

R.W.Brother Stanley H.A.F. Hopkins was appointed Provincial Grand Master for Somerset in 1990. At the time Freemasonry was under attack, this was nothing new but in the wake of Stephen Knight's book, "The Brotherhood" the attacks seemed to be even more outlandish and unfair. It was open season for Freemason hunters. Since then much has changed although there may well be a long way to go before the word Freemason is once again synonymous with the phrase "pillar of society" things are moving in the right direction. In this interview the PGM talks to Ray Guthrie, the editor of compass, reflecting on his 10 years in office, and the future of freemasonry.

*Can we start with your Masonic C.V?*

I Was initiated in 1962 into Prudence and Industry Lodge No 1953 at Chard and was Master in 1972. I became Provincial Junior Grand Warden in 1978. Now of course both the Provincial Senior and Junior Wardens would be existing Provincial Officers, the highest first appointment now for a Provincial Officer would be Senior Deacon, but back then the Warden would be a first appointment, I have to say I found it quite terrifying! I was appointed Assistant Provincial Grand Master in 1983, I resigned in 1988 having done five years which I felt was a long enough period. Some people thought that decision very strange and it was a complete shock to be asked to be PGM in 1990. From my view I was a complete outsider, I wasn't in the frame at all, I was amazed, it hadn't even occurred to me that I would be asked. I remember I was in Australia at the time, when I got back to the usual mountain of mail I discovered the letter from the Grand Secretary, which had of course gone unanswered for several weeks, it was all very laid back!

*Were you involved in the "politics" of the Province or Grand Lodge?*

Not really, I had been an Assistant PGM of course, and in those days we only had one assistant, on the basis of one assistant for every forty Lodges in the Province. I was aware of some of what went on but I would say not involved. It was of course a very different environment then, the amount of Provincial activity was very much less than it is today. There were few Provincial visits and the Provincial team taking part in a ceremony was unheard of. There was also very much an "us and them" attitude and I was aware very early on that that had to change. One of the things that I have tried to do is bring the Province much closer to private Lodges. I was talking to someone from outside the Province only recently who was amazed at the amount of involvement we as a Province have, his Provincial Grand Master is only seen on a couple of occasions a year. I happen to think that is not the way to do it. We are a voluntary organisation and I believe that everyone deserves encouragement from the top. Ultimately the success of the organisation depends on it's members therefore the person in charge must be enthusiastic and supportive, that can only be achieved –with active Provincial Officers.

*So you changed the Job description?*

Yes I suppose I did. When I was an Assistant for example all decisions were made by the PGM and the Deputy. That is not a criticism of my predecessor Ken Kinnersley or his deputy Gilbert Parrot, it was just the way that things had always been done. One of the first things that I did as PGM was to set up the executive. It comprises of myself with the Deputy, Assistants, Provincial Secretary, Treasurer, Almoner, Charity Steward and the Public Relation Officer. The executive meets at least three time a year, it's job is to make decisions and lay down policy for the Province. I felt it was wrong for the decisions to be made by one or two people when there is a vast amount of grass roots experience on which we can draw. It also has an added advantage for me, in that if it all goes wrong I can say it wasn't my fault!

*What is your personal background?*

S.H. My personal background is pretty boring. I was an only child my father wasn't a freemason. It was a couple of friends, who have unfortunately long since passed on, who got me interested. They suggested I should consider joining and I thought about it, freemasonry seemed to me to have the sort of values and ethos that I could embrace, it is not everyone's cup of tea of course but eventually I became a member.

I was a farmer for 35 years and was fortunate enough to get out while the going was good. I think what got me into the public arena was my year as a Kelloggs scholar. When I was 22 I spent a year in Australia, working on various farms and properties studying Australian agriculture. That started to involve me in public speaking, radio and television interviews etc. Up until that time I had been a very shy and quiet individual, something some of your readers would be very surprised to hear! Returning to the UK I was asked to be chairman of the young farmers, then I got involved with the parish council, the district council the county council and of course once you become known as a volunteer, you start to get lumbered!

From my work as a local Councillor came my long interest in the Rating Valuation Service. Next year I will have completed thirty years with that body, I am President of Somerset, President of West of England and Chairman of the Wessex Board. It is our job to listen to all rating appeals in the area.

Sylvia and I have been married for 38 years. She has been fantastic, I know it sounds glib and everyone says it of their wife but it is absolutely true, without her I couldn't possibly have done the things in freemasonry that I have done. Sylvia has always been very supportive and very interested in Freemasonry. We have two sons, Adam and his wife Caroline live in Cumbria, they have two daughters Emma who is five and Rachel who is three. Adam is a chartered accountant. Our other son Mathew who is a mechanic, lives in Taunton with his partner Debbie. Mathew has two children Christopher 12 and Fiona 11. Fiona loves horses but doesn't fall off as often as I do! We are very lucky because Christopher and Fiona spend most weekends with us. Neither Mathew nor Adam have shown any interest in Freemasonry and I would never try to persuade them to join. Sylvia always says that they saw too much of it when they were young, which may well be true. When they were twenty one I said to them if they were ever interested they should talk to me about it, but I have never mentioned it since.

*Many people don't understand the duties that form the job of Provincial Grand Master, what are they?*

Well they are not just ceremonial. I suppose it is rather like being the M.D. of a company. There is an enormous amount of organisation and in that respect I have been very fortunate in having two absolutely first class Provincial Secretaries. In this Province we are extremely lucky in having a large number of very talented people, Don Smith and now Terry Hart are two such people who have worked very hard for the Province. Terry takes a terrific amount of the day to day stuff off my shoulders and with Pauline (Smith) does a first class job in administering the Province. Our Treasurer Tony Norman also does a wonderful job not just in the normal sense as someone who looks after the books, but also in the investment strategy he has pursued while looking after the Provincial Benevolent Fund. Being PGM is very much being part of a team and the Provincial team do make my life so much easier.

*Your Masonic duties do not stop with the Province, you are also a senior member of UGLE, can you tell us what your involvement is in that respect?*

I am the fourth longest serving PGM. That said the jobs for life attitude of previous times has gone. Grand Lodge do not like to appoint anyone over the age of 68 as a PGM, generally anyone over 68 will only be appointed for five years. They also prefer to see PGM's and District Grand Masters retire at 75. That isn't always possible because in some areas particularly overseas but also in this country, finding a suitable replacement can prove difficult. The approach from Grand Lodge has been to bring the average age and length of service down and I think that has been and continues to be the correct approach. If you look at some of my illustrious predecessors some of them were in office for twenty or thirty years, they were largely absentee landlords but it was a different day, they weren't expected to be as active as Provincial Grand Masters are now.

One of the things that been extremely interesting to me is about six years ago I was asked to serve on the Grand Master's Council. This is the body which formulates policy for Grand Lodge these policies are then submitted to The Grand Master at York House via the Board of General Purposes. The Council make up is similar to the Provincial Executive but with the the Grand Secretary etc rather than the Provincial Secretary. There have been great efforts made to try to make this a body and therefore it's recommendations more grass roots oriented. For example when I joined there were only two PGMs now there are four out of a total of eighteen members. I think it is one of the strengths of the organisation that the Grand Master is very involved. As an example part of our job, one of the major jobs in fact as the Grand Masters Council is to provide recommendations for the appointment of all Provincial and District Grand Masters and Grand Superintendents. It is not just a rubber stamping operation by the Grand Master he is surprisingly knowledgeable and I am constantly amazed by his grasp bearing in mind this is just one organisation that he heads.

Again I was surprised to be asked to serve but it has given me a tremendous insight into the way things work. Grand Lodge does appear to be autocratic and bÖy the nature of it's constitution that is perhaps the way it has always been, however things are changing. The days of patting you on the head and telling you to go away are gone, Grand Lodge do take much more notice of what we say. We now have a thing called the Provincial and District Grand Masters Forum which I was president of a couple of years ago, this also has some influence with Grand Lodge.

*You obviously enjoy your connections with Grand Lodge?*

Yes I do I suppose I enjoy being involved, one meets some tremendously interesting people and I guess I enjoy being in the know!

*During your time in office you have done a great deal to promote "openness" now called "awareness". Do you believe that policy is working?*

Looking back there were many reasons after the war why Masonry became so secretive. The pre war persecution, the climate of secrecy which the second world war engendered. There was a huge explosion in the number of men joining Masonry in the years after the war. Most had served in the forces and had got very used to the 'need to know' principal, that is don't tell anyone anything unless they need to know. In that war of course the result of not following that maxim could have been fatal and they took the principal with them into Freemasonry. Fifty years on that is not how things work, society is much more open, people are immediately suspicious of those who try to hide what they are doing. I believe that Masons have nothing to hide and should be immensely proud of their organisation and their membership of it.

*What do you say to those that say we should go back to the "old" ways, ie keep it quiet?*  
We cannot turn back the clock, things have changed and I don't believe it is possible to go back to what some people perceive as the good old days. In one way I agree with them, I would like to get back to the time before the Great~ War, when being a Freemason meant you were a pillar of society, someone who could automatically be relied upon to fulfil their civic duties. However in today's more open world I believe the only way we can achieve that is by being more up front about who and what we are. I respect the views of those who say don't tell them anything, I just happen to think they are wrong, there is no going back to the "old" ways.

*Do you see the time when women will be able to join Masonry?*  
Well of course they can join now, there are separate organisations for lady freemasons but I do not see the time when women will be able to join our Lodges. What I think we should do from Grand Lodge down is encourage the organisations which already exist for women. For instance we could allow them the use of our facilities, why not? many of our buildings are underutilised anyway. I hope soon to see a recommendation from Grand Lodge that premisses can be shared in this way.

*Why do you think it is that English Freemasonry continually fails to attract a younger audience?*

I believe we are attracting younger members, not enough perhaps but a bigger problem than that is retaining members. In that respect we have to make sure that people who join us are made welcome. This happens automatically for the candidate but once he has completed his third degree he may well find himself on his own. The mentoring programme and the booklet that accompanies it, which has been written by W Bro Sidney Price I believe will be a great help to retaining members. We can't forget that there is vast a number of different ways for people to spend their leisure time, if we don't make Masonry attractive to them they won't stay. It is up to all of us to make it attractive and desirable. Again I think it is important that we improve our image and standing in the community by being more open.

*In some other countries, New Zealand for example the Grand Lodge advertises in the press, do you think that should happen here?*

I don't think direct advertising is something we are ready for yet but we do advertise now in an indirect way, Compass for example, our internet site ([www.pglsomerset.org.uk](http://www.pglsomerset.org.uk)) and the very successful open days that have been held by various Lodges. All of this is part of the image building that we need to do and, while I wouldn't rule out direct advertising in the future I don't think we are ready yet for it. The Human Rights Bill could also play a part in this, after 2nd October this year, if we advertise for members and then refuse someone could they then say we had infringed their human rights? I don't know. In today's world of course there is a great deal about rights but not much about the responsibilities that come with those rights, which is a great shame.

*With the benefit of hindsight, do you think the removal of the traditional penalties from the obligations was a wise move?*

I am fairly laid back about that, I don't think it has done any great harm except of course to the purists. The more open Masonry has become of course the more obvious it is to everyone that they could have only been symbolic penalties anyway and it is a long time since we cut anyone's hand off!

*You recommend that the main officers of a Lodge, Secretary D of C etc serve five and no more than seven years. There are some Lodge officers who do not agree with this, what do you say to them?*

My guiding principal on this is that officers should not stay in office if it prevents younger, all be it less experienced Masons coming up through the ranks. I don't mean younger in the physical sense. There are always of course exceptions but I am sure that we lose some members who have been through the Chair who want to be active in their Lodge but see no opportunity to do so. That lack of opportunity may cause them to drift away from Masonry. As I have already said, there are plenty of other organisation where they may well be able to utilise their talents in a more active way. I think the five to seven year concept is a good one and in general it is one I have tried to implement in the Province. By the same token of course that makes me four years overdue! I do accept the argument by those in Private Lodges who say that if I say five to seven years for them why don't I do the same myself? My answer is that the average service for a PGM is ten years and I am just on that now but obviously the time is approaching when I shall retire. There is a difference I believe between my situation and that of a Private Lodge. There are not as far as I am aware a crowd of people behind me wanting the job although no doubt there would be many who would like it. This is probably the best job I have ever done but it is not a sinecure, it involves a lot of work and a lot of responsibility.

*During your ten years as PGM. Freemasonry has often been attacked and sometimes vilified. UGLE never quite seem to get on top of this problem. Do you think they could do more?*

S.H. I have been a critic and a supporter of Grand Lodge on this one. There was a long period of looking down the nose and no comment where they just hoped the bad press problem would go away. Again times have changed, the advent of cheque book journalism has meant that they have had to bite the bullet and actively refute some of the scurrilous stuff that is printed. I am very heartened by the current Grand Secretary, Jim Daniels who is much more active in that department, the vast majority of printed allegations that we investigate are proved to be totally without foundation and the main Fleet Street editors have come to realise that if they print this sort of stuff we are going to go for them and demand retractions. The main Newspapers have also come to realise that we are no longer an easy target. On a local basis I don't think we have ever enjoyed better relationships with the local press and radio. Our great problem I think is freelance reporters who aren't easily controlled and a good sensationalised story even if it isn't true can earn them some money.

Incidentally, Sylvia is just now typing an article for me that I was asked to contribute to the local hospice news letter on why Freemasons support the local hospice movement. I think that is a great opportunity for us, it puts us on the same level, not any better, as other groups who also provide support. To my mind this is a heartening step forward. So there is much that we can do in addition to what Grand Lodge does on this particular question, on all levels Provincial, local and personal. Our best ambassadors for Freemasonry have to be our members and their wives or partners.

*Should UGLE have a professional PR person or marketer?*

Grand Lodge do take a lot of professional advice, I am not sure they would want a professional PR person of their own, they are extraordinarily expensive people. I am happy with the way it is handled at the moment, if there is a specific problem then Grand Lodge can call in expertise to help. On the whole the staff that are involved do a good job and perhaps more importantly they are being seen by the media as responsible and genuine people.

*For most members the selection of senior Provincial officers is a mystery, do you think that the current selection system is acceptable in today's more open environment?*

There is no mystery about it really. Every Mason is reported on four times during his Masonic career prior to his appointment as a Provincial officer. Each report will probably be done by a different Provincial Officer and it is those reports which are used for evaluating someone for Provincial Office. There is no scoring system as such so it could be argued that it is subjective, but I believe it is as democratic as it can be. A greater problem for me is appointing Grand Officers. We get five collars every two years but there are so many who do such wonderful work throughout the Province who deserve the reward, it is one of my biggest headaches! Fortunately Grand Lodge are changing the way that they allocate Grand Lodge collars to the Provinces. At the moment the allocation is based on the number of Lodges in the Province, the new calculation is based on the number of members. This should give Somerset an extra collar every year.

*Do you think, in an increasingly secular society, that one of the main qualifications for being a Freemason should continue to be a personal belief in a Supreme Being?*

I've got no doubt at all that we must not change, I am quite adamant on that. I believe one of the great things that Freemasonry has to offer society is that we are an organisation which demands that its members share certain fundamental beliefs. I believe that society today is crying out for leadership in that area. I am old and therefore I suppose somewhat prejudiced, but I believe it very sad that we don't see leadership from the mainstream churches on moral questions, on discipline and good behaviour. Freemasonry has always stood for all these things, good order, discipline, looking after the underdog and above all a belief in a supreme being and I believe it would be absolutely catastrophic to change that. I get very cross when we are criticised by politicians and various other people, far from criticising they should be quietly encouraging us because we are maintaining the standards which are sadly lacking in a lot of areas of public life.

*In your opinion are there too many other orders in Freemasonry? I ask the question having seen some Masons put themselves or perhaps, having been persuaded to put themselves under enormous pressure by joining too many orders. Some then unfortunately crash out of Masonry altogether.*

I have to be very careful what I say about this! All the orders of course as you know are independent they have their own equivalent of the PGM and I would never dream of criticising any of them. I do think that every Freemason should join the Royal Arch because it is the completion of the third degree but I also think we have to be very careful that we do not over encourage, particularly young Masons with family commitments to take on too much masonically which could detract from their family or business lives.

R.G. What is the future for Freemasonry in England/Somerset?

S.H. The future is in the hands of the members, now that may sound very bland but it is true. It depends where and how far the general membership are prepared to take it. We have a lot in our favour we have been going for two hundred and eighty five years so we have to be doing something right. We have been through some extraordinarily turbulent times, many ups and downs at home and overseas and yet we have managed to grow and flourish and play our part in the world. I am reasonably optimistic that Freemasonry will continue to evolve and be successful.

*Fifteen years as a leader in any organisation is remarkable, is there a highlight that you would pick out?*

Always a difficult one! One of the highlights must be the 1993 festival. For The Lodges of the Province it was a terrific achievement, the amount raised per Lodge was higher than for any previous festival. Another highlight and something else of which I am very proud is the Provincial Trust Fund. This has been made possible solely through the generosity of our members. It has meant a completely new development of very substantial financial support which we are able to give to non Masonic causes throughout the Province. Last year for example over £6,900.00 was given by the Province to non Masonic causes. That is of course in addition to the many many thousands of pounds that are given to non Masonic causes by Lodges.

*I am not suggesting that you will continue for another ten years, but there is no doubt that the policies you have pursued and new initiatives you are setting in training, awareness, what may appear to be small things such as Lodge ties etc will have an effect for years to come. What is your wish for Freemasonry in 2010?*

Very difficult isn't it to second guess the future! I do see the trend of awareness continuing, perhaps with not so many dramatic changes as we have seen in the last ten years, evolution as opposed to revolution. I think I can only answer your question by saying I really do believe that Somerset Masonry is on a very sound foundation, I really do. I know I am biased! but one of the things I have had experience of is Masonry in various parts of the world and all parts of the country. I am not saying that we do things better than anybody else but I believe we are in very good shape. The future will be challenging and there will be difficult times ahead, of that there is no doubt, but I believe strongly that we are going in the right direction and I am confident the future will be very bright.

*What is the future for Stanley Hopkins?*

S.H. I think I would rather avoid this! Again I have to be very careful what I say. I wouldn't want to be misquoted or misinterpreted or to start any sort of speculation. All I would say is that I am getting towards the end (of my time as PGM), I have got to be, for the good of the Province.

*Thank you*

*This original interview appeared in the December 2000 issue of Compass Magazine.*