

Address to Provincial Grand Lodge 2024

Brethren,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this annual meeting which launches the new masonic year for the Mark Province of Berkshire. September is a busy month, of course, and we are the first of three orders in Berkshire that have their annual Provincial meeting in September: Knights Templar next week and culminating with the Craft the week after, and I have a little more to say about that meeting in particular, later in this address. So, in many ways, as the first of those Provincial meetings, we are the start of the Berkshire masonic year, and it is exciting to be in that position. I will, of course, be at those other Provincial meetings and I want you all to know how closely all the orders work together in Berkshire. When I welcomed the guests earlier, you saw how many orders are represented here today and I thank those other Provincial leaders, who are all very busy masons for taking the time and trouble to be here with us today. It is so important for us to show the width and breadth of 'the whole masonic structure' and to demonstrate our support for each other. We are very fortunate in Berkshire that we work so closely together and the heads of those orders which are centred purely on Berkshire still meet on a monthly basis – when I am not rescuing stranded children from the Forest of Dean, which is what happened this week! Freemasonry in Berkshire is supportive of each other and that is especially true at the heads of order level.

In reviewing the last masonic year let me start with our membership numbers. At last year's meeting I reported a very small dip in the number of Mark members, which I am delighted to say has reversed this year and we are back in positive growth and in Royal Ark Mariner we have seen the third consecutive year of an increase in members. Mark and RAM are both showing an increase in membership nationally – though the growth is less than 1% in each case. In Berkshire, we have had a 1.4% growth in Mark and a very healthy 4.4% growth in RAM, so we are outstripping the national average. To be clear brethren, I am referring here to members not memberships so this is new brethren joining both orders and is the third consecutive year that the number of candidates has been greater than the number of lodges. I don't underestimate the effort that goes into making that happen and I thank you for that work, and hope it encourages you to continue your endeavours to grow Mark masonry in Berkshire. Of course, as with all the orders in Freemasonry, lodges go through cycles and there will be some that are finding it difficult and are struggling to maintain momentum. My

message to those lodges is: don't lose heart; keep attending the meetings and offering support to each other but, most important of all, make sure you are active in your Craft lodges and invite your Craft brethren to join the Mark.

Before moving on from the past year, I wish to thank all the outgoing Provincial officers for their support during their year in office. Brethren, you have been outstanding in your support of the Province and in being seen around the lodges and your presence has been appreciated by them and by me and I hope you derived the enjoyment from your year in office that your dedication deserved. Looking ahead now, I congratulate all those who have been appointed or re-appointed to active Provincial Grand rank today. Brethren, there is no single item during the year that the Provincial Executive spends more time, thought and discussion on than selecting the Provincial team and the active Provincial appointments. I know that we have put together another outstanding team and I so look forward to working with you during the coming year and I hope you too derive the enjoyment you deserve from your new appointments. I also congratulate all those who have received their first appointment to, or a promotion in, past Provincial rank. Brethren, your honours have been well earned but they also carry with them an expectation that you will continue to be active in your Mark lodges and also in promoting the Mark in your Craft lodges and Royal Arch Chapters, and I have no doubt that you will.

This year sees the retirement of two very senior Provincial Officers, both of whom have given many years of outstanding service. I have already paid tribute to Very Worshipful Brother Mike Sanders, but the other Officer who is retiring is Very Worshipful Brother Digby Woods who has been Provincial Grand Chaplain since 2014. Digby, your service to Berkshire Freemasonry is quite extraordinary. You were an outstanding Provincial Grand Master of the Craft and your dedication as our Provincial Grand Chaplain in the Mark has been equally admirable. I well remember when I telephoned you ten years ago to ask you if you would be willing to accept the office you said, "Are you absolutely sure? I must be the least reverend brother in Berkshire!" You are not, of course. Your dedication and support has been incredible and you have delivered orations at centenaries and banner dedications particularly, of course, at the dedication of our Provincial banner. Digby, reverend or not, you are certainly revered and that is something that is earned over time and in your case most deservedly so! We would have been happy for you to continue as Chaplain but you have asked to stand down. As I intimated just now, you have completed ten years as Provincial Grand Chaplain. In May of this year you celebrated your 90th

birthday. You don't look it and you don't seem it! But, you have certainly earned your retirement and will be a very tough act for Worshipful Brother Jem Whitmore to follow, but I know you have already given him support and will continue to do so and I hope we can continue to enjoy your company in the Mark Province for at least another ten years – or more! Digby, thank you! And there might be a little something for you later.

Brethren, once again this year, Berkshire brethren have been honoured by Mark Grand Lodge. W Bro Tim Spriggs, our Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies, was appointed in June to the active rank of Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies, which, as you will have already seen from his work today, is richly deserved. W Bro Hugh Ranscombe, who was an outstanding Provincial Grand Almoner for so many years, received a well earned promotion, just the day before yesterday, to Past Grand Junior Deacon and W Bro Peter Hughes, who has been Provincial Deputy Grand Chaplain for several years but not well enough to join us today, has received a promotion to Past Grand Junior Overseer, making him a Very Worshipful brother. I offer my congratulations to them all and please give them a round of applause.

Our Provincial charity BeMBA continues its excellent work and I thank the lodge representatives but, above all, the dedicated and hard working BeMBA Executive for all that they are doing to further the charitable endeavours of this Province. I must particularly mention the BeMBA Secretary and Provincial Grand Almoner, W Bro Bob Watson and our incredibly active Provincial Grand Charity Steward and BeMBA Treasurer, W Bro Brian McCormack. Brian, you do so much for BeMBA and I thank you on behalf of the whole Province for all your hard work. Brethren, I hope you are all aware that we recently presented a cheque from BeMBA for £3,000 to Thames Hospice, fulfilling our pledge to grant them a total of £9,000 over three years. I know the BeMBA Executive are thinking of what the next project should be, so watch this space brethren. Of course, BeMBA also supports the MBF through the Festival system and I am delighted that we are continuing to do that as it is most important. Bro Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies, will you please conduct to me the Provincial Grand Master for Oxfordshire, RW Bro Ian Wright. *** Presented with £1,200 for the 2025 Festival ***. Bro Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies, will you now conduct to me the Provincial Grand Master of Hampshire and Isle of Wight, RW Bro George Deacon. *** Presented with £1,200 for the 2026 Festival ***

Brethren, I said in this address last year that the very fact that you are all members of this marvellous order means that you are experienced and knowledgeable masons and that makes you senior members of your Craft lodges. I am sure that you will all be aware that the United Grand Lodge of England is now referring to the orders beyond the Craft and Royal Arch as “the companion orders”. This is a marked change of tone and can only be good news as it confirms our place at the heart of English Freemasonry. This closer association was underlined when our Pro Grand Master, MW Bro John Herbert Prizeman was invited to address a Quarterly Communication of Craft Grand Lodge. Brethren, this would have been almost unthinkable only a few years ago. At the very start of this address, I said I would have more to say about the forthcoming meeting of the Berkshire Craft Provincial Grand Lodge. I am delighted to share with you (in case you don’t already know) that at that meeting on Tuesday 24th September, MW Bro Prizeman, our Pro Grand Master will be present and will address Provincial Grand Lodge. Brethren, this is an enormous coup for Berkshire and I am very grateful to our Craft Provincial Grand Master for making this happen. Brethren, you cannot have a clearer signal of the close relationship between the Craft and the Mark and I urge you to make sure you foster that relationship by supporting your Craft lodges and, of course, to introduce more Craft brethren to the Mark degree. At a forum of Provincial Grand Masters two days ago, the Grand Secretary used this phrase: we need to Advance quality candidates, in quality ceremonies, delivered in quality lodges. Brethren, I couldn’t put it any better and I commend that thought to you.

This annual meeting of Provincial Grand Lodge doesn’t just happen as if by magic and a great deal of work goes into its organisation. I give my grateful thanks to the Provincial Grand Secretary and the Deputy Provincial Grand Secretary for handling the administration so efficiently and patiently and for dealing with all the headaches that have presented themselves, quite often at the last minute, and also to the Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies and his team for ensuring that the ceremonial aspects run smoothly and in the traditional Berkshire manner of which we are all justifiably proud.

Brethren, thank you for your kind attention and may the Great Overseer of the Universe grant you all good health to enjoy this special degree for many years to come.

Thank you.