

Why 'United' Grand Lodge?

It has nothing to do with uniting England with Wales as some brethren think. The phrase takes us back to 1751 when a new GL, known as the Ancients Grand Lodge of England was formed. Its members were Irish masons who had fled Ireland following the *Year of Slaughter*, the 1740-1741 famine. Caused by potato blight, it killed some 400,000 people. The blight returned 100 years later. Called the *Great Hunger*, it killed a million people in a four year period.

The new GL did not intend to compete with the existing Premier GL - the one founded in 1717 or perhaps 1723. In fact, they knew little about it because from 1730 and 1760 the Premier GL was going through a very bad patch. The new GL came about because the founders wanted to use their own ritual one which they brought with them and is very similar to today's Irish working. A group of us witnessed Irish working in Cork and Skibbereen last year. It is quite different from our ritual, and indeed older.

As the new GL grew, the premier GL had to take notice, especially as some of its own lodges switched allegiance, and from 1760 onwards, the two GLs exchanged highly unmasonic attacks and insults. Several attempts were made to get them together but the differences in ritual made this very difficult — and how masons cling to their differences! Eventually two royal brothers became involved. Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, became GM of the original or premier GL and Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, became GM of the new or Ancients Grand Lodge. They ordered the two GLs to sort themselves out, personally leading the union, which took place on St John's Day December 27 1813. The proclamation read:

*Be it known to all men that the act of union between the lodges of Free and Accepted Masons of England is solemnly signed, sealed, ratified and confirmed and the two Fraternities are one, to be henceforward known and acknowledged by the style and title of THE **UNITED** GRAND LODGE OF ANCIENT FREEMASONS OF ENGLAND...*

There you have it. The word UNITED refers to the UNION of the two GLs.

What about the differences in ritual, you may ask. Well, to put it crudely, following 1813 the ritual was re-written almost in its entirety and was thus new to both GLs. A few lodges in Lancashire refused to accept it and continued to work the Ancient's ritual until 1913. Eventually they succumbed to pressure and conformed.

To see some of the old ritual at work, you should visit a lodge in Ireland, Scotland and some parts of North America, including Nova Scotia where I visit.