

Congratulation to those Companions appointed to, and promoted in Provincial Grand Chapter today. I hope that you all enjoy your new, well earned ranks and I look forward to working with you. Remember that your new rank is not solely a reward for past services, it is also for what we are expecting you to contribute to you Chapter and the Province in the future.

Congratulations also to those Companions who were appointed or promoted in Supreme Grand Chapter last month. E.Comp David Maddern, 3rd Provincial Grand Principal, was appointed AGDC and our Deputy Grand Superintendent, E Comp Neil Hurcum was promoted Past Grand Sword Bearer.

Thank you to the outgoing Companions of the active Provincial Team who have worked hard and given great support to the Province and to me. Your support has been greatly appreciated, I have enjoyed your company and I hope that you have all enjoyed your time on the Team. I would especially thank E Comp Roger Reina standing down after eight years as Provincial Registrar & E Comp Chris Summers standing down after two years as Provincial DC.

Two years ago in my address I said we have over 500 Royal Arch Masons in our Province who are no longer subscribing members of a Chapter but remain a member of their Craft Lodge. That equates to one in six Somerset Craft Masons. Most left because they had decided that the Royal Arch wasn't for them. Too heavy, too long, didn't understand it etc. In 2015 we had just over 1000 members. Seven years later at the end of 2022 that figure had fallen to 850. Those figure continued a downward trend that has been ongoing for many years. I also said that together, I think we can turn things round. That the combination of increased encouragement by the Craft for more Master Masons to join us, one journey one organisation, together with a large pool of possible rejoining members created an opportunity for us to expand our numbers. My membership challenge to you was, and remains to increase Royal Arch membership in Somerset Chapters to 1000 by the end of 2025, to equal or better the number that we had at the end of 2015.

Companions, I am pleased to report that we are making some headway. At the end of 2023 our numbers had grown by thirteen. Not a big number but the first increase for at least fifteen years. In the first four months of this year the numbers are also up by a similar amount, if we can continue on this upward trend then by the end of this year our numbers should be back over 900, roughly where they were five years ago.

The question now becomes what do we all need to do to keep up the momentum?

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Supreme Grand Chapter have now published Archway. It contains all the tools required to help you shape your Chapter's future, grow your membership, involve all Companions and enjoy your Royal Arch Masonry. I encourage you all to check it out, it is available on the bugle web site and there is a direct link from our own joint Craft/ Royal Arch website to it.

In the Craft Province we will continue actively promoting membership of our order. Every Master Mason will be presented with the Discover More booklet when he receives his Grand Lodge certificate. Together with a recommendation that he should complete his journey in Pure and Ancient Freemasonry by joining the Royal Arch when the time is right for him. There will be additional training for Craft Royal Arch reps to help them fulfil their role as ambassadors for the Royal Arch.

The Royal Arch Province will continue to provide help to all Chapters when requested. Members of the Provincial Executive and senior members of the Province will be available to attend Chapter committee meetings and Convocations to provide information and ideas that Chapters need to help them in moving forward. The Provincial Team will perform exaltations of candidates, at the invitation of Chapters using the Savage ritual. This ritual has attracted a great deal of interest from Chapters in the Province with some having already decided to adopt it. I think, it simplifies the ceremony without taking away any of the drama or changing the meaning. However I would emphasise, I am not putting pressure on any Chapter to change their ritual, I am putting pressure on you to make sure that whatever ritual you use, you do it well.

Many Chapters have already started to make themselves more user friendly to new and rejoining members. Most Chapters now share out the ritual. Doing so means that more Companions are actively involved, that no one Companion has to present really long pieces of ritual, it produces better ceremonies and is a better candidate experience. Plus we all appreciate ritual that is well presented. Chapters meet less frequently than Craft Lodges, so the opportunity for rehearsal or practice tends to be limited. Chapters should consider having extra rehearsals for exaltations to make sure that they do produce a good ceremony for the candidate and for their visitors.

There are Chapters that have yet to appoint a Mentor although I first asked you to do this two years ago. We need to look after and involve new members so that they stay, appointing a mentor should help ensure that this happens. It is a collared office and it is essential that every Chapter appoints a Mentor. Succession planning is also vital for the Chapter to be able to thrive, every Chapter should have a succession plan in place. Again there are tools on Archway to help you plan.

In September we will consecrate the Sir Isaac Newton Chapter No 9801 at Nailsea, it will become the thirtieth Chapter in the Province and our first daylight Chapter. I would thank the 34 Founders led by E Companion Bob Moore, Past Deputy Grand Superintendent and the founding Scibe Ezra, E.Comp Simon Sparkes together with Provincial Scribe Ezra, Charlie Barker, who have helped to make this happen. With potential joiners and new candidates waiting in the wings, I am sure the Chapter will flourish.

Over the last two years Chapters across Somerset have donated more than fifteen thousand pounds to local foodbanks. It is a fantastic effort Companions and I thank those Chapters who have taken part. It is yet another demonstration of our engagement with the community. While the need to support food banks hasn't diminished, I think we have to move on to helping other disadvantaged groups in our community. Details of a new Royal Arch Charity initiative will be announced in August and I know that Chapters will, as always give this their support. Today's retiring collection will be donated to the Provincial Benevolent fund so please give generously Companions using the gift aid envelopes if you can.

I want to thank the members of the Craft Executive for their continuing support for the Royal Arch. Thanks also to the Rulers of the other Masonic Orders, many of whom are here today, for their continued support. We are fortunate in enjoying good relations with all the other orders meeting in the Province, and it is certainly my intention that that cooperation will continue under my tenure as your Grand Superintendent & Provincial Grand Master.

There are many people to thank for their work in making this day a success. The Provincial Scribe E, Charlie Barker and his team, the Provincial director of ceremonies Chris Summers his team of assistant DCs and Stewards and the Provincial Janitor, Ray Johnson Smith. The Principals and Companions of Fidelity and Sincerity Chapter, under whose banner this convocation has been held for supplying the Chapter equipment and helping to set up the Chapter. Our organist, Companion Barry Renwick and our sound engineer, Excellent Companion Toby Hammond. Not forgetting the management and the team at the Webbington Hotel. If I have missed anyone please accept my apologies.

In a similar vein, it isn't possible to run a Province without a great deal of help and work from others. In addition to those already mentioned, my special thanks to my deputy, Neil Hurcum and my Co-Principals Martin Slocombe and David Maddern for your support.

Companions of Somerset, thank you all for being here today, it is your meeting I hope that you have enjoyed it and that you will enjoy the lunch and the company afterwards. Thank you also for your warm welcome and hospitality when I visit your Chapters. To our guests, thank you

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for joining us today, some of you have travelled considerable distances. We appreciate your presence and the generous hospitality we receive when we in turn visit you.

Finally Companions there is a realisation in most Chapters that Royal Arch Masonry must adapt if it is to flourish and I am encouraged by that and of course by our initial success in the Membership Challenge. I wish you well in your membership challenge and remember, the Provincial team and I are here to help you succeed.

Thank you for your attention Companions and may the TALGMH keep you all safe.

Ray Guthrie, 16th May 2024