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The early History of the Willoughby/Chatswood Suburbs and The History of Lodge Kuring-gai No. 230 and the establishment of Freemasonry in the District.

It is well that we should, at the outset, view in true perspective the foresight and judgement of a few earnest and enthusiastic Freemasons who, over a century ago, decided to inaugurate the movement resulting in the ultimate establishment of Lodge Kuring-gai and a Masonic presence in Chatswood.

In order to do so, it is necessary to consider briefly the conditions then existing in the district for these formed the Masonic ground these pioneers proposed to explore and develop.

In the early 1800's, Willoughby was considered a rural district somewhat remote from Sydney, with no transport and only a small population of timber-getters and farmers. Cart tracks provided the only means of access. It was an area lacking most of the amenities that other parts of Sydney enjoyed.

The Municipality of North Willoughby was incorporated in 1865 and the first meeting of Councillors was held on New Years Day 1866 when James William Bligh was elected Chairman. Council meetings were held in a sparsely furnished slab hut owned by 'German Bill' Reynolds at the corner of Penshurst and Penkivil Streets, Willoughby, until the old Town Hall was built in 1903 in Victoria Avenue, Chatswood.

Not many suburbs are named after women but Chatswood is one exception. The suburb is named after a Mrs Harnett whose husband, Richard Hayes Harnett was a notable figure in the area and Mayor of Willoughby in 1871. In 1876, he sub-divided an estate in Chatswood and named it after his wife. Her Christian name was Charlotte but his pet name for her was Chattie or Chat and the family referred to the bushland areas of the estate as Chat's wood.

When the Post Office was established in 1879, the Council suggested naming the area Chatswood after Harnett's successful estate.

Willoughby was named by the Surveyor General, Sir Thomas Mitchell, after his friend and superior officer of the Spanish Peninsular Wars, Sir James Willoughby Gordon, (1773-1851).

Some say the suburb of Gordon was also named after him.

The Australian poet Henry Lawson was so impressed with the naming of Chatswood, that he wrote a poem about the subject in 1909.

CHATTIE'S WOOD

'Twas an old respected settler, in the unrespected days,
 Who had land along the North Shore, and - we'll say his name was Hayes -
 And he came there as a young man, when there was great work to do
 And his young wife's name was "Chattie" (and no doubt, she chattered, too)
 'Twas a "small place in the country" - where he went to be carefree -
 Out beyond the pleasant suburb that they now call Willoughby,
 And a little wood was on it, and the trees were tall and good,
 And his young wife used to dream there, so he called it "Chattie's Wood."
 "Chattie's Wood" has long since gone, and shops are standing in a row
 Where the young wife went a-dreaming in the days of long ago,
 How the pretty name was altered doesn't matter, anyhow,
 But the wife is still remembered, as they call it "Chatswood" now.

In 1901, the Pacific Highway, then known as Gordon Road, was not much better than a dirt track, full of potholes and, as historians have stated, "a quagmire in wet weather". But people walking on the rough footpaths did not have to worry about being splashed by passing cars - there weren't any! Horses and horse-drawn vehicles were still the main means of transport. The sealing of Gordon Road did not commence until 1922.

Bro. George Leafe's spring carts were the first regular transport saving the walk or horse ride to Milson's Point to catch the ferry to Sydney Town. Then came the famous Bianconi horse-buses which ran regular services until displaced by trains. Other services were provided by Harry Russell, landlord of the Great Northern Hotel and those along Willoughby Road by W.T. Muston, a former owner of Laurelbank.

The railway had been completed from Hornsby to St. Leonards in 1890 and extended to Milson's Point in 1893. Services were restricted to four each way, each day, with a late night service on only two nights of the week. This did not auger well for Masonic visitations. There were very limited weekend services.

Tom Watson was still able to make a living with his 19-seat horse buses on the Milson's Point to Pymble run.

Never-the-less, the railway was the catalyst for the rapid development of Chatswood which moved ahead of the older Willoughby area.

The tram line had been electrified and extended to the corner of Penshurst Street and Victoria Avenue in 1898 but wasn't extended to Chatswood Station until 1908.

Street and house lighting was by means of gas lamps until the domestic electricity supply came to the district in 1916.

Most of the commercial development was centered on the western end of Victoria Avenue between the station and Gordon Road. There was some commercial development on the eastern side of the station, a few small shops, a branch of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney and the Royal Hotel. This hotel became the Chatswood Hotel and then the Railway Hotel, finally to become affectionally known as 'Dockers' after the then publican.

Incidentally, in 1901, this hotel as well as the Great Northern Hotel at the corner of Mowbray Road and Gordon Road were owned by my great grandmother.

Victoria Avenue was then joined across the railway line by a level crossing, not the multi-storey shopping complex that is there today.

It was against this 'backdrop' that, on 28 October 1901, nine brethren, five past masters and four master masons held an informal meeting in the Royal Hotel and formed themselves into a committee to consider the possibility of establishing a Masonic lodge in Chatswood. It was resolved that all interested masons be invited, by circular, to attend a meeting at the Chatswood Hall in Brown Street, Chatswood, on 12 November 1901, to consider a motion to form a Masonic Lodge. This motion was carried unanimously and an application was made to Grand Lodge for a Charter with Lodge Samaritan being the sponsor of same.

At that time, apart from Lodges Samaritan and St. Leonards at North Sydney and other Lodges at Mosman, Manly, Hunters Hill and Ryde, there were no Lodges to the north of Sydney until those at Newcastle.

It was resolved that the name of the new lodge be Lodge Kuring-gai after the aboriginal tribe that formerly inhabited the northern shores of Port Jackson, the area being the hunting grounds of the Kuring-gai people.

A meeting place for the lodge was found. It was a two-storey building on the corner of McIntosh Street and Gordon Road, just north of, and opposite the Fullers and Gordon Roads intersection in Chatswood. The building had been built for a club and with minor alterations, it was approved by the Grand Architect, Bro. G.G. MacIntosh and approved by the Board of General Purposes.

Lodge Kuring-gai No. 230, United Grand Lodge of N.S.W. was consecrated in the lodgeroom, MacIntosh Street, Chatswood, on Thursday, 30th January, 1902 by the Grand Master, Most Wor. Bro. John Cochrane Remington, and Wor. Bro. Fred S. Willis, the Mayor of Willoughby, was installed as the foundation master.

Nominations for four Candidates for initiation and nine for affiliation were read out by the Secretary on that night.

With the membership increasing from 14 to 46 in the first nine months, the lodge premises were completely inadequate so a committee was formed to approach the Mayor of Willoughby with reference to "making provision in the new Town Hall, to be erected in Chatswood, for suitable accommodation for the lodge."

On 20 November 1902, the terms for a five year lease for a Lodgeroom, Ante room and Supper Room in the Town Hall were signed.

The Town Hall was officially opened on 4 September 1903 and the Lodge held its first meeting there on 16 January 1904.

It is interesting to note that the Mayor throughout all the negotiations was Wor. Bro. Fred Willis, the foundation master!

Seven members of the Lodge have occupied the office of Mayor of Willoughby - their combined service totalling 32 years. Members of other Lodges have also occupied the office of Mayor, the most recent being Wor. Bro. John Squire of Lodge Falconian.

Many Ministers of the local Churches became members of Lodge Kuring-gai, most of whom served from time to time as Chaplain. They took it in turns to hold Masonic Services in their churches.

In every Lodge there seems to be a few Brethren of outstanding character whose leadership and wise counsel is sought in many ways. One such member was Wor. Bro. Robert Henry Gordon. He was the foundation Junior Warden and a Trustee of Lodge Kuring-gai. He was a very generous man and was always to the fore when it came to charitable matters and frequently made generous donations to Lodge Widows in need, Masonic Charities and the Lodge Benevolent Fund.

He owned a large furniture store in Sydney, R.H. Gordon Pty. Ltd., and donated a number of items to the Lodge - the Wor. Master's and Wardens' Chairs and Pedestals and the Altar for the original Lodgeroom - these are still in use in the Rehearsal Room in the Coachhouse at Laurelbank.

After the First World War, he donated the 1914-1918 Honor Board now hanging in the Coachhouse Masonic Military Museum on the ground floor. He also gave framed photographs of the early Past Masters, now hanging in the crush area of the lodgeroom. He also donated an organ for the Lodge.

He passed away after a long illness on 23rd May 1935, aged 73 years.

An interesting item is recorded in the minutes of 6 March 1905:-

"A Lodge of Sorrow was held in the Lodgeroom on Monday 8 March 1905, on account of the death of a respected Brother, Bro. Dr. James Browne Crabbe, the Lodge being opened at 2.30 pm by the Wor. Master, Wor. Bro. Robert Henry Gordon. This much loved Brother's name was inscribed on the Death Roll and duly deposited in the archives, the ceremony being under the direction of Wor. Bro. Fred Willis, the Director of Ceremonies. The Brethren then marched to the late Brother's residence in Victoria Avenue, Chatswood, and from there, behind the horse-drawn hearse to Gore Hill Cemetery, a distance of about five miles, the final Masonic rites being given by the Wor. Master.

This esteemed Brother, being a local Doctor, was greatly loved in the district, and his cheery, breezy personality had endeared him to all sections of the community. Crabbes Avenue at Willoughby was named in his honour.

It would have no doubt been a warm day being March, and the brethren would have been in three piece woollen suits.

Over the years, many members of Lodge Kuring-gai have been very prominent citizens and distinguished themselves in the fields of local government, the ministry, business, the judiciary, public service, sport and community affairs.

The Headmaster of Gordon Public School for 35 years Wor. Bro. Harry L. Fry was a member of the Lodge as were two Headmasters of Chatswood Public School, Very Wor. Bro. H.B. (Bill) Squires and Bro. Peter Tapp.

On 6 August 1906, it was announced that Wor. Bro. Claude Leplastrier had been appointed District Grand Inspector of Workings for the District, then numbered 1A.

The District then consisted of the following Lodges:-

Lodge Balmain No. 23 (Balmain)	Lodge Star of Eastwood No. 134 (Ryde)
Lodge Hunters Hill No. 139 (Hunters Hill)	Lodge St. Leonards No. 98 (North Sydney)
Lodge Mosman No. 228 (Mosman)	Lodge Waratah No. 166 (Balmain)
Lodge Sir Colin Campbell No. 92 (Balmain)	Lodge Drummoyne No. 210 (Drummoyne)
Lodge St. John No. 83 (Manly)	Lodge Kuring-gai No. 230 (Chatswood)
Lodge Pacific No. 114 (Balmain)	Lodge Samaritan No. 50 (North Sydney)

With the limited means of transport in those days, it must have been very difficult for V.Wor. Bro. Leplastrier to cover such a wide area. He must have stayed overnight on occasions, returning home the following day.

A resolution from which great things afterwards arose appears in the minutes of 27 August 1908 in the name of Wor. Bro. Robert H. Gordon, "That a block of land in Chatswood be purchased for the purpose of erecting a Lodgeroom." Two blocks of land adjoining the Town Hall were subsequently purchased.

Between 1914 and 1918, 25 Brethren saw active service and although some were wounded, and one lost a leg, all returned from the conflict.

Lodge Roseville No. 344, sponsored by Lodge Kuring-gai was consecrated in the Lodgeroom at Chatswood Town Hall on 25 March 1920.

Lodges Kuring-gai and Roseville were host to the Masonic English Cricketers whenever they visited the State during a Test Series. Names in the Presence Book include F.C. Toone, F.E. Makepeace, Douglas Jardine, H. Sutcliffe, Walter Hammond, G. Duckworth and Harold Larwood. Many Australian Test players names are also recorded. No doubt 'Bodyline bowling' was not mentioned!

In April 1921, The Kuring-gai District Lodge of Instruction was formed with Wor. Bro. Robert R. McGechan as Preceptor. This Lodge is still operating today (February 2013) and meets on the first Mondays of each month.

In January 1922, the Hall Company, Kuring-gai Lodge Ltd., was formed and shares were issued to the Brethren in order that the Lodge could erect the Chatswood Masonic Hall.

Lodge Hercules No. 452, sponsored by Lodge Kuring-gai, was consecrated at the Town Hall, Chatswood on 6 December 1922 and Wor. Bro. Robert Todd Forsyth, a Past Master of Lodge Kuring-gai was installed as the foundation Master. He was a prominent Estate Agent in the district.

In April the following year, it was decided to recommend the petition of another Lodge, Lodge Mowbray No. 488. This Lodge was consecrated at Chatswood Town Hall on 10 August 1923. Wor. Bro. Richard Ernest Keegan of Lodge Kuring-gai was installed as the foundation master.

The foundation stone of the Chatswood Masonic Hall was set by the Grand Master, Most Wor. Bro. William Thompson on Saturday, 19 August 1922. It was a grand affair! In addition to the stone set by the Grand Master, three others were set - one by the Wor. Master, Wor. Bro. Richard E. Keegan, and the other two by V.Wor. Bro. Fitt Charles Petrie, D.G.I.W., and Wor. Bro. Robert H. Gordon, the Trustees and only remaining foundation members of the Lodge.

The Lodgeroom was dedicated and Lodge Kuring-gai held the first meeting in the new building on 20 September 1923.

On 19 July that year, the advent of yet another Lodge was announced - Lodge Kuring-gai Lewis No. 499. This Lodge was consecrated in the new Chatswood Masonic Hall on 8 October 1923. Wor. Bro. John Ralph Green of Lodge Kuring-gai was the foundation master.

Lodge Kuring-gai sponsored many Lodges including, Lodges Roseville, Hercules, Mowbray and Kuring-gai Lewis in this District and from these came Lodges F.S. Mance, Prometheus and Brotherhood. In other Districts, it sponsored Lodges Renown, No.360 (Turramurra), Lindfield No. 362 (Lindfield), Chatswood No. 285 (Artarmon), Willoughby No. 363 (Artarmon), Artarmon (Artarmon), and Endeavour No. 429 (Crows Nest).

It is interesting to note that 22 years after the foundation of Lodge Kuring-gai, 32 other Lodges had been established on the North Shore and Masonic Halls were built at Chatswood, Turramurra, Hornsby, Lindfield, Northbridge, Artarmon, North Sydney, Gore Hill and Longueville.

At the outbreak of World War II, 31 Brethren of Lodge Kuring-gai, including at least one First World War veteran, enlisted in the armed services. All returned safely with the exception of Bro. Albert Leslie Hayes who died on 1st August 1945.

On 30 January 1952, Lodge Kuring-gai held its Golden Jubilee meeting which was attended by the Grand Master, Most Wor. Bro. John Hodgson accompanied by 43 Grand Officers, in addition to representatives from all the Lodges in the District. The Lodgeroom was filled to capacity making it one of the most memorable events in the history of Freemasonry on the North Shore.

At this meeting, a presentation of new furniture, the Wor. Master's and the Warden's Chairs and Pedestals and a new Altar was made to the Lodge from the other District Lodges. These are the ones used at present in the Lodgeroom at Laurelbank.

All went well with the Lodges meeting at Chatswood for 42 years until, in 1965, Willoughby Council decided to resume the Masonic Hall and land for the building of the present Civic Centre.

A committee was formed with a view of finding a suitable alternative site for a new Masonic Centre. They wisely chose the 'Laurelbank' property and, in doing so saved the historic building from demolition to make way for a service station.

The compensation offered by Willoughby Council fell short of the purchase price and the necessary alterations to the cottage, and the building of a new Lodgeroom. The Hall Company was restructured ; shares held by individual Brethren were recalled and new shares were issued to the Lodges meeting at Chatswood on a per capita basis and a loan for the building was arranged. The Company became Kuring-gai Lodge Pty. Ltd.

The architect for the project was Bro. Ivor Lloyd of Lodge Roseville and the builder was James Reid Craig. He was later initiated in Lodge Kuring-gai and served as Wor. Master for the term, 1974-75.

The new Lodgeroom was dedicated by the Grand Master, Most Wor. Bro. Edward Leslie Beers, CBE, on 21 July 1966.

The History of the Laurelbank property and District is published in full in the Booklet available from me after this meeting.

Over the years numerous local aldermen, mayors and parliamentarians, have been or are members of the Lodges meeting at Laurelbank. This list includes the late Bro. Sir William McMahon, one of the ten Prime Ministers of Australia who were proud to be Freemasons. To this list can also be added many local businessmen, prominent sportsmen including Test Cricketers and Rugby Union Test Players, and other distinguished Willoughby citizens.

On 9 December 1997, the Company changed its name to 'The Laurelbank Masonic Centre Pty. Ltd.,' which the Directors felt was more appropriate.

During the 1970's when the Sydney Masonic Centre was being rebuilt, the lodges meeting there had to find other temples for their meetings. Four of these moved their meetings to Laurelbank -

Lodges University of Sydney No. 544, Gladstone Temperance No. 618, Ubique No. 900 and Mackay No. 761. This increased the number of Lodges meeting at Laurelbank to 14.

This made my term as D.G.I.W. in 1974-75, very busy indeed as apart from their regular meetings, all the Lodges held many social functions throughout my term.

During the 47 years since the masonic involvement at Laurelbank, numerous changes have taken place. Most of the original lodges have consolidated, some moved to other centres and others have replaced them at Laurelbank and the Laurelbank-Kuring-gai Daylight Lodge No. 230 was consecrated.

The five Craft Lodges now still meeting at Laurelbank are:-

The Schools Lodge No. 639, Lodge F.S. Mance No. 671, Lodge Balmain No. 23, Laurelbank Kuring-gai Daylight Lodge No. 230, Lodge Harold Herman Unity No. 428.

There are nine other Masonic orders currently meeting at Laurelbank :-

The University of Sydney R.A. Chapter.
 The John Sunman Daylight Conclave, O.S.M.
 The Adeste Fideles Rose Croix Chapter.
 The Preceptory of Sydney, No. 2, Kts. Templar
 The Fort Denison Assemblage.
 The Mystic Rose Chapter.
 The Unity Conclave No. 7. Constantine.
 The Allied Masonic Degrees.
 The Chapel of St. Andrew No. 42.

And so, in conclusion, the Brethren of the District Lodges can look back with pride at the Masonic achievements in Chatswood and Willoughby during the past 111 years. May we all, inspired by the traditions of the past, face the future with the same foresight and confidence that was shown by those Brethren in the formative years so long ago.

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