

In learning about our Masonic Hall from 1924 to the present....

I will be incorporating some of the characters that supported our lodges and this building.

But firstly...I would like to mention again two influential brethren, already mentioned, who sadly never saw this building as a masonic hall. I refer to Rt W Bro Henry Martin Kennard and W Bro Henry Griffiths, after whom Griffithstown was named.

Secondly to thank, in absentia, the twelve trustees who were first willing to risk their own money in this masonic venture. I wonder what they would think of us here now, 100 years on.

The period between the two World wars was one characterised by post war trauma and camaraderie and then by economic pressures epitomised by the 1926 general strike. It was an era perfect for those with kind hearts to practise brotherly love, relief, and truth. It was a time of growth in freemasonry throughout the UK.

Although the formation of a second lodge in Pontypool was first discussed as early as 1934, the unstable political situation in Europe discouraged further action. Then, as World War II came to an end, optimism for the future improved. With membership of Kennard Lodge now close to 200, and with long waiting lists both for initiation and progression to the Chair, the PGM, supported the petition for a new lodge.

Subsequently, Trevethin Lodge No 6008, was consecrated in March 1945 by Rt W Bro Lt Col JG Bishop and with W Bro Mansel Davies installed as the first WM. In its first year Trevethin initiated 16 candidates, which had mixed reactions from the Province. By 1960 membership had peaked at 139.

INFLUENTIAL MASONS from Trevethin Lodge at this time were...

1. Founder member and First WM, Mansel Davies, one time ProvG Registrar, who was regarded as a "prodigious and exalted mason", receiving Grand Rank in Craft, the Royal Arch and the Mark
2. W Bro Mendy Lewis, a founder member and WM in 1954/55. A well respected local chemist and a driving force in the early years of the lodge.
3. W Brother John Howe Davies Past ProvSGW. Initiated into Trevethin Lodge in 1947, WM in 1966. Greatly respected and first treasurer of the Board of Management circa 1973. Father of our current PGM
4. W Bro Clive Griffin. WM 1983/84. A larger than life character, arguably the best ritualist Trevethin has ever had.

By the 1960's, the opening of the Severn Bridge and growth of the New Town of Cwmbran was mirrored by a further demand for membership, resulting in discussion about a new lodge in the province. The first meeting of interested parties was led by W Bro Roy Davies and led to the setting up of the Llantarnam Lodge 7901.

With the support of the PGM, Rt WBro Colonel Roderick Hill, and with the Loyal Monmouth Lodge as its sponsor, the Llantarnam Lodge was consecrated in September 1963... at the Masonic Hall Newport, with W Bro Roy Davies as the first WM. They continued to meet at Newport until the former Methodist Chapel at Wesley Street Cwmbran was purchased, with the help of the newly formed Masonic Hall (Cwmbran) Ltd. This building was dedicated and then in use from June 1967.

At this time Llantarnam Lodge was being driven by

1. W Bro. Roy Davies prominent in forming the Lodge, jointly purchasing Wesley Street.
2. W Bro. The Reverend Canon Peter Gower. Vicar of St. Gabriel Church in Old Cwmbran. Influential member of the lodge and a strong presence in Llantarnam Royal Arch Chapter.

Llantarnam quickly found a waiting list for initiation of over 2 years, and the formation of a second lodge in Cwmbran was soon being discussed. Support from the Province wasn't immediately forthcoming but, once received, things moved swiftly and the consecration of the **Henllys Lodge No 8283** at the Cwmbran Masonic Hall took place in November 1969. The officiating officer was the PGM, Rt W Bro Roderick Hill . The first meeting of the lodge was in January 1970.

Prominent in Henllys lodge at this time were: -

1. Lord, later Baron, Granville West. A founder member. MP for Pontypool and a Home Secretary who was always very concerned about unemployment in the valleys.
2. Col RM Williams OBE MC TD, a distinguished wartime veteran and founder member of Henllys.

So....

By 1976, a third Cwmbran lodge, St Gabriel, had also come into existence.

However, the extremely high interest rates of the period made it difficult to keep the building in good repair and it became necessary to sell. St Gabriel left for Castleton and Henllys joined us here at Pontypool in September 1982; followed by Llantarnam Lodge who held their the 180th meeting and first meeting in this building in September 1983. They brought with them the chequered carpet, pillars, Master and Wardens' chairs and the tracing boards, all of which are still in use today.

SO.....

At the time of the four craft lodges first sharing this building, in 1983 -84, the Monmouthshire Masonic Directory records subscribing **Craft** membership of the building as **463**.

The main drivers at this time were, from **Llantarnam Lodge...**

1. W Bro. Ren Thomas, a former Newport Headmaster who did much to encourage and mentor new members particularly when the Lodge moved to Pontypool. He was a marvellous singer and orator with a voice that equalled, if not bettered Richard Burton.
2. W Bro. Ron Meredith, secretary of the Lodge and Deputy Grand Superintendent of the Royal Arch Degree in Monmouthshire. He was a mainstay of the Lodge who fought for equal representation for Llantarnam and Henllys on the Board of Management.

from **Kennard Lodge ...**

1. W Bro. David Arthur Thomas. Deputy Headteacher at Abersychan Grammar Tech. WM in 1970; Formidable preceptor, Lodge secretary, First secretary to the BoM circa 1973. Dominated MMM in the 1990's first as DepPGM and then PGM.

2. W Bro. Roy Forrester, a local businessman and engineer. In the 1980's he took the principal Chair in each of the orders using the building. He was a great ritualist but an even greater character and was at the forefront of many social events, raising lots of money to support this building

from Henllys Lodge ...

We had the very unusual situation of a father and son pair, Meiros and Christopher Evans, who were active Provincial officers at the same time and, as we all know, V W Bro Chris since gained active Grand Rank and currently our DepPGM

In contrast to the first half of the 20th century, since the 1980's we have witnessed a period of considerable economic decline. Many big employers, who brought a workforce, have left us and our local economy has suffered accordingly. Added to this decline, in the 1980's and 90's freemasonry came under threat from the press and civic leaders causing many masons to keep their membership to themselves; Police officers were actively discouraged from any association our institution. This climate certainly had an impact as some brethren left us never to return and a generation of young men were taught to be suspicious of our organisation and chose not to join.

Nevertheless our lodges have all survived thus far, with Trevethin, Llantarnam and Henllys lodges all celebrating 50 years of existence and Kennard celebrating 150 years.

At the opening of the 21st century, whilst the press and society are generally more acceptant of Freemasonry, following some public challenges to their attitude, the economy has remained under strain and our membership still challenged. Today, as much of a threat has come from the era of computers and social media which has changed the social activities of young people to the detriment of Freemasonry. More recently, the impact of the Covid virus has resulted in some change to older people's priorities and reluctance by some to socialise in the same way.

Whilst it is true to say that 100 years from its opening, the building is well used, hosting: - four craft lodges; two Royal Arch Chapters: two lodges of Mark Master Masons; one lodge of Royal Ark Mariners and one conclave of the Red Cross of Constantine

Nevertheless, the 2023-24 directory shows that subscribing **craft** membership of the building has declined to 149.

Isn't that food for thought! I believe that our survival is dependent on us all working together. I wonder what the Pontypool masons will think of our efforts 100years from now.

THE FUTURE

The time for learning to live together is over.

It is now time to move on TOGETHER; supporting each other, meeting challenges and growing with and for each other, not as one lodge but as one community of freemasons.

We need to share the building as equals as I suspect, Henry Martyn Kennard would have expected.

The challenge is there for us. Let's embrace it ... TOGETHER

HLW March 2024