

Why join the Royal Arch?

by John Hamill PGSoj.

In line with the fashion of the day, I should perhaps begin with a declaration of interest.

At the age of 23, and only three months after becoming a Master Mason, I was exalted into the Royal Arch. That is something I have never regretted.

On joining the Grand Lodge Library staff in August 1971 like all keen young historians I looked for a subject on which little work had been done. Knowing the seniority of the Royal Arch and its indissoluble link with the Craft I was amazed to find that little was available on its origins, history and development and I spent a fair amount of my 28 years in the Library and Museum trying to repair that loss.

In the best sense of the word, I am an enthusiast for the Royal Arch and find it difficult to understand why more brethren do not seek membership in it.

Why should anyone join the Royal Arch rather than any of the other Masonic degrees and Orders available to us? My first reason would be that indissoluble link, which is peculiar to English Freemasonry.

For historical reasons, when the two Grand Lodges came together in 1813 to form the United Grand Lodge of England they adopted a definition of 'pure ancient Masonry' which stated that it consisted of three degrees and no more, viz., those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft and the Master Mason, including the Supreme order of the Holy Royal Arch."

As a result the two became indissolubly linked administratively and thematically. Unfortunately that definition was open to misinterpretation and until relatively recently the general view was that the Royal Arch was the completion of the Master Mason degree. Indeed, so widely held was that view, that in the ritual the candidate was informed that he must not think that he had taken a fourth degree but that he had completed his third.

I always had a problem with that statement. It was both illogical and rather insulting to those who remained solely in the Craft. Illogical, because the Third Degree is complete in itself and insulting in that it implied that those who did not go into the Royal Arch were somehow incomplete or second class Master Masons.

Completion in a different form would be my second reason conjoining. Our progress through Freemasonry is a journey of self-discovery and self-knowledge. In the Craft we are presented with eminently practical principles and rules which, if we follow them in our lives, we would hope to live a life of service to our fellow man and pleasing to God, however we worship Him.

But we are not simply practical beings. We have a vital spiritual aspect to our natures which is addressed in the Royal Arch. In essence the Royal Arch, without

transgressing the bounds of religion, invites the candidate to consider the nature of God and his relationship with Him.

In that way the Royal Arch completes the man by leading him from the practical to the spiritual, and the Craft and Royal Arch form 'pure ancient masonry'.

My third reason would be the ceremony and the ritual itself. Done well, the exaltation ceremony is one of the most beautiful and thought-provoking in Freemasonry.

More dramatic than the Craft, the climax of the ceremony forms a vivid memory for all who go through it. Done 'by the book' the ritual lays a heavy burden on the principal officers. Sadly, that has been used in the past to deter candidates from coming forward, suggesting that they should concentrate on getting through office in the Craft before joining the Royal Arch.

That should no longer be the case, as for more than 20 years Supreme Grand Chapter has been encouraging Chapters to share the work. This has three advantages: it lessens the burden on the principal officers, it enables more Companions to take part in the ceremony rather than sitting as spectators. and it allows newer members to learn the ritual at their own pace and to fit in with what they are doing in the Craft.

My fourth reason would be companionship and enjoyment. It is rare for a Chapter to draw its membership from only one Lodge. By joining a Chapter you will increase your Masonic acquaintance beyond the membership of your own Lodge, which, in turn, can lead to an increase in your Masonic experience and knowledge.

But, above all joining the Royal Arch should increase your enjoyment of Freemasonry. It brings with it new experiences, new insights and new Companions, all of which add to our pleasure and our enjoyment of Freemasonry.