Chairman for the 2032 festival. It will be Gavin's primary role over the next couple of years to prepare us for Festival. I hope you will give him every support that you gave me when I was appointed in 2014.

Membership

When the membership challenge was launched by the Pro it was to identify to Provinces incoming and outgoing of members. Once you identify we have a problem in falling membership then hopefully we can address it.

In 2022 we were minus 155, this means at the end of 2022 we had 155 less members than the year before. In 2023 the loss was 139, still a loss but the loss was less than the year before, so an improvement.

In 2024, this is January to date in 5.5 months we are plus 18, granted this in only half of the year but very encouraging. Our members pathways steering team under Rak Bhalla have been making great strides in encoring new members, as well as reducing resignation.

But resignations are still too high Brethen, this coupled with exclusions remains our biggest problem.

As soon as the brother has stopped attending the work must begin. Keep in touch with your members, if they do leave, have you told Province? if they are thinking of leaving have you told us. Our members leave for various reasons, it's just not for them, internal pressures, clash of personalities, not being involved or financial issues. Look out for the signs and include them especially the newer Brethen, make them feel part of the team.

In September we will be rolling out our Charter Mark scheme for Lodges, these Charter Marks will be either Bronze, Silver or Gold and will be awarded to Lodges reflecting your Lodges commitment to the members' pathway and the strategy for thriving Lodges and community engagement.

Can I take this opportunity to thank to our membership, mentoring, almoner, L&D, retention and retrieval teams for their hard work over the last 12 months.

As Provincial Grand Master I said I want to be consecrating Lodges not closing them. Well unfortunately some do inevitably close, but we have successfully consecrated our first Lodge in the Province for almost 10 years. Anglers Lodge is now fully established with Gambrinus Lodge's consecration in July with then Derwentside Chapter will be consecrated in September. Can I thank those individuals who had that vision along with our secretariat for their dedication during this long process.

I have been asked numerous times would I support starting new Lodges, specialised Lodges for those who want to bond not only because of Freemasonry but from another passion, such as cycling, the military, football, shooting, motor bikes and the list goes on.

If you're considering founding a new Lodge you must have a plan with plenty of support, this doesn't happen overnight.

If you're considering this, talk to us we have guidelines to assist you.

Our organisation has adapted, changed, and thrived for over 300 years and will continue to do so.

Royal Arch

I'm also keen that we continue to promote our Royal Arch Masonry, I encourage you all to educate our Brethen who are not members.

My aim is to increase RA membership from the 43% of craft members we have today

Thank you to all the Lodges and our members who took part in our Chapter month earlier this year. I think this has been a great success and we got some recognition in this month's edition of FMT with our ceremony of the veils, adding more theatre, RA roadshows etc, don't forget these teams are anxious to reprise their roles.

Remember we are one organisation .

Thanks

Can I thank our Provincial Grand Secretaries, WBro Tom Gittins, Richard Scott, our Deputy Secretary, W Bro Mike Davies, Caroline & Pamela, and the many volunteers for making today the success it is.

I thank those retiring and stepping down today and to their replacements I wish you every success.

Our Stewards Lodge who supports us in so many of our events.

Can I take this opportunity to thank the team at The Fed for looking after us today?

Also, to the Provincial DC Martin Rankin and his Team for their outstanding work, today as always.

Brethen, we have acknowledged many Brethen with a rank and a collar today. But to make Province tick we require so many more.

At this point I would like to thank those who work behind the scenes, those you don't always see on the front line, those who support unassumingly from a distance, you know who you are, and we do also.

Don't just be a member of our Province be part of it!

Buildings

Brethen, I want to discuss the vision I have for our Masonic buildings in the Province. This is a subject I feel we have neglected for far too long, but we need to address it.

Currently, the Executive has very little say in the running of our buildings. However, my responsibility, given to me by the Grand Master, is to our members, and I want you to have the best experience as Freemasons.

In the past, we had 42 halls which were designed to cater an excess of 20,000 members. Today we have 36 halls with just 4,200 members. The numbers don't lie; we have too many buildings for our current membership. Many of our buildings are too big and vastly underused

Membership is greatly affected by the environment in which we meet. Are our buildings up to the standards we expect? We live in challenging times with high energy costs, rising expenses and increased legislation that we didn't face in the past. Many of our hall management teams lack the resources they once had. The members who would readily help behind the bar or had expertise for repairs and maintenance are not there anymore.

Many of our buildings are old and require more and more expense. While many of our management teams are doing a fantastic job, they simply don't have sufficient funds for major projects on the buildings.

Our vision should be fewer buildings with higher standards, strong membership, with multiple unit occupancy, and proactive management teams.

We need good governance with all units having a say in the future and direction of the building. I want centres of excellence where our members want to visit and return. Members should enjoy the environment of the building and feel proud to bring their family and friends. New or well

refurbished buildings will be more attractive to other external organisations who could use our buildings to increase external income and reduce pressure on subscriptions.

This won't happen overnight, but I appeal to our hall committees to consider the future of their building and plan accordingly. This may involve expansion or, in some cases, closure. I don't want buildings hanging on to the bitter end with no effective plans which results in members being displaced and leaving Freemasonry, which is my responsibility.

I'm also appealing to our long-standing members who hold great affection for our buildings to be pragmatic and put those feelings aside and consider what is best for their Lodge and its membership.

Intervention is required now to manage the process of change. You need to plan for the future, including the possibility of relocating, amalgamating with another building to improve facilities for your members.

I understand that for some our members, this will sound radical, but my responsibility is for the future and vibrancy of our organisation. Our membership and mentoring teams are slowing down the membership losses, and we hope to be a growing organisation once again. But to achieve this, we need 21st-century facilities. Future members will expect nothing less.

To start this process, I want all our buildings to get their house in order. Understand who the owners of our buildings are, protect the trustees and management teams, and ensure everyone using the building has a say. Some buildings like Darlington have had great success with this process, let's learn from them.

My vision includes a provincial building fund to support other buildings. I hope Masonic buildings that decide to close will consider supporting this fund to ensure other buildings thrive and keep Freemasonry strong in Durham.

We are having the same discussions at the Provincial Office Brethen; we are not immune either. We are a membership organisation and have to plan how we best serve our members and where from. Do we redevelop, do we relocate the office and the museum, or do we co-locate with Lodges on an existing or new site? Nothing is off the table.

I would love to see building management teams in the same geographical area come together and plan collectively. The Asset Management team remains willing to assist halls and support you through change. UGLE has a highly informative Centres of Excellence document. All the guidance and advice is contained in that document.

Over the coming months I will be facilitating meetings with hall management teams either individually or in groups to bring building owners together. I know this has been discussed and mentioned before, but I believe this time there may be an appetite for change.

I am passionate about Freemasonry and our members. I see too many of our hardworking management teams distracted from Freemasonry to keep a building going with very little reward.

I would be happy for our Lodges to meet in a hotel, community centre or local pub without the risk or liability.

Brethen, this message may be hard to hear, but I want the best for our members, and our buildings play a large part in their enjoyment.

I hope my message will resonate with you all and together we can take our Province forward.

Ending

Today we start our new masonic year and I hope a year of optimism as we look at our future.

I'm keen for us to sustain and build our membership by promoting Freemasonry positively within the community to improve our public perception, improve our membership enquiries by emphasising our core values of integrity, respect, friendship, and service.

I want the best membership experience for every member, whether it's from our buildings, ritual, dining to the positive interactions with Province to ensure the all-round experience ensures they want to stay members.

Enhancing our community profile helping those less fortunate than ourselves and demonstrate our commitment to discharging our civic duties.

In all of this don't forget those important people, our family who give us the support and encouragement to enjoy our Freemasonry, make sure you always put your family first.

Can I thank you all for coming today and for making this day so special for those who have been appointed and promoted today and for the very kind attention you have given to this address.

Remember we are stronger together.

Brethren. I'm proud to be a Freemason, and extremely proud to lead this Province, Thank you!

Other Business.

I would like to take this time to thank a brother who typifies Freemasonry and all its values, and I want to acknowledge his service today not only to his Lodges and Chapters but to our Province.

He is a very unassuming man who doesn't claim the limelight but is always there supporting and doing. He is a Freemason of over 39 years' service, Masters in his Lodges in 1990, 2010 & 2013. DC for over 10 years and Chaplain for over 5 years.

He was acknowledged by Province in 1998 as Provincial Grand Superintendent of Works promoted to PJGW in 2008 and appointed Past Grand Standard bearer in SGC in 2018

And I'm proud that he is currently a very active provincial Officer.

WBro Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies will you bring The Provincial Grand Tyler, WBro George Field to the Dias please.

George for the support you have given to our Province over many years, and we hope for many more it gives me great pleasure to promote you to Past Senior Grand Warden.

Brethren, I'm sure you will agree with me that today our Past Provincial Secretary has performed with the same high standards that he brought to this role during his tenure from 1st January 2016 to approx. 11.30 am on the 22nd June 2024

Over these years, Tom has demonstrated exceptional commitment to the role, serving three Provincial Grand Masters with distinction.

He has ensured the continuous progress and modernisation of the Provincial Secretariat.

Additionally, Tom has served as the Secretary of The Durham Freemasons Charity, supporting the administration, our members, and the community especially during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

His time and commitment were critical to ensuring we maintained communications with our members and liaised nationally to meet our charitable aims.

His outstanding contributions have significantly enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of our organisation, reflecting the highest standards of Freemasonry.

I call upon the Provincial Grand Secretary

WBro Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies will you bring WBro Tom Gittins to the Dias please

Tom, it gives me great pleasure to present you with the Provincial Grand Master's Certificate of Service to Freemasonry in recognition of the outstanding service to our Province.