



The Chapter of Charity No: 187 Royal Arch Province of Bristol

Our small party from Northamptonshire & Huntingdonshire were warmly received by the Royal Arch Province of Bristol as we visited the Chapter of Charity (No.187) to witness their very special Exaltation ceremony as practised only in the Province of Bristol and which, in accordance with their ancient custom, includes the unique ceremony of “Passing the Veils.”

In September 2015, we had been delighted to host the Demonstration Team from Bristol when, to much acclaim, they performed their Exaltation and Veils ritual at our First Principals’ Chapter. In December 2016, we were able to fulfil a long-standing invitation to experience at first hand this very special ceremony in a working Chapter.

On arrival, the welcome and hospitality extended to us was quite magnificent. On a tour of the Masonic Hall, we learned of the traditions and history of the Province and the Chapter of Charity in particular– it was an education in itself. The building at Park Street in the centre of Bristol–the home of both the Provincial Grand Lodge and Provincial Grand Chapter –was opened in 1871.The Chapter of Charity had been meeting for more than a century by this time, at various places, including several hostelries within the City.

Unfortunately, this Freemasons’ Hall was firebombed in November 1940 when the City of Bristol became a prime target for enemy bombers. Almost the entire contents of the building, including most of Bristol’s oldest Masonic artefacts, were lost in the inferno. Some records held in the basement strong-room survived but were subject to water damage as the fire raged.

It is said that the Royal Arch Degree was probably introduced to Bristol from Ireland, given the amount of trade transacted between the ports of Bristol, Cork and Dublin in the 18th century. The earliest known reference to the Royal Arch Degree anywhere in the world was in fact published in Faulkner’s Dublin Journal in January 1744. At that time the Royal Arch ceremony was often worked within Craft Lodges and the earliest record of the Royal Arch being worked in Bristol is in the Minutes of a “Moderns” Lodge, No. 220,in August 1758.

The Chapter of Charity received its Charter in the name of “The Lodge of Hospitality or Chapter of Charity No. 9” in December 1769,from the then newly formed Grand Chapter of the “Moderns.” It proudly remains to this day the oldest, continuously operating Chapter, not only under Supreme Grand Chapter but also, allegedly, throughout the world. In October 1785, the Chapter discussed and agreed to acquire from London a full set of Principals’ robes at a cost of £14.19s.11d, which were worn for the first time on 2ndDecember of that year. The cost was covered by members’ personal loans and an increase in Chapter fees. The original robes were eventually replaced by new ones in 1889. Up to May 1872, when the Provincial Grand Chapter of Bristol was consecrated, the Chapter of Charity had itself served as the Provincial Grand Chapter; many other Chapters in neighbouring Provinces had also been consecrated in ceremonies conducted within the Chapter of Charity.

The Union of the rival Craft Grand Lodges of the “Antients” and “Moderns” came about in 1813. Another Chapter had been formed in Bristol in 1790 but had not lasted long and by 1817, when the United Grand Chapter (the forerunner of the Supreme Grand Chapter) was formed, the Chapter of Charity was the only Chapter working in Bristol. The new United Grand Chapter required all Royal Arch Chapters to be formally attached to a sponsoring Craft Lodge and the Chapter of Charity chose to attach itself to the Royal Sussex Lodge of Hospitality, with which it had always been closely associated. As a consequence it was forced to adopt Royal Sussex’s number of 187,but did not adopt

the Lodge's name. This caused a lot of dissent since Charity was moved a long way down the Register of Chapters, despite being one of the oldest Chapters in operation at that time.

The ceremony of "Passing the Veils" had been widely used in English Royal Arch workings up to the early 19th century and was regarded as an essential part of the Exaltation ceremony. In 1836, however, English Royal Arch workings were completely revised—they were de-Christianised; the ceremony of "Passing the Veils" was removed; and the Historical, Symbolical and Mystical Lectures were added at the end. A third Chapter had been formed in Bristol in 1817 but it had disappeared in the early 1830s, so by 1836, the Chapter of Charity was again the only Chapter in Bristol. It was as a result of the reluctance of the members of the Chapter of Charity to adopt these ritual changes, that the Province of Bristol still has its wonderful old Exaltation ceremony that its Chapters still work to this day. The ritual includes many examples of beautiful 18th century expressions; it unfolds in a much more logical way than other English Royal Arch workings; and, of course, it retains a ceremony of "Passing the Veils." Also it never had any of those long lectures at the end, so it has not been affected by any of the recent ritual changes either.

It was for a long time thought that the "Veils" ceremony had been re-introduced in Bristol in about 1900-1910 but recently it has been shown that a Veils ceremony has been worked in Bristol continuously from at least around 1817 but by 1890 it was being worked without actual Veils. The three coloured Veils of Blue, Purple and Crimson were hung in the Veils room in 1899 and, in 1933, the fourth White Veil was added on the door into the Chapter room. Although the ritual of 'Passing the Veils' was 'stabilised' in 1910 to adjust it to the presence of actual physical Veils, what is being done in Bristol today is essentially what was done in 1890 and has probably now been done for 200 years.

After Opening the Chapter, the Companions withdraw into the Veils room, leaving the three Principals and the Scribes behind in the Chapter room. The Principal Sojourner's desk is situated close to the door of the Chapter with attending Companions seated on the sides of the Veils room while the Candidate is given the Signs and Words to allow him to pass through the Veils. The rest of the Companions themselves then pass the Veils as they return to resume their seats in the Chapter.

Mackey's Lexicon of Freemasonry tells us that blue is an emblem of universal friendship; crimson alludes to zeal and fervency; purple, a union of both blue and scarlet, represents unity and concord; and white is the emblem of innocence. White is also a symbol of the earth, blue a symbol of the air, purple a symbol of the sea, and scarlet a natural symbol of fire. These were the colours of the curtains and veil of the Tabernacle as related in the Book of Exodus, Chapters 26 & 27, which in itself adds much weight and import to the ancient ceremony of the "Passing the Veils."

Over the years, there have been many attempts, to modify, amend and even forbid the long-standing Bristol Exaltation ceremony, including the unique experience of "Passing the Veils." Under all this pressure over the years, Bristol has stood its ground throughout and their "jewel in the crown" has remained intact. It now enjoys a high reputation and is a strong and prominent part of English Royal Arch Masonry. Bristol remains the only Province in the English Constitution to practise its special and unique Exaltation and Veils ceremonies. All fourteen working Royal Arch Chapters in the Province of Bristol jealously guard and carefully preserve this ritual and long may it continue.

It was indeed a rare privilege to be so royally entertained by our friends at Bristol. The warmth of their welcome and the generous hospitality they extended to us will remain a very pleasant memory for us all for many years to come.

E Comp Wayne E. Williams
Most Excellent Grand Superintendent,
Northamptonshire & Huntingdonshire