

The Brotherhood: Power and Secrecy in British Freemasonry

An investigation into the influence, rituals, and controversy surrounding the Masonic order

Our History



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The Secretive Influence of the Brotherhood

Host: These men are Freemasons, members of a worldwide fraternity which unites working men in small towns with men of rank and opulence occupying the highest seats of power. Once public Masonic parades were commonplace, but this annual march by the Masons of Melrose in Scotland is probably the last in Britain.

Host: The march honors the stonemasons who built Melrose Abbey and gives local Freemasons a chance to parade their new lodge master around the town. But Britain's other 9,000 lodges meet behind closed doors, and the identity of most of Britain's half a million Masons is a closely guarded secret. It's estimated that of 135,000 serving policemen in Britain, 22,000, or one in six, are Freemasons.

Host: Most Masons say there is no conflict of interest between police work and membership of the Brotherhood, but some outsiders disagree.

Guest: What is certain—and I've seen the evidence for it and other people have seen it—is that there are lists of lodges which include active criminals and serving policemen in the same lodge, and that can never be right.

Host: Critics also worry that Masons are concentrated in many other powerful institutions, notably the law. Confidential Masonic documents reveal that hundreds of magistrates, at least 18 circuit judges, four Queen's Bench judges, three Family Division judges, two judges in Chancery, three Lords Justices of Appeal, and one Lord of Appeal are Masons. But it's in the City of London that the greatest concentration of Masons is found. For Britain's richest square mile, there are hundreds of Masonic lodges in which brothers from the great banks and insurance houses, the Stock Exchange, and all the other money markets meet in secret. Here at the Guildhall, from which the City is governed, Masons gather in the crypt for a meeting of the Guildhall Lodge. A past lodge master, Sir Kenneth Cork, is handed the briefcase containing his ceremonial apron by his chauffeur. The head of one of the City's most successful accountancy firms specializing in company liquidations and bankruptcies, Sir Kenneth is also a former Lord Mayor of London. Since 1900, 70 London Lord Mayors have been masters of Guildhall Lodge, evidence of the high esteem in which Masons are held in Britain's traditional institutions.

Host: But have other Masons used the Brotherhood for corrupt ends, as even some Masons claim?

Guest: I think that people use Freemasonry for the wrong purposes. They use it as a way to get on, to improve their position, to get promotion, and corrupt people use that to carry out their corruption in a secret manner with very little chance of being caught.

Guest: Brother Junior Warden, there is a report.

Host: Tonight, in the first of six programs on the Brotherhood's power and influence, we investigate the secret ceremonial rituals of the ancient fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons and show how its members have ranged from the highest to the lowest in British society, from kings to convicts.

Guest: Whom have you there?

Guest: Mr. Martin, a poor candidate in a state of darkness.

Host: Filming the mysteries of Freemasonry is forbidden. So using Masonic handbooks and helped by master Masons, we have reconstructed the Brotherhood's rituals. Tonight, thousands of men all over Britain are performing these mystic rites.

Guest: Worshipful Master, Mr. Martin, a poor candidate in a state of darkness who has been well and worthily recommended.

Host: There are three degrees of initiation into basic Craft Freemasonry. This is the first degree ritual in which the candidate seeks to...

Ritual Officer: Become an apprentice mason. Do you, brother inner guard, vouch that he has been properly prepared?

Inner Guard: I do, worshipful master.

Ritual Officer: Then let him be admitted in due form. Brother Deacons, do you feel anything?

Unknown: Yes.

Host: Women are not allowed to become Masons, and some interpretations of the ritual say the candidate's left breast is exposed to prove that he is not a woman. His trouser leg is rolled up to show that he's able-bodied, and he is blindfolded because he is in a state of darkness seeking light. To non-Masons, these rituals might seem a strange pastime for grown men to indulge in. But psychologist Jane Furbank, who studied male bonding, believes that Freemasonry may satisfy a deeper need than other all-male groups.

Ritual Officer: Thus assured, I will thank you to kneel while the blessing of heaven is invoked on our proceedings.

Psychologist Jane Furbank: On the purely practical level, it has the same appeal as joining the local chamber of commerce, golf club, and all the rest. But it does also give you what's called a rite of passage. It takes you in from being adolescent or from being what's technically called a peripheral male, one on the outside. It brings you into the center, into the heart, where the power and the influence is.

Host: That power and influence knows few bounds. The Palace of Westminster houses one of English masonry's best-kept secrets: the existence of two lodges reserved for men who work in Parliament. One of these, the Gallery Lodge, was founded 100 years ago by pressmen and lobby correspondents. The other was created at the suggestion of the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, an ardent Mason. In the 1920s, he was upset to learn Labour politicians were being blackballed when proposed as members of Masonic lodges. The craft stood to be condemned as the Tory party in aprons. And when Labour looked set to become the party of government, masonry was in danger of losing all influence over Britain's future.

Host: The prince suggested a new lodge to welcome Labour MPs and so draw them into both masonry and the middle ground of British politics. The aptly named New Welcome Lodge was consecrated in 1929, and today it contains 20 past and present MPs from all leading parties. Yet, it must tread a careful path if it's not to break one of the Brotherhood's loudly proclaimed rules. "Your obedience must be proved by a strict observance of our laws and regulations, by abstaining from every topic of political and religious discussion." Despite this injunction against discussing politics within the lodge, there is no rule against Masons interfering in politics outside the lodge. In 1935, Masons played a crucial role in the election of a new leader of the Labour Party. Clement Attlee and one of his rivals for the leadership, Arthur Greenwood, were Masons. But a third candidate, Herbert Morrison, was not. In an interview filmed in 1965, but not broadcast, Morrison reflects on Freemasonry's damaging effect on his career.

Herbert Morrison: Somebody who I do not know anonymously sent me a copy of a notice convening a Freemason's lodge meeting. A few days, anything up to a week, I forget the exact lapse of time before this meeting of the parliamentary party to decide upon the leadership, and the anonymous writer suggested that the meeting of the Freemason's lodge was to win support for Mr. Arthur Greenwood, who was known to be a Freemason and in fact was a very important officer of this lodge.

Host: Yet as Freemason Robert Burns perhaps meant to say, even the best-laid plans of Mason men can fail. Greenwood came third in the first ballot and was eliminated. In the runoff, the Masons switched their vote to brother Attlee. This ensured the defeat of the non-Mason Morrison. So despite Freemasonry's claim never to interfere in politics, it seems the brotherhood had a direct influence on one of the most important British political decisions this century.

Host: Worshipful Brother Attlee went on to become prime minister in 1945 and stayed Labour leader until 1955. Today, British Masons still occupy positions of political power. At least two cabinet ministers are members of the Brotherhood. Cecil Parkinson belongs to the Royal Athol Lodge and the Potter's Bar Lodge, which meets in his constituency, and Lord Belstead belongs to the exclusive Kaiser Ehend Lodge. He became leader of the House of Lords in 1988, succeeding another Mason, Viscount Whitelaw, who had been Mrs. Thatcher's deputy prime minister. Former health minister Sir Gerard Vaughan and backbencher Neil Thorne are both grand officers of English Freemasonry. Many other MPs are Masons, including Cecil Walker, Ulster Unionist, Sir William Clark, Anthony Nelson, Peter Rost, Tony Baldry, David Sumberg, and Gary Waller, all Conservatives.

Host: Another Mason is the former MP and Solicitor General, Sir Ian Percival, who says it's inconceivable that Masons would interfere in politics. "If anybody tried it, not only would they not succeed, but they wouldn't get as much as they would have got without doing it. I mean, they would be blacklisted. And not only by the rest of the house,

they'd be blacklisted by the Masons in the house because we don't want that reputation. And if anybody tries it, I can tell you we're very stern about it."

Host: But some non-Mason MPs remain uneasy about the existence of a parliamentary lodge. "It's bringing together a subgroup within the house for various covert purposes from which the rest of us are excluded. Therefore in a representative institution it must ipso facto be undesirable." Freemasons Hall, London, headquarters of the English craft. One man in every 30 in England and Wales is a Mason. In Scotland and Northern Ireland the ratio is even higher. Their leaders always come from the top of the social pyramid. This century, three kings have been Masons. The Queen's father, George VI, was in the Navy lodge. So was Prince Philip, but he quit many years ago. Today, England's chief mason is the queen's cousin, the Worshipful Grandmaster, the Duke of Kent.

Duke of Kent: I think it is probably true that many of the problems that Freemasonry has encountered in recent years do stem from perhaps a misguided policy towards information.

Host: As part of a new policy of openness, England's other Masonic bosses were filmed for the first time in 1988. The Pro-Grandmaster is Lord Cornwallis, third Baron of Linton, a farmer and businessman. The Assistant Grandmaster is Lord Farnham, a merchant banker. And the Deputy Grandmaster is the Honorable Edward Ballieu, a retired stockbroker. Although many Masons are from what used to be called the working class, most are from the middle and upper classes, professional men, lawyers, doctors, army officers, bank managers, and self-employed businessmen. Show business personalities like Alfred Marks, Mike Reid, and Bob Monkhouse are also on the square. All these men have been put through the ritual humiliation inflicted at each of the Brotherhood's first three degrees.

Host: They are therefore sworn to uphold three principles: brotherhood, relief or charity, and truth. But alongside these worthy principles, the Brotherhood has many disquieting features. Its membership is largely secret. The brothers have secret ways of making themselves known to each other, and they have sworn secret oaths of mutual aid. These are all hallmarks of a secret society. Yet, English Masonry's Grand Secretary, Michael Haime, rejects any sinister interpretation of the order's secrecy.

Michael Haime: We've got secrets. Secrets which derive from the old days when they were recognition signals between craftsmen protecting their trade secrets, and we still use them now as a link with the past, but we're absolutely not a secret society.

Host: Nevertheless, among the public, the fear persists that there may be more to the secrets than harmless ritual, and when cameras were invited to film in Grand Lodge for the first time, not everything would be open for scrutiny. Journalist Paul Foot has long campaigned against what he sees as Freemasonry's sinister power.

Paul Foot: It's the secrecy of the association and the bonds that they tie each other up with, which is the sinister aspect of it. Most of the other organizations which bring together important people in the community – I mean the Rotary Club or the Round Table or organizations like that – they can be discovered, if you like, by someone like me or you. We can go and find out who's the chairman of the Round Table or who's the chairman of the Rotary Club, and they throw their meetings open to the public and the press mingle with them and so on. Freemasons, they mingle in secret.

Officiant: Are you therefore willing to take a solemn obligation, founded on the principles I have stated, to keep inviolate the secrets and mysteries of the order?

Candidate: I am.

Officiant: Then you will kneel on your left knee, your right foot formed in a square. Give me your right hand, which I place on the Volume of the Sacred Law, while your left will support these compasses. One point presented to your naked left breast.

Host: The impressionable apprentice Freemason undergoes a bizarre and powerful bonding. Nevertheless, many senior Masons dismiss concern about secret Masonic influence as an orchestrated campaign against the brotherhood.

Senior Mason: I think there is a small body of people who, for reasons that I don't understand, are not friendly – they are downright hostile – and the activists usually are the ones whose views get heard most, and they've been making quite a noise.

Host: In 1988, in an attempt to confront growing public suspicion, the Freemasons produced a glossy video. The spire of Salisbury Cathedral, 250 feet of soaring stone rising above the water meadows of the Wiltshire Avon. The traveling stonemasons who built the great cathedrals of medieval Europe formed their own associations apart from the rest of the medieval guild system. For all its apparent openness, the commercially produced video is a careful exercise in concealment. Even the legend that modern Freemasons are descended from medieval stoneworkers is left virtually intact. But there is little historical evidence for this, as Masonic historian John Hamill confirms.

John Hamill: When people were first starting to put Masonic histories together, the tradition grew up that we grew directly out of the stonemasons. And I mean, traditions die very hard, particularly in this country. And it's taken a lot of time to break that down and say, "Well, look, that's fine. It's a nice story." But is the evidence there?

Guest: Most evidence indicates that ritualistic Freemasonry was started much later in 17th century Britain, not by stonemasons, but by middle-class gentlemen. The movement soon caught on. It was a period of great religious and political turmoil when differences of opinion on religion and politics not only split families but led to the civil war in this country and to bloodshed and brother fighting brother. And we believe that the people who started Freemasonry were a group of people who wanted to have some sort

of forum where they could meet without the differences of religion and politics coming into it.

Officiant: The dangers you have escaped are those of stabbing and strangling. For on your entrance to the lodge, this poniard was presented to your naked left breast to imply that had you rashly attempted to rush forward, you would have been accessory to your own death by stabbing. While the brother who had...

Guest: The blood-curdling rituals of Freemasonry today were invented in the early 18th century.

Host: At that time of religious and political persecution, a fearsome oath of secrecy may have seemed essential. But can the same be true today?

Officiant: Equally fatal. But the danger which traditionally would have awaited you until your latest hour was the physical penalty at one time associated with the obligation of a mason. That of having your throat cut across had you improperly disclosed the secrets of masonry.

Host: According to their own video, today's masons steadfastly keep the secrets of the rituals for innocent, if masochistic reasons.

Guest (a mason): You will lose all the mystique. I think if I knew what was going to happen, I don't think I'd have got the same pleasure.

Host: Earlier this century hundreds of Protestant clergy were masons. The craft was an unquestioned pillar of society and bishops even archbishops felt its rituals supported religion. But growing unease provoked a Church of England inquiry which reported in 1986 that elements of Freemasonry are incompatible with Christianity, even blasphemous. Today, many Anglican priests share the Catholic view that masonry's offer of spiritual light is not just unacceptable. They think it's a satanic fraud.

Guest (critic): Well-meaning people, good, honest, upright people are being deceived. And the Bible teaches us that there's one source of the deceiver who is described as the devil, Satan. And I think underneath it all, it is a deception. It purports to be light, but is in fact darkness.

Host: Freemasonry stresses it is not a religion, only that its members must be male, over 21, and believe in a god, any god. Freemasons of different faiths pray together to a supreme being who is referred to as the great architect of the universe. We asked Jane Furbank as a psychologist and a woman for her thoughts on the great architect.

Jane Furbank: Well, this is obviously a biased point of view, but he sounds to me rather a masculine sort of god. There seems to be very little talk about the more spiritual side or what you might describe as the more feminine side of religion. And there's no Freemason equivalent of the Virgin Mary, for example. This God requires you to stand

up straight, to make certain very precise gestures, to talk a great deal about being straight and level and square. Not round, you notice, but square. If you look at the psychology of symbols, you'll find roundness is the mind, the spirit. It's wholeness and squareness is much more order, material, physical world.

Host: So why do men continue to join Freemasonry in the face of suspicion, even outright condemnation? It's difficult for outsiders not to think that self-interest and career considerations must play a part. Certainly, the view persists that the code of mutual aid in the ritual can lead to brother Masons combining to the detriment of non-Masons. Those Masonic bonds of preferment seem to apply in unlikely places. Ex-detective Sergeant John Simons was a Freemason when he was in the Metropolitan Police. Later he went to prison convicted of soliciting a bribe.

John Simons: Freemasonry is rife in prison. I spent some time in an open prison where I witnessed contacts between Masonic prisoners and Masonic prison warders, and Masonic prisoners were getting special visits and having parcels left by the gate and all this sort of business.

Host: But Masonic prisoners may enjoy more than special privileges. Informal lodge meetings are held in Britain's jails as one bemused inmate discovered.

Inmate: I go to the meeting and there is the chaplain and the deputy vicar from outside, two prison officers, two or three prison officers, and maybe half a dozen prisoners.

Host: Ted Dan Smith, one-time boss of Newcastle City Council, had been sentenced to six years jail in 1976 for corruption. He was not a Freemason.

Ted Dan Smith: I just didn't know what the hell I'd put myself into. And within minutes they – I mean obviously they knew that I didn't know what I was doing there and that I wasn't a Mason. And consequently there was considerable annoyance. The chaplain of all people said, "Oh, you know, this is outrageous." And of course I was out in two seconds flat. But by then, of course, I knew what the score was.

Host: Contrary to many Masons' belief, nothing in their vows forbids them telling outsiders that they are Masons. Yet, as long as most refuse to admit membership, they will encounter suspicion that they use Masonry to combine clandestinely and to scratch each other's backs.

Guest: I don't mind mutual sustenance, and I positively like charitable organizations which provide a service, and many of the lodges, much of Freemasonry, does that and concentrates on that. It's when it becomes something more than that, not only a means of serving the community, but of serving themselves, that it becomes worrying.

Host: This concern about the brotherhood has recently been reflected nationwide in the last five years, in response to local allegations of Masonic skulduggery. Councils from

Liverpool and Manchester to Worthing and Southend have expressed grave misgivings about Freemasonry. Questions have been asked in parliament, and police committees up and down the country have debated Masonic influence within the police force.

Police Official: Okay, like to welcome everybody to this meeting of the Islington Police Community Consultative Group.

Host: During the next five weeks, this series will investigate public concern about the Brotherhood. Freemasons claim to occupy higher moral ground than non-Masonic outsiders, but a constant flow of allegations suggests that Freemasonry may be a perfect vehicle for corruption. Corruption in law enforcement, in local government, and in business overseas. It has even been used to subvert democracy. Next week, we investigate the unacceptable convergence of Freemasonry and corruption in Britain's police forces.

How this was made

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