

STRONG MAN LODGE No.45 - a potted review of an old lodge and its curious name

By Bro. Bryan Clark

On 2nd February this year, Strong Man Lodge No.45 reached the 275th Anniversary of its Constitution although it had actually been founded some five years before. Its celebrations were held at the HQ of the Honourable Artillery Company in the City of London, in the presence of several Grand and Provincial dignitaries. This was especially appropriate as the Lodge was founded in the City.

The Lodge is believed to be the 19th oldest lodge extant in the English Constitution, considerably older than quite a few others with lower numbers which, though founded much later in the 18th century, acquired the warrants of older lodges that were closing (and thereby their numbers) before the practice was banned. Mind you, Strong Man also benefited when Brethren of some of those closed lodges joined it. Over the years the Lodge had no fewer than nine numbers before finally becoming 45 in the middle 1800s.

Many Brethren at the anniversary celebration were from Lodges that could, in a sense, share the special occasion as members of a large family. No fewer than 93 Lodges can trace their ancestry back to Strong Man, mainly in the southern half of the Province of Essex. Indeed, hardly any place name in that area is missing from the list. However the major progenitors of the family have been elder daughter Lodge of True Friendship No.160, based at Rochford, Essex, which can claim motherhood of five Lodges, four of them still in existence – and 160's own eldest daughter, Priory Lodge No.1000, which has prolifically no fewer than eleven Lodges calling it mother, all going strong. Two family clusters have been held, in 2000 and 2006, drawing together many members of this extraordinary fraternal group.

True Friendship was founded in east London, principally by four members of Strong Man and constituted in 1766. They became the Master, Senior Warden, Junior Warden and Secretary of the new Lodge, which made steady progress. Towards the end of the century however, its membership – and this is remarkable when you consider the transportation restrictions of the era – had clearly shifted to a majority living in Essex. Showing its true mettle and self-reliance, in 1801 it upped sticks and removed down on to the Essex marshes at Rochford, where it been ever since (and this was without so much as a by-your-leave from mother and also, and this is a sore point still, without even sending a postcard !) Happily mother and daughter enjoy a strong fraternal (perhaps that should be sororal) relationship these days. As does Strong Man with its other Highgate, London-based younger daughter Skelmersdale Lodge No.1599 consecrated in 1876 which was granted authority to take the name of the then Assistant Grand Master, Lord Skelmersdale.

Strong Man has always been a proud and committed lodge, ever ready to help others when times were hard. Indeed Mount Lebanon Lodge No 73 (then 104) was such a Lodge that several members of Strong Man Lodge joined and helped to support during the period around 1820, especially a Bro George Turner who was seemingly a man of means. Initiated

on 6th February 1817, he was a leading stalwart of the Lodge for many years. He was WM in 1833. In 1836 he gave 80 valuable Masonic books to the new Grand Lodge Library (and they still only had 200 a year later!) In the by-laws of Strong Man Lodge No.53 in 1854 he is shown as the doyen of the Lodge. 45 and 73 enjoyed mutual visits a few years ago and these will hopefully continue. And then Willing Lodge No.2893 is also a lodge that was assisted; for when they were consecrated in 1902, Strong Man offered its Brethren a fraternal welcome into its Lodge of Instruction, which they shared for five years before founding their own.

Other great stalwarts of Strong Man were Henry Sadler, William Briggs and the Mills family. Henry Sadler's portrait hangs in the sitting room at Freemasons' Hall. He joined the Lodge in 1890, became Grand Tyler and then Librarian and Curator of Grand Lodge Museum in 1910. His book "Masonic Facts & Fictions" is considered essential reading. William Briggs was a wealthy publisher and many consider him the inventor of the Open University concept. He certainly was the first to offer academic training and professional qualifications by mail order. It was also he who in 1898 gave the Lodge the solid silver collars and cuffs worn to this day by the Master and Wardens and the beautiful silver snuffbox passed around at every festive board. The Mills dynasty was quite remarkable. George Mills celebrated 50 years in the Craft in 1938. His son George served as an army captain in World War II, becoming WM in 1945 and proposed his own son into the Lodge in 1982 thus totalling 94 years of continuous family membership.

The Lodge has a number of valuable artefacts in its possession – its Tracing Boards are awesome, for instance - but none are so prized as its set of three wonderful mid-1700s chairs - WM SW and JW - that currently languish, sadly unseen, on the mezzanine floor of Grand Lodge Museum. A few years ago they were examined and valued by both John Bly and Eric Knowles of "Antiques Roadshow" fame. Both estimates of value were nearly identical, several X00,000s – and that was even before they were refurbished by the Lodge three years ago. Nowadays they are only used for Installation Meetings.

Strong Man has had many different meeting places and the minutes describe or hint at some quite hilarious arguments and reasons why the present tavern or inn was now showing an unacceptable lack of respect for and attention to the Brethren's comfort. Examples were a shocking paucity of spittoons and ash bowls for instance; or the supplying of poor meat and bad ale; or just being plain rude and unappreciative of the Lodge's custom; or, as in one case, because the landlord was raising the price of a *barrel* of brandy by the equivalent of 12p. Much like today really. In total, the lodge has had 31 venues (does picky come to mind?) At one, the Swan Tavern, the minutes recount that when Samuel Pepys had been there on one occasion he drank 2 or 3 quarts of wine and chewed up over 200 walnuts but praised the place highly. Also included were 56 years at the now defunct Holborn Restaurant, 53 years so far in total at Freemasons' Hall and, significantly, 49 years at the Strong Man Tavern: which brings us to the name.

In 1702 a boy called Thomas Topham was born. Tom was a big boy who showed phenomenal strength from an early age. Naturally his pals admired him but, as he grew up, he was also

universally liked for his amiability and modesty. At fifteen he was apprenticed to a carpentry firm in north London (incidentally there is a Topham Street) where he would amaze and entertain his friends and colleagues with extraordinary feats – such as bending straps of heavy iron, twisting big nails with his fingers or lifting enormous weights – but also with his general ability to bring enormous strength to the job, including the handling of large horses.

Now, living nearby at that time was a young Huguenot doctor called John Desaguliers who heard about Tom and began to take a particular and scientific interest in the lad. Desaguliers was already an active and well-known freemason: he was also an highly regarded Fellow of the Royal Society, then as now the most prestigious scientific body in the country, founded in the previous century with King Charles II's benefaction. From this time, and for many years afterwards, Desaguliers would take Tom regularly to exhibit his great strength at meetings of the Royal Society where there was considerable and growing interest in human physiology. Interestingly, there is some evidence of links between the Lodge and the Royal Society.

In 1719, however, Dr. John T. Desaguliers (JTD) was elected as the Third Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England, founded just two years before at the Goose & Gridiron Inn in London. He asked Tom to accompany him as his bodyguard or “minder”, as we might say today, on his various Masonic journeys. So Tom went, among other places, to Bristol, Derby, Gateshead and even to Edinburgh. Whilst there, he was encouraged by JTD to use his time profitably by showing off his immense strength in public demonstrations. Finding this to be a handsome source of income, young Tom made quite a good career out of his public performances – and became nationally famous too. One of his most celebrated feats was to hold back a large farm horse that another man was whipping (and this is depicted on the Lodge badge)

In 1737, by this time happily married, he was able to buy a tavern in east London. He and his wife ran the place successfully, mainly because Mrs Topham was a redoubtable and clever woman who could easily handle things while Tom was a-travelling doing his strong man act. All went well for 12 years. Regrettably and tragically, Tom came home unexpectedly early one day in 1749 to find that his lady wife was “keeping company”. Tom went berserk. He hurled the other man down into the street and attacked his wife, stabbing her horribly a number of times. He must have had serious remorse because he then cut his own throat. Paradoxically he died two days later but, against the odds in those days, his wife recovered from her terrible injuries. She continued to run the tavern. This was by now well known as *The Strong Man*. Remarkably too, for those times, she was granted probate of Tom's estate. When the Lodge moved there, in 1764, it soon became itself known as the Strong Man Lodge: the name stuck and was adopted formally.

The Lodge is often asked if there is any proof or even strong evidence that Tom Topham was himself ever a freemason. There is not and yet he must have learned from JTD a considerable amount about freemasonry and its possible advantages for itinerant men. He seems from all contemporary accounts to have been an amiable man of integrity; and it would not have been *infra dig* for JTD to have proposed him either to his own Lodge (don't ask) or another in London. Mind you, in those days freemasonry was still held by people to be for the gentry and

higher echelons of society. Happily Strong Man Lodge was never in that category at all; nor is it now! However some work on this tantalizing question was undertaken by Bro Bernard Williamson (a contributor to this journal, who is now a member of Wakering & Barling Lodge No. 9790 at Rochford, Essex !!). Bro. Bernard is a PM of Strong Man, his mother Lodge, and was the Lodge historian for some years. He discovered that Mrs Topham's own estate papers are in the national archive at Kew. At some point some further work needs to be done to discover if there is anything in them that could throw light on the question.

By the way, it's a pity that most of the Lodge's very oldest minutes and books went up in smoke at some time towards the end of the 1700s, not long before the law required full disclosure of secret societies' and arcane associations' affairs. These included Lodges which also had to obey the Act of Sedition 1799, calling for full disclosure of their, hopefully, good works. One bright exception, of items that did survive, is the treasurer's Quarterage Book of 1749. This shows the subscription to have been the equivalent of 33p per quarter (Brother treasurers, look away now) a subscription that wasn't then raised for 55 years !!

Better news for the treasurers – in the early days, the Lodge being located deep in dockland, many members had jobs relating to maritime activity and several were themselves mariners. There were also members whose main addresses were in Hamburg or elsewhere along the North Sea seaboard. Strong Man Lodge still uses the expression “*Sea & Country Member*” for Brethren wishing to enjoy less regular membership. For many years, it was common practice to initiate, pass and raise a man at the same meeting prior to his departure for foreign parts. The fee for this convenience was 3 guineas, no mean layout when the average wage was £10 to 15 per annum. In 1815, however, spoilsports that they were, Grand Lodge banned the practice of multiple degree ceremonies, much to Brother Treasurer's disgust and all Brethren's disadvantage, because those extra monies had hitherto funded excellent parties!

The Lodge has been quite active socially over the years. Way back in the 1700s there were what were called Country Feasts when Brethren and their ladies mounted a large horse-drawn wagon and went into the “bush” of Buckhurst Hill, Essex. In the 1890s the press even made note of Strong Man's Ladies' Nights as having “moved outside the old Masonic course...!” Great Ladies' Nights were held in the 1960s at the Dorchester Hotel and other high-class West End venues. Later, a fraternal partnership with Hortus Lodge No.2469 resulted in joint Ladies' Nights at the Connaught Rooms. These led to the formation of a “*Mandalay Club*” which in turn evolved into the Mandalay Lodge No.9383 (West Kent) neither of which had anything to do with Burma: it was adopted as the club's name following raucous renderings of the song “*The Road to Mandalay*” at club gatherings! In recent times, Strong Man has had a series of successful garden parties at the current WM's home or chez some other kind Brother whose location or garden was more convenient. A couple of years ago a very successful Ladies' Dinner was held at the House of Lords. Attending the dress rehearsals of the “*Trooping the Colour*” ceremonies on Horseguards Parade has been a wonderful spectacle several times recently too.

The Lodge has recently experienced a healthy increase in membership, especially by younger

men, several of whom, though not of British nationality, are permanently based in London. Several have been referred to the Lodge through Grand Lodge. They have brought about (one might almost say brought back) a splendid international mix of new, younger Brethren and this has strengthened even further the happy situation where *all* the officers including the stewards are master masons or fellow-crafts with others ready to take office. The fresh *mélange* of occupations has been hugely important both for the younger Brethren but also for the considerable number of retired PMs. The current corps of “strong men” is in great shape!!

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