



NARRATIVE GIVEN BY E.COMP. EDWARD SMITH AT THE CENTENARY MEETING OF PROGRESS CHAPTER No. 1768

In the event, this Chapter was Consecrated at Sutton on 28th May 1913 by the M.E. Grand Supt. Of Surrey, Rev. H.W. Turner, with 27 other comps. present. It seems the proceedings were very similar to those in use today. What is surprising, however, is that towards the end of the proceedings, after the appointment & investiture of officers, a committee was set up to frame the By-laws. So whilst Progress Chapter may not be absolutely unique, it certainly is unusual in two respects: first, although being recommended by a London Craft lodge (Lodge of Progress No. 1768) it was founded in order to meet and work in Surrey; secondly, it was Consecrated without any By-laws -- something which could not possibly happen today!

The very first summons may well be unique, for as well as the usual items, including details of 6 candidates and one Joining Member, it lists the times of trains between Victoria and Sutton, and between London Bridge and Sutton.

Only fifteen months after the Consecration a world-shaking event occurred -- the outbreak of the First World War. This lasted for four and a quarter years with casualties running into millions. The effects on everyday life were quite considerable, with women taking on all kinds of jobs previously considered as a male preserve, and all kinds of restrictions, including food rationing. Yet it seems not to have affected the operations of the Chapter one bit, for there is not a single reference to the war in all the Minutes of that period! The post-war period saw the Chapter consolidate and develop into a relatively strong unit, with at least one Candidate for Exaltation every year, and sometimes multiple ceremonies for two or even three Candidates. In 1929 the Installation Convocation saw E. Comp. Frank Lingard installed as First Principal, whereupon he promptly installed his son Claude as Second Principal, and he in turn installed his brother Aubrey as Third Principal. What an occasion for rejoicing in the Lingard family!

During the Second World War the Sutton Masonic Hall was requisitioned by the Local Authority, and from June 1938 until June 1949 the Chapter met either at Freemasons' Hall or at Frascati's Restaurant in Oxford Street. By the 1950s it seems that someone at Freemasons' Hall had become aware of the anomalous position of the Chapter for, although it had existed for over 40 years as a Surrey Chapter, some two-thirds of its meetings had been held by Dispensation in London. After considerable correspondence with Supreme Grand Chapter and with the Prov.G.Scribe E. of Surrey plus a number of face to face meetings, a motion appeared on the Progress Chapter agenda reading: "The Chapter shall meet regularly in Sutton instead of partly in Sutton and London". This was passed in June 1955 and the Chapter has always met here in this building ever since.

Understandably, the Convocation of 28th June 1963 was an occasion of great rejoicing, for it celebrated the Chapters 50th year, and the M.E.G.Supt. of Surrey, E.Comp. Bernard Davis attended with a considerable retinue. Generally speaking, the Chapter had succeeded in attracting candidates for Exaltation, with 69 during the fifty years, so that by 1963 it numbered 30 members. In the 1970s and 80s, however, we didn't do so well, and in October 1974 we received our first Exalte in 5 years. Nevertheless, as so often happens, we had a 'white knight' who came to the rescue. In 1981 E.Comp. Donald William Boydell, a Lancastrian of expansive and jovial personality who invariably became the life & soul of any gathering, joined the Chapter and introduced 5 Exaltees and 6 Joining Members within the space of two years. (Three of those Joining Members are your Principals of this evening). From that time onwards the Chapter has steadily progressed.

In October 1982 the words, "Let there be light" took on a new meaning for, during the Exaltation of Roy Archibald, when unveiling the plate of gold, Scribe E's surplice was ignited by one of the lesser lights, but quickly extinguished by the prompt action of Comp. Frank Hirst. (E. Comp. Roy Archibald eventually emigrated to New Zealand, and died only last year, aged 92).

In 1983 the By-laws were amended and the meeting dates specified as 3rd Friday in February, May and October. Although the meeting dates had been changed many times since 1913 the June meeting had been always remained. It was always the intention of the Founders to have a summer meeting in the country in June, and now, after 70 years there was to be no June meeting! However, times had changed and the members were by then all Surrey masons, most of whom knew little of such ancient traditions.

Now, Comps., I propose to talk to you about the rise and progress of this Chapter during the past 100 years. I think it likely that I am the oldest Comp. present, having celebrated my 88th birthday yesterday, but my own memories only go back to about 1930 -- 20 years after the time when a group of twelve comps. were contemplating the establishment of a new Royal Arch chapter.

Consider for a moment that every one of these Royal Arch comps. had been born during the great age of Queen Victoria who ruled for 64 years, when Great Britain was at the height of its power and controlled an Empire, which stretched right round the world.

They had mourned the death of the Queen in 1901, lived through the coronation of King Edward VII, mourned his death in 1910, and had been living since then in the reign of the youthful King George V.

They were not Surrey masons. They lived in London, at a time when Londoners had all the advantages. Travel was relatively inexpensive, with horse-drawn omnibuses and trams. Steam train services were frequent and reliable. At night, most streets were lit by gas lamps which were turned on and lit at dusk by the lamplighter on his bicycle-round. Most houses had gas for lighting and cooking, although coal fires were still the norm for keeping warm indoors. A few affluent people even had electricity in their homes. Ten miles outside London these comforts were not the norm. The motorcar was still an expensive and unreliable luxury owned by far fewer than one in several hundred.

Yet, despite all these advantages, there were still drawbacks to London life. Whilst there were parks and open spaces, it was still necessary to travel several miles to reach open countryside. Autumn and winter were not only cold but, when conditions were right, the capital was brought to a standstill by fogs which were often described as 'pea-soupers' because it was impossible to see more than 3 to 4 feet in front of one's face through the brown soot- and fume-laden atmosphere.

In those days the class system was paramount and, since everyone wore a hat of some kind, this headgear was undoubtedly an indication of class. Artisans wore a cloth cap, clerical workers and middle management wore bowler hats, whilst the top hat was indicative of senior management and the nobility. The trilby and the straw boater were worn on informal social occasions. I think it very likely that the Founders of this Chapter wore bowler hats.

Nowadays we take the telephone for granted, as though it had always been there, but it wasn't until 1902 that the Post Office began establishing local telephone exchanges. By 1913, most businesses had telephones, but fewer than one private house in 100 was equipped with a telephone. In cases of emergency the working classes had to go to the nearest Post Office, complete a form, and pay for a message to be transmitted by wire to the destination town, from whence the telegram was delivered by the Telegraph Boy on his bicycle.

As regards public entertainment, this was still the age of the theatre, the opera and the music-hall. Whilst cinematography had been invented, the local cinema, or 'picture-house', was unknown until the 1920s. As with the cinema, there was no such thing as public radio broadcasting anywhere in the world until the 1920s. In those days, keeping oneself up-to-date and in touch with affairs meant reading the morning and evening newspapers. Such was the world in which our Founders lived.

It seems always to have been the intention of the Founders that the Chapter should meet during the summer months somewhere in the country - preferably in Surrey. Richmond, Kingston-upon-Thames and Sutton were all considered, but in the end it was felt that Sutton would be the most convenient. No doubt the availability of a fairly new and up-to-date purpose-built Masonic Hall within three to four minutes' walk from the railway station was a significant factor!

20th May 1988 was another occasion for rejoicing, for it celebrated the Chapter's 75th Anniversary, when the Official visitor was the M.E.G.Supt., Rev. Graham Williams. At that time the membership amounted to the astonishing total of 29 comps.

In February 2006 E.Comp. Don Boydell proposed that the Chapter discontinue the practice of wearing white gloves. A lengthy and, at times, lively discussion resulted in the proposition being narrowly defeated. '

As regards ritual, my own recollection is that this Chapter has performed its ritual over the years to an above-average standard, and this has invariably been the subject of favourable comment by every one of the Official Visitors of whatever rank. Since the Consecration, the Chapter has always used the Domatic ritual, and in 1937 in response to a letter from Provincial Grand Chapter the members confirmed their desire to continue to Work Domatic. Nevertheless, the Chapter finally turned a page and entered the 21st century when, for the Exaltation of Bro. Richard Barwell in February 2007, his father, E.Comp. Terry Barwell and the other officers used the new Permitted Alternative Ritual. This was generally considered to have been a 'tour de force' by Barwell senior, who additionally rendered the three parts of the Mystical Lecture.

Reviewing the past 100 years, in purely statistical terms we have received 118 Exaltees and 31 Joining Members. Of course, we have had our share of deaths, resignations, and even a few exclusions, but in my experience we all pull together to produce the best work we can, and we enjoy each others' company. Although I could mention a number of Companions who have contributed significantly to the wellbeing of Progress Chapter during the past 20 to 30 years, most of them are here this evening, and I propose to spare their blushes. We still attract at least one Candidate per year, and the membership this year stands at 20. So we are holding our own, and judging from the support this evening we seem to be on course for another hundred years.

Finally, Comps., I must give my personal thanks to E.Comp. James Kirkbride, our Scribe E. for the last 14 years, who researched, wrote and produced our printed History. Also to E.Comp. James Sacré and Comp. Nick Tyrrell who have undertaken all the work involved in organising today's special meeting.

To all three, and on behalf of everyone present, I say, "Thank you, so very much".