Masonic Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony – Address – MWBro Mike Pope Past Grand Master

In this Address I hope to answer three questions –

1. What is Freemasonry?
2. What do Freemasons do? and
3. What have the Freemasons done today?

The origin of Freemasonry in the past has been much debated, and at times, rather fancifully. However, it is now largely accepted that early Freemasonry grew out of the practice of the operative or working stone masons of medieval Europe building the great cathedrals, monasteries and castles of that era, organizing themselves into groups in order to protect their architectural, engineering and building skills, and enabling them to pass these skills on to worthy apprentices. They would have been jealous of their secrets and privileges of membership, to the extent, which encouraged the use of secret signs and ceremonies.

By the early 17th century, these organized groups of working masons, or Lodges, as they were becoming known as, in order to ensure patronage, had started to invite into membership non-working Gentlemen-masons or non-operative masons, consisting of local gentry, town dignitaries and even members of other professions. Although these new members had no knowledge of the mason craft, they were still required to pass through the same ceremonies. Gradually however, these ceremonies, including the use of the mason’s working tools, were explained not so much in terms of craft skills, but rather in a symbolic manner, to teach and inculcate standards of behavior and morality which members believed should always be exhibited. You have seen an example of this today when the square, level and plumb have been used in this ceremony.

In 1717, exactly 300 years ago, 4 London Lodges formed themselves into the Grand Lodge of England, and this event is now considered by most to be the start of modern Freemasonry. From that date, it spread quickly throughout the world – by way of example, to the colonies of America by 1740, to Australia by 1800, and to New Zealand by 1842. In time, the new Lodges of different countries and states organized themselves into separate Grand Lodges, responsible for the administration and governance of their own exclusive territories. The Grand Lodge of New Zealand was constituted in 1890, although there are still a few New Zealand Lodges which remain allegiant to the original Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Therefore, the question of what is Freemasonry, is probably best answered by explaining its gradual development in historical terms, from the operative organization it was in medieval times, to the philosophical organization it is today – a worldwide fraternity, teaching and practicing principles of mutual support, moral improvement, religious tolerance, community betterment and universal charity. In summary, it is then, a fraternal organization for men, practicing principles of ethics and morality, developed by the use of symbolism, derived from the builders of stone.

So, what does the modern Freemason do? He meets regularly, mostly monthly, in Lodge, to conduct Masonic business and enjoy the fellowship of other members. He admits new members described as Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft Freemasons and promotes officers and leaders in ceremony. He enquires and researches into a wide variety of Masonic and philosophical subjects, and encourages members to observe and practice the Masonic principles and ideals.

Freemasonry has from its earliest times, taught and practiced charitable works, or, as sometimes has been called, benevolence. Charity has been described as its cornerstone, or a fundamental basis of its beliefs. St Paul writing to the Corinthians, described charity as the greatest of faith, hope and charity. Some have interpreted this to mean love of your fellow man, but Freemasonry has always interpreted it as the desire to do good and to be concerned with those in need.

The NZ Freemason’s Charity Fund and other Masonic administered Trust Funds, in addition to individual Lodges and Districts, provide financial support of the order of millions of dollars annually, to a wide variety of individuals in need, worthy community projects, scholarships, medical research and so on – all from their own resources. Traditionally however, Masonic assistance has been known for helping the elderly, not only of its own, but of the wider community generally. In this respect, I should give some brief detail of The Masonic Villages Trust.

It was incorporated on 13 December 1960 as the Wellington Masonic Association, under the Charitable Trust Act 1957, by the Freemasons of the old Wellington Masonic District, with help and support, I must say, of the two English constitution Lodges in Wellington. Initial plans were to erect what in those days was called an “Old People’s Home” here at Woburn. After much planning, the Ministry of Health, which had initially agreed to substantially fund construction, ruled that the need for beds in the Wellington Hospital District amounted to not more than 700, against which there were then 710 available and a further 60 under construction.

The Association was thus forced to alter its plans and so decided to erect 7 residential blocks, each of 4 pensioner flats – 28 in all. These, constituting the Wellington Masonic Village, were officially opened in February 1967 in the presence of MW Bro Redwood GM. The flats were, of course, finally demolished to make way for these apartments. Not long afterwards, the Government’s lending criteria again changed, as a result of which, and with substantial help from the Carter Trust and Mrs Carter personally, the Grand Lodge Fund of Benevolence and the Golden Kiwi Lottery, the Woburn Home, consisting of 45 beds, was opened in December in 1970. A later extension was opened in May 1991, in the presence of MW Bro Orr GM and the Lower Hutt Mayor, Mr Glen Evans, later himself a resident of these apartments.

From these early and humble beginnings, the Association, now called The Masonic Villages Trust, has grown into the substantial organization it is today, with 4 villages at Masterton, Levin, Palmerston North and here at Woburn, each having Care Facilities attached, a further multi-sited Village in Taranaki and another at Foxton, both being purely residential. The Trust operates through two wholly owned charitable companies – Masonic Villages Limited, which on completion of current building works will have a total of 457 residential units comprising independent villas, flats and apartments, and Masonic Care Limited, operating as I have said, 4 Care Facilities which have a total of 227 beds in 3 different DHB Districts. In addition, 3 of the Facilities have Care Suites which are somewhat akin to studio apartments. The company also holds contracts for ACC work and the Under 65 Programme. The Trust is currently considering the reconfiguration and rebuild of the Care Facilities at Woburn and Palmerston North, and is planning a possible new village at Wainuiomata, incorporating a 60 bed Care Facility and about 110 residential units. The Trust, with its operating companies, is now one of the largest “not for profit” retirement village owner/operators in New Zealand.

If anyone wishes to obtain further information or explanation of these matters, there is a display inside the foyer, with some written material on Freemasonry and The Masonic Villages Trust. Feel free to enquire or take a booklet, report or even an application form!

So finally, I move to what has happened here today. Earlier this year, there was some excitement when a time capsule was discovered during building work being carried out on the Government occupied building known as Bowen House. The precise location of the capsule was not disclosed, but it was eventually reported that it contained memorabilia of the time it was built. What was surprising was that the reports seemed to suggest that it was a “one off” or a very rare occurrence.

In fact, the ceremony of laying a foundation-stone, or has sometimes been called a corner-stone or foot-stone, is steeped in the history of many cultures. The inclusion of a time capsule, inserted in a cavity, has often been associated with these ceremonies. There are numerous references to foundation-stones in the Old Testament, references to laying of foundation-stones in England and France as early as the 12th century, and later, in 1667, Samuel Pepys diaried the laying of the foundation-stone of the Royal Exchange in London. The Lodge of Antiquity No 2 in England, claims to possess the mallet used during the laying of the foundation-stone of St Paul’s Cathedral in 1675. Of course, Sir Christopher Wren was himself a Freemason.

The first recorded Masonic ceremony, was the laying of the foundation-stone of the new Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, by the Scottish Grand Master, in 1738. It was reported that the stone was laid in the East corner of the foundation, and was given with 3 strokes upon the stone with an iron mallet, followed by 3 clarions of the trumpet, 3 huzzas, which I think are stamps of the foot, and 3 claps of the hands.

In the early part of the 18th century, the Masonic ceremony was quite simple, but in 1772, an official version was published in England. Some 25 years later, Webb published his American version which introduced the elements of corn, wine and oil, the test of trueness of stone, and the approbation of the Grand Master that the stone is well formed, as was stated by our Grand Master today. It is, of course, well recorded that in 1793, George Washington, a celebrated Freemason, laid the corner-stone of the United States Capitol Building in Masonic ceremony.

In New Zealand, particularly in earlier times, there have been several newspaper reports of Masonic stone-laying ceremonies, both of public and private buildings. Probably the most notable, is that of the Courts of Justice in Wellington in 1879, as reported in the “Evening Post” in December of that year. All participants, many of them being politicians and leading Wellington citizens, were named, and the actual ceremony was published in detail. What was described as “probably the most imposing ceremony then witnessed in New Zealand” recorded that the Masonic spectacle was added to by the attendances of a battery of the New Zealand Artillery, the City Rifles and a guard of honour of the Naval Brigade. It was even reported that the grandstand was thronged with gaily dressed ladies. Thus, the ceremony today, is merely another example in a long line of Masonic ceremonies.

I have been asked why it is that the foundation-stone is placed in the north-east part of the foundations. It is historical, but being the direction from whence came the first light of day, it is likely, that, was where the workmen commenced their work, by laying the first stone. In the Masonic ceremony of initiation, a new member at a certain time is placed in the north-east part of the Lodge and told he figuratively represents the foundation-stone, just as the ceremony lays the foundation of his Masonic career. The north-east corner of these apartments is located at the corner of Wai-iti Crescent and the driveway entrance to the Enliven Village. It was therefore considered impractical to carry out this ceremony precisely at that location, at the time of commencement of construction. As it was to be done symbolically anyway, it was also thought better to avoid the vagaries of inclement weather, and to facilitate the comfort of those attending. However, as you have heard, it has been undertaken to the Grand Master, that the stone will be permanently placed in the north-east location, and the time capsule placed in a cavity below it.

I have explained how the Freemasons now use the mason craft tools symbolically. The elements of corn, wine and oil are of biblical origin, being elements of consecration and dedication, and in some instances, were a method of payment to the workmen. I am sure that our builders and workmen have preferred the form of payment that the Trust has tendered!

To conclude, I express on behalf of both Freemasonry and the Masonic Villages Trust, pride and satisfaction on completion of these 87 apartments and their common-use facilities. We thank the architects, engineers, builders and all workmen and contractors for the quality of their work, and wish all who now or will reside, or will visit or work in Woburn Apartments, much health, satisfaction and happiness.

MW Bro JM Pope PGM

Woburn Apartments – foundation-stone laying ceremony

19 August 2017.