



The Lodge of Melrose St. John No. 12

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www.1bis.co.uk

Mason's Walk on 26th December 2009

Oration in Melrose Abbey by Bro. J. Blackie PM.

Past Master of The Galashiels Lodge No. 262

& Provincial Grand Secretary.

(Province of Roxburgh, Peebles & Selkirk Shires)

Ladies, Gentlemen, and Brethren

Those of us who are gathered here tonight are carrying on a tradition that has continued unbroken for well over two hundred and fifty years, when the Masons of Melrose have come to here to pay homage to this magnificent Abbey and the stone masons who built it. However, there has been a religious presence here in Melrose, since approximately 650AD when St. Aidan of Lindisfarne founded the first monastery at Old Melrose which quickly became not only a noted place of religious significance, but also as a resting for monks on a pilgrimage, walking what is now known as the Pilgrims Way to Holy Island from places as far away as St. Columba's monastery on Iona, and from all parts of the country. Religion in the Borders of course was well served in those ancient days as St. Columba, St. Cuthbert, St. Boisill and St. Aiden all lived and worked in this area at various times.

But it is this site and the Abbey in all its various buildings and rebuilding forms I wish to concentrate on tonight. This particular site dates from 1136, when King David 1st invited the Cistercian monks from Rievaulx Abbey in North Yorkshire to establish an Abbey here at Melrose, ordering that it was to be built on or near the site of the old monastery, which had been destroyed by fire in 839AD. The Cistercians, however, were a farming order and as the new Abbey was to be the centrepiece of their Order in Scotland as well as the headquarters for their considerable estates, they negotiated the purchase of this site. It was ideal for their purposes. The rich farmlands along the banks river Tweed a regular supply of water, ample grazing land for their sheep, excellent fishing, while the land around Gattonside was planted as orchards. This newly established their community rapidly made Melrose not only a favoured place of worship, but also very quickly made it extremely wealthy and powerful.

These literate and well educated monks, who were chosen to staff the new Abbey, not only started systematic record keeping, but significantly improved the central Borders economy, as they were instrumental in introducing new ideas and techniques in every area of life including architecture and the building crafts, forestry and farming. In a rural area like this, the agricultural reforms were very badly needed and the farming methods they introduced were still widely used until the Agrarian Revolution started to bring in mechanisation in late 1700's.

During the construction of the Abbey, the Stonemasons formed their living camp (which they called Lodges) at Newstead about a mile east of the site for the building The booklet "A Historical Sketch of the Lodge of Melrose St John No 1" contains the following quotation

Inside the entrance to the Melrose lodge is a wooden plaque bearing the Masons coat-of-arms within the date of 1136. Above it are the words "*In deo est Omnes fides*" and below it "*John Murdo 1st Grand Master of St John's Lodge Melrose*"

This is the first recorded mention of a Master or indeed of a Lodge in Scotland. Melrose claim the Lodge which was established in the village of Newstead, was indeed the birthplace of Scottish Freemasonry, and they still hold a small ceremony there during their summer festival. That is an argument for another time, and I for one, am not brave enough to debate its rights or wrongs here in Melrose, but other contemporary writings appear to add credence to that claim,

Twelve monks from Rievaulx originally staffed the new building. They oversaw the construction of the building itself, starting with the east end of the Abbey Church. The building progressed so quickly, only ten years after construction had begun; the church was consecrated in a service of dedication to the Blessed Virgin Mary on 28th June 1146. This date of course was Midsummer's Day and Melrose Lodge still honour that date as they hold a Summer Meeting each year on the Monday closest to Midsummer's Day.

The remainder of the Abbey buildings, however, took well over another 50 years to complete. The events of history, however, did Melrose Abbey very few favours. Due to the constant conflict between Scotland and England, all the Border Abbeys suffered greatly, and indeed Melrose Abbey was sacked and burned on at least four occasions.

The English invasion of 1322 was possibly the worst, as the Abbey and much of the town were ransacked and burned by Edward 2nd's army. The Abbey had to be rebuilt virtually from scratch, as only parts of the East Church had survived,

The subsequent rebuilding was helped greatly by a grant from King Robert the Bruce. Bruce had a great fondness for Melrose which he had used as his base during his successful campaign to recapture Roxburgh Castle, and as well as helping pay for the restoration, he also bequeathed the Abbey one hundred pounds per year to distribute as alms for the poor and needy.

That link with Bruce still exists to this day, as I am sure you know Bruce's embalmed heart lies buried here in the Abbey grounds.

As you can see for yourselves, that rebuilding gave us this magnificent edifice. A great deal of what you see today, can be dated back to that reconstruction, although a small part of the East wing dates back to the first Abbey, and other parts post date them. We can only imagine what a glorious building it must have been in its heyday, but at least enough of it remains to give us a glimpse of what it must have been like, and as you have already heard the acoustics are wonderful.

In 1385 the Scots unsuccessfully invaded Northern England where they suffered defeat at the hands of Richard 2nd who in retribution burned the Border Abbeys, and Melrose Abbey was partially destroyed once again. Years of reconstruction followed, and we know parts of the work were still unfinished when James 4th paid a Royal Visit in 1504.

Naturally all these building and rebuilding also meant the necessity for the "Masons Lodge" to remain here. It would be unrealistic to claim that the Melrose Lodge has existed all that time, it would certainly have been a series of different Lodges which would have been formed and disbanded as the work progressed over the centuries, but it can be claimed with a fair amount of certainty that Freemasonry has existed in some form or another, since those early days.

But back to the Abbey. Fortunes turned for the worse again in 1544 when the Abbey was nigh on destroyed by Henry the Eight's army, in what became known as "the Rough Wooing" and this proved the death knell for this building as an Abbey.

Only twelve years later (1556) the remaining monks complained that unless repairs were carried out, the Abbey would cease to function over the approaching winter. Faced with the aftermath of the Reformation, and with a badly damaged and rapidly deteriorating building, the Abbey closed down with the death of the last resident monk in 1590, some three hundred and fifty years after its dedication.

The Abbey stood empty and neglected for some twenty years before part of the central portion of the Nave of the Abbey Church was repaired, and converted into the Parish Church for Melrose, and it continued to be used as such, until a new church replaced it in 1810.

As a point of interest, the building that replaced it was destroyed by fire in the early 1900's, and also had to be rebuilt, as the only part that remained standing was the clock tower. So a word of advice, don't put your money into religious buildings in Melrose, as they don't have much of a track record as investment opportunities.

Today the Abbey still attracts huge numbers of tourists annually, who come to view the magnificence of these ancient ruins, the resting place of Robert Bruce's heart, and to learn about some of its long history. It is therefore still as important economically to the town as it was all those centuries ago. The history of Melrose Abbey and Masons both Operative and Speculative are inextricably linked. The original stonemasons sited their Lodges in Newstead and the Melrose Lodge, as we know it today, met originally in a house in Newstead, neatly joining the ancient with the modern.

St. John is the Patron Saint of Stonemasons and on December 27th, which is St John's Day, the torchlight procession, known locally as "The Masons Walk," takes place. The first recorded walk was in 174 although it would appear that it was already established before that date. It has continued unbroken ever since, even during wartime, so we should all be extremely proud to be involved in keeping that tradition alive. Few places, if any, can claim to have had Masonic connections for almost nine hundred years, but Melrose certainly can.

So, that Ladies, Gentlemen and Brethren is a very short synopsis on the history of Melrose Abbey and its links with Masonry and Freemasonry over the centuries.

Right Worshipful Master, thank you and the Brethren of Ye Ludge of Melros No. 1 bis for allowing me the privilege of addressing the assembled company this evening, and thank you ladies and gentlemen and Brethren for your attention.

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