

The True Status of the Royal Arch – a Review

The year 2020, and the Covid-19 pandemic has altered our lives forever. Although we have restrictions imposed by the Lockdown, it has given us an unexpected bonus of valuable time. With the slow decline in Masonic membership, **this may be the time to reflect on the past**, to analyze certain sequences of events – **and most importantly** – to question why we allowed the Supreme Degree of the Royal Arch to slowly recede from view, overshadowed by other Masonic Orders. **Many newly initiated Masons are not even aware of the Royal Arch.**

Looking back a few years, **June 3 2017 marked the 300th Anniversary of Freemasonry**, or more specifically, the **formation of the first or Premier Grand Lodge in the year 1717.**

Freemasonry existed long before 1717, and although up to the present time, no positive proof has been established as to its true origins, Craft Masonry as we know it today is almost certainly derived from early British origins, including the London Mason's Company. Records of this company, are still in existence from 1620 onwards, showing that within this company there existed an inner Fraternity known as the Acception. Also, in Scotland, there is a Minute Book from 1598.

For some years before the first Grand Lodge was formed, it was known that Craft Lodges were conducting one, two or three degrees, or any combination of those degrees, together with the Royal Arch and Knights Templar degrees, sometimes under the same Charter or Warrant.

It soon became apparent that a supervisory control was required, and Four Lodges in London England, came together to form the Premier Grand Lodge. The City of London was in those days only a few square miles, with a relative number of Lodges and very limited communications. One of the Four Lodges included members of the Aristocracy, a strong influence in those earlier days of English Class Distinction. There was also some religious influence in the background. Therefore, when the Articles of the Premier Grand Lodge were published, they declared there were only Three Degrees in Masonry, the Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason.

The Irish and Scottish Masons, together with the North of England Masons, increasingly resented the assumption of superiority by the 'English' Grand Lodge in London, and their exclusion of the Royal Arch. Consequently, a **rival Grand Lodge was founded in 1751**, and its adherents, believing they practiced a more ancient and therefore purer form of Freemasonry, called themselves the '**Antients**' (note the letter T) and referred to the Premier Grand Lodge as the '**Moderns.**' From the point of view of Masonic history, this has proved to be unfortunate and misleading, bearing in mind that the Premier Grand Lodge had already existed for decades. After much bitterness between the Antients and Moderns, and for the good of masonry, they eventually formed an Act of Union. **This solemn Act of Union in 1813**, finally recognized the Royal Arch **but at the same time, almost rendered it invisible by the compromise wording. Unbelievably, it took almost 100 years from the founding of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717, to reach the point, where the Royal Arch was recognised, but almost buried in the process.**

The wording of the **Act of Union**, 'declared and pronounced that pure Ancient Masonry consists of **three degrees and no more**, viz., those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft and the Master Mason, **including** the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch.'

Three Degrees and no more including the Holy Royal Arch, an unusual compromise indeed.

Although rendered almost invisible, **an Unbreakable Tie to the Craft was firmly established.** *This is an important point to understand – ALMOST INVISIBLE, WITH AN UNBREAKABLE TIE.*

For over 200 years (since 1813) we have been closely tied to the Craft Freemason, but also deprived of full recognition by the words three degrees including the Holy Royal Arch.

Interestingly, in the UK, with exactly the same compromise wording, the Royal Arch is accorded greater importance in relation to Craft Masonry. In effect, the Master Mason is encouraged to **continue his journey by joining the Royal Arch, before considering any concordant order.**

Craft Lodge summonses have regular notes included, asking Master Masons to consider joining the associated Chapter of the Royal Arch. The names of senior members of the lodge who are actively engaged in running the Chapter, are clearly advertised. At the present time (in the U.K.) **Craft Lodge Secretaries** include the following statement in their Summonses. **'The Supreme Order of the Royal Arch, is the completion of a Mason's journey through Pure, Ancient Freemasonry.'**

Please Note: the word **completion**, is the completion **of a journey**, not the completion of the Master Mason degree, the Master Mason's Degree is complete in itself.

The Unbreakable Tie in the UK. Is even more apparent when it is known that the Grand Master of Grand Lodge, is also the Grand First Principal of the Royal Arch. A truly Unbreakable Tie.

It may not be sufficient for Royal Arch Masons alone, to grasp and fully understand the true significance of the overshadowing of the Royal Arch, by concordant bodies. Craft Masons themselves need to be made aware of the 200 year old Unbreakable Tie, and its importance.

The Supreme Degree of the Royal Arch is the continuation of Craft Masonry, and is known as Capitular Masonry, and both are part of the York Rite (Ritual). Regarding the **York Rite**, and for the sake of clarity, it is worth mentioning the inaccuracy of a number of masonic Family Trees in the front pages of Masonic Bibles. These illustrations reflect the American Rite and show the York Rite commencing **after** the Master Mason degrees, **when in reality the degrees of the Craft Master Mason are an integral part of the York Rite, along with the Holy Royal Arch degree.** The York Rite is a **Ritual**, associated with the City of York in England, and the first acceptable ritual used in Masonry. The first words an Initiate hears in the Craft, are part of the York Rite (Ritual). *The Royal Arch is the continuation of Craft Masonry, and both are part of the York Rite (Ritual).*

Looking forward to a brighter future for the Royal Arch, it is worth examining some of the recent important decisions recently made (in the UK.) by the United Grand Lodge and the Supreme Grand Chapter. **As the bi-centenary of the 1813 Act of Union approached**, both the Grand Lodge and the Grand Chapter of England, reconsidered their position regarding the **true status of the Royal Arch.**

In December 2003, the United Grand Lodge of England, acknowledged and pronounced the status of the Royal Arch to be 'an extension to, but neither a superior nor a subordinate part of the degrees which precede it.' The Master Mason and Royal Arch degrees are of equal status. *This is worth emphasising, the Master Mason and Royal Arch degrees are of equal status.*

The Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, eventually questioned **their reasoning**, on **Nov. 10 2004**, after deliberations by a Special Working Party, the Supreme Grand Chapter, at its regular meeting in London, also 'grasped the nettle' and formally overturned the **compromise position of 1813, and declared the Royal Arch to be a separate degree in its own right**. The natural progression from the Third Degree, and the completion of 'pure ancient masonry' consisting of the Three Craft Degrees **and** the Holy Royal Arch. (note the word **and**).

The compromise wording of 1813 has been overturned – the Royal Arch is a separate degree.

The official position of the Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of England today, is that "the Royal Arch is the **continuation of Craft Freemasonry**, and 'Pure, Ancient Masonry' can be seen as a journey of self-knowledge and discovery, with the Royal Arch completing the practical lessons of the Craft, by a contemplation of man's spiritual nature, not replacing but reinforcing and supporting what he has learned from his religion."

A Summary of the True Status of the Royal Arch

The Royal Arch is a separate degree in its own right, known as Capitular Masonry.

The Degrees of the Craft Master Mason and the Royal Arch are of equal status.

No degrees have a greater value than the Master Mason and the Royal Arch.

The Degrees of Master Mason and the Royal Arch are both a part of the York Rite (Ritual).

The Supreme Degree of the Holy Royal Arch is the continuation of Craft Freemasonry.

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Sources:

The United Grand Lodge of England
Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of England