
English Freemasonry During the Second World War

This document was compiled from information in the following sources: "Freemasons At War" Keith Flynn, Prestonian Lecture 1991; Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org); "The Annihilation Of Freemasonry" Sven G Lunden The American Mercury vol LII 1941; the Provincial Library at Neville Hall in Newcastle-upon-Tyne; Coquetdale Lodge History compiled by W.Bro Ian Glendinning.

1st September 1939 4:41am: The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany began.

On 2nd September the United Kingdom and France issue a joint ultimatum to Germany, requiring German troops to evacuate Polish territory.

On 3rd September at 11:00am the final deadline for the withdrawal of German troops from Poland expired.

Just 15 minutes later at 11:15am the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain made the following announcement on BBC Radio:

"I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. This morning, the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11:00 that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany".

Australia, India, and New Zealand also declared war on Germany at exactly the same time.

What Was The Initial Impact for Freemasonry in this country?

4th September, the day after war was declared, a letter was issued by the Grand Secretary at Freemasons' Hall to all Lodges and Chapters as follows:

Having regard to the emergency orders of His Majesty's Government, I am to inform you that until further notice all Masonic meetings are to be suspended. It is hoped that this may only be a temporary measure [.....] Further instructions will be issued at an early date.

That order was lifted a month later on 2 October and, in addition, Grand Lodge empowered lodges to meet as early in the day as possible, if necessary to cancel any regular meetings and to alter dates up to seven days before or after the regular date without needing to obtain a dispensation, and instructed that after-proceedings should be kept as brief as possible.

Shortly after this all lodges were offered dispensation to transfer the recess period from summer to winter nights while a further communication ordered that dress for lodge meetings should henceforth be morning dress or uniform. However, because of the subsequent shortages, it quickly and of necessity became a matter of dark suits or uniforms.

Many members, by reason of advanced age, were initially unable to wear the uniform of the armed forces. However, when the Local Defence Volunteers (which was later to become the Home Guard) came into being, they quickly adopted the practice.

White gloves too were dispensed with as they soon became unobtainable.

In 1940 brethren were asked to surrender their jewels as a contribution to the war effort for which, in return, they would receive a certificate marking the donation and the owner's right to the jewel. A record in the Provincial Library at Neville Hall in Newcastle shows that by January 1943 a total of £27,500 had been raised in this way by English Freemasons. That is equivalent to about £1.1 million today.

English Freemasonry During the Second World War

It is perhaps worth mentioning in this context that in 1940 Coquetdale Lodge voted in favour of excusing all serving members of His Majesty's forces from paying subscriptions. I am also told there is nothing in its records to say that this dispensation has ever been revoked (although Bro Treasurer seems fairly relaxed about it!)

In May 1940 Grand Lodge advised the "non-admission of brethren who are enemy aliens". So it was that, within this structure, Freemasonry set out on the long journey through the war.

At that time and during the six long years that followed, there existed among the brethren an almost perverse obsession that meetings should be held at all costs.

This was not a matter of blind adherence to practice or a cussedness born of pique. Its significance lay in the fact that Freemasonry itself was threatened, both as a way of life and as a set of values proved and rooted in the past.

To explain this, we have to deviate for a moment from our title of English Freemasonry and briefly consider what had been occurring in European Freemasonry.

In their own countries Hitler and Mussolini had begun their respective reigns as early as 1933 with outrages against Masons and Masonic institutions, and during the years that followed, they never relaxed that systematic persecution.

Nazi and Fascist publications left no doubt of their belief that all evil in the world had been the work of Freemasons, either alone or with the help of the Jews.

One of the first official statements made by Hermann Goering in his capacity as Prime Minister of Prussia, when the Nazis took over power in 1933, was that "*in National Socialist Germany there is no place for Freemasonry.*"

That view was not news. It had run through all the Nazi propaganda and had been an intrinsic part of the Fascist attitude in Mussolini's realm.

Immediately upon Hitler's rise to power, the ten Grand Lodges of Germany were dissolved and many members were sent to concentration camps. The Gestapo seized their membership lists and looted their libraries and collections of Masonic objects.

Subsequent Nazi conquests of other European nations were followed automatically by hostile measures against Freemasons.

The persecution was carried over into Austria. When that country was captured the Masters of the various Vienna lodges were immediately confined in the most notorious concentration camps, including Dachau.

The same procedure was repeated when Hitler took over Czechoslovakia and then Poland.

Immediately after conquering Holland and Belgium, the Nazis ordered the dissolution of the lodges in those nations. It was also Point One on the agenda of Major Quisling in Norway.

From Norway to the Balkans, the progress of the Swastika brought persecution, vandalism and death in its wake for all Freemasons.

So this then was the European backdrop to English Freemasonry in those days.

At first, lodges continued to meet as usual; though slowly but surely it became apparent that the number of younger members in attendance was dwindling as they left to "join up".

In most lodges the matter of progression was taken very seriously and some went so far as to appoint "stand-ins", so that lodge officers who had joined the forces would not lose

English Freemasonry During the Second World War

their places. Brethren were appointed to act for them so that on their return they would be able to step back into the office they originally held.

Unfortunately many never did return.

Emergency meetings proliferated. Should a Master discover that a brother waiting to be passed or raised was due home on leave, every effort was made to hold an emergency meeting. Permission was not then required.

It was the onset of the first winter however that really began to alter things.

Firstly the blackout, which was total, made travel exceedingly difficult; private cars were few and far between and in any case petrol was only available to those using their cars in the emergency services. It quickly became apparent that evening meetings were untenable and most lodges rearranged their meetings for the summer months or met on Saturday afternoon.

What Was The Impact of the Air Attacks?

It was in the second winter of the war (1940-41) that the "blitzes" started. At first on London and, very soon thereafter, on the other major cities of the land.

Yet despite the exacting impositions of the time, damage to homes, lack of sleep, the priority of war work and the demands of civil defence duties, very rarely did a lodge fail to meet regularly or to conduct its ceremonies.

There are many examples of ceremonies being conducted at the height of an air-raid.

At a meeting of the Cutlers' Lodge at Cutlers' Hall in London, the Grand Treasurer, having been welcomed in due form, rose to acknowledge the salutation. As he stood up, the building was shaken by a large explosion nearby. He paused for a second and then said:

"I'm glad you didn't salute me with five of those"!

During a raising at the Eastminster Lodge and at the very moment when the heavy maul was descending, a flying bomb burst nearby with a tremendous crash right at the point of impact. The candidate never forgot it.

On another occasion at the Portland Lodge in Dorset, in the middle of an obligation, five bombs dropped 300 yards away. The Master gave a sigh, closed his eyes momentarily and then continued as if nothing had happened.

Here is an extract from the Minutes of the Lodge of Hope No. 2153, Portsmouth:

18 January 1941. Every building for a considerable distance around the Masonic Hall was just a heap of rubble. An unexploded bomb was lying deep in the roadside alongside the Hall.

The lodge was close-tyled at 5.30 p.m. It was a bitterly cold day and raining hard. Every window in the building was smashed and all heating and electrical installations had been destroyed. The only lighting in the Temple was the three candles on the pedestals. Rain was pouring through the roof where an incendiary bomb had gained admission.

The air raid alarm had sounded at 5.20 p.m. The gun fire was intense and at times it was almost impossible to hear the officers doing their work. The ceremonies were nevertheless carried out with the usual decorum and the circumstances never once detracted from the solemnity of the work.

The all clear sounded soon after the Lodge was closed.

At Llangattock Lodge in Cardiff, on 2 January 1941 a Grand and Royal salute coincided perfectly with a tumultuous crash of gunfire, much to the alarm of the brethren and to the

English Freemasonry During the Second World War

delight of the recipient. Later, at the end of the ceremony and as the result of a report, the Inner Guard announced with some relish,

“Worshipful Master, Queen Street is on fire”.

The Master replied: “Thank you Brother Inner Guard, your report will be attended to”, and stolidly completed the risings and closed the lodge.

Following an air raid on Newcastle upon Tyne on the 24th April 1942, Monkchester Lodge 5762 held a meeting on the following day at the Temple in Stephenson Road when an unexploded incendiary bomb was discovered in the ceiling above the Master's Chair. The remains of that bomb can now be seen in the museum at the Provincial Grand Lodge offices in Neville Hall.

As the bombing receded in 1942 and 1943 attendances increased and meetings reverted to their normal times. But in 1944 the V1 or flying bomb attacks started. London and the South East bore the brunt of this bombing.

These bombs were launched from the coast of France and Holland and were usually aimed at London. Over 8,000 altogether were sent resulting in some 6,000 deaths and many thousands injured.

When the bomb reached its target the engine cut out and it fell silently to earth to explode with great devastation.

Lambeth Borough Council Lodge No. 2941 reported as follows:

W. Bro. Pretty, the Master, had got as far as the obligation when the familiar staccato of a flying bomb was heard approaching. It became clearer and louder, everyone could hear it. Then suddenly it ceased. There was a deathly calm.

The brethren held their breath and glanced at each other.

Then the clear voice of W Bro. Pretty broke the stillness saying “I further solemnly engage ...” there was no response from the candidate.

A few seconds passed which seemed to all an eternity. Then again the unruffled voice of the Master “I further solemnly engage ...” and still no response from the candidate.

Eventually the flying bomb came to earth 100 yards away. The candidate recovered his powers of speech, the obligation ended and the ceremony concluded.

During the period of the bombings, firstly the “blitz”, later the V1 flying bombs and then the V2 rockets, many brethren lost their homes, their businesses, sometimes their families and often their own lives.

By December 1944, Londoners had generally reached a fatalistic view regarding the V2 rockets – one was either hit, or one wasn't. In any case no one knew when one was coming. Consequently attendances started to rise.

A member of the Lodge of Justice, on his way to work one morning after a particularly heavy raid the night before, turned a corner and came face to face with an unexploded bomb hanging from the railings of St. Paul's Cathedral and barring his way. He squeezed past and continued on his way to work.

Such was the spirit of Freemasonry during those dreadful days. It was business as usual.

A Few Words About the After Proceedings, Charity And Visiting

Formal after-proceedings were virtually abandoned early in the war but this did not prevent the partaking of refreshments however meagre.

Usually it was simply a matter of standing with a cup of tea and a spam sandwich. Although formal toasts were not encouraged, most lodges still continued with the loyal toast, that of the Grand Master and, if appropriate, the candidate. It was usually all over in about half an hour.

One lodge however managed to maintain its traditions at the Installation Meetings and was quite unaffected by the prevailing beer shortage. Among its members were the Master Brewer and the two maltsters from the local brewery!

Many lodges received food parcels from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, and these were always distributed to widows and masons in need.

Draytonian Lodge at Uxbridge in fact received no less than twenty-seven such parcels from Bro. Angus of Waipi Lodge under the Grand Lodge of New Zealand.

Regalia quickly came into very short supply and an enthusiastic second hand market rapidly established itself. Such regalia as was manufactured during the war was of very inferior quality and the charity jewels were at first made of cardboard and later produced in bakelite.

The reverse of the cardboard charity jewel issued in 1942 reads "This token signifies that 2/6d (the metal value of jewel) has been paid over to the Grand Lodge Fund for the relief of distress occasioned by the war".

Benevolence maintained its very important place throughout the war. Charity collections were always made at lodge meetings and remained high while the work on behalf of orphans, widows and those in need continued unabated.

Many children whose fathers had been killed in action were fully provided for and many attended the masonic Boys' and Girls' schools. It is maybe worth noting that in 1942 the Province of Northumberland raised £53,684 for the Masonic Girls School festival (almost £2.2 million in today's money).

Even in prisoner-of war camps collections of cigarettes were made at meetings of freemasons for those in the camp hospital.

During the seven years which ended in September 1946 the Royal Masonic Hospital attended to 8,600 cases and the cost of that work was wholly maintained by British freemasons.

One of the features of masonic meetings during the war was the number of visitors attending. These were mostly servicemen stationed nearby and many reports comment on the vast variety of uniforms to be seen.

It says much for the levelling nature of Freemasonry, that it was not unusual to see a Private in the Home Guard initiating a Captain in a fashionable regiment.

As the war wore on, more and more visitors from overseas appeared. At first it was representatives from European countries which had been overrun. But later, after 1942, there was a great influx of visitors from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Many foreign servicemen were initiated into lodges in this country during the war and many lasting friendships were made.

Canada Lodge of London initiated sixty-six members of the Canadian armed forces, twenty-two joined it and over 1,800 Canadians visited it during the war years.

English Freemasonry During the Second World War

It was in 1944 that the Grand Secretary circulated a letter which had been received from the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York in which there was quoted a message from a freemason serving in the American armed forces over here:

Those of us American brethren who, hailing as we do from a dozen or more States in America, have seen these, our British brethren exemplify the highest traditions and precepts of Masonry, and moreover we have seen it in actual practice.

The undersigned cannot speak too highly of the help these brethren have given us and it is his belief that the Grand Master of his own Grand Lodge would be pleased to know this.

Many an American soldier will remember in the years to come the word of greeting and the hand of fellowship and fraternal welcome extended to us by our Masonic brethren over the seas.

If, in some way, this communication could be transmitted to the proper masonic officers of the Grand Lodge of England it perhaps would indicate that the American Brethren are not unmindful of what our English brethren have done for us.

On a reciprocal basis thousands of British brethren were received with great hospitality by lodges overseas and indeed overseas lodges of the English Constitution continued to meet though sometimes under very difficult circumstances.

Meetings were held in Gibraltar and in Malta throughout the war. One lodge in Malta during the siege at its installation dinner had a special treat – potatoes!

Ba Lodge of Fiji survived and prospered only because of the war. After the hurricane of 1931 the members had considered giving up their warrant but decided to hang on. Then came the war and, because of the large numbers of visiting brethren from New Zealand and the United States, the lodge prospered.

One member has reported how, at the invitation of some Dutch officers, he attended a lodge ceremony in Java. It was quite unlike anything he had ever experienced before. All sat round a large table and out of courtesy the proceedings were conducted in English. To his surprise, throughout the ceremony, Javanese waiters served Bols gin and the visitor confesses in his report that, as the ceremony progressed, it became rapidly less strange and increasingly agreeable.

Damage to Masonic Premises And Property

Like everywhere else, Masonic premises suffered heavily from bomb damage and destruction.

Much lodge furniture and regalia and many records were destroyed. Freemasons' Hall in Park Street, Bristol, was completely destroyed with warrants, furniture and tools.

All records of Liverpool Castle Lodge in Liverpool were destroyed by fire in 1941 while, at Portland, bombs falling on the nearby beach set off a series of mines which blew the roof off the masonic hall.

That at Lake Road, Portsmouth, was completely destroyed. But a box containing the warrant survived. Although it was a bit knocked about after falling through two floors; it was nevertheless still in use after the war.

English Freemasonry During the Second World War

Many halls were rendered unusable because of damage by blast and fire and this meant lodges having to share premises with neighbours or to find somewhere else relatively suitable such as a nearby school, pub or restaurant.

Many lodges particularly in London which had hitherto met in hotels and restaurants found themselves homeless during the "blitz".

As the result Freemasons' Hall in Great Queen Street, London, was much overcrowded, but managed somehow to accommodate the homeless. Amid much overloading of the organization and despite the constant bombing it managed to maintain the continuity which was vital to the well being of the Craft.

A large number of masonic halls were requisitioned by the military.

The Masonic Hall in Rothbury was commandeered by the military and used as a billet, but the Temple was exempted from this and meetings were able to continue.

Sometimes lodges were "dislodged" completely while in some places they were able to share with their wartime guests and sometimes more than just accommodation!

For although sharing with the military was an immense inconvenience (in one case 300 soldiers sitting down to eat in their dining hall), there was an important mitigating factor, in that the generosity of the troops (or perhaps their studied carelessness) roundly subsidized the after-proceedings of their hosts.

Iver Lodge of Buckinghamshire had its hall taken over by the Home Guard and before each meeting had to remove all the military equipment and put it back afterwards. Permission to use the hall for a ceremony had always to be obtained from the Battalion Commander but as the lodge's Treasurer served in his orderly room, it appears that no real difficulty was experienced.

At the outbreak of the war, each lodge and chapter in the Province of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight was asked to deposit its warrant and other records in Winchester Cathedral for safety. These were placed in the crypt far from the danger of bombs. But unfortunately, at the war's end, it was found that, almost without exception, every record had been destroyed by damp.

A great many lodges lost all their records in the fires and destruction of the bombings and those which had not placed their warrants in a safe place lost those also.

In a surprising number of cases records had been placed in the vaults of a bank only to be destroyed with the building itself.

Some lodges had special fireproof boxes made for their warrants and, in at least two cases where fire was involved, the box survived but its contents were incinerated.

In several cases records were lost when the home of the Secretary or Treasurer was destroyed.

Some lodges used copy warrants throughout the war while the originals were placed in safety.

Yet despite the loss of financial records, minute books and sometimes warrants, lodges ploughed on undeterred, set their faces to the future and never once looked back.

[A Few Words About Active Service](#)

Many freemasons distinguished themselves greatly during their war service.

Brethren served in every theatre of war and from every part of what was then the Empire, and at every level of command and operation. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was himself a member of the Craft as was Franklin D. Roosevelt the then President of the USA.

At home, Freemasons fought fires, rescued the injured, manned anti-aircraft guns and, by their undying efforts in all walks of life, added greatly to the morale of the nation. The awards for gallantry are too numerous to mention.

Not every exploit however, was outstandingly successful:

Bro. Harry Wickett of Beadon Lodge No. 619 was a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Air Force and was on duty in the control tower of Debden airfield one night at the height of the RAF's night raids on Germany.

It was not unusual in those days, for stray bombers who had lost their way while returning from a raid to land here to get their bearings.

As the duty officer, Bro. Harry "talked down" what he took to be a stray bomber and later chatted to the pilot who had climbed up to the control tower to ask for directions. There were many Poles serving in our Air Force and it was presumed that he was one of them.

In fact, when the plane took off it was seen in the glare of the flare path to be a Heinkel 111 on its way back to Germany!

A brother of Vaga Lodge No. 3146 of Hereford was on the very last boat to leave the beach at Dunkirk. This may be deemed to have been a little careless.

[Freemasons In The Prison Camps](#)

As prisoners-of war, brethren continued to practice their Craft even in the less civilized atmosphere of camps and prisons under the control of the Japanese.

Meetings were held where secrecy could best be preserved, in a schoolroom, a workshop or a church. Tools were fashioned from bone or scrap metal, tracing boards designed and wands made. Lighting was provided by rags in cigarette tins containing oil "borrowed" from Japanese lorries.

Rings of Tylers were established in extended perimeters to prevent surprise (sometimes as many as twenty-four; although none of them were armed with a drawn sword) and a drill was devised and assiduously practiced to convert the meeting into something of an entirely different nature at a moment's notice.

A meeting of 45 freemasons was held in the Changi prison camp in Singapore as early as April 1942. The Senior British Officer, though himself not a mason was most sympathetic and helpful. Indeed he said:

"Anything which will assist in the preservation of the discipline for which, I believe, your Craft is universally noted, will undoubtedly prove valuable to me in the enormous difficulties I see arising".

W. Bro. Mackenzie of Lodge Johore Royal No. 3946 wrote of masonic activities in Changi Gaol as follows:

[The compulsory evacuation of Europeans from Malaya, across the Causeway in January 1942, and the fall of Singapore in February 1942, were followed by the](#)

English Freemasonry During the Second World War

immediate internment of about 2,300 civilians in Changi Gaol. Towards the end of March 1942, our Deputy District Grand Master, W. Bro Baldwin Lowick, was called to an interview by the Japanese Commandant and, on being charged, admitted that he was the head of Eastern Archipelago Freemasonry.

The Commandant agreed that there was Freemasonry in Japan, but warned that any subversive action by masons would be sternly dealt with. The Deputy District Grand Master assured him that brethren were submissive and obedient to the rules and laws under which they lived for the time being.

When discussing this interview later at a meeting of Past Masters, it was decided that, although the Commandant, Major Kato, may have implied that there were to be no meetings, he did not specifically forbid them. Translation difficulties were also a loophole.

Accordingly, a meeting of Lodge Johore Royal was summoned for the afternoon of 15 April 1942. We had the necessary members who were prepared to take the risk, but the greatest secrecy and precautions were necessary.

Subsequent meetings were few and far between, because, in place of the Japanese High Command, the Military Police, the Kempei-Tai, later took over. This new administration was far more ruthless and vigilant. Altogether, my memory records only six meetings in our three and three-quarter years of internment, the last one being on 22 March 1943 in Changi Gaol.

After our transfer to the Sime Road Camp, no meetings were possible in the crowded open huts, where we spent a further seventeen months before release.

Fortunately, at none of our meetings were there any outside incidents.

It is certainly interesting to look back on these memorable but frustrating days, months and years. The clandestine masonic meetings were among the few exciting highlights of an otherwise monotonous and grim existence.

It was a great joke at the conclusion of our meetings, to say that we would now retire to the Festive Board, and then look at each other in our skeleton thinness - and just laugh.

Masonic brotherhood was undoubtedly a reliable background for true friendship. It helped us so much in our underfed and sorry plight, perhaps even more than it does in normal free conditions.

In Sumatra where fifty-seven brethren had practiced the Craft before the war, only sixteen remained alive at the end of it.

Masonic meetings were also held in camps in Austria, Germany, Italy and Czechoslovakia. One brother wrote of his masonic activities in a prison camp as follows:

The peace and tranquility of those meetings stood out in great contrast against the turmoil and irritations of the day.

Although it was very hot, and all of us were in rags, ill, hungry, tired and dirty, yet it was possible during those meetings completely to forget our lives as prisoners-of war.

To sit quietly among proven friends and listen to the ceremonies took one's thoughts very far from a prison camp and lifted the mind above the reach of petty annoyances, restored one's balance and demonstrated the possibility of victory of mind over matter, a very important factor at such a time.

Lest We Forget

I have here my Father's Grand Lodge Certificate which was issued on 1 December 1942. It bears the name and coat of arms of the Duke of Kent (the coat of arms is therefore the same as that on certificates issued today as he was the current Duke of Kent's father).

Like all certificates issued before 1964 the wording on the left is in English and on the right there is a Latin translation.

However this certificate does have a rather unique feature it is endorsed in the top left as issued by:

The Right Honourable the Earl of Harewood, K.G., Acting Grand Master by reason of the death [...] of His Royal Highness The Duke of Kent.

It was on the 25 August 1942 that the then Grand Master, Air Commodore His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, was killed while on active service with the Royal Air Force. Following his death, all Lodges were in a period of Masonic Mourning for 6 months before his successor (the Earl of Harewood) was elected at the Quarterly Communications meeting held on 2nd December 1942. He was subsequently installed on 1st June 1943 by a Past Grand Master, the MW Bro His Royal Highness King George VI.

Our Grand Master was just one of many thousands of freemasons who died in the war.

We can only contemplate the nature of the sacrifice that these brethren made and perhaps see it as a gift, for, without any doubt whatsoever, without that gift it is certain that we would not be at liberty to practice our Craft today.

The war ended on V J. Day, Victory in Japan Day, in August 1945, when lodges and chapters throughout the world thanked the Great Architect of the Universe for their victory and for their deliverance.

Today, over seventy years later we are perhaps once again in a critical period for Freemasonry, but what is certain is that the values implicit in Freemasonry, not only held firm against the storms of war, but are today rooted deeper than ever in the heart of the Order.