

The Historical Records Survey – The St George's Lodge No. 112 perspective.

The Historical Records Survey was initiated at a very senior level within Masonry: from the former MW the Pro Grand Master, the Most Hon. the Marquess of Northampton, *DL*. The purpose of the programme is to record and catalogue Masonic documents of historical interest across the Lodges under the United Grand Lodge England and from that material, to assess the influence of Masonic activity on British social history over the past 300 years. WB John Hamill, Grand Lodge's Director of Communications and former librarian has been appointed Director of Special Projects has been charged with the task of collating this history for the purpose of the Grand Lodge tercentenary celebrations in 2017. Consideration is also given in the Historical Records Survey to the safe, secure storage of Lodge records with reliable access to legitimate parties by permission of the Lodge.

Towards the end of the 2007/8 Masonic season, I was approached and asked if I would like to represent St George's Lodge No.112 in this programme. I was naturally very keen.

On 10th May 2008, the Devonshire Province held a meeting at Fingle Glen with representatives from the Provincial Grand Lodge of Devonshire and many Devonshire Lodges including St George's Lodge. The background to the project was explained and various presentations given on a variety of related topics including archiving techniques, highlighting and some of the pitfalls that can befall the unwary.

The timescale for the survey was discussed with an expectation that returns will be complete by spring/summer 2009. The methodology for collecting and returning the data was outlined with two methods being offered:

1. Hard (paper) copies using a printed pro-forma.
2. Spreadsheet with each element from the pro-forma represented by a data field on the sheet.

Each Lodge was asked to nominate a Lodge archivist to undertake this task and for St George's Lodge, I was selected with WB Alan Green as my assistant and with our Worshipful Master WB John Musty in overall charge. After a brief hibernation over summer, the St George's limb of the project kicked off in earnest on 15th September 2008 when the WM, Alan and I met at Freemason's Hall, Gandy Street, Exeter armed with suitcases, boxes, pens and paper and systematically trawled through the contents of the St George's steel locker languishing somewhat unceremoniously in the rear of the building.

The site that met our eyes was both awe inspiring and horrifying. There were literally heaps of minute books, attendance registers, Masonic texts, correspondence, regalia, jewels, silverware and other paraphernalia lying in a steel locker in a fairly damp environment: no temperature or humidity control: just thrown in a locker.

Given the physical circumstances in which this historically important and irreplaceable material was stored, it is remarkable that the vast majority (but not all) of it has survived reasonably well. We divided the material between us making a careful note of the items we were removing from the Lodge.

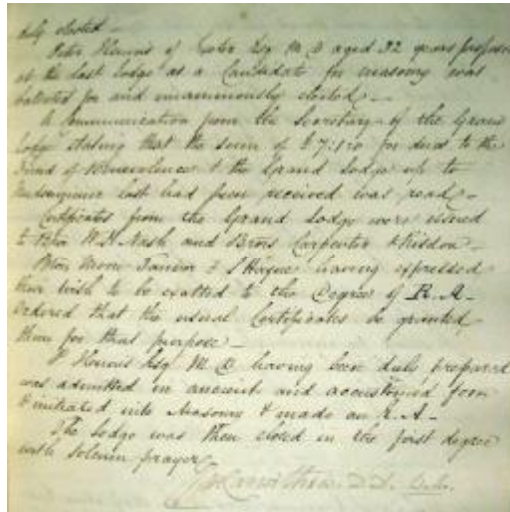
The next step involved going through each of these items carefully so as not to inflict further damage and for each item, to document the type of item (Minute book, attendance register, grand lodge certificate, correspondence etc.), the date or dates covered by the item, its location and the physical circumstances of its location in terms of security against theft and fire, temperature control, shelving and the like and then specific questions relating to the condition of that item, the state of its binding, stitching, any staining, paper quality and any attempts at repair.

In fact there are 32 data fields for each item and there turned out to be 811 items. Each of these 25952 data points was typed onto the spreadsheet. The items themselves were then carefully boxed and labelled. This task is now complete and the spreadsheets have been forwarded to Grand Lodge.



The St. George's material documents just under 200 years of the activity of this lodge. Unfortunately, all earlier material (between 1762 and 1817) is lost or destroyed. The earliest document is 1817 and the earliest Minute book dates to 1823. One might glibly say, 1823 - quite old. To put that into perspective, the battle of Waterloo happened 8 years before, George IV had been on the throne for 3 years and although his father had lost the United States of America to independence, that great Nation was still 40 years away from civil war. Lord Liverpool was Prime Minister, there were no cars and no railways. Exeter had no street lighting and a trip to London would take days and be frankly hazardous.

Epidemics of life-threatening contagious disease were common, gentlemanly disagreements were settled by duel and England was almost continuously at war with someone or other. These three last facts had important implications for St George's Lodge (then No. 178) which was meeting at the Half Moon Inn on the south side of Exeter High Street.



There are some wonderful historic gems amongst the St George's material. Let's look at Dr Peter Hennis. He was a young physician from Youghal, Co. Cork in Ireland living in Exeter who helped look after the Exeter residents during the 1832 Cholera epidemic. One year later this same young doctor was shot and killed in a duel over a young lady. So grateful were the residents of Exeter for his care and kindness during the epidemic that 20,000 lined the streets for his funeral cortège. He was the last man in Devon to be shot in a duel and this event provoked national outrage leading to the outlawing of duelling. There is a memorial to Dr Hennis on the South aisle of Exeter Cathedral and a plaque outside the graveyard at St Sidwell's in Exeter where he is buried. Turning back to our Minute Books we see the hand of man documenting his initiation into St George's Lodge.



Here is the entry in our Roll of Members documenting the initiation of John Rouse Merriott Chard, Maj R.E., V.C. into St George's Lodge in 1877. His Victoria Cross was won at the Battle of Rorke's Drift in Jan 1879. You may recall the battle was celebrated in that wonderfully uplifting if historically inaccurate film

"Zulu" in which Stanley Baker plays the part of Lt John Chard. The www.rorkesdrift.com website has further details of this extraordinary man and includes a moving photograph of Stanley Baker paying homage at the grave of the real John Chard.

And so our Lodge story continues, documented across the centuries; hundreds of lives, 1500 or so wonderful evenings of warmth, friendship and laughter; many extraordinary events, two world wars, 250 years of social

history and most importantly from our point of view, myriad research projects waiting to happen.

We are fortunate that this material has survived. Local facilities exist for its safe keeping with guaranteed access to legitimate parties only by permission of the Lodge – but that is for individual Lodges to decide for themselves. However, the material in question is irreplaceable and of great historic importance.

Bro Reuben Ayres, St George's Lodge No.112 – June 2009.