

# Story of Freemasonry in Limerick

**M**odern Freemasonry takes its origins from the stonemasons' guilds of the Middle Ages. At that time guilds consisted of men gathering together for the purpose of solidarity with, and support of, their co-workers and to ensure that their "trade secrets" remained only with those who were entitled to them. Once having qualified as master stonemasons they were then free to travel with their qualifications to the next major construction project. Literacy at that time was extremely limited so printed or written certificates of such qualification were useless. As each man reached the required skill level he was given the means of identifying himself to future employers. This was done by means of handshakes or grips together with unique signs and certain words that would identify the holder as being of a particular grade of qualification.

As the building boom of the Middle Ages came to an end, those same stonemasons began to have more time on their hands to consider aspects of life that were more important to them. They gradually accepted men of means from the local community as they thought more about the concept of character-building rather than cathedral building.

From the concepts of being able to be "free" to travel and welcoming or "accepting" non-stonemasons, the current title of the Order in Ireland is "The Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons of Ireland".

The first written constitution of the stonemasons' guilds was written in 1390 and is known as the Regius Manuscript. It is a poetic rendering of the rules and guidelines for the conduct of its members. It was donated by King George II to the British Museum in 1757 and has formed the basis for the conduct of all regular Freemasons since then. The Laws and Regulations of Freemasonry today have evolved from those early origins and copies may be purchased from the headquarters of Irish Freemasonry in Molesworth Street in Dublin.

There are three qualifications required to become a member in Ireland today. An applicant must be male, over 21 and have a belief in a Supreme Being.

Freemasonry teaches moral lessons and self-knowledge through participation in a programme of allegorical two-part plays which are learned by heart and performed within each Lodge. Freemasonry offers its members an approach to life that seeks to reinforce thoughtfulness for others, kindness in the community, honesty in business, courtesy in society and



The Baals Bridge Square

by G Hugh Milne\*

fairness in all things. Members are urged to regard the interests of the family as paramount but importantly, Freemasonry also teaches and practises concern for people, care for the less fortunate and help for those in need. Freemasonry is non-sectarian, non-political and has attracted men of goodwill from all sectors of the community into membership.

The Grand Lodge of Ireland was formed in 1725 but it is clear that there was Masonic activity in Ireland prior to that date as the Grand Lodge of Munster had been active in Cork from an earlier time. A number of Lodges are referred to as "Time Immemorial" Lodges as they pre-date the foundation of any Grand Lodge. However, since 1730 all Lodges have been issued with a Warrant, without which they would not be entitled to hold regular meetings.

One of the indicators that there was Masonic activity in Ireland prior to 1725 (actually a long time prior to 1725) comes from the discovery of an old brass square, which was unearthed in 1830 in Limerick. The old four-arched Baal's Bridge over the Abbey River was being demolished and the square was discovered bearing the inscription, "I will strive to live with love and care upon the level by the square". Obviously these sentiments are good in their own right, but the architect in charge of the

project, James Pain, was a Freemason and he recognised the item for what it really was. The square has the date of 1507 inscribed on it making it one of the oldest Masonic artefacts in the world, certainly the oldest Irish Masonic artefact. It is in the possession of Antient Union Lodge 13 and a replica is on display in the museum of the North Munster Masonic Centre in Castle Street. In 2002, 500 replicas in "distressed" silver, hallmarked and numbered, were produced from a mould taken from the original and each comes in a presentation box accompanied by a certificate of provenance together with a history of the artefact.<sup>1</sup>

The oldest Lodge in North Munster is Antient Union Lodge 13 whose Warrant was issued to Limerick on 22 November 1732. The Lodge celebrated its 275th anniversary in 2007 with a special meeting at which the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Ireland was present.<sup>2</sup>

Ferrar's Limerick Directory of Merchants, Traders etc, listed six Lodges meeting in Limerick when it was printed in 1769. Among the items of Masonic interest in this Directory, is that one of the Lodges was meeting in one of the houses that had been actually built on Baal's Bridge. The Directory also lists the Master and Wardens of those Lodges as well as the Lodge, known at the time as the Deputy Grand Lodge, which would have been the forerunner of the current Provincial Grand Lodge of North Munster.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the Lodges in the geographical Province of Munster, which were governed from Cork, had grown too large for the Provincial Grand Master to look after them all. In 1842 the new Provincial Grand Lodge of North Munster was formed with Michael Furnell as the first Provincial Grand Master. Today this consists of the counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary (excluding the towns of Roscrea, Clonmel and Carrick on Suir) and that part of County Kerry, north of a line drawn from the head of Tralee Bay to Clydagh Bridge,<sup>3</sup> but not including the town of Tralee.

There are currently six Lodges making up the Province, five of which meet in the North Munster Masonic Centre, Castle Street on King's Island in Limerick. The sixth Lodge, St Patrick's Lodge number 311 used to meet in Templemore but now meets in Roscrea by kind permission of the local Roscrea Lodge. The six Lodges that formed the Province of North Munster were, Antient Union Lodge 13 and Eden Lodge 73, both based in Limerick; Lodge 60, Ennis; Emerald Lodge 49 Charleville; Lodge 107, Kilrush and Lodge 208, Nenagh.

Not a lot is known of the very early history of most of the Lodges in Limerick, other than what is noted in the Minute Books, but one, Antient Union Lodge 13, had its history researched by John Armour Haydn one of its members to celebrate the 200th anniversary of its founding in 1732. He produced a booklet in 1932 with considerable help from the archives of the Grand Lodge of Ireland in Molesworth Street in Dublin.<sup>4</sup> With the Lodge's 275th anniversary approaching, the writer undertook



**Michael Furnell, 1st Provincial Grand Master of North Munster**

the task of gathering information about the next 75 years of the Lodge's existence and a print run of some 100 booklets was produced in time for the celebrations in November 2007.

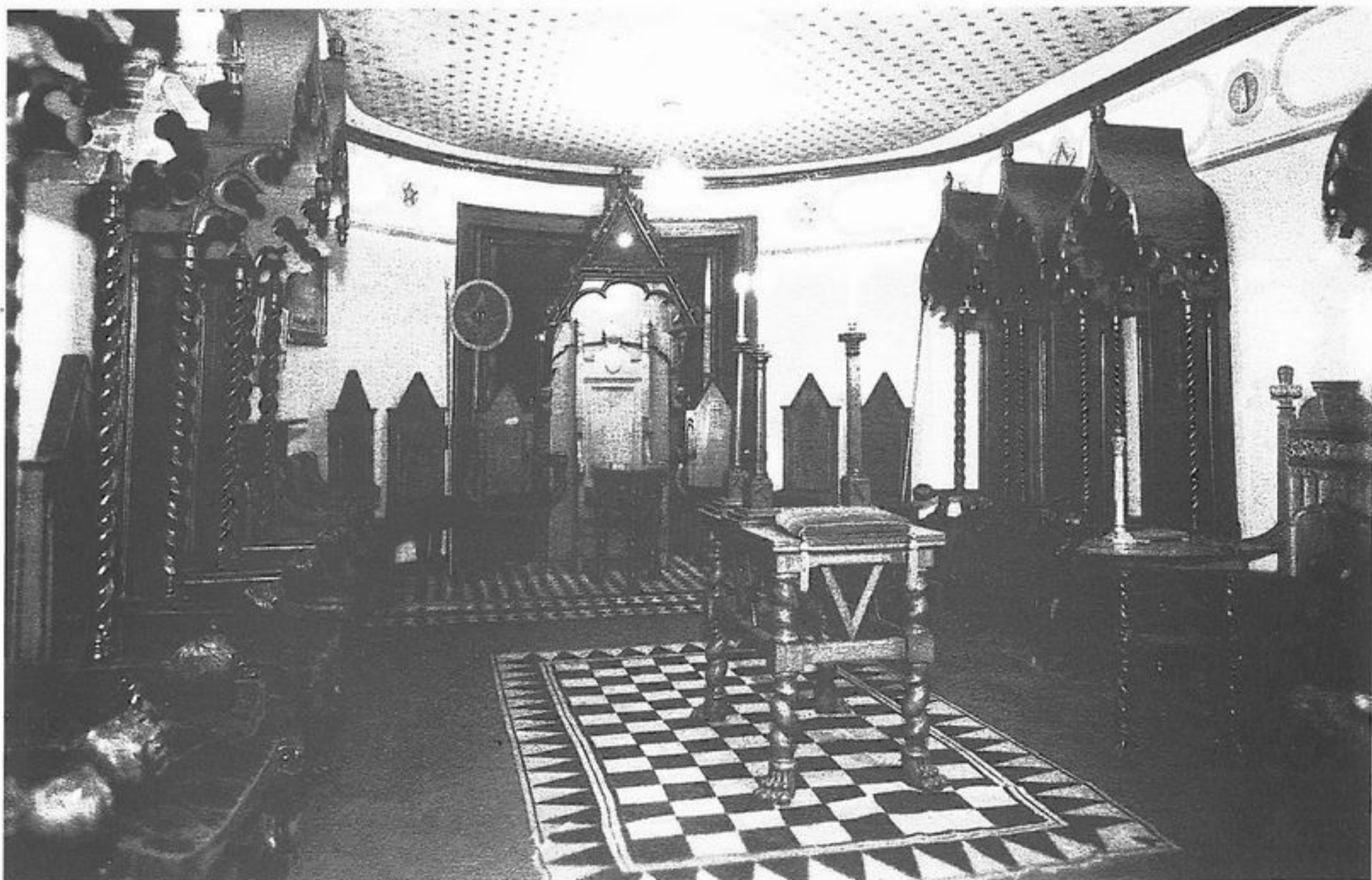
The Limerick Lodges have met in a number of premises over the years, but sadly the details of the very early years are not known. J A Haydn unearthed a number

of places but in those days, the Minutes of the meetings were somewhat sketchy in relation to the actual locations. The names of the buildings rather than the precise addresses were usually given and it is unfortunate that we cannot locate them properly. This is a project for another day! However, it is known that Lodge 13 met in some of the following addresses:

- 92 George Street (later O'Connell Street)
- Cruises Hotel, (then at 4-7 O'Connell Street, now Cruises Street)
- 97 George Street (1844 to 1852 and 1863 to 1870)
- Upper Cecil Street (number unknown from 1852 to 1853)
- 37 George Street (1854)
- Lynch's Hotel, Bedford Row (again, number unknown. 1855 to 1856)
- 39 Thomas Street (1856 to 1863)
- The Havergal Hall, Glentworth Street (1870 to 1877). A portion of this later became the Lyric Cinema and is currently an apartment block opposite Pery's Hotel.

According to Griffith's Valuation of 1850, Michael Furnell was the registered owner of premises at 9 Lower Cecil Street known as Northumberland Buildings and in the Valuation one portion was listed as "Masonic Lodge". St Michael's Temperance Society was also listed at this address, among several other occupiers. The present building dates from 1907 and is currently the home of St Michael's Sporting Club.

In the latter half of the 19th century, with a large Masonic membership, there was a Masonic Club that had a long lease at No. 6, The Crescent where most of the



**Lodge Room of Lodge 13 in No 6 The Crescent**



North Munster Masonic Centre Lodge Room

Lodges had been meeting for some time and it was here that Lodge 13 held their first meeting on Saturday, 26 June 1880. This was Freemasonry's home for probably the longest duration at any address in Limerick. However, by 1968 the maintenance of No. 6 became too much for the members to fund, so the lease was sold and the Lodges moved to two rooms at the Limerick Protestant Young Men's Association premises at 97 O'Connell Street. It is interesting that 97 George Street/O'Connell Street was twice the location in the 19th century when Michael Furnell lived there. This was supposed to be a temporary arrangement while more suitable premises could be found, but it took over thirty years before the move to Castle Street was achieved.

As the end of the 20th century approached, and with some of the more elderly members having some difficulty in climbing the four flights of stairs to reach the Lodge Rooms, the hunt began in earnest for new premises. Eventually after several false starts, attention was focussed on the premises at the rear of the Bishop's Palace and the purchase was completed in late 1996. Work commenced in January 1997 having obtained the services of FAS who agreed to run the project as a Youth Training Scheme. The late Jim Kemmy TD was instrumental in closing the deal and Freemasonry in Limerick will be eternally grateful to him. He took a special interest in the Order as he was a stonemason by trade and was very interested in the history of Freemasonry.

The site on Castle Street was sourced through the good works of the late Roy McCormack, ably assisted by the then Provincial Grand Master, Kenneth G Brislane, and that is when the hard work began. Geoffrey G Ashton, who at that time was the Provincial Deputy Grand Master, set about the task with gusto. Then in June 1999, after an archaeological dig the Foundation Stone was laid with due ceremony. Local politicians, clergy and dignitaries were in attendance. After that, work progressed somewhat slowly due to a scarcity of trainees, but eventually under the expert guidance of foreman Noel McCarthy, the building took shape. Great credit must also be given to the late Denis Leonard of Limerick Civic Trust who afforded every courtesy and facility to the Order during the construction as well as a huge amount of helpful advice as an expert in the restoration of old buildings.

Eventually with little or nothing by way of furniture, the first meeting was held on 14 February 2003 and during the summer of 2004 everything was moved out of the premises in O'Connell Street. The new Masonic Centre is the first such building to be owned by the Provincial Grand Lodge of North Munster as all previous premises had been rented.

The official opening was performed by the then Minister for Defence, Willie O'Dea TD, in the presence of a large number of members and visitors. As part of the official opening ceremony, the Minister was presented with one of the Baal's Bridge Square replicas. The then Grand Master,

Eric N Waller was the guest of honour and there were a large number of members from places as far apart as Londonderry and Cork, Galway and Dublin. Since then the Centre has played host to a number of both Masonic and non-Masonic occasions with guided tours now being arranged through Limerick Civic Trust. So it is with confidence that Freemasonry in Limerick looks to the future as the Grand Lodge of Ireland approaches the end of its first 300 years. No doubt great celebrations will be organised in 2025.

\*G Hugh Milne is Provincial Grand Master of North Munster.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 The late Jim Kemmy covered the finding of the square in a fine article about the Mariencourt Cup in the Summer 1989 edition of the Old Limerick Journal. This article is still available on the Limerick City Library website. Limited numbers of the replicas are still available and may be purchased through the North Munster website:  
[www.FreemasonsNorthMunster.com](http://www.FreemasonsNorthMunster.com)
- 2 Distinctive Lodge ties as well as cuff links and tie pins were produced for that occasion.
- 3 Clydagh Bridge is on the border of Cork and Kerry, near Mountcollins.
- 4 Very few of these booklets remain in existence today but thankfully Limerick City Museum has a scan of this booklet which is available on their website.