

Companions, this is our first AGM since I became ProvGM and Grand Superintendent in this very building on what was a very special day last June and I want to take the opportunity to thank, from the the bottom of my heart all Durham Freemasons and their families for showing so much support, passion and love to our wonderful organisation and myself. We truly are stronger together. You are all most welcome, I'm delighted over 10% of our membership is here and whilst every brother matters, equally, I'm sure you want me to say what a delight it is to have my immediate predecessor, John Thompson, recently released from his year of purdah, here with us. John, we watch with immense pride how one of our own is making such a positive difference in freemasonry across the constitution.

Chapter is an incredibly special part of our masonic journey. It completes the 4-ceremony pathway through pure ancient masonry. A few months ago, a Jewish friend from another province posted these words in a national WhatsApp group about the Royal Arch which inspired me and I have been saving them to share with you today:

“Craft Masonry is the path we walk, the practical, the everyday. But the Royal Arch is the deeper search, for meaning, for truth, for something higher. It is the spiritual heart of the journey.”

We experienced that special Companionship in London only 3 weeks ago when about 50 Durham brethren and companions supported those HRH The Duke of Kent promoted and appointed in Grand Rank. This year he allowed Durham 2 promotions and 3 appointments plus an extra special promotion for Den Wilson to recognise his work as DepGM of The Mark Masons. DepGSupt Clinton Leeks and Darlington based John Parker were promoted and first appointments went to 2ndProvGP Stephen Ranson and past assistants to the Provincial Principals Gary Elgie and David Green. I hope you agree their commitment and dedication to the Royal Arch befits their new ranks and they deserve your acclamation.

Others I want to specially acknowledge are those who have been exalted in the last year, if that's you please stand up. Welcome Companions, you've all heard about our Cornerstone community in which newer brethren are identified by a light blue pin badge, well for light blues who have completed their journey in

pure Ancient freemasonry we now have an extra special badge with a red quarter and as soon as I finish speaking please come forward and be the first to receive one, they were only delivered from the manufacturer yesterday. (15 companions did so)

Companions, for many years September's quarterly communication of Grand Lodge has been a grand Durham day out to London but this year the province's grand day trip will be on Wednesday 11th November to Supreme Grand Chapter. Yes, that's Armistice Day and during our second Armed Forces month. Grand chapter will open a little later than usual to enable those who wish, to pay their respects at 11am on 11th of 11th either at the cenotaph in Whitehall which is less than 15 minutes walk from Freemasons Hall, or in the vestibule of our Grand Temple in front of the roll of honour of our members who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Whilst only companions of the royal arch are qualified to attend Grand Chapter, there's plenty time for any interested Master Mason to be exalted before then. Companions, these are only a couple of examples of what Province is doing to encourage all brethren to take their fourth ceremony in a chapter at a time and place of their choosing.

You know that there is no longer a separate grand or provincial registration or certificate fee for Chapter and that at our next provincial meeting, which is the Craft AGM here on 27th June, members will be asked to change our bylaws so all provincial chapter funds are transferred to provincial grand lodge in support of the one organisation one journey mantra. And because of the resultant savings, to do away entirely with provincial chapter fees, and due to prudent financial management, we have no intention to increase craft fees. (Pause for a cheer!)

This is all supportive of the 5-year strategy for freemasonry (also known as the membership challenge) and Building Together which I strongly recommend to you. Some ideas from other parts of the country that you might want to consider here. Hold chapter and craft meetings back-to-back with joint dining saving meal and travel costs. As we are Stronger Together, hold a chapter convocation back-to-back with companion orders, many of which are on the banners behind me, perhaps prioritise those that require membership of craft AND chapter as eligibility criteria to join.

Prepare for multiple exaltation ceremonies as I expect an increase in interest from a series of 5 “discover more” letters Grand Lodge will soon send to all our master masons who are not yet experiencing this special companionship.

Our current aspiration is 50% of Craft membership to be in the chapter and I am delighted that we are on the way. In the last year we have increased from 41% to 43% and in actual numbers a genuine increase of 7.

Part of the % increase is due to a slight reduction in craft members so please continue to do all you can to drive Craft membership too.

Portal continues to develop and will soon change from desirable to essential for unit Secretaries, Scribe Ezra's and treasurers so now is the time for another Companion to stand. Nick Taylor. Anyone who needs help with Portal please see Nick who will get you signed up today.

We will shortly retire so the room can be prepared for lunch after which I will personally propose a toast to the newly promoted and appointed provincial officers but to those who cannot stay, a brief Thankyou for doing what you have in the Royal Arch which led to today's new ranks.

Thanks also to the acting officers who have stood down today for your service to the province.

The success of days such as this are a huge team effort and we owe a great debt of gratitude to the provincial grand stewards, the admin team led by Richard Scott supported by Pamela Davis, Bryan Kennedy and office volunteers; Wayne, Richard and Keith for all matters communications, and to the Provincial Grand DC, his deputies and all involved in the ceremonial.

I'm going to end by repeating what Chapter means to my online friend.

“Craft Masonry is the path we walk, the practical, the everyday.
But the Royal Arch is the deeper search, for meaning, for truth, for something higher. It is the spiritual heart of the journey.”

After presiding over my first AGM the spirit I most desire now is Gin, and I look forward to your companionship in the bar.