

THE PLACE OF THE ROYAL ARCH IN ENGLISH MASONRY

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In November 1990, I addressed this Supreme Grand Chapter on the subject of "pure antient masonry", that is, the relationship between the Craft and the Royal Arch in our Constitution. That address caused comment, particularly from Companions from other Constitutions, where the relationship between the Craft and the Royal Arch is very different from ours. Indeed, a surface view would be that although we are the senior Grand Chapter we are out of step with much of the Royal Arch world both in the content of our ceremony and in our general arrangements.

The closest to us in the ritual sense would be the Scottish Royal Arch where the legend is the same. The Irish and the Americans (where the development of the Royal Arch was greatly influenced by travelling Irish brethren) base their ceremony on a totally different legend: the repair of the first temple under Josiah rather than the preparations for the building of the second temple under Zerubbabel. Nevertheless, the *import* of the ceremony is the same.

Where our sister Grand Chapters, other than those in Europe who have adopted our system, differ from us in a major way is where they place the Royal Arch within their Masonic systems. In Scotland and Ireland and in the Commonwealth Grand Chapters where Scottish and Irish influence predominated at their formation, the Craft and Arch are linked by the Mark and Cryptic degrees or the Ceremony of the Veils which are essential steps before a candidate is exalted.

It is in the United States of America where the greatest difference is seen. There the Royal Arch forms part of a linked system designated the York Rite, as opposed to the Scottish Rite as they term what in these Islands is known as the Ancient and Accepted Rite. The York Rite grew out of the great influence of the Antients' Grand Lodge of England on the development of American Freemasonry. The warrants of lodges under the Antients' Grand Lodge stated that they were working "according to the ancient institutions granted by Prince Edwin at York in AD 926". This resulted in American brethren referring to themselves as Ancient York Masons.

We also know that Antients' lodges believed that their warrants empowered them to work any of the known Masonic degrees *within the lodge* and that they developed a linked system of the three Craft degrees followed by the Mark, passing the Chair (if the candidate was not already an Installed Master), the Excellent Master and High or Super Excellent Master degrees (the Veils ceremony) which qualified the candidate for exaltation and then allowed him to proceed to the Knight Templar, Rose Croix and *ne plus ultra* degrees. This was the system that prevailed when the America lodges declared their independence after the colonies had become the United States of America and continued when the Craft separated itself from the other degrees and State Grand Chapters and other governing bodies began to be formed.

Today, in general terms, because there are localised differences, the York Rite in America consists of the Royal Arch, in which the necessary preliminaries are the Mark, a Virtual Master degree (many American Grand Lodges not having a special Installation ceremony like ours) and the Veils Ceremony followed by the Knight of Malta, Knight Templar and Red Cross degrees, the whole being worked as a progressive system. Confusingly for us, despite the linking and interdependence of the degrees, the various sections of the York Rite - the Royal Arch, the Cryptic and the Knight Templar - each has its own sovereign and independent State governing body and each has a national body which acts in an advisory capacity,

There being these differences between the place the Royal Arch has in our system and its placing in other Constitutions begs the question of why? The answer was partly given in my 1990 address on "pure antient

masonry". HRH the Duke of Sussex and his Masonic aides were responsible for bringing about the Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813, the formation of Supreme Grand Chapter in 1817 and the necessary changes brought about by both those events. Central to those events and changes was their definition of pure antient masonry being the Craft and the Royal Arch, embodied in Article 2 of the Articles of Union and used as the preamble to the Craft *Book of Constitutions* since 1843. There is no doubt that they fully believed that the Royal Arch was the completion of the Craft and an integral and important part of "pure antient masonry". That being so, it logically followed that it should be allied as closely as possible with the Craft and entry to it should be as simple as possible for every Master Mason. Hence our present administrative arrangements and the dropping of any intervening steps between the third degree and exaltation into the Royal Arch.

Defining pure antient masonry and removing any intermediate steps between the third degree and exaltation gave rise to one of the enduring myths of English Freemasonry: that because they were not included in the definition, and in two cases were actively removed from the former Royal Arch system, the degrees and Orders beyond the Craft and Royal Arch are not recognised by Grand Lodge and in some curious way are looked down upon. Nothing could be further from the truth. By definition, they cannot be recognised as part of pure antient masonry but they are acknowledged as graceful additions to basic Freemasonry by means of which the enthusiastic Freemason can extend his participation in and enjoyment of his Masonic life. They are recognised as additional units with their own sovereign governing bodies solely concerned with the administration of their particular degree or Order, wholly independent administratively from basic Freemasonry, but dependent upon it for their membership.

As with so many things basic to the Royal Arch its place in English Freemasonry was defined over two hundred years ago by Lawrence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Antients' Grand Lodge from 1752 to 1771, who did so much to promote the Royal Arch. In addition to describing it as the root, heart, and marrow of Masonry, he characterised it as the keystone of the Craft. Those characterisations found favour with those who brought about the Union of the two Grand Lodges and formulated the definition of pure antient masonry, causing them to place the Royal Arch as the completion of the Master Mason degree and an integral part of pure antient masonry. It would be invidious for me, or anyone else, to claim that one Masonic system is in any way better than another - personal preference is always guided by personal experience - but, I find the reasoning behind their actions compelling and the resulting place of the Royal Arch in English Freemasonry intensely satisfying.