

Beginnings in Freemasonry

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Making Money

I MADE money out of my first contact with Freemasonry, which is something no good freemason should do, other than as a salaried officer. However, I was not then a freemason. Indeed it was in 1935, when I was only 11 years old, that my father asked me to deliver parcels of printing to addresses nearby in West London. He rewarded me with 6d (2½p) per parcel.

My father, J.H. (Harry) Beck, and his two brothers F.W. (Fred) and W.E. (Wal) Beck owned and ran Becks' Printing Works, at 70 Silchester Road, which was only a few hundred yards from my home in Kingsbridge Road, W10. I was a frequent visitor to the Works and when I started travelling by bus each day during term to the Polytechnic Secondary School for Boys in Regent Street, it was only a minor extension of what I was already doing to get me to drop off parcels of printing on the way or to make special journeys out of term and at weekends.

Each parcel of printing had a sheet of what it contained pasted on the outside, and I suppose my first awareness of Freemasonry came from seeing what I now know are lodge summonses and ladies' night programmes, which seemed rather more ornate than most of the printing I was delivering. I probably delivered quite a few packages to lodge secretaries and had cause to be grateful for the extra pocket money thus provided.

It was probably from discovering the names of my Uncles Fred and Wal on the Lodge literature that I learned that they were something or other called freemasons. I also remember my father saying that he was not a freemason but that he sometimes played the piano at dinners after masonic meetings. He cited one occasion when he had accompanied Arthur Askey in a recital of songs at the Clarendon, Hammersmith, after what I now know as a Festive Board.



Exmoor Masonic Hall, Minehead. Polytechnic School evacuees were taught here. Courtesy Exmoor Lodge 2390.

Being Taught

My next contact with Freemasonry was under very different circumstances. On 1 September 1939, two days before the outbreak of World War Two, the Regent Street Polytechnic School held its usual assembly in the cinema which served as its Hall. The Chairman of the Board of Governors, Sir Kynaston (R.E.K.) Studd, addressed the School, saying "You are going away; it may be only for a few days, it may be for a few months; it may be even longer. No one can tell. The Polytechnic will seem very strange without you, but wherever you are, our wishes, our thoughts and our prayers will be with you. Goodbye". The School was then evacuated to four villages in Somerset.

The Headmaster, Dr. B.L. Worsnop, originally a King's College London physicist specialising in the then pioneering subject of X-rays, pulled quite a few strings to get the School transferred to Minehead, and have the sole use of its County School in the afternoons while the County School people had each morning. The number attending the Polytechnic School was, however, larger than for the County School so the Headmaster had to look around for other accommodation. He managed to rent the hall attached to the Methodist Church and also Masonic Hall.

It was as a 6th former that I was taught in Minehead's Masonic Hall. My form room was upstairs, overlooking the road. Classes were held in it, as well as meetings of the '49 Club', a debating society named after the room in which meetings had been held back at the Regent Street premises. I vividly remember advocating in one debate that lessons about sex (another taboo subject in Freemasonry!) should be part of the school curriculum. My suggestion was greeted with stunned silence, which made me feel somewhat despondent. However a number of classmates came up to me afterwards and thanked me for expressing what they had been thinking, which turned my despair to elation.

I was not without curiosity about the downstairs part of the building for I remember asking a master what lay beyond a blocked portal. I received an obfuscating answer which must have satisfied me, beyond leaving a faint air of mystery about what I now know was the Temple.

It turned out that during our occupation of the masonic hall the connection between the School and Freemasonry was rather closer than we had thought. Some of the evacuees returned to Minehead in later life, buying houses for holidays or to retire there, and a few of them joined a masonic lodge meeting in the hall.

In September 1999, a reunion was held in Minehead to mark the 60th anniversary of

evacuation, and former evacuees who had become freemasons were invited by the local returnees to a meeting of their lodge, Exmoor 2390.

In carrying out research in preparation for the visit, it was discovered that at least 13 of the Polytechnic School masters had been freemasons and had been made honorary members of Exmoor Lodge for the duration. The most senior freemason among the masters was H.J. Beadon, who took PT, and one of the most junior was his Headmaster – such is the nature of Freemasonry. Moreover the Lodge had celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1941 and it was recorded that two of the masters, Harry Beadon and Joey Lambert (as we had called them, though not to their faces), had played a significant part in the ceremonies. Thus the picture emerges of we schoolboys being taught until about 5pm and then our masters sometimes coming into the hall and engaging in masonic labour and refreshment.

It was also realised in 1999 that the School's Chairman, who had addressed us so movingly on the day we were evacuated, was a prominent freemason, having been Provincial Grand Master of Cambridgeshire since 1934.

It was a great occasion when, in September 1999, we Poly boys who had become freemasons witnessed a ceremony in the Temple which had been barred to us, and we dined, were Toasted and Responded in the very room where we were taught some 60 years before.

Several members of the lodge remarked that we had been at the masonic hall long before them.



Sixty years after, 12 Polytechnic School evacuees presented two charity bags to Exmoor Lodge.



Teaching staff outside Minehead County School 1944. Over half the teachers were freemasons in various lodges. All were made honorary members of Exmoor Lodge for the duration of the War.

Becoming a Freemason

It was through my job at Cambridge Instrument Company, that I became a freemason. I joined that firm in 1950 as Head of Physics in their Research Department in Cambridge. In the course of the rather exciting work – for it was at a time when electronics was making an enormous impact in all manner of fields – I came in frequent contact with the Works Manager, John Hammond. Because we also attended the same Church, Holy Trinity in the centre of Cambridge, my wife and I got to know the Hammond family very well. It was John Hammond who first broached the subject of my becoming a freemason and became my proposer. Another senior colleague, John Davis, became my seconder. One of the Directors of Cambridge Instruments, Cecil C. Mason, expressed beforehand his pleasure that I was taking this step.

I was initiated into Freemasonry in Alma Mater Lodge 1492, which was for senior members (e.g. MAs) of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Although I was a London University graduate, and therefore not eligible to become a member of that particular lodge, an exception was made in my case. The only other person admitted on the same basis up to that time was my proposer. It should be mentioned that such distinctions are now relaxed, though

I 'regularised' my membership anyway – when I crossed from Town to Gown by joining the Cavendish Laboratory I was given an M.A. by virtue of the seniority of my post.

The auspicious occasion of my entry into Freemasonry occurred on 29 January 1955. On the day itself I had a hard morning wrangling with a Head Office Sales executive, Sydney Barron. Imagine my surprise when I next saw him, a few hours later, beaming delightedly at me part-way through the ceremony of my initiation into Alma Mater Lodge! Not only that, I was astounded to find my Uncle Wal and my cousin Walter (his son) were present. I had been asked about relatives who were masons, and my proposer must have gone to a great deal of trouble tracking them down and inviting them as his guests to the ceremony.

By 21 May 1955 I was fully admitted into Masonry, and from that delightful and caring beginning my masonic progression took off. When, much later, I realised that Sir Kynaston Studd had been the king-pin of Freemasonry in Cambridgeshire. the Province in which I had been initiated – indeed there is a lodge and a chapter named after him which meet in Cambridge – I felt the wheel of Freemasonry had turned full circle.