



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PAPER NO: 49

PRESENTED BY: Rt Wor Bro Max T. Gadd (Guest Speaker)

DATE: 23 November 1998

THE FRANK WHIDDON MASONIC HOMES

At our initiation we are told that "it cannot be denied that among the thousands ranged under its banners there are many who, perhaps from unforeseen and inevitable calamity are reduced to the lowest ebb of poverty and distress. These claim not only our sympathy but also our assistance". We were then asked if we would contribute to the relief of poor and distressed brethren. Fortunately most of us do not run across such brethren in our daily walks of life but they are there and they have always been there.

The story of the development of the Frank Whiddon Masonic Homes really commenced nearly seventy five years ago when, before the onset of the world wide depression of the 1930's, social welfare as we know it did not exist and long illnesses were to be feared and unemployment was often a disaster for a man and his family.

Three concerned members of the craft who have now all passed on - Bro Herbert Cracknell, Wor Bro Fred Greening and Wor Bro Harold Wilkins - and who in about 1923, whilst accompanying a concert party to the Lidcombe State Hospital, visited a brother mason who was an inmate there. He shocked his visitors when he told them of the conditions there. This Lidcombe State Hospital was also called the Old Men's Home. It was one of the largest institutions of its kind in Australia, having over 1300 inmates. Conditions in this home were really appalling by today's standards. These three brethren then discovered that there were quite a few brethren in such institutions who had come upon hard times. Indeed there were possibly more about whom they knew nothing who, probably through shame, were unwilling to admit that they were members of the craft. When informed of these circumstances members of Grand Lodge visited these brethren and distributed small comforts.

After further representations from the original three brethren, the Grand Master, M.W.Bro John Goulston, in 1926 recommended to Grand Lodge "that a committee be appointed to report at the next communication on the advisability of opening a Masonic Hostel for the accommodation of our aged and infirm brethren". It was found that there were at least 37 brethren who were inmates of the State Hospitals - some had only themselves to blame but others were genuine cases of distress which were brought about by a series of unfortunate circumstances. The grants which were made were not sufficient to cover the needs of these unfortunates and many of them had no relatives to whom they could turn.

It was found that, to support a hostel of the sort contemplated, it would cost about £100 per head and this was beyond the capacity of the benevolent fund. It was decided to conduct a plebescite amongst the brethren of all lodges and it was found that many brethren who, perhaps because of the onset of the depression were themselves committed so much that they weren't able to contribute more.

One brother, it is reported, whilst visiting a lodge one evening took up a collection in the south to provide Christmas cheer for some of our brethren who were inmates of State Hospitals and whose ranks ranged from Master Masons to P.D.G.I.W. The response was good but it did not go far enough and so it went on.

The committee which had been appointed by Grand Lodge reported that there seemed a necessity to provide a hospice for the bed-ridden and a hostel for the aged and infirm. The committee also came to the conclusion that most of the names submitted to it did not come within the requirements of the constitutions rendering them eligible for Masonic relief. Further consideration of the matter was deferred by Grand Lodge - they didn't seem in a hurry to do much to alleviate the situation.

In the meantime the three brethren mentioned earlier continued their visits to Lidcombe and also the Liverpool Old Mens' Home and they were practical in their efforts by visiting as regularly as they could and taking with them small comforts. Bro Harold Wilkins wrote in the November 1927 issue of the Masonic Club Journal in which he ventured "to bring before you the matter of the aged and distressed brethren domiciled in our State Hospitals (Lidcombe, Liverpool, etc.). Some of these you met at the Club a year ago when Bro Cracknell and I brought a few of them to town and the Club entertained them at afternoon tea. We are anxious to brighten their Christmas again this year and I trust that you will be able to bring the matter before your members and perhaps assist us to some small degree. I might add that if any of your members desire to visit these places or to send recent issues of magazines we would be pleased to help".

The group continued their good work during the drab years of the depression of the 1930's. One of their number, Harold Thomas (by this time the original three had been joined by others) wrote - "Sunday morning 7th April, 1935 the group visited the Lidcombe Home and were joined by several others. The manager, who had heard of the visit, had arranged for suitable accommodation for the group in one of the larger rooms and after a few speeches, the inmate brethren were presented with sweaters - even to those who were confined to bed. Thanks were extended by the manager who, together with his assistant were members of the craft".

On one occasion the group took some of these brethren to inspect the Masonic Hall in Castlereagh Street. One of them sought permission to play the organ in the No. 1 Lodge Room. He went on to play "Lead Kindly Light" and "Abide with me". On being questioned later, it was discovered that he had been a Grand Organist. The group was later entertained at afternoon tea and a brother presented a welcome cheque to the group.

On one visit the committee noticed a young man in his early twenties. Who was he and why was he here? He was Bro A of Lodge B who suffered from two complaints either of which is pronounced by the medical profession the world over as incurable. He was completely out of funds and was forced to take refuge in the only place available to him and where he could obtain some medical attention. This was one of the types who were being assisted by the group who were "doing unto him as they would that he, under similar circumstances, would do unto them".

Other Masons joined the group who continued their good work with very little outside assistance. A re-union of the inmates of the Lidcombe State Hospital was held in 1936 in the Lidcombe Masonic Hall and entertainment was provided. Lodge Thespian, the actors' lodge, came to the party and gave of their talents freely and

the use of the hall was also given freely. Wives of members of the group made cakes etc. Magazines were cadged for distribution and one of the members said "These visits upset me as many of the brethren once had good jobs but were now really poor and shabby". One brother had been for 30 years a signwriter, another a commercial traveller and another a former D.G.I.W. Becoming widowers or having family medical expenses in the past was the cause of most of them eventually arriving at the State Hospital.

The Comforts Fund, as it was called, could never have existed without the Burwood Temple executive who made room available "gratis" and the Lidcombe Temple executive which made their hall available together with its kitchen for the Quarterly Re-unions - also "gratis".

Financial assistance came from various lodges, individual brethren and the Board of Benevolence. There was an assembly at the Lidcombe Temple in December, 1937 with a large representative gathering when Christmas Cheer with Christmas Cake made by Lodge Leichhardt were dispensed to those present. Other gifts included cigarettes, pipes, tobacco (at that time not considered dangerous to health), jars of tongues, wallets, pouches, knives, oranges and sweets. Bro Cracknell and his group continued to bring cheer to the inmates of these institutions. They must have been receiving support from the various lodges, particularly in the Lidcombe and Burwood districts.

Sunday, 18th December, 1938 must have been a memorable day for Bro Cracknell. The Aged and Distressed Brethren Comforts Fund Committee as it was now known, made its usual trip to Lidcombe and was accompanied by at least 7 Past Grand Officers. Bro McAndrew, an inmate of the institution presented to Bro H.J. Cracknell an illuminated address on behalf of the inmates in appreciation of Bro Cracknell's interest in them over a period of 16 years. The whole of the work including the binding of the address was done by inmates.

The last year of peace saw an increase in the activities of the committee in March 1939 and it was followed by quarterly re-unions. Bro Cracknell stated at the re-union of September, 1939 that the ultimate aim of the group was the establishment of a home for aged and distressed masons. He had long carried out the work of visiting the masons of Lidcombe, Newington and Liverpool (17 years) and had long felt that the craft should have one of its own to care for them.

For some time no Mason had been buried as a pauper in which last duty Grand Lodge came to the assistance of the Fund by grants.

The second World War of the 20th Century brought many changes and restrictions into the lives of ordinary Australians who were not in the armed forces: rationing of food, clothing and petrol; shortages of goods and blackouts were some. For a time the country faced the possibility of invasion. In these circumstances many pre-war organisations ceased to exist "for the duration". But war or no war, the aged brethren living in State institutions in the outer western suburbs of Sydney could not be swept away or forgotten and the committee continued its work. At each re-union more and more practical help was evinced by the lodges. Many entertainers offered their services at these quarterly re-unions.

Sadly, in 1941 Bro Cracknell passed away. He had always hoped that Grand Lodge would become more involved with the work of the group but this was not to be in his lifetime.

In 1942 the committee extended its work to take in the sanatorium at Waterfall. Later in 1942 they extended their activities to the Randwick Auxiliary Hospital. By this time the Aged and Distressed Brethren Comforts Fund had many members and a large committee to carry on the great work of the original three. They had an income for the year 1942 of £154.18s.

Grand Lodge was represented by R.W.Bro Gollan at the quarterly re-union in the Lidcombe Temple on 12th June, 1943. At that re-union, Bro A G Golham of Croydon Park promised £1000 and R.W.Bro Gollan praised the work of the committee and expressed his support. Donations began to come in from far and wide showing that the general members of the craft supported the work.

Disapproval of the work was expressed by M.W.Bro F A Maquire, the then Grand Master in December, 1944 saying: "Complaints have been made to me that Lodges and Brethren are receiving requests for Masonic objects which are not recognised by Grand Lodge". Faced with official disapproval, the committee nevertheless carried on its work during 1945 and went from strength to strength. This situation began to change with the appointment of R.W.Bro Frank Whiddon as Deputy Grand Master and his subsequent election as Grand Master in August 1945. He was personally present at the quarterly re-union in early 1946.

The committee had leased a cottage at Mt Druitt and the President of the Fund, Bro F F Straughen said that this was just a "drop in the ocean". He added that they would like to call it the Frank Whiddon Home.

Since the Grand Master had given the committee permission to appeal for funds they had received £172 within one month from 64 lodges .

The Grand Master in reply said "what more important viewpoint can a mason have than the care and welfare of the aged mason?" Any country or people who did not make provision for their aged and distressed had gone back to jungle law. With approval from Grand Lodge the committee undoubtedly had a bright future. I believe that the Aged and Distressed Comforts Fund is well established and when I turn over my gavel to my successor the history between this and then will give him an inspiration to get right behind your movement", the Grand Master said. He hoped that the movement would snowball and show the community that we take care of the old brethren who have born the heat and burden of the day.

At the AGM of the Aged and Distressed Brethren Comforts Fund on 7 February 1947 at Burwood it was reported that the Grand Master had given his approval for the fund to change its name to "The Frank Whiddon Masonic Homes of N.S.W." (with which is incorporated the Aged and Distressed Brethren Comforts Fund). There was then a generous increase in the donations to the fund from lodges and individual brethren.

At this stage the committee began negotiations for a 40 acre site at Baulkham Hills on which a home or hostel might be built. Before the negotiations could be completed another offer was received in the form of a 21 acre estate at Glenfield, south of Liverpool from Mrs Ethel Easton Symonds, widow of Bro Charles Joseph Symonds who had been a member of Lodge Arcadia. Bro H J Daley, then Town Clerk of the Municipality of Ingleburn introduced the project to Mrs Symonds. All that she asked was that it be known as "Easton Park" and that she might be able to live in her cottage there during her lifetime. After the Grand Master and his Deputy R.W.Bro Frank McDowell and the secretary of the fund, Wor Bro Hansford visited

Glenfield and reported favourably, it was decided to accept Mrs Symonds' most generous gift on 14 May 1947.

Unfortunately M.W.Bro Frank Whiddon passed away after a short illness on 1 September 1947 and was unable to see his dream realised.

However, the movement was in good hands and the Deputy Grand Master R.W.Bro Frank McDowell on 29 November 1947 received the title deeds from Mrs Symonds.

And so began the great movement which is still known as The Frank Whiddon Masonic Homes of N.S.W.

But there was much work to be done.

The first Duo Cottages were erected and opened by the Grand Master M.W.Bro Frank McDowell on 15 April 1950. Three aged masons and their wives occupied the first cottages. The Grand Master said that it was "a memorable occasion in the history of Freemasonry in New South Wales". It is interesting to note that each pair of cottages cost about £4000 to build and furnish.

One of the cottages was built and paid for by the brethren of the Ryde District. Two more pairs of cottages were built, one by V.W.Bro A Webb (Lodge Artarmon) and the brethren of F District (Artarmon to Hornsby) and another by the brethren of U District (Auburn to Parramatta).

And so the building went on piece by piece at Easton Park.

Many donations came in from districts far and wide - such was the interest.

An attractive feature was the number of native trees planted by Bro Peter Duplessis who had a nursery at Mosman. He and his helpers planted thousands of trees over a period of many years.

It was difficult to get to Easton Park in the early days because of the poor roads after Liverpool but that didn't stop an army of volunteers from going there regularly to assist in its development. The number of brethren who supported the early development either by donations or by practical help was enormous. The Federal Government, in recognising the need for such homes as the Frank Whiddon Masonic Homes subsidised the committee pound for pound and later dollar for dollar for the erection of further accommodation and this enabled the project to proceed.

It is worth mentioning at this stage that the committee did not let up in their visitations to Lidcombe State Hospital, Liverpool State Hospital, Waterfall Sanitarium, Randwick Auxiliary Hospital and Bodington Red Cross Hospital at Wentworth Falls for, in spite of the development at Glenfield there were still brethren in need of care and attention at these institutions - there were 80 on the list.

As funds became available building went on apace and quite a few large buildings went up named after such proponents of the scheme - Christie House, McDowell House, Maas House, Webb House (hospital), Thespian Hall, Cracknell Court, Raines House, Sir David Martin Memorial Nursing Home, Taylor House. There is also accommodation for relatives who may need to stay over at the Village. At

Easton Park accommodation consists of 27 self care, 79 proposed self care, 222 hostel and 196 nursing care.

The first officially arranged visit to Easton Park for Ladies was on 30 July 1959 and since then Ladies have been to the fore in fund raising activities. The first lodge meeting was held in Thespian Hall on 19 August 1960 - Lodge Ryde. Since then there have been many lodge meetings which give residents an opportunity to visit.

Fetes have been organised and these have, over the years raised large sums of money - the first on 19 November 1960 raised over £20,000 and since then this figure has been greatly exceeded. The organisation operates mainly on voluntary donation, fund raising efforts, grants from the government (building) and moneys paid by residents who pay only according to their ability to do so. The big fund raising efforts of course are annual fetes and donations by members.

The Frank Whiddon Masonic Homes did not stagnate with the building of accommodation at Easton Park, nor did it limit its access to masons and their wives and families. It has now become a state-wide institution which provides for all aged people in need whether they be masonic or otherwise. This is a fact that many people don't seem to realise and which should brighten the image of Freemasonry in New South Wales.

In addition to the main complex at Glenfield we are proud to have -

Primrose Court, Hornsby -	60 self care
Masonic Towers, Hornsby -	59 hostel
The Cedars, Casino -	60 nursing care
A H Livingstone House, Grafton -	56 nursing care
Ilumba Gardens Retirement Village, Kelso -	28 self care, 60 hostel
Kyogle Court, Kyogle -	32 Hostel
Laurieton Haven, Laurieton -	62 self care
Laurieton Haven for the Frail Aged, Laurieton-	40 hostel
Redhead Gardens, Redhead -	26 self care, 40 hostel
Lake Macquarie Retirement Village, Belmont -	35 self care, 34 hostel
Wingham Court, Wingham -	34 self care, 33 hostel, 49 nursing care
Lower Clarence Retirement Village, Maclean -	15 self care, 51 hostel
Greenstone Lodge Hostel, Temora and) -	24 self care, 36 hostel,
Nurraburra Lodge Nursing Home, Temora)	40 nursing care
Shang-ri-la Hostel, Narrabri -	40 hostel
Dr A J Park Memorial Court, Narrabri -	16 self care
Maitland Retirement Village "Largs Lodge", Largs -	43 hostel
Birrunangan Lodge, Yamba -	16 self care

Now this is a very impressive list and one of which we, as masons can be very proud.

It has been said that from an acorn a mighty oak tree grows. Isn't this true of the Frank Whiddon Masonic Homes of New South Wales and with your support it will continue.

A hearty vote of thanks must go to Bro Cracknell, Wor Bro Greening and Wor Bro Wilkins for their practical application of Masonic Charity and the vision they showed in looking to the future.