

Reply to toast to visitors

Your Excellencies, Excellent Companions, Companions all ... I am delighted to be here this evening and delighted to have the honour of replying to the toast to the visitors.

This is my first visit to the Ingrebourne Chapter and I very much hope that it will not be my last. We had a most enjoyable afternoon in the temple and we are enjoying an excellent Festive Board.

My mother Lodge - in Craft - is St Laurence Lodge No. 5511, which is the daughter Lodge of Ingrebourne and in normal circumstances I might have expected, when the time came for me to be exalted into this Supreme Degree, to have joined this wonderful chapter. However, with a young family, I did not want to give up any more Saturdays and so I spoke to the late Excellent Companion Frank Lodge, a great mason and someone whom I am sure many companions here this evening remember with deep affection. He was kind enough to propose me to the Chapter of Remembrance No 7674, of which he was a founder. It must have worked out pretty well as I am this year, MEZ of that chapter. Thus it is a double pleasure to be here today.

I trust and hope that the Ingrebourne Chapter is prospering. Many Chapters and Lodges have been experiencing a lack of candidates in recent years. Indeed, Masonry itself is going through a difficult period and has suffered a decline in membership over the last 10 years. Initiations have reduced from around fifteen thousand in 1985 to eleven thousand in 1994, a decline of 26%. Since there are here are more Lodges today than in 1985, individual Lodges have experienced an even steeper decline than this. The same effects have been felt in the Royal arch.

There are many ideas advanced to explain this decline - the public attacks on the Craft, the political agenda of some misguided people, the economic cycle, the attraction of many so-called leisure alternatives and so on. Some people have argued that Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter, in de-mystifying the Craft and making changes to the ritual, are reducing us to just another Men's Club. Others point to the demographic changes in England, the reducing birth rate and the consequent decline in the number of men of the right age to be interested in Masonry. Some have argued that we have become a little staid - that our ceremonies are in danger of becoming repetitious. Perhaps all of these reasons contribute to the truth. Perhaps there are more or different ones. I do not know.

True, it has happened before and the Institution has recovered. Our era is not alone in experiencing such difficulties. For example, between 1820 and 1832, 30% of the Lodges on the register on what had just become the United Grand Lodge of England, closed their doors. Of the 647 Lodges working in 1820, only 424 survived 12 years later. Essex, which had but 15 Lodges in 1813, was left with only 4 by 1832. Coincidentally, this was a

period when Essex had no Provincial Grand Master, from 1823 to 1836 in fact.

For the survival of Masonry in the mid 19th century, we can be grateful to a small number of enthusiastic Masons who set out to preserve Lodges in danger and to preserve Essex Masonry as a whole. One of these Masons, history records, was a Brightlingsea shopkeeper, James Webb, reputedly the ugliest man in Essex, who was initiated in the Angel Lodge in Colchester in 1834. At the age of 45, he is said to have walked from Brightlingsea to Colchester and back for Lodge meetings, a round trip of 20 miles.

It has happened before and no doubt it will happen again. Yet perhaps now Masonry in general and the Holy Royal Arch in particular, needs our active help. I do not know, as I said, the reasons for our current difficulties. What I do know, however, is that it is up to the ordinary Mason to solve the problem. The strength of Masonry is in its Private Lodges and its private Chapters. This is where it lives. This is where its values are safe guarded - here at Ingrebourne or at Remembrance. We, in our Lodges and Chapters, create the day to day life of Masonry and it is our company and fraternal love that candidates will seek - or reject. Companions, we have to face up to this challenge. We cannot sit back and let Supreme Grand Chapter solve the problems for us. In fact, they cannot solve them. It is up to us.

If public attacks are the issue - and I doubt it - then we must live our public lives with excellence and probity. If the economic cycle is the issue, then we must demonstrate that the cost of masonry is far outweighed by its benefits. If we are in danger of becoming staid, then we must look at our ceremonies and meetings and enliven them. In my belief, we do not talk to the uninitiated sufficiently about what we do and what we stand for. In the 18th and 19th centuries, to be a mason was a public avowal. Today, I fear that we hide our membership, and people who know no better may think we are ashamed of it. I am certainly not and I very much doubt whether there is a single Companion here this evening who is.

It is a delight to be here in the warmth and Companionship of the Ingrebourne Chapter, the first and the most significant in this area. I trust that we can look to our senior Chapter for local leadership and a continued demonstration - a living demonstration - of the beauties of membership of the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem.

Companions, I thank you for your welcome and for your attention.