

The Membership Crisis in Freemasonry

Part 2 – Hinchley Wood Lodge in Particular

Patrick Byrne MA PM

This section will deal with results of the questionnaire sent to all Lodge members. I have received 21 replies from 31 members, which is excellent.

I will now discuss the findings in the same order as they appear on the questionnaire.

What time would you like the lodge to open?

4.30 start – 2

5.00 start - 1

5.30 start – 6

6.00 start – 5

Whatever the Lodge decides – 7

We have 6 votes for a 5.30 start and 5 for a 6.00 start with a further 7 going with the consensus.

Because the object of the exercise is to encourage new members – who, most of us agree, cannot leave work as early as we older brethren could in our day, I'm not sure that a 5.30 start is going to make the difference we need. Certainly further north they start at 6.00 pm or later and are not suffering anywhere near the drain in members that we are.

However, this is a democratic debate and, although the results are very close, I am quite happy to recommend a 5.30 start and to see how things proceed. If, though, any brother has an interested candidate who cannot make 5.30 but could manage 6.00 then I hope we can revisit this matter.

What time would you like the lodge dinner to end?

9.30 end - 3

10.00 end - 7

10.30 end - 3

11.00 end – 1

Whatever the Lodge decides – 7

There is a clear consensus for the status quo and a 10.00 pm finish. Indeed a couple of those who voted for a later end were not prepared to pay extra for staff overtime.

If you would like lodge meetings to end later than 10pm are you willing to pay extra for catering staff overtime?

Yes - 6

No - 11

Whatever the lodge decides – 4

This item is no longer relevant.

Do you regularly attend lodge meetings?

Yes – 15
No - 6

We have received six responses from non-active brethren and one said that a later start would help him to attend; another said work commitments made some visits impossible.

Have you proposed a new member to the lodge?

Yes – 9
No - 12

This response surprisingly shows that nearly 60% of our members have never proposed a new member. This is probably the key finding from the questionnaire and we need urgently to address this problem. There is clearly a barrier, which discourages brethren from inviting their friends and we need to find ways of removing it.

If the answer to 6 was “no” why not?

Friends not interested – 2
I struggle to attend - 1
Young are busy and old are not interested – 2
Not local – 1
No suitable candidates – 1
Friend would not like to participate in ritual - 2

There are 7 responses, from which it is difficult to discern much of a pattern. I suggest that we set aside part of the occasional lodge of instruction to review how the recruitment is going and what measures – if any – we need to implement, to improve recruitment.

If the lodge holds an open meeting to discuss this matter will you attend?

Yes – 19
No – 1
Subject to work - 1

This issue clearly has the attention of all members resident in the UK.

What aspects of the ceremony don't you like?

Risings – 1
Too long – 3
WM does everything – 2
Long discussions where nothing is decided - 1
All ritual – 1
Poor ritual – 1
None – 12

We have already addressed the question of the master doing everything with some success. With a 5.30 start we will need to address what areas of our proceedings need to be curtailed.

Although only one brother finds the risings annoying it is possible to shorten the procedure. It would be difficult to roll all three into one because interventions usually need to take place at particular risings. However, it is permissible for the master – on the second and third risings to say, “I rise for the second or third time for a like purpose”, removing two out of three tongue twisters.

I also suggest that we reduce the reports from charity steward and almoner to one per annum and – in accordance with the recommendation from Province - add a report by the mentor and the membership officer so that we have only one report per meeting.

If either steward has anything urgent to bring before the lodge then he can use the third rising or deliver it at the festive board. This is especially easy for the almoner who can propose the toast to absent brethren at each festive board and say a few words beforehand if he needs to.

What aspects of the ceremony do you like?

Seeing a brother do his best - 1
The history – 3
Ritual keeps my mind active - 1
Dependability – 1
Presentations – 2
All of it – 13

It appears that Hinchley Wood Lodge is delivering satisfaction to its current members.

What do you like about Freemasonry?

Friendship – 17
Charity – 1
Universality - 1
Most or all of it – 2

These findings confirm the analysis of part 1 of this presentation.

What do you dislike about Freemasonry?

Cliques – 1
Hierarchy and pomposity – 4
Official visitors out of touch – 1
Lengthy meetings – 1
Occasional insensitivity - 1
Toasts - 1
Hypocrisy - 1
Ritual – 1
Politics – 1
Nothing – 9

The lengthy meetings and ritual will hopefully be addressed by shorter meetings – which we must ensure produces crisper ceremonies, not rushed ones.

The problems with cliques is not something I have experienced within Hinchley Wood lodge but our commitment to make new members more welcome will – hopefully – keep this area under constant review.

We now have an official lodge mentor – C. W. – so if any member experiences a problem with cliques, hierarchy, pomposity or any other aspect of our meetings, they should have a quiet word with Colin and he will do his very best to resolve the problem.

Additional comments

Financial

We should not be financially elitist.

We should be making Freemasonry more affordable

We cannot afford more price increases or young people will not be able to afford it.

Cost of Freemasonry may be a problem

Festive board/Surbiton hall

Meals are poor.

Bar prices are over-priced for a club.

Lodge dinner is over-priced. If I go to a restaurant, meals are round £25 and I have a choice, this is why there are fewer visitors and members.

Meal prices are competitive as they include wine.

There should be a time limit on after-dinner speeches of 2 minutes especially official visitors.

We need more low cost events to which non-masons could be invited

After our Lodge meetings we should go straight into the festive board. Then we would finish by 10.00 pm. the management would soon give you an extra half hour free, to sell their over-priced drinks.

We used to have a drink after the festive board but the staff are always in a hurry to close up, the Surbiton Club does a good trade from the Masons. I suggest you have a drink at the Surbiton Club one evening to see for yourself what could be done to our Masonic hall during the day.

It should be made more acceptable for guests to pay for themselves.

The Masonic hall should open during the day with cheaper lunches more facilities like pool, darts, snooker, card games etc. Masons would use it during the day, taking their wives and friends to have lunches, open to non members for a fee like the Surbiton Club; this would also bring in more revenue for the Masonic hall.

Ceremony

Ritual is not for everyone.

There is too much to learn in Freemasonry

General

What is a brother's commitment?

We should not be snobbish.

Amalgamation with a smaller lodge might solve the problem – 2 brethren said this.

Questionnaire should have probed deeper into our problems.

People can't get away from work as early as they used to

We need to avoid a start when the traffic is heavy.

Lack of explanation of the aims of Freemasonry.

We need a higher profile.

Charitable side of Freemasonry is not well enough known.

Grand Lodge could do more to promote Freemasonry

General appeal – especially to younger males - has gone - 2 brethren said this.

Rotary is suffering similar problems and now recruits from a wider field.

DISCUSSION

I will discuss financial aspects first.

I wish first to thank Arnie for providing the necessary information for the period I requested.

From 1994 until last year the annual cost of being a member of Hinchley Wood Lodge rose by about 20% above inflation over the same period. This equates to around £20 in today's money.

Grand Lodge fees as a percentage of our overall annual dues are as follows:

1994	19%
2000	25%
2008	18%

Any fears that our Grand Lodge dues are escalating are clearly unfounded.

Provincial Grand Lodge fees as a percentage of our overall annual dues are as follows:

1994	13%
------	-----

2000	18%
2008	12%

Any fears that our Provincial Grand Lodge dues are escalating are also unfounded.

Surbiton Masonic Hall non-dining fees as a percentage of our overall annual dues are as follows:

1994	29%
2000	31%
2008	22%

Any fears that our Surbiton Masonic Hall non-dining fees are escalating are also unfounded.

Other overheads as a percentage of our overall annual dues are as follows:

1994	39%
2000	26%
2008	48%

Our “other overheads” have escalated by 9%, or around £18 in today’s money. I suggest that the Secretary and Treasurer prepare a report to see what – if any – action is possible to reduce or contain them.

In my paper, which accompanied the questionnaire, I suggested that we approach the Masonic Hall to see if they will revisit their meal charges. Clearly it is more economic for the Hall to provide 40 meals at say £20 than 10 meals at £20. They have fixed costs that have to be covered: such as maintenance costs, heating, cleaning and administration staff etc. It is in the Masonic Hall’s interest to encourage individual Lodges to have higher turnouts. They could do this by discounting some overheads and offering a reduction on meal costs above say 20 diners. This reduction could be passed on directly to guests and so encourage more visitors to Lodges, who will buy more drinks at the bar.

It seems appropriate – especially if we can persuade the Hall to give a reduced meal cost on numbers over 20 – to emphasise that this lodge warmly welcomes visitors who wish to pay for their own meals. This is perfectly normal in northern lodges where a steward will either go round the diners during the meal and collect the money, or sit at the entrance to the dining room and collect it as brethren enter the dining room.

Lodges in Surrey generally only meet 4 times per year, as against twice as many times in other provinces. There is enormous scope for more visiting but not if the financial burden is going to fall on the host – many of whom are retired and on reduced incomes.

In conclusion, the question of recruitment and retention of new members is clearly of the utmost importance to us all. The introduction of a mentor gives us all a conduit to nip many potential problems in the bud.

It is important that we constantly review this matter and to that end I suggested above that we set aside part of the occasional lodge of instruction to review progress. In addition, if the recommendation - to have the mentor and membership officer report to the lodge annually – is accepted, then this should keep the matter under regular review.

There is evidence from American Freemasonry that setting achievable targets is helpful to recruitment.

I, accordingly, finally suggest that we set ourselves the goal of recruiting one new member each year and keeping him on board.

ACTION POINTS

		YES	NO
1	Ask Masonic Hall to consider cheaper meals above 20 places	✓	
2	The lodge should start at 5.30 pm	✓	
3	The master's words for the risings should be altered to "I rise for the second/third time for a like purpose".	✓	
4	There should be one report per annum from the Almoner, Charity Steward, Mentor and Membership Officer		✓
5	We should set the goal of initiating one new member each year and constantly review progress towards this goal.	✓	