

Freemasonry....

The 20 Most Frequently asked Questions

1. What is Freemasonry?

Firstly, it's fun! Freemasonry is the oldest and the largest of the secular (that is, non-religious) fraternal societies. It exists to allow men with a social conscience to put something back into society by providing aid, support and hope to those in need. Freemasons support a wide range of charitable causes dealing with everything from major international emergencies such as earthquakes, to local community causes, and individual problems such as ageing, illness or poverty.

2. Where and when did Freemasonry start?

No one actually knows. No documented evidence has been found to support the existence of practicing Freemasonry prior to October 1646 when the diary of Elias Ashmole (the founder of the Ashmolean Library in Oxford) records his admission into a Lodge of Freemasons in Warrington, Lancashire. The first Grand Lodge was founded in London in 1717. Whatever its exact origin, Freemasonry has a long and rich historical tradition extending back almost 400 years.

3. Are you a Secret Society?

No, certainly not. All our meetings are publicised in advance, are closely minuted, and are run to a strict set of regulations. We publish an annual directory listing the senior officers of every Lodge, we hold open days and attend community events; and we maintain one of the largest Masonic websites on the internet. Members are actively encouraged to discuss their membership openly with family, friends and colleagues. Does that sound very "secret"?

4. So what exactly is a Masonic Secret?

The traditional "Secrets" of Freemasonry are the means by which medieval Stonemasons are supposed to have made themselves known and proved their qualifications when arriving at a building site where they were not previously known. Professional knowledge was hard won and "Cowboy" builders were presumably as common then as they are today. Masonic tradition maintains that they were kept secret for exactly the same reasons that you keep your PIN number secret today.... to prevent identity theft and misrepresentation. In Freemasonry now, it is more a test of character; you have promised to keep something private, and are proud to do so.

5. How do you do a secret Masonic Handshake?

Sorry to disappoint you, but there is actually no such thing as a secret handshake, it's a myth! Within our ritual dramas there is a grip exchanged at each level which is one of the traditional means of recognition (See 4. above). This is supposed to have allowed a qualified stonemason to make himself known even in the gloomy of interior of a medieval building. These days all Freemasons are encouraged to be open and enthusiastic about their membership, so if you want to know if someone's a Freemason it's very simple.... just ask

him whether he is! So how do you give “The Handshake”? Like that! Just an ordinary handshake!

6. Is Freemasonry a Religion?

No, most certainly not! We have neither clergy nor sacraments, which most religions do have. It is true that prayers are offered during our meetings in just the same way as they are in the House of Commons or at some local council meetings, however all discussion of religious topics (as well as political ones!) is strictly banned during our meetings. Freemasons prefer to concentrate on the moral principles that unite men, such as Compassion, Benevolence and Integrity. Anyone wishing to become a Freemason must profess belief in a Supreme Being, but the nature of that individual’s relationship with his God is his own business. This allows men of all religious persuasions to meet in harmony and peace.

7. Why do some established Churches dislike Freemasonry?

There are some elements within certain faiths that misunderstand what Freemasons do, their aims and objectives. In particular, they confuse our secular ceremonies with religious ritual. Because of this, some religions have discouraged or banned their followers from becoming Freemasons. Such opposition is becoming less prevalent, and we have members from all faiths, even those that have sought to impose bans.

8. What are the Politics of Freemasonry?

None! Whilst individual Freemasons will have their own personal views on politics and state policy, Freemasons as a body will never express a view on either. The discussion of politics or political issues at Masonic meetings has always been banned.

9. Why do you roll your trousers up?

The honest answer is that nobody really knows for sure. There are many opinions within (and outside) Freemasonry as to the reason, but all we do know that it is one of the traditions whose origins have been lost over time. The only time a Freemason is required to bare his knee is during his progression through each of the three Degree Ceremonies which introduce him to different aspects of Masonic philosophy.

10. Why can’t Women become Freemasons?

Traditionally, Freemasonry was restricted to men; the earliest stonemasons were all male, and when Freemasonry was organising, the position of women was different from today. There are, in fact, Lady Freemasons, with their own Lodges organised under their own Grand Lodge. In this country, Lady and Gentlemen Freemasons prefer to keep that separateness. There are some parts of the world which have “co-Masonry”, admitting men and women to the same Lodges, but these are not recognised by Grand Lodge. In this day, single-sex organisations are very rare, but both Ladies and Gentlemen agree that their Freemasonry offers special attractions for socialising.

11. Do Masons favour one another in business dealings?

No! One of our fundamental rules on joining is that Freemasons agree that they are not seeking to gain personal, financial or material advantage. However, in any other club or society (golf, bridge, rugby, football etc.) people will naturally prefer to do business with those they know, like and trust and in this respect Freemasonry is no different. Using Freemasonry for financial benefit is strictly forbidden.

12. What happens at a Masonic Meeting?

Meetings are in two parts. The first part is concerned with the administrative business that any organisation has, such as the minutes of the last meeting, discussing Lodge charity and finances and so on. The second part is usually devoted to ceremonies either for admitting new members, or the annual installation of the Master. The three ceremonies for new members take the form of a one-part play, to introduce the candidate, in a dramatic way, to the principles of Freemasonry.

13. Why do you meet in a Temple?

Freemasons' ceremonies are based around the re-enactment of supposed events surrounding the building of King Solomon's Temple, and the way in which stonemasons of the time would have progressed. It refers, therefore, to the place of work of these people, rather than a place of worship. We retain that symbolism in our one-act plays.

14. Why do Masons wear aprons?

The aprons hark back to working stonemasons, on which our ceremonies are based. Even today stonemasons still wear lambskin aprons to protect themselves and their work. In Freemasonry, they also represent badges of rank, signifying different stages in a Masonic career. As a rough guide, the colours can be likened to participation in sport. The light blue can be considered as playing at club level, dark blue for the county, and dark blue with lots of gold as playing for the national team.

15. Why do Masons call God the Great Architect of the Universe?

Freemasonry is open to men of all faiths and denominations. It is therefore important to refer to a higher Being in terms that are non-denominational, and that all Freemasons will recognise. As Freemasonry uses stories about building a temple, we think of the highest individual involved as being the person who designed the whole structure. We therefore refer to the highest Being as the Great Architect of the Universe, as there can be no-one superior.

16. Is it expensive to be a Freemason?

There are some costs in the first year, such as joining and initiation fees, and the cost of regalia. Overall, this might total around £300 or so. You would also need a dark lounge suit. After that, the costs would be annual membership fees, which vary from Lodge to Lodge, the costs of dining, together with charity collections and so on. Overall the total might average out at between £15 and £20 per week.

17. What are the three Degrees?

The three Degrees are a series of traditional dramas, re-enacting the supposed events connected with stonemasons in the building of King Solomon's Temple. The tradition is over 300 years old, and helps members to learn by direct experience, teaching them the history and philosophy of Freemasonry

18. Can just anyone become a Freemason?

Freemasonry is a multi-faith, multi-cultural, multi-racial organisation. It is open to all men who are over 21, law abiding, of good character, and who believe in a Supreme Being. We will only accept men who fulfil all of those three essential requirements.

19. How do I go about joining a Lodge?

If you know someone who is a Freemason, just ask him! If not, and you are interested in joining, just give your name and contact details to one of us here, and we get someone to get in touch with you. If you are a little unsure, we do have some literature, and you can find out more on our website.

20. If I do join, what's in it for me?

You will find it a worthwhile and fascinating way to invest some of your spare time. For most, it provides a sense of belonging to a pastime that gives a structured and formal part of life which many feel is missing in today's world. Above all, you will form new friendships that will last a lifetime. You will also have fun!