

Communication and ‘Research versus Education’ -the battle for a master mason’s ‘daily advance in masonic knowledge’

by John L. Belton

Of late there have been mutterings to be heard among concerned masonic intellectuals and they have translated themselves into initiatives like, at the grander end of things; The Cornerstone Society, The Canonbury Centre and the Centre for Research into Freemasonry and at a more mundane level by individual lodges introducing initiatives to ensure that their new members are awoken to a better picture of what Freemasonry is and what it can offer. Indeed the January 2005 issue of *MQ* reports upon a meeting of research lodges held to consider the future and value of research within English Freemasonry. Clearly after something approaching a century without any radical initiatives things are on the move again. But in what direction and to what ends is not clear and the lack of clear objectives is likely to hamper any progress.

I must admit to having been a marketing professional in a past incarnation. In a masonic research sense I have written ‘academic style’ papers, dashed off short articles for masonic magazines and spoken in lodges around the world - in short I have experienced the trials and tribulations, as well as the pleasures, of communicating information. The approach and suggestions that arise herein are based upon my own use of marketing practices.

This paper does need two caveats – in attempting to review the situation it must inevitably deal in generalities. There will inevitably be organisations that are doing trailblazing work who are not mentioned, for which I apologise, but they will I hope recognise, indeed probably have already recognised, the shortfalls in what Freemasonry has today. Secondly that the evidence is drawn from the United Kingdom and the conclusions will relate to the masonry practiced therein.

A brief historical perspective to masonic research

1. The late 1700s and early 1800s

Examining the past often offers lessons of value when one comes to address current issues, and in this case things are no different. So let us start with William Preston words from the Introduction in his 1812 edition of “Illustrations of Freemasonry”

I continued the pursuit; and with the assistance of a few brethren, who had carefully preserved what ignorance and degeneracy had rejected as unintelligible and absurd, I diligently fought for, and at length happily acquired, some of the ancient and venerable landmarks of the Order.

Fortunate in the acquisition of friends, and fully determined to pursue the design of effecting a general reformation, we persevered in an attempt to correct the irregularities which had crept into our assemblies, and exemplify at all our meetings the beauty and utility of the Masonic system.

We commenced our plan by enforcing the value of the ancient charges and regulations of the Order, which inattention had suffered to sink into oblivion, and established those charges as the

basis of our work. To imprint on the memory a faithful discharge of our duty, we reduced the more material parts of the system into practice; and in order to encourage others to promote the plan, we made it a general rule of reading one or more of these charges at every regular meeting, and elucidating such passages as seemed obscure.

2. The late 1800s and early 1900s

And from 13 May 1876 edition of *The Freemason* which printed the following when announcing the launch of a masonic library in Sheffield:

'The days of apathy, indifference, levity, unconcern, all are gone, and in their stead we have to deal with the demands of a young, an ardent, an enquiring generation.

'...far too many of our older school, good masons though they be, contended themselves, so to say, with the framework of masonry, without seeking to master the spiritual teachings and the living soul within.'

'It is a great reproach to us in England that we have so few lodge libraries To remove this blot in our masonic system, by setting on foot a library open to all lodges in that great and important town.'

Only shortly afterwards, in 1884, comes the formation of Quatuor Coronati Lodge with the objective 'To develop for brethren everywhere an interest in research, to encourage study, ... To have papers read' and they also founded a library which was later to become a physical part of the now Museum and Library of Freemasonry in Freemasons' Hall in Great Queen Street.

The Leicester Lodge of Research was formed in 1889 and Bro Billson, the last of the founders still living, wrote in the 1932 Transactions regarding the foundation of the Lodge. There were only five lodges in Leicester at that time with one Lodge of Instruction serving them all. In particular he comments upon the lack of interest by those attending the lodge of instruction on anything other than practicing the ritual:-

I had noticed that the meetings of the lodge were little more than rehearsal meetings for the benefit of those actually in office and were practically of no interest to others. I pointed this out to Bro Thorp and suggested that we should try to raise discussions upon points of masonic interest to brethren generally. Could we not invite the brethren to ask questions and then discuss such questions in lodge, leaving it to the Preceptor to wind up the debate? Bro Thorp was quite willing to try, but the brethren had not shown any inclination to ask questions.

Bro Thorp, the leading light and collector and bibliophile eventually proposed 'to follow in the footsteps of Quatuor Coronati Lodge and to apply for a warrant'. The founders agreed that the objects of the new lodge should be declared to be:-

- To provide a centre and bond of union for Masonic students and brethren of literary tastes.
- To provide and encourage and exemplary rendering of the masonic ritual and ceremonies.
- To attract and interest brethren by means of papers upon the history, antiquities and symbols of the Craft, in order to imbue them with a love for Masonic research.

- And generally to cultivate Masonic good fellowship and promote the grand principles upon which our order is founded.

The ritual element vanished fairly rapidly but in 1942, at the golden jubilee Bro Bunney was able to say “Our aim is the dissemination of Masonic knowledge in its *widest* sense” (the italics being those of the author). Bro Newman writing in 1992 on the occasion of the lodge’s centenary felt able to write:-

“The wealth of masonic learning which has been passed on to others is enormous, and it would be impossible to write a history of freemasonry ... without reference to the Transactions of this lodge or the series of reprints and publications which the lodge has sponsored”.

In the north west in 1910 came the Manchester Association for Masonic Research, later to become the Manchester Lodge for Masonic Research, with the following Aims and Aspirations:

1. to provide a local centre for Masonic students and *literary recreation and instructions* by means of ‘Masonic Research’ papers read by Brethren;
2. to gather and record particulars of the Craft in the *time past and present*, especially pertaining to the Province of Lancashire;
3. to *publish* - when ‘ways and means’ permit - the transactions of the Association;
4. to form a Masonic Library and Museum;
5. to *avoid expenses* not actually necessary in connection with the objects stated and
6. (I add from a separate document) to hold a fairly *informal social board* after each of the meetings.

Some italics have been added to encapsulate some of the original intent and in particular we maybe need to note those in objective 1. - *literary recreation and instruction* and *informal social board*. It seems to me that there was an emphasis on the notion that the meetings were never intended to be erudite *per se* but rather enlightening and informative with an emphasis on (appropriate) informality.

It seems therefore, that about every 100 years or so or so the thinkers of the UK Craft wake up to the fact that far too many of its members are in great ignorance of the ‘tenets of the Craft’.

3. The late 1900s and early 2000s

The late 1900s saw the rise of the ‘Lodge of Installed Masters’ whose purpose is to meet a few times a year to hear papers read and to dine. While they provide enjoyable occasions for those interested they really do very little to encourage ‘a daily advance’ let alone home grown research. Neither are they particularly effective at communicating with the vast majority of Master Masons.

Bro J. W. Daniel hits the nail firmly upon the head when he bemoans the shortage of original research, commenting in the article in MQ Magazine:-

“It is difficult to find papers for publication. There are fewer members of the Craft interested in genuine original masonic research or are willing or able to undertake it.”

Although only anecdotal, observant members of 'traditional styled' research lodges around the world all make similar comments. Consider the Past Master of a research lodge whose only written researched paper is the one they delivered at their Installation. One past master of a research lodge in New Zealand told me that he felt that the quality of the papers delivered by incoming masters was deteriorating and even that one master did not deliver a paper at all.

The reasons for this situation could be various:-

- There are certainly fewer masons than say half a century ago – maybe the proportion of those interested has remained the same but the actual number have got proportionally fewer.
- Today's educational system may not be generating the same proportion of men within an inbuilt curiosity to know more.
- The almost total focus on ritual in lodges and virtual exclusion of improving knowledge may be driving out those whose major interest is to learn more.
- The rise of masonic 'pseudo-history' of course requires little or no proof to be required before something is stated as fact. This is rather alarming because it raises the thought that far too many men today are unable, and see no need, to distinguish between fact and fiction.

Undoubtedly there are groups that are proactive and innovative. The purpose here is to stimulate thought and discussion. It also must be said that as in other areas Freemasonry is a broad church and how individuals and groups choose to spend their time is always a valid form of activity. It may be that in the total perspective of what is needed for the benefit of the large majority of masons that something different is required.

Of the recent innovations there are the examples of The Cornerstone Society (www.workingtools.org.uk) and the Canonbury Centre (www.canonbury.ac.uk) and these do address the more esoteric or spiritual components of the masonic experience. There must however be a question as to what degree of 'trickledown' of knowledge actually results after the delegates return to their lodges.

The problems have been identified in past centuries and twice actions taken to redress the balance between knowledge and ignorance - each time in the idiom of that century. And now a third and greatest trial awaits us; how do we deal with the problem in the 21st century!

The knowledge problem of today

This is perhaps best spelt out by reflecting that among the approximately 250,000 freemasons in England and Wales only about 25,000 subscribe to *Freemasonry Today* and somewhat less to *The Square*. It is worth reflecting that for whatever reason only around 10% of freemasons have taken the trouble to subscribe to a masonic magazine that will broaden their masonic horizons. Those who subscribe to a masonic research transactions of some sort may amount to some 10,000 or so - perhaps at best some 5%, and that is before allowing for individuals with multiple subscriptions.

Brethren when presented with suitably sized chunks of 'masonic education' do enjoy them and are interested - it is just that they do not feel the need to be proactive in seeking them out. And when encouraged, can and do actually produce home grown short talks.

There are few Brethren who would dispute that we will all be better masons if our understanding of the Craft is improved. Better knowledge is also likely to encourage more freemasons, albeit a small percentage, to seek a deeper level of knowledge, to read more, to question things that puzzle them etc.

For most English freemasons the thought of taking time out to read is increasingly not a popular one and therefore it is necessary to take the message direct to the ear of our target audience. It may also be that the poor knowledge of many freemasons also simply reduces the potential number inclined to do any research of their own.

Applying the principles of business and marketing

What was not clear from the report in *MQ* was that there was any clear definition or agreement of exactly what the Craft was wanting to achieve through the means of "masonic education" in its broadest sense. Defining the Objective is not something that can be done in five minutes but it would undoubtedly include a strong element along the lines of 'broadening the perspective and understanding of Freemasonry of the vast majority of masons' - so that they know there is more to Freemasonry than being able to regurgitate the words of the ritual or buy some raffle tickets in the cause of charity - in short to enrich their masonic experience. This is in principle going back to William Preston's 'Illustrations of Freemasonry'; both in providing the materials and importantly in providing relevant ways of communicating the information to the target audience.

It is clear that masonic research and its outreach is a continuum that ranges from the academic research being promoted by Prof. Prescott at the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, through traditional masonic research lodges, lodges of Installed Masters to the work done in many lodges across the land to educate their members - the education function!

I have, of course, omitted The Cornerstone Society which tends to deal with philosophical and spiritual aspects of Freemasonry and thus comes clearly into the education sector.

In trying to disentangle this web of activities it is clearly going to be crucial to identify what the needs are, what the message(s) to be delivered is, and how, when and to who it might be delivered.

What is 'masonic research' today?

Finding a clear definition of masonic research is a challenging task. It ranges from the erudite, arcane and academic to producing a short talk to deliver at a lodge meeting - a complete spectrum and within masonry the borders between research and education are

blurred. Within the craft there are probably only a few hundred actually producing any work that is published, and a few thousand producing papers to deliver in lodge.

Who the intended reader is is also somewhat vague as is the intended purpose and indeed one cannot discount the desire to see one's work in print as being a major driving force in producing what can be read. Certainly any educational element has often been absent or lost, this culture might have been a key driver in Victorian times but has faded through the last century and the knowledge of the average freemason is often described as 'lamentable'

There are four different segments of research, although there is not necessarily a clear split between them. Some bodies actually bridge between different areas of activity. All of these areas are valid and worthwhile activities even though they may not contribute to meeting any 'corporate objectives'. They are:-

1. Research of an academic nature which can be subscribed to or is available to masons and non-masons alike.
2. Research usually conducted by masons for their own pleasure and not usually available to non-masons.
3. Organisations whose members do not undertake much academic research but whose primary purpose is to meet, receive papers and socialise.
4. Organisations whose primary purpose is to produce educational material for masons or for use at lodge meetings.

1. Research of an academic nature which can be subscribed to or is available to freemasons and non-masons alike.

Prior to the start of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry at Sheffield University there was little research being undertaken into the role played by Freemasonry within the historical social context and increasingly useful and interesting material is appearing on its website, including (from 2005) streamed audio.

Since the Quatuor Coronati Correspondence Circle permitted non-masons to subscribe to its *AQC* Transactions it now seems to fit more comfortably into this category especially since it has for some years had papers by non-masons read at its meetings.. Sadly its website remains stubbornly and amazingly short of any informative content. Given the number of positive advances in this area it is probably fulfilling its own objectives.

2. Research usually conducted by UK freemasons for their own pleasure and not usually available to non-masons.

This group is composed of Research Lodges some of whose members actually do research but the majority of members do not and there is not normally any encouragement to assist passive members into becoming active researchers. Attendance has fallen away much in line with the fall in masonic numbers over the past half century. Whether such bodies have the energy, desire and indeed the skills to make any move into masonic education is unclear. Those bodies producing printed transactions probably amount to a few thousand copies per year.

3. Organisations whose members do not undertake much academic research but whose primary purpose is to meet, receive papers and socialise.

This is of course a perfectly good thing to do, Freemasonry is after all a voluntary occupation and if it does not give the participants pleasure then it will fade into insignificance. In this group are some research lodges and lodges and bodies that tend to be on balance to be recipients (i.e. mainly passive) of information and research rather than generators and encouragers of endeavour. On balance they probably, in the broader context make little contribution to any educational effort for the improvement of masons. It may well be that they have little inclination to do so and that is a valid stance for them to take.

4. Organisations whose primary purpose is to produce educational material for freemasons or for use at lodge meetings.

In this group there is really only The Cornerstone Society which specifically sets out its stall to appeal to the Brother who wished to know more. There are a few lone voices in the wilderness who have aimed to get straightforward messages to a large number of UK freemasons; e.g., Neville B. Cryer (*I Never Knew That*, 104pp and £9.99) and George Power (*Masonic Miscellany*, 160pp and £9.99).

While the reach of The Cornerstone Society is hard to determine they will reach a few hundred per year with their meetings and the website has considerably more (worldwide) potential. Their material is however rather too lengthy to be easily used in lodges and does not constitute practical 'masonic outreach'

Prof Prescott in addressing a meeting of Research Lodges wrote:-

'Research is aimed at producing new discoveries; anything which has another function, for example improving freemasons' own understanding of their rituals, is not research. I would say it is instead education. Good research should assist education, but it is not its primary aim. As previous speakers have indicated, masonic education is of great importance and presents its own problem and issues, but since it is primarily concerned with the dissemination of existing knowledge, it is not research, which seeks to add to wider human knowledge''.

This statement perhaps serves to highlight the potential for confusion. As far as freemasons are concerned their activity is voluntary and if it does not offer satisfaction and reward then participation will reduce and cease, and this applies in masonic 'research' as much as going to the meetings of one's own lodge. **Market forces** are at work here just as they are in the rest of society!

Whether masonic research by freemasons should become more 'academic' is a mute point. There are risks to be considered and balanced. Any research lodge, especially one which publishes transactions should always remember that if it fails to produce what its corresponding members want to listen to or read it is rapidly going to go out of business. We were taught to be cautious!

If one considers Research Lodges such as *Quatuor Coronati* and, for example, the Manchester Lodge of Masonic Research and the Leicester Lodge of Research then the actual number of members (rather than the total attending) of those lodges who attend a meeting will probably only occasionally produce a large audience, nor is attendance alone going to offer a sufficient sized audience for any form of published transactions. All these bodies require a large body of corresponding members to remain viable - the economics of hard copy transactions is that the unit cost rises rapidly as production runs fall.. Thus they must produce what their target audience desires or loose members and viability.

I would argue that most of what is currently termed ‘masonic research ‘ is done with a full or partial intent that it is going to be of some enlightenment to freemasons themselves

There must also be questions asked about just what the average UK freemason reads. Only circa 10% of freemasons are prepared to pay the typical cost of a meal and drink after one lodge meeting for a years subscription to *Freemasonry Today*. Research in America on newspaper readership has shown that reading a newspaper depends upon when you were born. If you were born before 1929 then 75% read a newspaper daily but born 1929-45 that drops to 60-65%, between 1946-60 down to 55% and after 1960 25-30%. If you doubt that this trend is applicable in the UK then just look at the long term and ongoing decline in UK newspaper readership.

What might future objectives be?

1. The Centre for Research into Freemasonry at Sheffield University is stimulating some interesting work among academics and undoubtedly this will have some spin off into the research done by freemasons. It is however likely to completely bypass and not influence the average mason. The Canonbury Centre is also unlikely to have any impact generally within the UK Craft. In raising expectations and aspirations such bodies are vital in broadening the vistas of possible activity for freemason researchers.

2. Research Lodges should be hotbeds of thought and discussion but it doesn't often feel like that at the meetings and attendance has been affected by the decline in membership and of course part of their ‘turf’ has been stolen by Installed Masters Lodges where one can be a passive recipient closer to one’s home town. Whether research lodges would wish to engage in new activities remains an unanswered question. They have evolved a style and a membership that enjoy that environment. That is the question they need to answer when addressing their future.

3. If the improvement of the knowledge of the average mason about Freemasonry is to be a key objective then some radical changes are going to have to take place. Many of the issues will revolve around the subject of **communication**. There is little benefit in producing good works if they are not effectively disseminated to those who should be receiving the message. This is the classic dilemma that faces every marketing function in every organisation - how to reach one’s target audience. Clearly if improving the knowledge of the organisation is going to be an objective then that must be delivered at the lodge level.

The facts tell us that 90% do not subscribe to magazines like *Freemasonry Today* or *The Square* and probably 95-97%+ have no contact with any masonic organisation producing ‘educational material’. If they will not seek out information then the information has to be delivered to them!

Anecdotally a survey of a single lodge showed that when members were asked if they wanted some ‘meaningful masonic information to be communicated at every meeting’ 95% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Clearly they were not adverse to being better informed!

Traditionalism, passivity and resistance to change

One of the attractions of Freemasonry is that it offers something of tradition to its members and is concerned with the preservation of Landmarks (even though those are not defined). Thus one might expect, and can easily experience, the reality that masons are even more averse to change than society in general. This is perhaps best epitomised by a joke I heard recently 'What is more conservative than a mason? Two of them!'

We also suffer from what might be described as an archaic organisational structure. Theoretically lodges can do as they choose but the top down hierarchy, coupled with a desire from above for uniformity tends to produce either passivity or resignation. In times of great change in society, which is being experienced now, such attributes are unhelpful at best.

In seeking to implement change one must bear in mind that in a population in general only around 1-3% are active promoters of change and only about 10% will consider adopting change unless they can see it in successful operation elsewhere. Change stands little chance of adoption unless there are perceived to be clear benefits that outweigh the risks of innovation.

The Internet

The most depressing part of my research has been to trawl the net to see which research lodges have websites with any quantity of useful material for masons - sadly one almost draws a complete blank. Even the premier research lodge, Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, has absolutely nothing to offer an enquiring freemason. Most of those with websites are happy to take your money as a corresponding member!

There are some heroes to be found but curiously they all come from outside the traditional research lodge environment. They deserve to be named:

- Bro Bruno Vigillio Gazza in Italy with his *Pietre Stones Review of Freemasonry* at www.freemasons.freemasonry.com
- Bro Trevor McKeown, librarian and webmaster of the GL of British Columbia www.freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/index.html
- The Cornerstone Society, whoever they are, at www.cornerstonesociety.com
- Bro Gary Dryfoos web.mit.edu/dryfoo/Masonry/ (the first masonic web page)
- Prof Andrew Prescott, of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry has an (increasingly) interesting site to freemasons.org. Curiously his previous haunt was the British Library.
- Bro Paul Bessel, inveterate collector of masonic facts at bessel.org/webindex.htm

There is a big question mark over whether research lodges consider that part of their remit is the dissemination of masonic information to the world of freemasons. All the online evidence is that they see the communication function as irrelevant. This seems oddly in contradiction to their founding ideals!

Where Next?

The start of the 21st century sees Freemasonry in the English speaking world suffering from some 60 years of decline in new members and membership. Without doubt there is an urgent need for it to renew itself. It must be sufficiently of this century as to encourage men to join, obtain pleasure and satisfaction enough to retain their membership. Part of that has to be that our members understand something of Freemasonry.

This paper only aims to address the information available to freemasons themselves, if you like the 'education' function. There would seem to be little if any understanding of what information the lodges would like to have available, no one, so far, seems to have considered that to be the starting point.

How that information should be communicated does not have any consensus - but it surely must be through the Internet. It could be that those who will drive this revolution will have few ties to traditional research lodges - they will be driven by a need to communicate.

We will probably be well to bear in mind that:

- reading serious amounts of worthy erudite text, whether books or newspapers is not something most masons will do (We watch Dickens rather than read him);
- that for younger men issues of 'work / life' balance weigh heavily in deciding where to allocate leisure time (partner, family, television, meal out, pub and then free time);
- that attention spans are limited (television would indicate a limit of 3 to 5 minutes);
- Failure to offer 'value for a brothers time and money' is likely to lead to resignation;
- Masonic resistance to change will probably mean that new initiatives will come from new men or 'radicals' rather than from within existing organisations within Freemasonry.

The balance between darkness and light; that is between ignorance and knowledge, is an ongoing part of the human condition. Clearly there are periods of action followed by declines - there are clear indications that light is currently in the ascendent; but that as yet the rays have not really reached 'Bro Joe Bloggs' in his lodge. They should!

Apologies

The views expressed are those of the author. I offer apologies for errors and omissions; my knowledge might be geographically wide but it is certainly not universal. I am also sure that there are many individuals beavering away doing good work, to those please do not treat my words as a personal attack, I hope that readers can agree with the general thrust of my arguments and the need for focussed action.
