



Sussex Freemasons - West Group

'The West Wing'

(Bognor, Chichester, Clapham, Littlehampton, Midhurst, Pulborough, Steyning and Worthing)

Chichester Chapter of Improvement:

Lesson One – A Journey into the Royal Arch

Welcome, Companions, to the first lesson of the Chichester Chapter of Improvement. As we embark on this enriching journey through the sacred mysteries of the Holy Royal Arch, it is my sincere hope that this course will illuminate the profound connections between this venerable Order and the Craft Masonry that underpins it. This handout serves as a comprehensive summary of the key concepts explored in our session, providing a framework for your continued study and reflection.

Our primary objective in this initial Chapter of Improvement is to lay a solid foundation for your understanding of Royal Arch Masonry. By the conclusion of this course, each of you, as student Companions, will be equipped to:

- Articulate the intricate relationship between the Royal Arch and Craft Masonry, specifically through the lens of allegory and esoteric reflection.
- Comprehensively recite, meticulously analyse, and fully understand the ritual of 'Exaltation', encompassing its three distinct and illuminating lectures: Historical, Symbolic, and Mystical.
- Skillfully examine and accurately demonstrate the designated floorwork executed by each of the officers of the Chapter during the solemn ceremony of Exaltation.
- Thoroughly investigate, critically analyse, and deeply understand the esoteric meaning vested within the roles and responsibilities of the officers of the Chapter, fostering personal contemplation upon these symbolic representations.
- Thoughtfully analyse and practically apply the fundamental purpose and principles of Royal Arch Masonry to the ongoing process of personal growth and spiritual development.

This first lesson specifically addressed several foundational elements crucial to achieving these broader objectives. Let us delve into the key areas we explored.

The Tapestry of Connection: Royal Arch and Craft Masonry

One of the paramount aims of this lesson was to illuminate the enduring bond between the Royal Arch and the Craft. This connection is not merely historical but deeply interwoven through the very fabric of Masonic allegory and esoteric reflection. To truly appreciate the Royal Arch, one must first understand its place within the broader narrative of Freemasonry, a narrative that has evolved over centuries, transitioning from its operative origins to the speculative system we know today.

As we discussed, the early Craft degrees, comprising the Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft, primarily focused on the symbolism of a man entering the world of work and progressively learning his "craft". These degrees,

rooted in the practices of operative stonemasons, emphasized the acquisition of skills and the journey towards becoming a proficient craftsman or journeyman.

However, as speculative Masonry began to take form, thinkers such as Dr. Desaguliers recognized a potential lacuna in the existing ceremonies – the dimension of man's faith. This realization spurred the development of the Third Degree, a pivotal point in the Craft that introduces the allegorical themes of loss and recovery, often drawing upon narratives from the Old Testament. The story of Noah and the "birth of a nation" were considered, with the latter capturing the imagination of the ritual's writers.

The allegory of the Third Degree centres on the tragic demise of Hiram Abiff and the subsequent loss of the 'Word' – a symbol of something profoundly valuable. This loss signifies an incompleteness, a broken triangle representing the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hiram King of Tyre, and the beauty (or artistic capability) of Hiram Abiff. It represents the temporary inability to fully realize the vision of a complete, moral, and educated individual grounded in faith. In the interim, a substitute for the original 'Word' is put in place, hinting at a future recovery.

It is precisely at this juncture that the Royal Arch enters the narrative. While the Craft degrees explore the initial stages of learning and the symbolic loss during the construction of King Solomon's Temple, the Royal Arch shifts its allegorical focus to a later historical period: the building of the Second Temple following the liberation of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon. Key figures in this subsequent narrative include Zerubbabel, who led the first wave of returning exiles; the prophet Haggai and the High Priest Jeshua.

The concept of the 'Word' serves as a crucial link between the Craft and the Royal Arch. Our lesson touched upon how the 'word' is communicated within the Royal Arch ceremony, a practice that directly relates to the loss and substitution experienced in the Third Degree. While the specifics of the 'Sacred Name' and its full significance are explored within the Royal Arch ritual itself, it is important to understand that the Royal Arch potentially represents the recovery or a further revelation of that which was lost or substituted in the Craft. The communication of this Sacred Name through a series of three interconnected triangles, formed by the hands of the participants, signifies a unique and profound aspect of Royal Arch Masonry.

Furthermore, the lesson introduced the notion of 'Grand Originals' and their integral role in the allegory and ceremony of 'Exaltation'. Figures such as Moses, who received the Ten Commandments, are considered 'Grand Originals'. Their stories and actions provide a rich tapestry of symbolism that is woven into the fabric of the Royal Arch ritual, offering deeper layers of meaning for the student Companion to explore.

Unveiling the Heart: The Ritual of 'Exaltation'

At the core of Royal Arch Masonry lies the magnificent ceremony of 'Exaltation'. This central ritual marks a significant step in a Companion's Masonic journey, leading them to new understandings and perspectives. Our lesson emphasized the importance of not only witnessing but also actively reciting, carefully analysing, and profoundly understanding the various components of this ceremony.

The 'Exaltation' ritual is structured around three distinct lectures:

The Historical Lecture: This lecture provides the narrative backdrop for the Royal Arch Degree, recounting the historical circumstances surrounding the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, their subsequent liberation under Cyrus the Great, and the arduous yet ultimately successful efforts to rebuild the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Key figures like Zerubbabel, Haggai, Jeshua, Ezra, and Nehemiah play pivotal roles in this historical account, each contributing to the unfolding allegory. Understanding this historical context is essential for grasping the symbolic significance of the ritual.

The Symbolic Lecture: This lecture delves into the rich symbolism embedded within the Royal Arch ceremony. It explores the meaning of the various tools, implements, and architectural references encountered during the ritual, drawing connections to both operative masonry and broader esoteric principles. This lecture helps to unveil the deeper moral and spiritual lessons inherent in the Royal Arch experience.

The Mystical Lecture: This, perhaps the most profound of the three lectures, guides the Companion towards a deeper understanding of the spiritual and mystical aspects of Royal Arch Masonry. It often touches upon themes of divine presence, the nature of the Supreme Being, and the ultimate destiny of humanity. This lecture encourages introspection and a personal application of the mystical truths revealed within the ritual.

Beyond the lectures, the 'Exaltation' ceremony also involves specific floorwork performed by each of the officers of the Chapter. Our lesson highlighted the importance of examining and demonstrating this floorwork, as each movement and position carries symbolic weight and contributes to the overall meaning and impact of the ritual. Understanding the purpose and execution of this floorwork provides a more complete appreciation of the ceremony's structure and intention.

Pillars of the Chapter: The Esoteric Meaning of its Officers

The officers within a Royal Arch Chapter are not merely administrative roles; they embody profound esoteric meanings that are integral to the teachings of the Degree. Our lesson encouraged you to investigate, analyse, and understand these hidden significances, fostering personal reflection upon their symbolic representations. Each officer, through their title, duties, and position within the Chapter, represents a specific principle or aspect of the Royal Arch narrative. Reflecting upon these roles allows the Companion to gain a deeper appreciation of the collective wisdom and purpose of the Chapter.

An Arch of Unity: The Catenarian Representation

A unique aspect of Royal Arch Masonry is the symbolic representation of the Chapter as a catenarian arch. Our lesson introduced this concept, explaining that the arrangement of the Companions can be seen as forming a chain or curve, reminiscent of a suspended cable or arch. This representation underscores the principles of unity, strength through connection, and the interconnectedness of the members in their pursuit of Masonic knowledge and truth. Understanding this symbolic structure enhances one's appreciation of the communal aspect of Royal Arch Masonry.

Order and Reverence: Opening and Closing Ceremonies and the Reverential Sign

The Opening and Closing ceremonies of a Royal Arch Chapter are not mere formalities but integral parts of the overall experience. Our lesson aimed to explain and demonstrate these ceremonies, highlighting their significance in preparing the Chapter for its work and concluding its labours in due form. These ceremonies establish a sacred space and frame the proceedings with dignity and reverence.

A key element within these ceremonies, and indeed throughout the Royal Arch ritual, is the Reverential Sign. Our lesson meticulously explained and demonstrated this sign, emphasizing its proper execution. The Reverential Sign involves bending with humility and resignation while shielding the eyes, followed by placing the hand upon the heart. We learned that this gesture symbolizes acknowledging the "chastening hand of the Almighty" and the engrafting of His laws (specifically the Ten Commandments) upon our hearts.

The sign is employed when entering or retiring from the Chapter, during all prayers, and as directed by the ritual. It is invariably given towards the Name on the Pedestal, representing the TLGMH, understood to be "omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent" – ever-present with the Companions. This act of reverence acknowledges His divine presence and our humility before Him. It is crucial to note that no step is taken when giving the Reverential Sign, and it should be discharged before speaking. When addressing the Principles, a 'court bow' is the appropriate gesture.

We also explored the purported origin of the Reverential Sign, tracing it back to Moses, considered a 'Grand Original'. When the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush at the foot of Mount Horeb, he is said to have thus shaded his eyes from the brilliance of the Divine Presence and placed his hand on his heart in token of obedience. This historical connection imbues the Reverential Sign with profound significance.

The Sacred Name: Communication of the 'Word'

A distinctive feature of Royal Arch Masonry is the unique method by which the 'word', or Sacred Name, is communicated. Our lesson detailed this process, emphasizing that it occurs through a series of three interconnected triangles formed by the hand grips of the participants. Standing to order with the Reverential Sign, the process involves specific hand placements between designated Companions. The Sacred Name itself is then communicated by syllables, repeated three times, underscoring the triadic nature of this key element. This method of communication highlights the importance of connection and shared knowledge within the Royal Arch.

The Journey of Steps: Significance of the Number Seven

The lesson also addressed the seemingly simple yet profoundly symbolic act of taking seven steps within the Royal Arch ceremony. We explored the breakdown of these steps into three, followed by two, and then another two (3:2:2). To understand this, we considered the steps taken in the preceding Craft degrees:

Three steps are taken in the Entered Apprentice degree, symbolizing a candidate's entry into a new life as a free man.

An additional two steps are taken in the Fellowcraft degree, making a total of five, representing entry into the fellowship and a call to study the secrets of nature and science.

Finally, two more steps are taken in the Master Mason degree, culminating in seven, signifying the journey from the entrance of the temple towards the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant.

This progression led us to contemplate why only seven steps are taken in the Royal Arch. The lesson introduced the suggestion that seven could indeed be the true and complete number in ancient Masonry, marking the attainment of a Free and Accepted Mason's goal. This notion of completeness is further supported by the composition of a Lodge: three rule it (Worshipful Master, Senior Warden, Junior Warden), five make a Lodge (adding two Fellowcrafts), and seven make a Perfect Lodge (adding two Entered Apprentices).

Drawing upon the excerpt from brother Neville Barker Cryer, our lesson highlighted the idea that the 3 2 2 steps in the Royal Arch, and their connection to the Craft degrees, reinforce the conclusion that seven holds a significant place in ancient Masonic symbolism. Furthermore, the concept that Ancient Masonry consisted of only three degrees, including the Holy Royal Arch, suggests that these seven steps encapsulate the entirety of ancient Masonic progression, with the Royal Arch representing its culmination.

Echoes of the Past: Brief History and the Grand Lodge

While not the primary focus of this introductory lesson, we touched upon a brief history. We noted the significant impact of the Great Fire of London in 1666, which led to a large influx of operative stonemasons to rebuild the city, including St. Paul's Cathedral. This period saw the formation of numerous operative Lodges. We also briefly reviewed a list of early Grand Masters in the late 17th century, including figures like Thomas Savage, Earl of Rivers, Sir Christopher Wren, and Charles Lennox, Duke of Richmond.

By the 1690s, as the rebuilding work neared completion, many operative stonemasons left London, leading to the abandonment of some Lodges. This had an impact on speculative Masons, whose numbers began to dwindle. This context led to initiatives to revitalize speculative Masonry, culminating in the formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717 through the union of four existing Lodges, including the Rummer and Grapes Tavern. Members of these early Lodges, such as George Payne and Dr. Desaguliers, played a crucial role in establishing Freemasonry as we know it.

This historical overview, though brief, provides essential context for understanding the evolution of Freemasonry and the eventual emergence of the Royal Arch as an integral part of the Masonic system. The development of the Third Degree in the speculative era, driven by a desire to incorporate the dimension of faith, paved the way for the further explorations of Masonic allegory and symbolism found within the Royal Arch.

A Personal Edifice: Applying Royal Arch Principles

Finally, our lesson emphasized that the study of Royal Arch Masonry is not merely an academic exercise but a journey of personal growth and development. We encouraged you to analyse and apply the profound purposes and principles revealed within the Royal Arch ritual to your own lives. The lessons learned through allegory, symbolism, and esoteric understanding can serve as valuable tools for self-improvement, ethical conduct, and spiritual enlightenment.

Conclusion

This first lesson of the Chichester Chapter of Improvement has aimed to provide a comprehensive introduction to the foundational principles of Royal Arch Masonry. We have explored its intricate connections with Craft Masonry through allegory and esoteric reflection, delved into the significance of the 'Exaltation' ceremony, examined the symbolic roles of the Chapter officers, and considered the profound meaning embedded within the Opening and Closing ceremonies, the Reverential Sign, the communication of the 'Word', and the symbolic journey of the seven steps. Furthermore, we touched upon the historical context that shaped the development of both Craft and Royal Arch Masonry.

It is my sincere hope that this handout will serve as a valuable resource as you continue your exploration of the Holy Royal Arch. Remember, the journey of Masonic learning is a continuous one, demanding reflection, study, and a sincere desire to seek further light. I encourage you to revisit these concepts, engage with the recommended ritual practice and mentor notes, and most importantly, to contemplate how the timeless wisdom of Royal Arch Masonry can enrich your personal and Masonic life.

Thank you for your attention.

We look forward to meeting at the Chichester Chapter of Improvement lesson two.



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