



# Provincial Grand Lodge of Shropshire Frequently Asked Questions

## Introduction

The following questions and answers have been compiled by the Provincial Grand Mentor to encourage and help us all to talk openly about Freemasonry with our family, friends and colleagues. In doing so, we will become 'Ambassadors for Freemasonry' and actively support our policy of openness.

The answers to this collection of frequently asked questions should be supplemented with personal experiences where possible. Their use will ensure our message is both factually correct and interesting.

The information used in the compilation of this document was drawn from a number of sources including information released by the United Grand Lodge of England, the on-line interview given at the BBC by the Grand Secretary in March 2012, and various international Masonic websites. To make them suitable for use in everyday conversations, the answers have, in many cases, been shortened, simplified and anglicised.

## What is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry is one of the world's oldest non-religious, non-political, fraternal and charitable organisations.

We are concerned with moral and spiritual values and our members are taught these values through a series of plays that are learnt by heart and performed within each Lodge. These plays follow ancient forms and use stonemasons' customs and tools to illustrate their lessons.

## Why do men become Freemasons?

There are many different reasons why men become Freemasons. Two of the main reasons are friendship and camaraderie. Many friendships made through Freemasonry endure for life. Dinners, which follow our formal Lodge meetings, offer members the opportunity to enjoy each other's company in a relaxed and informal environment.

Other reasons put forward and highlighted by recent research include: Freemasonry brings a sense of belonging and structure, which are not always easy to find in today's fragmented society; Freemasonry provides the opportunity for those who wish to help other people by encouraging them to become involved in charity work and their local community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ugle.org.uk/news-events/future-of-freemasonry-report>



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Most importantly of all, Freemasonry is all about enjoyment: if our members didn't enjoy Freemasonry they would not remain part of the organisation in the way that they do.

## What does Freemasonry mean to its members?

Freemasonry means many different things to each of us who join, for some, it's about making new friends and acquaintances, for others, it's about being able to help deserving causes and make a contribution to society, for many, it provides an opportunity for self-development through participation in our Lodges, for all it is a highly sociable and enjoyable pursuit.

Members are expected to be of high moral standing and are encouraged to speak openly about Freemasonry.

## How can I become a member?

People might think that to become a Freemason is quite difficult. In fact it's very straightforward.

New members can be recommended by a friend, or individuals can put themselves forward for consideration. It is a common misconception that a person must be asked to join a Lodge; if a man wishes to become a member of our fraternity then he should feel confident to ask.

Nationally, there is detailed information about becoming a Freemason on the United Grand Lodge of England's website.<sup>2</sup> This has been designed to support and encourage those who are interested in membership, including those who may not already know a member.

On a local level, the Provincial Grand Lodge of Shropshire's website provides very similar information, including membership information, contact details and a list of the Lodges that meet in the Province.<sup>3</sup>

Today, many Masonic Halls hold regular open days, during which they offer guided tours and give short talks about Freemasonry. With the growth of the internet, it is not uncommon for membership enquires to be submitted by email following the visiting of a Masonic website.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ugle.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.shropshiremasons.org.uk>



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### Isn't Freemasonry a club for retired men?

Absolutely not. Any man over the age of 21 years (or 18 in the case of University Lodges, or in other special circumstances) can apply to join a Lodge. In Shropshire we have approximately 1,400 members of all ages.

Our membership increased rapidly after the Second World War, as men were demobilised from the armed services and sought ways to retain close associations with their fellow men. Over the years this caused the average age of our membership to increase, but the trend is now reversing. The average age for a new member in Shropshire is 45.

Although there are advantages to joining as a younger man, these must be balanced with other commitments that may present themselves at that time, such as families and careers.

When questioned, a large number of Freemasons state that they wished they had joined the organisation many years before they actually did.

### How much does it cost to be a Freemason?

It varies from Lodge to Lodge, but anyone wishing to join can find a Lodge to suit his pocket.

A member pays an annual subscription to his Lodge that covers his membership, the administrative cost of running the Lodge and the maintenance of the building in which it meets. In Shropshire, the annual subscription is approximately between £110 - £130 per year, but differs from Lodge to Lodge, the exact figure depends on the number of meetings the Lodge holds each year.

It is usual to have a meal after the Lodge meeting. In Shropshire, the meal costs approximately £15.

It is for the individual member to determine how much he gives to charity, but it should always be without detriment to his other financial responsibilities. Similarly, he may join as many Lodges as his time and pocket allow, as long as it does not adversely affect his family life or employment.

### How and where did Freemasonry begin?

It is not known, but it is well documented that the first recorded initiation in England was that of Sir Robert Moray in 1641. This took place in a Scottish Lodge meeting just outside



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Newcastle upon Tyne. The earliest recorded making of a Freemason in an English Lodge is that of Elias Ashmole in Warrington in 1646.

Organised Freemasonry began with the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, the world's first Grand Lodge. Ireland and Scotland followed shortly after. All the regular Grand Lodges in the world trace themselves back to one or more of the Grand Lodges in the British Isles.

There are two main theories of origin.

According to one theory, the operative stonemasons, who built the great cathedrals and castles, formed Lodges at which they discussed trade affairs. They had simple initiation ceremonies and, as there were no certificates or trade union membership cards, adopted secret signs and words to demonstrate they were qualified masons when they arrived at a site at which they were not known. In the 1600s, these "operative" lodges began to accept non-operative masons as "gentleman masons". Gradually, as the number of non-operatives masons increased, the "operative" Lodges became "free and accepted or speculative" Lodges as they are today.

The other theory is that in the late 1500s and early 1600s there existed a group that was interested in the promotion of religious and political tolerance. In forming Freemasonry, they were trying to make good men better and in doing so build a better world. As the means of teaching in those days was by allegory and symbolism, they took the idea of building as the central allegory on which to form their system. The old trade guilds provided them with their basic administration of a Master, Wardens, Treasurer and Secretary, and the operative masons' tools provided them with a wealth of symbols with which to illustrate the moral teachings of Freemasonry.

## What is the funny handshake?

There is no Masonic handshake. However, we do have a grip or token, which is used at Lodge meetings to allow a member to demonstrate his position in the organisation. Similarly, in the middle ages, stonemasons used similar grips to prove their qualifications when visiting sites at which they were not known. This was important, as the grip would be used to determine the stonemason's level of ability and experience, and therefore his salary and position in the workforce.

A Freemason is also issued with a certificate so he can give proof of his membership. This may be required, for example, when he visits a Lodge where he is not known.



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### How many degrees are there in Freemasonry?

Freemasonry, as practiced by Lodges on the register of the United Grand Lodge of England, consists of three degrees and no more. They are the Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, and are completed by the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch. Collectively, they are known as “pure ancient Masonry”.

There are many other Masonic degrees and orders. These are often known as “additional orders” because they add to the basics of “pure ancient Masonry” and are joined by those who are already Freemasons. Some of these are numerically superior to the third degree, but this does not mean they are superior in any other way. The ranks and status these additional degrees carry have no standing with the United Grand Lodge of England.

### How many Freemasons are there?

There are over 200,000 Freemasons on the register of the United Grand Lodge of England, which covers both England and Wales. In Shropshire, there are just under 1,400 Freemasons.

There are Grand Lodges in Ireland, which covers both Northern Ireland and Eire, and Scotland, which have a combined total of approximately 150,000 members.

Worldwide, there are approximately six million Freemasons.

### What happens at a Lodge meeting?

A Lodge meeting, which like those of other groups, is open only to members, and is normally in two parts.

First, there are normal administrative procedures similar to all clubs and societies, such as: approving the minutes of the previous meeting; reporting news and correspondence; discussing accounts and finance; proposing new members.

Second, there are the ceremonies for admitting and progressing members, and the annual installation of the Master.

The meeting is followed by a dinner, held in a relaxed and informal environment. In Shropshire, this is known as the Festive Board.



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## What are the Masonic secrets?

There are no great secrets in Freemasonry.

Our grips or tokens, signs and words are largely ceremonial and allow our members to demonstrate their position in the organisation. This is particularly important when a Freemason visits a Lodge in which he is not known. For these reasons, we do keep our grip or token, signs and words private, as the medieval stonemasons did.

It is a valuable indication of a person's merit if he or she can keep something private, and we all have personal and private affairs that we do not reveal to others.

## Is Freemasonry a secret society?

We are not, but Lodge meetings, like those of many other groups, are private and open only to members.

The United Grand Lodge of England and Provincial Grand Lodge of Shropshire have websites containing large amounts of information about Freemasonry, including its rules, aims and objectives. Many Lodges also have their own websites and publish their history, the dates and times of their meetings, and items of local interest.

Our meeting places are known and in many areas are used by local community groups for activities other than Freemasonry.

Our members are encouraged to speak openly about Freemasonry, and many share their experiences on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter.

## Why do you wear regalia?

Wearing regalia is historical and symbolic and, like a uniform, serves to indicate to members where they rank in the organisation.

## Why do you roll up your trouser legs?

This mode of preparation is historical and symbolic. One theory suggests it was important to know that a Freemason was fit and capable of carrying out the work, so it could be seen as a form of medieval medical assessment, similar to the rolling-up of the shirt sleeve. An



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alternative theory suggests it was to show the man was free and did not bear the marks of a leg shackle.

### Why do you bare your breast?

It is often said that it is to prove the candidate is male; however, women's Lodges follow the same tradition and there is evidence to suggest that there were female stonemasons in medieval times.

It is therefore more likely that it shows we have complete trust in our fellow men, and that our reasons for seeking membership are both genuine and honourable.

### Why do you have a noose around your neck?

It is a historical tradition and a symbolic demonstration of trust in our fellow men, and that no harm will come to us during our initiation into the fraternity.

Also, as the First Degree ceremony can be said to represent a person's birth into the world, the noose or cable tow could represent the umbilical cord which is removed when we are accepted into Freemasonry.

### Why do Freemasons take oaths?

New members make promises concerning their behaviour both in the Lodge and in society. Members also promise to keep confidential the way they recognise each other when visiting other Lodges.

Freemasons promise to support others in times of need, but only if it does not conflict with their own public and private commitments.

### Aren't rituals and ceremonies out of place in a modern society?

Not at all. Rituals and ceremonies are very common in society with many dating back hundreds of years. Our ritual and ceremonies provide a shared experience that binds our members together. In many ways, Freemasonry must be experienced to be understood.



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The use of drama, allegory and symbolism impresses Freemasonry's principles and teachings more firmly in the mind of each candidate than if they were simply passed on to him in matter-of-fact modern language.

## Why do your obligations contain hideous penalties?

They no longer do. When Masonic ritual was developing in the late 1600s and early 1700s, it was quite common for legal and civil oaths to include physical penalties and Freemasonry simply followed the method of the times. In Freemasonry, however, the physical penalties were always symbolic and were never carried out. After a long discussion, they were removed from the promises in 1986.

## Don't Freemasons only look after themselves?

Care of others is a very important part of Freemasonry.

We donate millions of pounds every year to the victims of disasters throughout the world, to medical research, hospices, disabled children and many other important charitable causes.

It has been said that our charitable giving is second only to the National Lottery and every penny is raised from Freemasons and their families. We never approach the general public for donations, and you will never see us in the street with collection boxes.

We do also support our members, their families and dependents when they are in financial need or distress, but that is only part of our charitable work.

## To which causes do the Masonic charities donate?

Whilst there are Masonic charities that cater specifically, but not exclusively, for Freemasons and their dependants, others make significant grants to non-Masonic charities.

In recent years, Shropshire Freemasons have donated many thousands of pounds to the Midlands Air Ambulance, Shropshire Hospices and Lingen Davies Cancer appeal amongst others.



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### Can people of all races become Freemasons?

Any man over the age of 21 years (or 18 in the case of University Lodges, or in the case of other special circumstances) can apply to join a Lodge, regardless of his race, colour, religion, political views, sexual preference, social or economic standing.

It should also be noted that Freemasonry is a non-religious and non-political organisation, and that the discussion of religion or politics at Lodge meeting is strictly forbidden.

### What is Freemasonry's relationship with religion?

All Freemasons are expected to have a religious belief, but Freemasonry does not seek to replace a man's religion, or provide a substitute for it. Freemasonry deals in a man's relationship with his fellow man; religion deals in a man's relationship with his God.

The discussion of religion at our meetings has always been strictly prohibited.

### Is Freemasonry compatible with atheism or humanism?

The prime qualification for admission into Freemasonry is a belief in a supreme being. Therefore, having some form of religious belief is the one thing that all Freemasons have in common, whatever their backgrounds might be.

As atheists and humanists do not believe in a supreme being, they cannot fulfil that prime qualification.

### Does Freemasonry accept Roman Catholics?

Yes. Although we have ancient origins, our membership criteria is refreshingly modern. We accept mature men of any race, colour, religion, political views, sexual preference, social or economic standing.

Today there are many Roman Catholic Freemasons. Four Grand Masters of English Freemasonry have been Roman Catholics.



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### What is Freemasonry's relationship with politics?

Freemasonry is not a political organisation and, as a body, will never express a view on politics or state policy. The discussion of politics at our meetings has always been strictly prohibited.

### Are Freemasons expected to give preference to fellow members?

Certainly not. This would be unacceptable and may lead to action being taken against those involved. On joining, every new member must state that he expects no material gain from his membership. Compare this, for example, with a golf club, which is very unlikely to have such a requirement.

The Book of Constitutions, which every Freemason receives on joining the organisation, contains strict rules governing abuse of membership which can result in penalties varying from temporary suspension to expulsion.

### Do public servants, such as magistrates, have to declare their membership of the Freemasons?

No. The United Grand Lodge of England is working hard in other professions to stamp out discrimination against Freemasons.

In 2007 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that, in a modern democratic society, it was discriminatory to single out Freemasons from the many voluntary organisations to which an individual can belong, and to require them to register their membership with their employers.

### Why are there so many conspiracy theories associated with the Freemasons?

Conspiracy theories are just that: conspiracy with no truth or grounding. The origins of such theories are likely to originate from the secrecy that surrounded our organisation from the time of the Second World War.

Part of the reason for our current drive towards openness is to dispel all the myths and conspiracy theories attached to Freemasonry. This is particularly important, as we celebrate the 300th anniversary of the formation of the world's first Grand Lodge in 1717.



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## Are there women Freemasons?

Yes. Whilst membership of a Lodge on the register of the United Grand Lodge of England is restricted to men, women Freemasons have two separate Grand Lodges, whose membership is restricted to women.

The United Grand Lodge of England acknowledges both these Grand Lodges, in some areas sharing meeting places with them and, from time to time, meeting with their leaders to discuss matters of mutual concern.

The United Grand Lodge of England's Library and Museum of Freemasonry recently held an exhibition entitled "Women and Freemasonry: The Centenary".<sup>4</sup> This exhibition described how, at the end of the nineteenth century, women were campaigning for full civic and legal rights and wanted to join Masonic Lodges.

The current Curator of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry is Diane Clements.

## Is Freemasonry an international order?

Freemasonry exists throughout the world. However, each Grand Lodge is sovereign and independent. There is no international governing body for Freemasonry.

The Grand Lodge covering England and Wales is the United Grand Lodge of England.

## What is the relationship between Freemasonry and groups like the Orange Order, Odd Fellows and Buffaloes?

None. There are numerous fraternal orders and friendly societies whose rituals, regalia and organisation are similar in some respects to those used in Freemasonry. They have no formal or informal connections with Freemasonry.

## Why do you call the Bible the Volume of the Sacred Law?

To many Freemasons in England and Wales, the Volume of the Sacred Law is the Bible. However, there are a large number of Freemasons who are not Christians and who wish to make their promises on the book regarded as sacred to their religion. For this reason, the holy book mentioned in our ceremonies is called the "Volume of the Sacred Law".

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.freemasonry.london.museum/events/exhibition-women-and-freemasonry-the-centenary/>



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### Why do you call God the Great Architect?

Freemasonry embraces all men who believe in God. Its membership includes Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslim and many others.

The use of generic descriptions, such as the "Great Architect", prevent disharmony. In this way, men of different religions may refer to God in an inclusive manner and without offence being given to any of them.

The Great Architect is not a specific Masonic god, or an attempt to combine many gods into one.

### Why don't some churches like Freemasonry?

There are elements within certain churches that misunderstand Freemasonry and confuse secular rituals with religious liturgy.

Freemasonry lacks the basic elements of religion: it has no theological doctrine, and by forbidding religious discussion at its meetings will not allow such theological doctrine to develop; it offers no sacraments; it does not claim to lead to salvation by works, secret knowledge or any other means.

Without interfering in religious practice, Freemasonry expects its members to follow their own faiths. Our moral teachings are acceptable to all religions.

Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury (1945-1961), was a Freemason and the Grand Chaplain of the United Grand Lodge of England. In Shropshire, our current and many of our past Provincial Grand Chaplains are, or have been, clerks in holy orders.

### Is Freemasonry a cult?

Absolutely not. A cult is generally regarded as a religion or religious sect considered to be extremist in nature and requiring the unquestioning support of its members. Its members must commit considerable sums of money, often live in an unconventional manner and operate under the guidance of an authoritarian and charismatic leader.

Freemasonry is not a religion, does not compel attendance at any of its meetings and charges modest dues and fees. Our members represent the society in which they live and whilst they meet in unity, may have very different political or religious views. Freemasonry encourages self-improvement and tolerance in all aspects of life, and its members are often



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involved in community service, and civic or religious organisations. We allow any of our members to resign at any time; it is sometimes said that it is easier to get out of Freemasonry than it is to get into it!

### Is Freemasonry linked to the guilds and craft trades?

Organised Freemasonry as we understand it today began with the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, hence our tercentenary celebrations in 2017. Whilst not directly linked, we have taken much of our symbolism from the stonemasons.

Our Lodges are similar in many respects to those of the operative stonemason and we use their tools to symbolically impart our teachings. For example, we teach that the square teaches morality, the level equality, and the plumb-rule justness and uprightness of life and actions.

### Why do we use strange words like “Worshipful”?

It is important to remember that our ritual, together with many of the terms we use, date from the late 1600s and early 1700s. At that time, some words had very different meanings than they do today.

The term “worshipful” was taken from 18th Century English. It has nothing to do with religious worship and is an old synonym for “honourable” or “respected”.

### Is Freemasonry part of a global conspiracy?

No, but we do understand that is not a very satisfying answer for those who have heard many preposterous rumours about Freemasonry concerning the New World Order, the Bavarian Illuminati and so on.

First, there is no single governing body of Freemasonry, which would make a global conspiracy very difficult to achieve. The United Grand Lodge of England is the descendant of the first Grand Lodge of England formed in 1717, but that gives it no authority over other Grand Lodges, all of which are sovereign and equal. The United Grand Lodge of England does not even have total authority within Great Britain, as Scotland has its own Grand Lodge. In addition, individual Lodges manage their own affairs and whilst confirming to the rules of their Grand Lodge, manage their own membership.



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Second, our members represent the society in which they live. Whilst they are able to enjoy the company of their fellow men in a spirit of friendship and tolerance, they do not conform to a single ideology, and have different political and religious views. It would be implausible for an organisation such as ours, with so wide and diverse a membership, to be part of a global conspiracy.

Third and finally, the Three Grand Principles on which Freemasonry is founded are Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. Unless the global conspiracy was concerned with creating a better society, Freemasonry would be a most unwelcome participant.

As an aside, a Lodge Committee can spend many hours deciding what to eat for dinner; it would therefore not be the most suitable place for planning world domination!

## What is the role of various doctrinal books like Albert Pike's *Morals and Dogma*?

There are no doctrinal books in Freemasonry. Ours is a society dedicated to free thinking and freedom of all kinds. No Freemason has the right to dictate to another what he shall or shall not believe regarding his religion, his politics, or even his interpretation of Masonic symbols.

There are a number of conventional interpretations of Masonic symbolism, some of which are given in formal lectures, but a Freemason is not required to accept any or all of them; he is free to research, explore the world of thought and make up his own mind.

Members and non-members alike may form their own personal theories and thoughts, and these are frequently published in print or on the world-wide web. Such commentaries are simply the personal views of the individuals concerned; they have no official sanction and do not represent Freemasonry in any way.