

LOOKING BACK

2020
REFLECTIONS
REFLECTIONS
2020
OVER 150 YEARS

issue 1

Ready for occupation

1st February 1870



FREEMASONS' HALL

ARTHUR SQUARE

Since 1st November 1867



READY FOR OCCUPATION

1ST FEBRUARY 1870

FREEMASONS' HALL ARTHUR SQUARE BELFAST

(The following is an adaptation of a paper given at Lodge of Research 200 meeting on 28 November 2018, which was held in the Hall)

This beautiful modernised Masonic Hall in the centre of Belfast was first proposed in 1863, to be a building where Belfast Lodges in the Province of Belfast, Massereene and North Down could meet under the one roof. And an aim, that in term of The Provincial Grand Lodge of Antrim, it still fulfils, right up to the present time.



Site of the Hall before clearing *circa 1860*

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Belfast has always been a stronghold of Freemasonry in Ireland. Over those early years its membership kept pace with the wonderful growth in the scale and size of the city. However the main problem was finding suitable accommodation for Lodges to meet. Lodges have met in rooms located at:

Donegal Arms Hotel - Lodge 257 The Gentleman's Lodge used to meet. This Lodge was constituted on the 6th June 1755 when William Johnston became First Master and Bros Samuel East and James Thompson became the foundation Wardens.

In the year 1780, Aymas Griffiths, Esq. appeared on the scene, having appointed Surveyor of Excise in Belfast. He was an enthusiastic Freemason, recently arrived from Dublin, with great driving force, to which Lodge 257 owes much of its prosperity.

In the year 1781 no fewer than 70 members were admitted, and by 1806, there were a total of 226 members in the Lodge. Aymas Griffiths resided in Belfast from 1780 until he was dismissed from his government post in 1785 for exceeding his duties and taking part in Parliamentary Election activities. He was very fond of publicity, and during his five years residence in Belfast, lived up to his reputation.

In the list of members of the Lodge published by L. Dermot in 1752, "Aymas Griffith, Esq., Past Master and Captain General" heads the list, and in the letter which follows from "The Editor" it will be noticed that it is addressed to the "Right Worshipful Past Master, Master, Wardens and Brethren", and that the "Master" comes after the "P.M." indicating priority for the latter, which is not so now. Laurence Dermot dedicated the "Ahiman Rezon" of 1782 to Lodge 257 with a flattering eulogy which is recorded in full in the introduction to his Laws and Constitution.

In 1783 Lord Donegall granted: That parcel of meadow ground being part of the Castle Meadows situated on the South side of the town and Castle of Belfast, in trust, to permit a Market House to be erected for the sale of White Linens, to be managed by a Committee, and for no other purpose whatever.

On the 28th April, 1783, the first stone of the Market House known as the "White Linen Hall" was laid by "the Master of the Gentleman's Lodge" No. 257. Wor Bro, Major John Brown, Esq. with the Wardens and Brethren, of Lodge 257 accompanied by the members of other Lodges in the town, together with the Sovereign (George Black, Esq.) and the principal inhabitants of the town. An engraved copperplate was placed in the cavity of the foundation stone and had inscribed on it the officers of the Lodge for the year 1782 together with a further inscription.



Another earliest known meeting place was 'The Sailor's Tavern' in Mill Street where 272 (New Blues) and 354 met. It was then known as the "New Blues", No. 272, afterwards as "True Blues", where they assembled once a month and numbered about thirty members. It is a great misfortune that the original minute books have been lost; consequently the authentic early story of the Lodge cannot be related. Fortunately, we have many references of that period in the Belfast "News-Letter" and a few are worth including here 29th April, 1783: "Lodge 272. In the procession at laying the first stone of the Belfast White Linen Hall last Monday, Joseph Clotworthy High Priest of Lodge No. 272, an old man, who had attended every publick matter of the sort for upwards of sixty years dropped dead just behind the deacons of the 'Orange' Lodge.

He was buried last Wednesday by the 'Orange' Lodge and the rest of the brethren of the town and country with all Masonic honours; and the humane and worthy brethren have generously resolved to provide for his poor widow during the remainder of her life. 'Tis somewhat remarkable that the deceased had frequently been heard to pray that his dissolution might be in the very midst of his brethren; and indeed so it happened, in the very centre of some hundreds." Lodge 272 did all honour to their esteemed old member.

Other meeting places are recorded as:

- Hercules Lane.
- Pottinger's Entry
- The Hope Tavern in Hanover Quay.
- Green Street (Now known as Exchange Street).
- Corner of Church Lane and Ann Street.
- 14 Castle Lane.
- 19 John Street.
- 74 Waring Street.
- 11 1/2 Cromac Street.
- 15 Donegal Place.
- Weir's Tavern - 28 Divis Street.
- Castle Chambers.
- York Road.
- Princess Street.
- Pilot Street.



*Freemasons' Hall, Arthur Square
circa 1925*

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- **Ulster Hall, 10/ 11 / 12/ 13 Donegall Place Buildings.**
- **75 Upper Arthur Street.**
- **Corner of Donegall Street and Royal Avenue.**
- **5 Murray Terrace.**
- **Richmond Crescent.**

These premises all served their day, and generation, as home to various Belfast Lodges, and have now been long vacated as Masonic venues. In the 2018 edition, Calendar and Directory, it now records Belfast Lodges as:

- **42 Lodges meeting in Arthur Square.**
- **17 Lodges meeting in Rosetta.**
- **16 Lodges meeting in Crumlin Road.**
- **14 Lodges meeting in Park Avenue.**
- **9 Lodges meeting Ballymacarrett.**
- **2 Lodges meeting in The Glen.**

All Lodges have a story of some sort to tell. But in many cases next to none of the old records, minute books, parchments, insignia, banners and such like relics of the past have survived. Sadly those few that have survived are in clear and present danger of imminent disposal and dispersal.

Thankfully, this is not the case, in respect of the history of the planning, fund raising, construction, and history of Freemasons' Hall Arthur Square. Much credit is due to the late Very Wor Bro Samuel Leighton, 18 Degree, K.C.T., P.P.S.G.W. of Antrim, whose portrait in oils, hangs in this building. In his day, Samuel Leighton was an exceptional Mason, Organist in St George Parish Church in High Street, and was responsible for our Masonic musical odes used up to the present day. He was an active ritualist, a member of Temple Lodge 51 Belfast, a founder member of The Irish Lodge of Research and a correspondence circle member of Quatuor Coronati in London; still the leading English Masonic Research Lodge in the world.

But our debt to Samuel Leighton was much greater, as for most of his adult life; he collected Masonic Certificates, Minute Books, Jewels, Banners, Circulars, Byelaws, Masonic Books and Publication, Artefacts and other Masonic Euphrema. Rt Wor Bro James H. Stirling, a past Provincial Grand Master of Antrim appointed Sam to become the first Provincial Grand Lodge Archivist and Librarian, in 1927, and he was the man who laid the strong foundations for our excellent Provincial Grand Lodge collections, now sadly in storage and current future unknown.

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At the time that the Arthur Square Masonic development was getting underway, the following Belfast Lodges were represented at the various preliminary meetings:

- **Acacia Lodge No 7, who took some time to eventually come on board.**
- **Ark Lodge No 10.**
- **Lodge of Truth No 22 which is no longer in existence.**
- **Concord Lodge No 40.**
- **Temple Lodge No 51.**
- **Hertford Lodge No 54.**
- **St John's Lodge No 88 now meeting in Derriaghy.**
- **Union Lodge No 106.**
- **St Patrick and St Andrew Lodge of Harmony No 111.**
- **Prince of Wales Own Lodge No 154.**
- **Lodge No 195 which is no longer in existence.**
- **New Blues or True Blues Lodge No 272 - no longer in existence.**

The first fund raising effort by those interested in 1863 raised the capital sum of £ 1,500.00, from subscribers who had paid one guinea a share. This sum had been offered to the then owner of The Music Hall in May Street, but as he had been seeking a price of £ 4,000.00 for this building he declined. Two years would pass before another attempt was made, and in this instance, after extensive research on other funding models for Masonic premises, it was decided to adopt the Manchester model and a new joint stock company was set up to fund, manage and develop the proposed new Hall. A site was located at Arthur Square, and plans were produced. Initially it was proposed to have three main rooms for Grand Lodge, general Lodges and the Higher Degrees. A further three refreshment rooms were provided on the top floor with a kitchen to service same. It was also intended to develop a new Masonic Club for the use of Brethren throughout the Province.

Finally on the 24th June 1868 the Foundation Stone was laid with great pomp and ceremony by Rt Wor Bro Charles Lanyon, Provincial Deputy Grand Master of the Masonic Province of Belfast, Massereene and North Down. This must have been some occasion in the City of Belfast.

The Mayor Samuel McCauseland Esq ordered the closing of Arthur Square, Arthur Street, George's Lane, Ann Street, Corn Market and Castle Lane to all carriage traffic, and some 10,000 spectators assembled in these streets to witness the Masonic procession into and then later, out of the Arthur Street Hall to the Ulster Hall.

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In the Northern Whig newspaper, we read that from early morning on the 24th June the environs of Arthur Square were thronging with people. The windows of all the houses in the Square, particularly The Thistle Hotel and Messrs Edgar & Lowry warehouse were particularly crowded. The roof and windows of the Theatre were burdened in a similar manner, whilst every window or spot from which the ceremony could be seen, were occupied.

Amongst the Provincial Grand officers present that day were the Senior Warden Bro R McCalmont from 272, Senior Deacon Bro H.J. Hill from 111 and Junior Deacon Bro W.A.C. Dobbin of Lodge 10. One other rising star, also present in the Provincial ranks was The Inner Guard – Bro W. Redfern Kelly from Excelsior Lodge No 109.

In the evening a banquet took place in the Ulster Hall when some 500 Brethren sat down to a dinner served by Bro Charles Thompson. The interior of the Hall bore a very brilliant appearance, when filled with Brethren, dressed in the full regalia of the Order. The top table had, as their guest of honour Rt Wor Bro Sir Charles Lanyon Deputy P.G.M. of Belfast and North Down. On his right was Rt Wor Bro Dr Browne D.P.G.M. of Derry & Donegal and on his left was seated Rt Wor, the Venerable Archdeacon Mant Past District Grand Master of Belfast and North Down, and current P.G.L. Chaplin.

The evening eventually came to a close with a Masonic Ball held in the Music Hall. Again, there was a large attendance of Brethren and their Ladies, who danced the night away to the music played by Mr McConnell's String Band.

Whilst we have an established date 1st November 1867 to when the lease to site was signed and that the foundation stone was 24th June 1868. The Hall never really had a formal opening as such. You will observe a date stone 1870 moulded on the external upper floor elevation. Within the excellent and detailed history of the Hall by Very Wor Bro Samuel Leighton states that the hall was 'ready for occupation' 1st February 1870.

Thus, it is this date to focus a period of reflection upon 150 years and I am optimistic that others will also participate in an appropriate and timely manner.

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FREEMASONS' HALL
ARTHUR SQUARE
Since 1st November 1867