

Address to Provincial Grand Lodge 2025

Brethren,

It is a very great pleasure to welcome so many of you to Provincial Grand Lodge today. We have more than 185 here in the Temple with more than 180 dining today. That is, by some considerable margin, the largest attendance we have had since before COVID. Furthermore, despite that very long list of visitors you heard me welcome earlier (and I thank them again for their support today), they are outnumbered by members of the Province. Again, the first time that has been the case for some years.

My review of the last year is going to be brief, not because there is very little to report (quite the opposite), but because I have a lot to say about plans for the coming year and I know that R.W. Bro. Peter Sands will have his stopwatch out, and tell me off after the meeting if I have gone on for too long!

I am delighted to report an increase in members in both Mark and RAM. The fourth consecutive increase for RAM and now three out of the last four years for Mark. We Advanced 23 brethren across our 18 lodges. That is only one less than the first year back after COVID when, of course, we had the 'COVID backlog' which gave us a usefully long list of candidates. To almost equal that in an 'ordinary year' is a fantastic achievement and I congratulate you all.

Some of those newly Advanced brethren are here with us today and I would now like to make a small presentation to them....

***** PRESENTATION *****

To those new brethren I have just welcomed: I hope you are already enjoying your Mark masonry and that you will encourage other brethren from your Craft lodges and Royal Arch chapters to come and join us. Brethren, it is never too soon for you to propose new members.

Most of you will know that the statistic I am most interested in is that of individual members as opposed to memberships. In addition to the newly Advanced brethren we have had 10 joining members, 8 of whom were not already members of the Province, making total of 31 new members from our 19 lodges (including the Past Masters' lodge). What is particularly pleasing is that the number of Advancements alone exceeded the total loss of members due to both deaths and resignations – an important measure of our progress.

On the subject of resignations, unfortunately, I am aware of a number that are pending and, therefore, not included in the numbers I have given. It happens at this time of year when many subscriptions become due and people review their commitments. Most of the resignations are due to failing relocations or failing health. The latter being an inevitable result of an ageing membership. Sadly, this will make a significant dent in our growth from last year so we cannot ease off on the continual search for more candidates. Brethren, I am confident that you are up to that challenge.

One of the great highlights of the year was to present 50 year certificates to W.Bro. Ian Thomas and R.W.Bro. Peter Sands, both of Jersey Lodge. I congratulate them both on a milestone that is even rarer in the Mark than it is in the Craft. We have another 50th anniversary coming up soon – and that is also at Jersey Lodge. There must be something in whatever it is you drink at Jersey Lodge!

We continue to have monthly Heads of Orders meetings, focused mainly on those orders which cover Berkshire specifically. I really value these opportunities to talk about Berkshire masonry in general and how the orders can support each other – and we do. You have seen the support we have today from the Craft and Royal Arch Executives and from our Inspector General for the Ancient and Accepted Rite. Our new Provincial Prior is not yet qualified to attend this meeting – but I have that in hand brethren, and I am confident he will be here next year. These meetings are a fantastic example of how well Berkshire masonry works together.

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, I hope you have enjoyed your year and that it has inspired you to talk about the Mark to your Craft brethren and encourage them to join us. I congratulate all those who have been appointed or re-appointed to active Provincial Grand rank today and welcome you all to the team. We have a busy year ahead and I know that I can rely on your full support. Indeed, the involve yourselves the more you will get out of your year in office and I look forward to your company. 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.

I have said that we have a busy year ahead. The aim for the first year after COVID was just to get back up and running, to clear the backlog of candidates and then for the next couple of years to stabilise and consolidate. Now we need to drive forward. Our numbers show that that has started, but we can never stand still and there are a number of initiatives that I and the rest of the Executive have been working on.

We will be re-launching the Travelling Keystone to promote visiting between lodges. It is currently held by Porchester Lodge (nominally. Physically, the Deputy Provincial Grand Master has it at home!) and a group of members will be handing it over to Wallingford on the **24th of this month**. From there it will make its way around the Province and there is a Travelling Keystone event almost every single month and we have a schedule that goes out to September 2027! I am very grateful to W.Bro. Graham Parker of Linden Acre Lodge who has taken over the administration and has put together that schedule.

One of the initiatives I announced when I was first Installed was a 'Lectures Evening' to present both the lecture on the Mark Degree and Mark Tracing Board. We weren't able to do that last year, but it is back this year and will be hosted by Old Rectory Lodge on **Thursday 6th November**. Please put this date in your diaries and there will be a special invitation to those brethren who have been Advanced in the last two years. This is the first event as part of turning Old Rectory Lodge into a 'demonstration' lodge to perform ritual from the past or that is rarely seen. If you cannot make that date then I am delighted to tell you that Linden Acre will be presenting the Tracing Board on the Tuesday 14th October and the evening prior to that, Monday 13th, at Leopold RAM Lodge there will be an even rarer chance to hear the lecture on the RAM Tracing Board, and I am very grateful to V.W.Bro. Phillip Purves who will be presenting it that evening.

On **Saturday 13th December** the Provincial Executive will be delivering the 'Introduction to Mark Masonry' presentation which is specifically aimed at those brethren who may wish to come and join us. It will be preceded by a full English breakfast and the Province are subsidising the cost for all guests who are not already Mark Masons, so please, please, bring along as many of your Craft brethren and Royal Arch companions as you can. The success of this presentation depends upon having potential candidates there. It is not a high

pressure presentation but is designed to inform and, hopefully, pique their interest.

I will be asking our Provincial Communications Officer to make sure that all these events are well publicised around the Province. As you can see brethren, Berkshire Mark is certainly not standing, but moving forward – and those are just the events are in the next three months!

Berkshire brethren have once again been honoured by Mark Grand Lodge and I am delighted to tell you that this year we have had THREE first appointments and ONE promotion. W Bro Anthony Howlett-Bolton, our Craft Provincial Grand Master and Royal Arch Grand Superintendent has received a first appointment to the ACTIVE rank of **Grand Senior Deacon**. Anthony, you are looking utterly resplendent in your chain and it is a great honour for the Province to have you in that rank. Brethren, in case you don't know, W.Bro. Anthony's appointment to such a senior active office is largely in recognition of his initiative of adding the Mark degree to the United Grand Lodge of England's Solomon education portal. This was entirely Anthony's idea and, having first got approval from the Craft Pro-Grand Master, he then had meetings with our own Pro-Grand Master and plans are now in progress with the communications team at Mark Masons Hall to bring this fantastic idea to fruition so W.Bro. Anthony is not just supporting the Mark degree in Berkshire, but nationally! W.Bro. Phillip Batten and W.Bro. Dr. Silverio Ostrowski have both received first appointments to the rank of **Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies**. Both are former active Provincial Wardens of this Province and also Secretaries of their respective lodges so these appointments are well deserved. Just two days ago, at the annual promotions investiture, our Deputy Provincial Grand Master received a promotion to **Past Grand Junior Overseer**, making him a Very Worshipful brother! Brethren this was not a tariff appointment – for which Jim would have had to wait another two years – but is in recognition of his past service as the Provincial Grand Treasurer, the initiatives that he is pursuing with BeMBA and, of course, in anticipation of the further contribution he will continue to make to the Province in his current role. All those Grand Ranks have been well earned and are thoroughly well deserved and I offer those brethren my most sincere congratulations and I think we should give them all 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. At my Reception in April we had a presentation from Thames Hospice to tell us about their work and how they have used the £9,000 we have given them over the last three years. BeMBA has also supported other worthy causes within Berkshire, most notably a donation of £3,100 to the Bridge for Young People in Newbury. The Bridge is a charity that supports vulnerable young people, many of whom were formerly homeless, as they try and transition from the world of care to a more independent life and engage with the wider world. Our grant was used to provide white goods for the 7 apartments that the charity has to support that transition. Last Friday, our Past PGM, R.W.Bro Richard Olliver, who is a trustee of the MBF and I, along with many of my fellow Provincial Grand Masters, were present at an event at Mark Masons Hall to mark the MBF's latest major capital grant to the blood bikes organization. Brethren, it was a most heart warming and, I must say, humbling day that made you proud to be a Mark Mason. As well as local good causes, BeMBA also supports the work of 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 Hampshire and Isle of Wight, RW Bro George Deacon. *** Presented with £1,500 for the 2026 Festival ***. Bro Provincial Grand Director of Ceremonies, will you now conduct to me the Provincial Grand Chaplain of Warwickshire VW Bro John Handley. *** Presented with £1,500 for the 2027

Festival ***

Brethren, it is an enormous privilege to lead this very special Province, and it is YOU, the members, who make it so special. I hope this address has shown you that the Berkshire Mark Province is in the best of health and the very best of spirits and I know that you will all play your part to keep it that way. As I always say, don't keep the Mark to yourselves. Talk about it to your masonic friends and acquaintances and encourage them to join us so that they can see what they have been missing, and make sure that you give them the very best experience at their Advancement ceremony and the whole Provincial team is here and ready to help you with that ceremony if you need it. Let me remind you that we should aim to Advance quality candidates, in quality ceremonies, delivered in quality lodges – and I know we can do that in spades!

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.