

Provincial Grand Chapter of Wiltshire

**ORATION by E. Comp. Michael F. Barratt, Provincial Grand Almoner,
at the Banner Dedication Ceremony of Harmony Chapter No. 663
held at Devizes Masonic Centre on Friday 13th January 2017.**

Companions, we have gathered today to dedicate the Banner of Harmony Chapter No. 663, a chapter which was originally attached to the Lodge of Concord in Trowbridge and numbered 632. Founded on 15th September 1869 it was consecrated by the then Provincial Grand Superintendent for Dorset and as such the Chapter narrowly pre-dates the Provincial Grand Chapter of Wiltshire. One of the Chapter's founders, Samuel Wittey, who was its first Haggai, shortly afterwards became the first Provincial Grand Superintendent for Wiltshire. It is recorded that in those days the Exaltation Fee (exclusive of the Annual Subscription) was 3 guineas (£3 3s or £3.15) which was a considerable sum of money in those days. The annual subscription was half a guinea or 10/6 – 52.5p in today's decimalised currency.

The Chapter continued to work in Trowbridge until 1883 by which time the membership had declined to only fifteen Companions with only ten attending regularly, five of whom were from Devizes and they agreed, unanimously, to hold the Chapter meetings in Devizes from March 1884. This you will see recorded in the Honours' Board on the wall of this Lodge Room. In Devizes they found new candidates and became attached to the Lodge of Fidelity changing their number from 632 to 663 in 1887. However the Honours' Board has never changed and despite having existed for 147 years the Chapter has never had a banner with either number displayed on it.

Membership remained low for many years and between 1900 and 1903 many meetings had to be cancelled on the night due to low

attendance. However, despite this, in 1904, the Chapter made a donation of the then colossal sum of £15 towards the cost of paying off the mortgage on this building. By careful accounting and with a membership very loyal to the Chapter, it has been able to maintain its position of being the third oldest Chapter in the Province. Prudence and economy were very much the order of the day and it is for this reason that the number of the Chapter on the Honour's Board remains at 632 to this day. I think it is rather quaint and also reminds us of the origins of your Chapter in Trowbridge and also that low membership is nothing new. In Royal Arch Freemasonry it is always the quality that counts and not the quantity and it is a great credit to the founding members that the Chapter continues to this day and this evening is having, for the first time, a wonderful banner dedicated to their memory as well as creating something for the future enjoyment of its later members. I do also hope you will keep your quirky Board.

As has been remarked upon by our Grand Superintendent this evening, how heartening to see so many Royal Arch Chapters now wishing to have and dedicate a banner. We often talk about working under a banner but, in reality, several Chapters, this one included, have had no actual banner to work under since their consecration.

As we are all probably aware, banners, standards or ensigns have long been used by a variety of organisations, to establish identity and be a focus for all who range thereunder. There are so many examples of this in history:- armies following their banner into battle and rallying around it when needing to regroup. The modern day study of flags is called vexillology – the word deriving from the Latin word Vexillum meaning a flag or banner as used by the Roman Legions. Flags or banners have existed long before the Romans and were used by the Chinese to denote clan and rank. Indeed, as recently as 1912 the Chinese Chin'g Empire still had 8 special clans of nobility known

as Bannermen available to provide troops to the Imperial Army. Even more recently trade unions and benevolent institutions have marched behind their banners as a mark of solidarity and commitment; youth organisations, such as the Scouts, Guides and Boy's Brigade parade them to identify the respective units of their organisation; religious groups too where they are used in acts of worship, as a focus for their belief especially in Evangelical churches where flags are waved in praise of God.

In Freemasonry banners have always been an integral part of the furnishing and equipment of Masonic units. In both the Craft and Royal Arch; Lodges, Chapters, Provinces, Districts and of course Grand Lodge and Supreme Grand Chapter, have felt it necessary to have their own banner to mark their identity within the fraternity, but in the Royal Arch, banners and ensigns have an additional, very significant and important purpose. Whilst individual Chapters have, only fairly recently, introduced a banner specific to their Chapter, the splendid colours and pageantry of the Royal Arch could not be created without the four Principal banners and twelve ensigns. As we all know they represent the four divisions of the army of Israel, and the twelve tribes that Jacob instigated shortly before his death, although as I learned only on Tuesday of this week from E. Comp. John Hughes who gave the oration at the dedication of Chapter of Agriculture's new banner, there are actually thirteen names on the twelve banners – Joseph's name being replaced by that of Ephraim and Menasseh (his grandsons) and Simeon and Levi being placed on one stand – the Levites not being accorded any land of their own because of their priestly functions but both being offspring from Jacob's wife Leah now share the same banner. Each of the other tribes was expected to provide a tythe of 10% of their income to the Levites who otherwise would have no income of their own.

*Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun.
Rachel: Joseph (Ephraim and Menasseh), Benjamin.
Bilhah (Rachel's maid): Dan, Naphtali.
Zilpah (Leah's maid): Gad, Asher (Genesis 35:22–26)*

We are, or should be, fully aware of the symbolical significance of the four Principal banners; representing, **intelligence & understanding, strength & power, patience & assiduity** and the **promptness & celerity** that the will of the True and Living God Most High is executed.

The twelve tribes, named after the ten sons of Jacob [Genesis 29,30 and 35] and two grandsons of his son Joseph – Manasseh and Ephraim, who Jacob adopted before his death are represented by the 12 banners displayed: In the East - **Judah**, Issachar and Zebulon; In the South - **Reuben**, Simeon & Levi and Gad; In the West - **Ephraim**, Mannasseh and Benjamin; In the North – **Dan**, Asher and Naphtali. They all rallied around these four Principal banners when they gathered together at the Tabernacle – thus obeying another command given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The, device on the Standard of **Judah** was a **Lion**; The device on the standard of **Ephraim** was an **Ox**; The device on the standard of **Reuben** was a **Man**; The device on the standard of **Dan** was an **Eagle**.

It is thought that they gathered in a square formation, with an equal number of tribes on each side. Here they gathered before offering up their praises to the Most High. For us as Royal Arch Masons, this should remind us to rally in equality behind those principals depicted by the four Principal banners. Being armed with the faith in our God, and ever wishing to praise him for favours already received, we are expected to be prepared to face the world with strength, to patiently, and with the care of others foremost in our minds, bring to all an understanding and awareness of the values for which we stand, ever bearing in mind that the Most High will reward us or not according to our actions. Indeed, not only are our own banners an illustration of our love of God but in the Book of Song of Songs Chapter 2, verse 4 we read *“He has taken me into his banquet hall and his banner over me is love”*.

This evening, this Chapter of Harmony No. 663 has been presented with and had dedicated a glorious banner which its members can rally behind. We should give thanks to those who initiated its creation and those who made it..... We should also give thanks to all those who contributed towards its cost.

This glorious banner illustrates and celebrates a seamless record of work for over 147 years, some of which were difficult ones. It represents the faith and loyalty of its members in the belief they have had and shown through the ceremonies and through those troubled times – including two World Wars.

From this day on, let this banner be proudly displayed at all your meetings and on other occasions when called upon by Provincial Grand Chapter.

I thank you for the honour you have bestowed upon me today by allowing me to give the Oration on this wonderful occasion.

May the True and Living God Most High forever bless your banner and the members of this venerable, noble and historic Chapter.

E. Comp. Michael F. Barratt
Provincial Grand Almoner

13 January 2017