

The Stonemasons who founded Lodge Melrose St. John

Good evening Ladies, Gentlemen and Brethren all. On behalf of the Lodge of Melrose St. John we thank you for your presence this evening.

We gather here as we do every year on Saint Johns day, to pay tribute to the Stonemasons who built this Abbey, the Founders of our Masonic Lodge. I thought to speculate on these Masons and mention some key dates in our early Lodge history.

St Mary's Abbey was founded in 1136 by the Cistercian order and was initially staffed by an Abbot and twelve monks. It was originally constructed of wood with a thatched roof.

As the Monks themselves did not have the necessary skills to build the Abbey, it is probable that they contracted out the work. The original Stonemasons would likely have been European itinerant workers of various skills and disciplines.

The Monks had a new approach to agriculture and sheep farming in particular which was a huge success. Their Order grew and became very wealthy.

After 7 years, the East part of the Abbey was dedicated to The Blessed Virgin and Saint John. Over the next 50 years the rest of the Abbey was built in the form of a St. John's cross with other buildings added to the complex. They enjoyed nearly 200 years of peace.

In 1322 the Abbey was attacked by an English Army and many monks killed. Petrus de Mein, Architect and Mason was employed by King Robert the Bruce to rebuild the Abbey.

63 years later the Abbey was again burned down. This time it took a period of about 120 years to rebuild. Reconstruction was still ongoing in 1504.

Our Lodge was founded by the Stonemasons who built Melrose Abbey. It is not unreasonable to speculate that during this 180 year period of reconstruction that the Operative Lodge was formed to:

- Foster harmony and regulate their trade;
- Resolve disputes;
- Provide benevolence and support for the Masons and their families;

The Drygrange Charter dated 1540 confirms that parcels of land at Newstead were rented by the workers at the Abbey. These were mostly the Mein and Bunzie families of Stonemasons. The records show that between 1540 and 1682 104 parcels of land at Newstead were awarded. Of these, at least 39 were to Meins and 5 to Bunzies.

In 1540 there were 130 monks at Melrose.

In 1544 English Armies again destroyed the Abbey from which it never recovered. The last Abbot died within a few years.

After the Scottish Reformation in 1560 the Abbey ceased to function. Its carvings were smashed by a Protestant mob and much of the Abbey carted away by the local people for building material.

In 1590 Melrose's last monk died. By this time, the lands belonging to the Abbey had been taken back by the Crown and granted to the Buccleuch family. Some lands were sold, some portioned off, and the Stonemasons of Newstead had to find work elsewhere.

In 1613 The Mein family home was built in Newstead and was used for our meetings. The old Lodge Room was correct to the compass and had a Maul and Chisel engraved in the door lintel. On the third Saturday of every June, the Officers of our Lodge still gather there to receive the Lodge Maul from a descendant of the Newstead Masons.

In 1618 the Lodge repaired part of the Abbey roof for it to be used as the parish church. For this, the Abbey gallery was designated for the use of the Masons; a privilege they had for nearly 200 years until a new parish church was built.

In 1670 the first non-operative Masons were admitted to the Lodge.

In 1674 a rare Old Charge from nearly a century before was copied by the Master of the Lodge. In that same year Lodge minutes were recorded. The Lodge met at Newstead and had 85 members of which 32 were Meins and 15 Bunzies.

In 1743 Lodge meetings were transferred from Newstead to Melrose. They were first held in hired rooms until 1791 when the existing Lodge in Melrose was built.

In 1891 after several approaches from the Grand Lodge of Scotland, the Lodge members voted 69 to 20 to join Grand Lodge. In recognition of the antiquity of the Lodge, we were allocated Lodge number 1bis. On the GLS records Lodge Mother Kilwinning No. 0, Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) No. 1, and Lodge Melrose St. John No. 1bis all have their foundation dates stated as 1598. Ironically 1598 was 8 years after the last Monk of Melrose Abbey died. The Lodge of Melrose St. John was the last of the older Lodges to join the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

Our Lodge Coat of Arms is two compasses formed in a saltire surrounded by fleur-de-lis. This is a copy of that carved on the wall of the Abbey dated to 1460-1470. The Coat of Arms and accompanying inscription commemorates John Morow or Morvo (which likely later became Murray) who was reputed in our Lodge records as a Master of our Lodge. He was a Parisian born Medieval Architect who oversaw many major ecclesiastical works in Scotland and of course ... including Melrose.

The Stonemasons of Newstead who worked on this beautiful Abbey were not part of some secret society skulking in dark corners. For many hundreds of years, they paraded through the streets of Melrose, sat in their Kirk together on a Sunday and (as now) practised benevolence and charity in their community.

We honour their memory. Thank you all for your attention this evening.

**Bro. Kenneth Hamilton Ross – Master
The Lodge of Melrose St. John No. 1bis
Oration at Melrose Abbey
St. John's Day – 27 December 2019**