

ORATION – MELROSE ABBEY - Tuesday 27 December 2016 - A.W. Little P.M.No.1², P.G. Secy.

Ladies and Gentlemen and Brethren.

In my oration this evening I'd like to speak about the origins of the Masons' Walk and some of the changes which have taken place over the years.

Freemasons have historically celebrated the feast days of St. John the Baptist on the 24th. of June and St. John the Evangelist, the latter being recognized as the patron saint of Scottish Freemasonry, on the 27th. of December. The Lodge of Melrose St. John No.1² still marks both these days with a summer meeting on the last Monday in June and today, the 27th. of December.

We don't know exactly when the Masons' Walk in Melrose first started but the Lodge Minutes of 1745 record that "all members of the Lodge should attend the Grand Master on St. John's Day to walk in procession from their meeting to their General Place of Rendezvous". This suggests that the brethren were already in the habit of processing to a place away from the Lodge premises on St. John's Day and in all probability that place was Melrose Abbey. The Walk may have originated in the Middle Ages when trade guilds, such as the operative masons who built and rebuilt the Abbey in which we are standing this evening, marked ceremonial occasions, such as the day of their patron saint, with prayers, processions, banquets, the singing of psalms and the distribution of alms to the poor.

Some of these traditions continue to this day when members of the Melrose Masonic Lodge, joined by visiting brethren from many other Lodges, walk in procession to Melrose Abbey, having met earlier this afternoon to witness the installation of its Master and Office-bearers during which psalms were sung and prayers were said. At the conclusion of the Walk, celebrations will continue later this evening with a banquet or dinner.

However, a study of the Lodge records over the last 150 years show that several changes have taken place. Numbers of brethren taking part in the Walk have dwindled - an average of 39 in each of the last 4 years compared with an average of 152 in each of the 4 years from 1946 to 1949.

With the exception of the First and Second World Wars the torchlight procession has been led by a band, in the earlier days mainly instrumental and brass bands from the neighbouring Border towns and for the last 15 years we have engaged the Melrose & District Pipes and Drums.

Bureaucracy now plays a big part in the organisation of the Walk. Permission is required from Scottish Borders Council in terms of the The Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 to hold a march, parade or procession. A Temporary Traffic Restriction Order is put in place to allow officers from Police Scotland to control the traffic. The new one-way road system in the town, introduced in 2006, saw the route of the Walk reversed so that it followed the flow of traffic.

Before we can enter the Abbey this evening permission has to be obtained from Historic Environment Scotland. This involves agreeing to a 12 clause indemnity form and various other conditions. You'll be pleased to know one of the conditions is that this address should last no longer than 15 minutes. A risk assessment under Health & Safety Regulations has to be carried out and one million pounds public liability insurance cover is required. A charge for the use of the Abbey is also incurred.

Changed days from a friendly word at both Melrose Police Station and with the Abbey Custodian to put things in place. However the Lodge continues to be indebted to Scottish Borders Council, Police Scotland and Historic Environment Scotland for their assistance in allowing the Masons' Walk to take place each year.

The minutes of 1909 tell us that the Lodge having considered its ancient privilege of holding a torchlight procession to the Abbey on St. John's Day, decided that while welcoming coloured lights, which enhance the solemnity of the occasion, the practice of firing squibs within the Abbey precincts be prohibited, not only as being a source of danger, but as lending indignity to the Craft and exhibiting an absence of that reverence and propriety and respect, which the sacredness of the edifice demands.

Today we have floodlighting in the Abbey and thanks to Melrose Community Council the abbey bell rings as we enter, both of which add to the atmosphere of the occasion.

And in the highly unlikely event that squibs are fired and anybody is injured we do have five million pound public liability insurance and can assure you we will review our health and safety risk assessment for next year.

The three basic guiding principles of Freemasonry are 1. Brotherly Love, 2 Relief (or Charity) and 3. Truth. I made reference earlier to the Middle Ages when the distribution of alms to the poor gave relief from poverty and suffering. The modern day equivalent of this is the fundraising and charitable donations made by Scottish Freemasons at national and local level and abroad. At national level, for example, The Grand Lodge of Scotland has supported The Children's Hospice Association Scotland since it was founded in 1992 and by April 2011 had raised half a million pounds for this one particular charity. Over the past three years Grand Lodge has raised over 300 thousand pounds for Prostate Scotland which is its current chosen charity. Examples of overseas aid is Grand Lodge's involvement with the building and running of medical centres following the Haiti earthquake disaster in 2010 and again in November 2013 when the island of Leyete was badly affected when Typhoon Haiyan struck Southeast Asia. This is over and above the numerous other charities which Grand Lodge supports. Closer to home our own Provincial Grand Lodge of Roxburgh, Peebles and Selkirk Shires disburses grants from its Border Youth Support Scheme to a wide variety of youth organisations and individuals to assist in their fundraising activities. In 2014 and 2015 these grants totalled almost three thousand pounds annually, examples of beneficiaries were the Boys Brigade, Scouts and Girl Guides, Junior football, rugby, hockey, cricket and netball teams and individual youngsters, many of whom were volunteering to travel and work abroad on charity projects. The Melrose Lodge itself, in addition to supporting the fundraising activities of Grand Lodge and Provincial Grand Lodge, continues to make donations to national and local charities.

Ladies and Gentlemen and Brethren, thank you for your attention and on behalf of Bro. James Thom - Right Worshipful Master and the brethren of The Lodge of Melrose St. John No.1² may I take this opportunity to wish all present, who have joined us here this evening in the Abbey, a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year.