



Provincial Grand Chapter of Berkshire

Oration Given by E.Comp. Michael Warner, PAGDC

Third Provincial Grand Principal of the Province of Berkshire

At the 150th Anniversary Celebration of

The Union Chapter No. 414

29th November 2017

Most Excellent Grand Superintendent, Excellent Companions and Companions,

It is my privilege this evening to deliver an oration on the occasion of the Sesquicentenary Meeting of the Union Chapter of Royal Arch Masons.

This is the first 150th Anniversary to be celebrated in the Province and is therefore an extremely important event. Windsor Castle Chapter No. 771 is actually older than Union Chapter but I will explain this discrepancy a little later.

“Sesquicentenary” simply means “a hundred and fiftieth anniversary” (but I’m certain you’ve already worked that out for yourself) It is a rarely used word in modern language and features in the lower 50% of commonly used words in the Collins dictionary.

The first time I heard the term was in 2009 when the late Michael Hooton (our PPGM) mentioned it whilst talking about the 150th anniversary celebration of my own St. John’s Lodge No.795.

The word anniversary is a countable noun and is defined as “a date that is remembered or celebrated because a special event happened on that date in a previous year”

I will definitely not mention wedding anniversaries!

That, I think, exhausts what can be said about the word “anniversary” and, as I can see that your eyes are starting to glaze over, I will move quickly on!

It would be remiss of me not to mention at the outset, my sincere thanks to Excellent Companion Richard Williams, Treasurer of Union Chapter and our Provincial Grand Treasurer (and all-round jolly good chap) for the tremendous amount of work he has undertaken to compile the history of the Union Chapter. Richard and I have had many amusing conversations over the past months regarding details that he has unearthed whilst going through the seven volumes of Minute-Books and other supporting paperwork.

Union Chapter was consecrated on the 22nd October 1867 at the Masonic Hall in Greyfriars Road, Reading.

The Consecrating Officer was Excellent Companion J Devereux who was the First Principal of the Windsor Castle Chapter. He later became the Provincial Grand Scribe E for the Province of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire when it was formed in 1877.

Companion William Biggs, of the Grey Friars Lodge No. 1101, was one of the main Petitioners for the formation of Union Chapter and was Installed as its Primus First Principal. He was appointed Third Provincial Grand Principal of the joint Province, also in 1877 (just 139 years before my appointment in Berkshire)

Whilst reading through the full history of the Chapter, many noteworthy events took place. I will highlight some that particularly grabbed my attention -

When Brother Reginald Crook Mount (of Reading Lodge of Union) was Exalted, along with three others, at the May meeting in 1876 they presented the Chapter with a "Broken Column" made from oak timbers taken from the roof of Eton College Chapel. He later became First Principal of the Chapter in 1886 and again in 1903 and was appointed as Third Provincial Grand Principal in 1892 and Second Provincial Grand Principal in 1893 (in the new Province of Berkshire) This broken column has been lightly restored by Excellent Companion Rod Bancroft and is displayed on the Scribe's table today.

When the MEGS of the joint Province of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, Sir Daniel Gooch, died in 1889 it was decided to divide the combined Province as both Berkshire and Buckinghamshire had the minimum number of Chapters necessary to entitle them to form independent Provincial Grand Chapters.

At a special meeting of the newly formed Provincial Grand Chapter of Berkshire at Abingdon on Friday 24th April 1891, Excellent Companion John Thornhill Morland was Installed as Grand Superintendent. He was a very distinguished Freemason and served as the Lord Mayor of Abingdon on five separate occasions. Morland Lodge No. 3066 was named after him and was founded in 1904.

The Union Chapter continued to flourish and remained active throughout the 1st World War, directing their charitable contributions to the Grand Chapter fund supporting English Freemasons who were prisoners of war in Germany.

At the outbreak of the 2nd World War the Chapter still continued to meet but decided to serve supper after Installation instead of a full dinner. The Chapter also formed The Union Chapter of Instruction which first met on the 1st January 1943. It is now known as the Reading United Chapter of Instruction and continues to assist Companions throughout the Province with their ritual (including Past Grand Superintendents – no names but his initials are K.B.)

Now to explain the discrepancy I mentioned in my introduction :-

Windsor Castle Chapter No. 771 is the oldest Chapter in Berkshire as it was consecrated in 1865 - but as it had a lapse of meetings between 1867 and 1872 they had to wait until 1972 to celebrate their Centenary. Union Chapter could prove continuity since the 22nd October 1867 and therefore Supreme Grand Chapter granted them a Centenary Charter in 1967 – thus making them the oldest Berkshire Chapter.

The Centenary Convocation of the Union Chapter was held at the Masonic Hall, Greyfriars Road, Reading on the 24th October 1967 – Excellent Companion Arthur Burton was the First Principal. The Chapter was honoured by the presence of the Most Excellent Grand Superintendent Lt.Col.George St.Vigor John Vigor OBE – he has to have the most interesting name of all our past and present Grand Superintendents (even Ian Richard Given Hopgood doesn't quite have the same ring to it!) He was Grand Superintendent in and over the Royal Arch Province of Berkshire from 1966 to 1978.

At the Installation Convocation on the 25th November 1969 a dispensation was granted allowing the Chapter to change its place of meeting to the Berkshire Masonic Centre and the bye-laws were subsequently changed to allow the Chapter to continue meeting at Sindlesham, where it still meets to this day.

Before I conclude let me run through some of the notable events and the incumbents of 1867 :-

- The Monarch was Queen Victoria.
- The Prime Minister was the Earl of Derby (Conservative) presiding over the 19th Parliament.
- By February the Society of Arts inaugurates the Blue Plaque Scheme – the first one being at Lord Byron’s birthplace, 24 Hollies Street, off Cavendish Square.
- On the 5th March the Fenian uprising took place in Ireland.
- The 15th March saw the first meeting of the “Conference of Trades” – later forming the nucleus of the Trades Union Congress.
- On the 18th May John Stuart Mills’ motion to give women the vote is decisively rejected by the House of Commons.
- Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone of The Royal Albert Hall on the 20th May.
- On the 4th September Sheffield Wednesday F.C. are founded at the Adelphi Hotel in Sheffield.
- In October Thomas Barnardo opens his first shelter for homeless children in Stepney.
- 12th October saw the end of penal transportation, as the last convict ship, the Hougoumont, departs from Portsmouth on an 89-day passage to Western Australia. 62 Fenians are amongst the transportees.
- The National Society for Women’s Suffrage was formed on the 6th November. It was a lengthy campaign as full voting rights for women over 21 were only granted in 1928 by the Equal Franchise Act.
- In the Autumn/Winter of 1867 Wasps Rugby Football Club was formed in London.
- Formal rules for boxing, prohibiting bare-knuckle fights, were drawn up under the patronage of the Marquis of Queensbury.

And finally,

Union Chapter No. 414 has now reached an incredible milestone by celebrating its 150th Anniversary. It remained active throughout both World Wars and has boasted many influential and interesting characters as members.

The spirit of Union Chapter has endured since its formation on the 22nd October 1867 and has given its support to many Chapters in this Province (and surrounding Provinces)

I think, in particular, the formation of the Union Chapter of Instruction (now known as the Reading United Chapter of Instruction) will be a lasting reminder of the good works carried out by the members of this Chapter.

I truly hope that the Founders are looking down, from the Grand Chapter above, on this extremely well attended celebration today and are really proud of what has been achieved over the last 150 years.

Long may the members of the Union Chapter continue the traditions laid down by their illustrious predecessors. May they be guided by The Great Overseer, whose eye never slumbers nor sleeps, so that when they are relieved from their post on earth, they may be admitted to the Celestial Grand Chapter above, and find their names recorded in the Book of Eternal Life.

Most Excellent Grand Superintendent, Excellent Companions and Companions, I thank you for your attention.

E. Comp. Michael J Warner, PAGDC

3rd Provincial Grand Principal

