

## **Address to Provincial Grand Lodge 2022**

Brethren,

I can hardly believe that it has been a whole year since my Installation as Provincial Grand Master, but it is certainly an enormous pleasure to be addressing you as I start my second year as head of this special Province.

It has been a great delight, over the past year, to be in your company physically and not just through the medium of Zoom! That familiar feeling of fraternal affection and convivial society returned so easily that it was almost as if we had never been away and “the friendly degree” showed that it was still exactly that. The year started busy, and never really let up. One of the very first things we did was consecrate a new Provincial banner – which is gracing our Provincial meeting for the very first time. Whilst it was commissioned by my predecessor, it was designed and made by my wife – so I hope you like it brethren. And it’s too bad if you don’t!

Last year, I said that my first priority would be to assist you all as we come out of lockdown and to get the Province moving again. I am delighted to be able to tell you that we have had the pleasure of Advancing 24 new brethren and it was a pleasure to formally welcome some of them earlier in the meeting. We have actually increased our number of members in both Mark and RAM. OK, so in RAM the increase is just 1 member – but an increase is still an increase! In Mark our total memberships have increased but, the more important statistic for me, is that our number of individual members has also increased. Brethren, that is an excellent start in our first year back after lockdown. Now, it is only a start, and we certainly cannot afford to be complacent, but it is, nevertheless a start and gives us an excellent platform to build on. The challenge will be to keep that momentum going, and I will have more to say about that in a few moments.

I congratulate all those who have been appointed or re-appointed to active Provincial Grand rank and also those who have received their first appointment to or a promotion in past Provincial rank. Brethren, your honours have been well earned and I know that you realise that they also carry with them an expectation that you will continue to be active in your lodges and in promoting the Mark in your Craft lodges and Royal Arch Chapters.

Four of our brethren have been honoured by Mark Grand Lodge this year. W Bros Paul Ackland-Snow, Steve Talbot and Geoff Webb all received their first appointments at the June meeting and next week W Bro Alan Spearman will be

promoted to PGJD. Brethren, hearty congratulations on your well earned Grand Ranks!

Our Provincial charity BeMBA continues to support our members who are in need of some assistance and it has been very heartwarming to see the level of donations that have been coming into BeMBA both from individuals and from lodges and I thank you for that support for without it BeMBA couldn't continue with its good work. As you know brethren, BeMBA also supports other charitable causes – both masonic and non-masonic. We support the MBF through the Festival system and I am delighted to report that at the BeMBA AGM earlier this afternoon donations to the West Yorkshire and Cheshire Festivals were approved and will be sent off to them. We have pledged £9,000 over three years to the Thames Hospice for the purchase of motorised syringe drivers and the first installment of £3,000 has already been paid. I did also say last year that I wanted the Berkshire Craft 2023 Festival to be a focus of our support. Bro Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies, will you please conduct W Bro Anthony Howlett-Bolton to me.

Provincial Grand Master, we are most fortunate in Berkshire that the orders work closely together, and we very much value the monthly Heads of Orders meeting that you host. It really does help to promote the feeling of a Berkshire masonic family and it now gives me very great pleasure to make a further donation to your Festival and, although this Provincial meeting next year will take place after your Festival event, we will do our very best to see if we can squeeze in a further contribution between now and the closing date for donations.

Brethren, near the start of this address I said that I would have more to say about the challenges that lie ahead and I want to close with that, because it is really important. Having emerged from the Covid pandemic and hoping that calmer waters lay ahead we now see, looming on the horizon, what may be an even greater challenge because I really do fear that the 'cost of living crisis' could become a much greater threat to our numbers than the pandemic turned out to be. The rise in energy prices will put pressure on our meeting places, and if they have to increase their charges then we are likely to see a rise in subscriptions at precisely the time when, for the same reasons, households will be forced to take a very critical look at any discretionary expenditure. I hope that the current anxiety is partly fuelled by the media's usual doom-laden view of everything, and the last thing I would want to do is to reinforce those gloomy predictions,

and I am sure we all hope that the Government will come forward with some sort of support. Nevertheless, if we don't acknowledge that tough times lie ahead and come up with ways to address them then we risk appearing out of touch. Well brethren, in my view, the tougher things are, the more important it is for people to have something positive in their lives that might help to lift their spirits. Brethren, we need to ensure that masonry, and Mark masonry in particular, can be that outlet. We must ensure that our members ENJOY their Mark masonry – as I know they do. Ensuring that our meetings are interesting and rewarding (whether there is a candidate or not) and that our festive boards are warm and friendly will be the best way of ensuring that membership of the Mark degree is something our members value and will strive to retain in the face of increasing demands on their family budgets. Even in difficult times we still need to encourage our Craft brethren and Royal Arch companions to join this “beautiful and important degree in Freemasonry” and make sure that, when they do, their first experience of the Magic of the Mark is memorable for all the right reasons. That means a good ceremony and a warm welcome. Our future depends on it. Candidates won't go back to their Craft lodges and enthuse about the Mark if they have a bad, or even mediocre, experience at their Advancement. Brethren, I don't want them to have a good experience, I want them to have a GREAT experience – and I know that you can deliver that for them. As I go round the Province I am generally very impressed with the quality of the ritual that I see, but if you feel that you need some support then the Provincial team is here and ready to help. With a little notice, we can fill in for officers who are absent. Brethren, I will come and be your Senior Deacon or an Overseer – or even an Inner Guard, if necessary!

There are two lectures in this order that add interest and masonic knowledge and, in my opinion are not seen nearly often enough. Indeed, many Mark masons get through the Chair and on to Provincial rank without ever having seen them at all, and I would like to change that, so I am instigating an 'Annual Lectures Meeting' where both the lecture on the Mark degree and the lecture on the Tracing Board will be delivered. All brethren Advanced since the previous Lectures Evening will receive an invitation to attend and I hope that it can be hosted by different lodges each year so that the host lodge receives the boost of a larger than normal meeting, perhaps with a slightly special meal and I hope it will become one of the highlights of the Provincial year. The first Lectures Meeting will take place at the Installed Mark Masters' Lodge at Wallingford on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> October. Brethren, please support it.

So many people have told me how much they enjoy the Mark and that they wish they had joined it years ago. We have something very special to offer and we should be proud to invite our Craft brethren and Royal Arch companions to join us. I am not just asking you to do this. I am not even relying on you to do it. Brethren, I EXPECT you to do it, because I am passionate about this degree and I know that you are too and I am confident that we can keep the Mark so attractive to our members that it would be one of the last things they would ever want to give up.

I said earlier that the number of individual members is the most important statistic that I keep an eye on. With an ageing demographic, we have many brethren who find it difficult to drive at night. We don't want to lose those members so do not forget that we have two daylight lodges: Wilder Mark and Old Rectory RAM who are there specifically to cater for those who would prefer a morning meeting followed by a light lunch. I would ask those who are able to attend daytime meetings to please give both of them very serious consideration.

Of course, when it comes to retaining members, keeping costs as low as possible is also important and we may need to be quite creative in that regard. Measures such as reducing the number of courses at a Festive Board and allowing members to pay their subscriptions in instalments, if necessary, could be of invaluable help in the difficult times ahead and I urge all lodges to give serious consideration to these and any other initiatives that might help in that regard.

Brethren, I now have an extremely pleasant duty to perform. Brother Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies, will you please conduct to me Right Worshipful Brother Richard Olliver.

So brethren, if there is one message I want you to take away from this address it is this: Your Provincial Executive know full well that the next year or two will be challenging but I am certain that we can get through it together and the key to that is going to be making sure that Berkshire Mark Masonry continues to be special by virtue of it being warm, friendly and enjoyable and the very best example of what masonry should be.

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.