GESTATION – From Petitioners to Founders

The Birth of Internet Lodge No. 9659

by W.Bro. Dr. Victor Sereno MPS

I suppose that I must risk a charge of ‘teaching grandma to suck eggs’, but, because of the international nature of this esteemed body and because of the differences in both practice and ritual around the globe, it is felt necessary to give some brief explanations of UGLE masonry, so that you may appreciate the differences and better understand the subject matter.

Writing with the benefit of ignorance, it would appear that a significant difference in our practice of the Craft is that our Grand Master (HRH the Duke of Kent) is a fairly permanent fixture; that the senior Officers of Grand Lodge (UGLE) have a more or less indefinite tenure and that appointments/honors come ‘from above’ and are not necessarily the result of campaigning at Grand Lodge meetings or of regular elections. That is not to say that it is not unknown for certain brethren ( & I use the word loosely) to ‘craw’ or otherwise inappropriately solicit Honors, which bring comments that Honors are dependent on who you know/ how much you give rather than on what you have done – allegedly.

So, Grand Lodge is the ‘supreme body’ in English ( & Welsh) Masonry and, rather than the many separate Grand Lodges in the USA, the system then operates through Provincial ( or District ) Grand Lodges – so I suppose that one could vaguely equate UGLE with COGMINA – but only vaguely. Each Provincial Grand Lodge is presided over by a Provincial Grand Master, appointed by the Grand Master. They usually serve for a term of 7 years ( with a ‘patent of appointment’) and it is the Provinces who control the individual Lodges. Provincial Honors are awarded annually (except the Provincial grand Master, his Deputy and Assistants and the Provincial Secretary ( who is appointed by the PGM anyhow). The rest of the Provincial ‘team is appointed either with Acting Rank – which means formal duties through the season, or Past Rank, which, for obvious reasons, is the more common. The actual Rank awarded creates a ‘pecking order’ which some find more ‘significant’ than others and there is often a jockeying for position; whilst effectively, apart from one’s place in a procession, the rank is meaningless.

What is the significance of this? Well, in theory each Lodge is an individual entity which can determine how it works – always under the Book of Constitutions of UGLE of course – and can conduct its after proceedings as it thinks fit. In practice, the Province will dictate, or ‘persuasively argue’ how it wants a new Lodge to function both in terms of by-laws and, if it has its way, ritual. The anachronism here is that many new Lodges are (simply put) spin-offs from larger, well established Lodges, which want to carry on the traditions of their ‘mother’, especially in ritualistic matters.

Seemingly, another difference relates to what will be termed ‘after proceedings’ and particularly alcohol consumption. It is usual for UGLE Lodges to have a meal (usually known as the ‘festive board’ or ‘social board’) after each regular meeting. This follows a simple formula of a three course, or thee course plus cheese and coffee (canteen style) meal where there are a number of wine takings and toasts. It is convivial and not too formal, except for Installations when the meal becomes a ‘banquet’ (i.e. an excuse for the caterer to charge considerably more for the provision of an extra course and probably candles on the tables ) with a more formalized structure. At all these events alcohol is served ( or sold). It may just be beer; there may be wines and sprits too. It is almost unknown for anyone to become the worse for wear at these events. I acknowledge that in Scotland, the after proceedings are limited to a sandwich and a drink or nothing, whilst some English Lodges are finding costs rising disproportionately to the incomes of their members so they are dispensing with a meal. This has a knock-on effect for the Halls, because there is a reliance on catering and bar profits to keep costs within due bounds. Most Halls (or Temples if you prefer) have a bar. The costs vary, some are as cheap as can be, whilst others ‘take advantage’ of a captive audience to push their costs up A publican – yes they are allowed here – told me that he thought he had the most expensive bar in a certain large city, but the Masonic Hall was dearer. However, it is no disadvantage when brethren arrive early for a rehearsal or committee to meet and chat at the bar, or even stay after a regular meeting for a ‘digestif’. In any case, the strict ‘drink-drive’ laws effectively restrict alcohol intake, even though some complain it spoils their enjoyment prior to a long drive home.

This highlights another significant difference in masonry this side of ‘the pond’. UGLE Lodges generally meet once a month ( or so many times a year) for their regular meeting during
the `season' (usually September to May). Falling numbers: rising costs and demographic changes now mean that rather than the 'old fashioned' 9 meetings a year, many Lodges now meet 3, 4 or 5 times (especially in the London area). Chapters; Mark; RAM and other 'adjunctive' orders tend to meet about 3 times a year. The meetings, which are open to all members (EAs are members & have full voting rights – they only leave the Lodge during the time it is open in a higher degree & return later) consist of business matters then a Degree (if there is a candidate ) or lecture followed by the after proceedings. They do not meet weekly. Prospective candidates are told that, if they join, they will be expected to attend rehearsals on another night in the month and committee meetings when appropriate, but with membership of other bodies, a brother can find himself out three or four times a month plus.

Unfortunately, as foretold some ten years ago, membership numbers are decreasing: Lodges are failing and merging or handing in their warrants and many Regular Meetings are simply perfunctory affairs, with the possibility of a 'demonstration'/rehearsal ceremony. A consequence of this is that reduced numbers of Lodges and members mean that fewer 'appointments' can be made (the number of Assistant Provincial Grand Masters is dependent on the number of Lodges and the number of 'provincial' collars that can be awarded depends upon the number of masons in any given Group or District). This, in turn, leads to an unseemly spectacle of brethren `crawling' obsequiously in an attempt to secure, what they consider, a suitable appointment. The significance of this to Masonic historians? It is not unknown for certain 'documents' to vanish from Lodge archives, especially if the subject matter is contentious. There are problems if Minutes vanish, for a Lodge has to prove continuous meeting to qualify for a 50th anniversary or centenary and this means having and showing a complete set of minutes. So, a heartfelt plea. Don't simply trash letters or documents which may indicate a significant event in your Lodge's history. Hopefully, you will have an archive, or somewhere to store them; perhaps someone will transfer them to CD or zip drive. It may not interest you at present, but, if your Lodge survives, there may be those who, in years to come, seek the truth about the origins and history of the Lodge. Don't feed them an incomplete fable. Compare the effect of the DaVinci Code on Masonic history.

So, now to the nitty gritty of this piece.

It is common, when reading Lodge histories, to find that the piece begins with a short paragraph to the effect that there were xx founders who gathered on such and such a date for the Consecration of XYZ Lodge. However, researchers really like to search for the 'hidden truths'; to discover what actually went on behind the glib Consecration minutes. Seemingly, little research has been published covering those many hours; countless meetings and reams of correspondence which form the actual genesis of a Lodge. In this case, the choice of Internet Lodge is deliberate for two reasons. Firstly because of the unusual nature of the Lodge, which is an attempt to marry 'new technology' with traditional freemasonry and secondly, because the writer was involved from its inception and able to compare the stages to those of another Lodge which he helped found. Consequently, this is an attempt to provide a warts and all scenario of the events which led from the early meetings of those who were to become Petitioners up to the moment when Internet Lodge formally came into existence.

It is at this point that I must indicate that I have deliberately and generally left out Ranks and Titles. These have changed over the years and, in any case, this is an attempt to record events not to glorify or denigrate individuals. Similarly, it was felt better to omit names in many cases, although the Petitioner's minutes should provide enough detail to satisfy the curious, if they are left intact. It is also necessary, at this point, to indicate that no personal opinions are expressed – unless they are found in quotations from other petitioners. The 'historian' in the writer attempts to ensure an unbiased, but accurate explanation of a series of events. The data here, other than 'personal reminiscences', which are quoted as such, comes from original minutes and documents.

The birth of Internet Lodge did not go as smoothly as many think. Indeed there was significant hostility to the concept of the Lodge and many obstacles were put in our way. Someone on high at Great Queen Street picked up on a glib jocular comment that, in keeping with the 'new technology' this Lodge would be opened by members clothing themselves in their Regalia, sitting at their computers and logging-on in a form of video conference (the contemporary buzz word) to hold a formal meeting. How any rational person could take this seriously beggars belief, but objections soon became apparent. Indeed at least two of those interested in becoming founders received phone calls from 'senior' brethren 'suggesting' that continued attachment and interest in this new organization would seriously affect their chances of future Honors. Accordingly, and much to their future chagrin, they withdrew.

It is hard to quantify how much effort was put in by Rt.W.Bro.David Law', the Provincial Grand Master of Derbyshire, and V.W.Bro. John Cockin the Deputy Provincial Grand Master of Oxfordshire, at the Board of General Purposes. They countered all falsehoods, corrected misconceptions and expounded the virtues of this novel concept to good effect. Without them it is doubtful that the Lodge would have come to fruition.

Similarly, enormous gratitude is due to the PGM of East Lancashire, V.W.Bro.James Dunsford Hemsley who was on a special committee at Grand Lodge and who talked directly
to the M.W. Pro Grand Master, the Marquess of Northampton, at the time and it was some of his work that allowed Internet Lodge to proceed. It was also as a result of this contact that some of early correspondence was directly with the Grand Secretary himself rather than through Province.

It should be remembered that this was a time when the internet was a tool used mainly by academics and Government Departments, exchanging research information between Universities, particularly in the non-communist countries. It was inevitable that friendships should spring up between those involved in this electronic communication system and those of similar interest groups set up ‘chat rooms’ or discussion groups. Inevitably, among the thousands of groups which proliferated, freemasonry became one of the interest groups and a forum called ‘alt.freemasonry’ became popular. It was a forum for the exchange of ideas and ideals, but was open to all. In academic fields, researchers were not overly interested in whether an information source was a ‘recognised’ Lodge. So long as the material was appropriate and verifiable, then that was sufficient.

Gradually, it became apparent that a number of British masons were contributing to the group and the idea of the internet was spreading. Consequently, a suggestion was made that on a certain fourth of July those within reach of Great Queen Street should meet, providing an opportunity to put names to faces. A dozen turned up and after brief introductions, embarked on a tour of Great Queen Street. It was then suggested that a new group be formed for UGLE, other British masons and those having some particular affinity or interest in the Craft in the United Kingdom. Thus was the ukmason-list born. It has grown from the original dozen to some 2000 encompassing many different Ranks and Constitutions. It is a veritable fountain of knowledge, providing answers to many obscure questions on history and procedure.

But it is now time to detail some of the significant events in the creation. One night in February 1996, after attending a Lodge meeting, two list members were discussing matters over a nightcap when the idea of forming a Lodge arose. The thought was that this would be a research Lodge open to those having internet access, taking advantage of the possibilities of the new technology and would be adjunctive to the ukmason-list. The idea of a Lodge having been floated on the internet, a request was made for interested parties to make themselves known. The response was more than hoped for.

Lodges do not appear overnight. There is an enormous amount of work to be undertaken, stretching over many months. Indications of interest were followed by a suggestion that those who wished to take Office should indicate their willingness and preference. Subsequently the first of many meetings was arranged and a number of strangers gathered in the Midlands to lay the foundations for this new enterprise. Meetings of what was to become the Petitioner’s Committee were held around the country; mainly in the Midlands, as a geographical centre, but as far apart as Essex and York. Contrary to further rumor, these were open to all interested parties, but the large amount of travelling involved (by English standards); the need to rise early on a Sunday for a lunchtime meeting and the realization that one has made a trip in excess of 300 miles for a couple of hours discussion, which may have proved fruitless, curtailed the eventual number.

Whatever was to happen, it was necessary to construct a framework for this new venture, for the Lodge as yet had no name. There had been significant interest from abroad, so arrangements would have to be made to cater for those brethren, not least in selecting the meeting time in order to enable those who were able to attend. Similarly there had to be availability in whatever Masonic Halls were to be used and the inevitable clash of dates had to be taken into consideration. It was felt that a meeting on a Saturday at noon would be most beneficial, although it unfortunately meant that one or two orthodox Jewish brethren than had to withdraw. There was also a feeling that at least one meeting should be held during the summer months, when overseas brethren might be vacationing in the U.K. giving them an opportunity to combine Lodge attendance with their summer holiday. It was always intended that the Lodge should be a ‘Service Lodge’ meeting only infrequently, in various locations and concentrating on matters of Masonic research and education, rather than actually Initiating candidates. Arising from this were two contentious proposals, both of which were flatly refused.

Bearing in mind the hope that the Lodge would elicit much overseas interest and being conscious of the fact that many of those overseas brethren would be unable or unwilling to travel to our meetings, yet would wish to have some connection, it was suggested that the Lodge form an ‘association’ somewhat similar in concept to the Quatuor Coronati Correspondence Circle (QCCC). This would enable interested parties to have some sense of belonging without having to pay affiliation fees to UGLE and Province as well as normal Lodge subscriptions. They would have some form of research input and would be able to receive Lodge papers. This was rejected out of hand, without any opportunity to present a case or to investigate how such a group could be assimilated.

Similarly it was proposed that there should be a Lodge Orator as one of its’ Officers; an opportunity to honor a distinguished Masonic re-searcher, who would in turn present appropriate papers. This too was rejected, although it was suggested that a steward could fulfill such a post, but that there was no provision for the formal appointment to such an Office.

It must be remembered that, initially, there was a possibility that the new Lodge would be part of either
East Lancashire or Warwickshire Province. In communication with Warwickshire the PGM and the Prov Sec were not too happy with the idea of an Internet Lodge, so it was decided that it would be East Lancashire. Fortunately, Mellor Lodge No.1774, the mother Lodge of at least two of those interested, was prepared to sponsor the new undertaking. Don Hyde, a Past Master of Mellor Lodge and the Petitioners' Secretary, recalled it was Jimmy Hemsley that cleared the link for me to talk directly with the Grand Sec to get all the ideas set up, but then to make it all official it had to be done via the EL Provincial office. To be honest if we hadn't used 'The old Pals Act' Internet Lodge would never have happened because at the beginning there was too much opposition to the idea from a number of Provinces and I understood that a deputation had been made to prevent the formation. It was Jimmy's belief in what I had proposed to him made him fight for us at GL and persuade the powers that be, that Internet Lodge could be a way forward for Freemasonry in the future.

Consequently all subsequent communications, requests and decisions were made and transmitted through that Provincial Office. There was no indication whether the source was UGLE or the Province itself. It was around this time that the 'competition' for a Lodge name took place on the net and our title was chosen.

It may have been serendipitous but, contrary to suggestions of a 'Manchester Mafia', the secretary to the petitioners, the future DC and the future Wardens were all geographically close to Provincial headquarters in Bridge Street, Manchester, so were able to attend the many 'informal meetings' requested by the Provincial Grand Secretary and the Provincial DC. Here much of the 'nitty gritty' of the future operation of the Lodge was discussed and agreed. One thing that was demanded of us was that we adopted GL model By Laws in full, and then anything that we didn't like was to be submitted to GL for approval. About four points were changed and approved by the Grand Sec. There was a 'persuasive request' (I won't call it an instruction) that East Lancashire ritual – a form of Emulation – should be used (sorry, but there was never any likelihood of 'Universal' being adopted) and that a copy should be submitted to Province. The only ritual submitted was a 'cod' opening 'according to the ritual of Ye Grande Lodge of Middleton', which went through the process of booting-up and logging on and which was received in the spirit intended.

Much time and effort went in to 'creating' the ritual; not so much the words, but the rubric (the instructions regarding perambulations and protocol – in other words, everything else) was carefully constructed to ensure a smooth flowing ceremony and accommodate members of different religions as well as high ranking brethren from overseas Constitutions and senior members of UGLE who might visit.

All this had to be incorporated in our ritual and protocols, including the procedures at the Festive Board and was thrashed out in discussions with the Provincial DC. It may have been subsequently amended but worked very well, even though I admit, it had many West Lancashire overtones, but those were because experience had shown them to be worth adopting. Since the Lodge Officers would come from different Provinces and have different ways of 'working' care had to be taken to accommodate those differences in a manner that would not be too obvious to visitors. Similarly, a decision was taken to 'restrict' the wine takings and toasts at our Festive Boards (remember that this was a late lunch) except for the Installation when, depending on who attended, the full toast list etc. would be observed.

It is easy to overlook the enormous amount of work undertaken by W.Bro. Don Hyde, the secretary to the Petitioners, who spent many hours gathering essential information and putting it into a suitable form for committee meetings, not to mention liaising with Provincial Office and overseas Lodges. Most newly formed English Lodges (using the term advisedly) are made up of local people. In this case the membership was not only spread across the British Isles but extended over the four quarters of the globe. The logistics of gathering clearance certificates and membership applications from far distant parts, then, having ensured that the applications were in order, devising a route to send the petition round for signature and arranging for the final signatures to be appended in Manchester was beyond the ability of lesser men, yet Don performed these 'heroic' tasks without complaint. He confirmed that "Just for the record I spend 4 years putting things together and in the last 6 months I finished up working some 6 hours every day." It is a pity that his efforts were not recognized by those 'on high'.

During this period there was a fluidity among our numbers. While the ukmason-list, the grass roots of the new Lodge, merely required an interest in UK Masonry, it was necessary for those wishing to become founders to join a UGLE Lodge. Arrangements were made to expedite this, although there was an influx of folk who seemed more interested in 'collecting Lodges' and dropped by the wayside. It should be noted that, once the Lodge was in existence, membership application requirements were simply those of a 'recognized' Lodge. On election the individual would become a member of UGLE, possibly requiring a Declaration in open Lodge.

A 'problem' was that some of our new members were extremely high ranking in their own jurisdictions, yet, as members of a UGLE Lodge, were expected to wear a simple PM's apron. This even applied to our esteemed Turkish member, Celil Layaktez, who was the representative of UGLE to the Grand Lodge of Turkey. However, it was accepted that a brother coming as the Representative of his own Grand...
Lodge was entitled to wear the Regalia of that Grand Lodge. In practice, a lot depended on the DC ‘thinking on his feet’, which introduces an important requirement laid down by the Province.

Initially there were requests on the ukason-list for interested parties to indicate willingness to take office and a number of brethren gave such indication. However, quite correctly, Province required that those occupying the ‘important’ Offices – Secretary, Treasurer and DC – should be experienced in those posts. It may have proved a disappointment to some who aspired to those positions (at least one brother withdrew from the petitioners because he wouldn’t be allowed to occupy one of those Offices) but the logistics of getting the Lodge off the ground and running smoothly required brethren who were sufficiently experienced to think on their feet and make decisions rapidly.

It was, however, decided by the petitioning committee, which had by this time become the founder’s committee, that nobody, apart from possibly the secretary and treasurer (and then only in difficult circumstances) should hold Office for more than three years. This would give a chance for new members to actually take Office and was one of the ‘traditions’ established from the outset.

Perhaps the main Custom established was that there should be no ‘ladder’ as such (following the pattern of many Installed Masters Lodges) but, the three founding Principal Officers having been selected, any member wishing to go into the ‘Chair’ should submit an on-line ‘paper’ setting out his aims and aspirations during a year in Office. These papers could be accessed by all the members. In the even of more than one ‘application’, a ballot would be taken on-line by the members and a winner declared. The successful candidate would be appointed Junior Warden at the subsequent Installation. Details for the conduct of such a ballot were finalized and agreed. Similarly, because it was assumed that most of the members would be active in their own jurisdictions Province was informed that we would not seek any Provincial Honors through East Lancashire.

By this time many details had to be resolved. There was the question of a Lodge crest, which again was selected by consensus and subsequently the provision of Founder’s jewels and Regalia – each Officer to provide the collar of his Office and subsequently to present it to the Lodge. This was put in the capable hands of David Stower who also presented the Master’s collar. Additionally, provision was made for the same basic jewel, without the ‘founder’ bar to be available to the first batch of joining members. The final design of the jewel was by Nigel Beaumont. A stainless steel tube to hold and transport the Lodge Warrant was made by the founding ADC, Mervyn Frank Wilson, who seemingly had visits from certain officers of Special Branch suspecting that this was part of some mysterious rocket launching system – the ‘Arms to Iraq’ scandal was at its zenith.

A difficult task was the creation of the Consecration brochure difficult insofar as what was to be included and how it was to be put together. Once more, Don Hyde was faced with this time consuming task and together with Charles Arnold, eventually created a worthwhile souvenir document which contained the ceremony, a brief history and photographs of all the founders. Incidentally, this was unusual because it was actually sent to a Southport Masonic printer (Roy Crawford) who wasn’t involved with the Lodge, to produce, whereas everything else connected with the Lodge is done on-line. A scan of the brochure is to be found in the history/photographs section of the Internet Lodge website.

So on a fine morning in February 1997 some 40 petitioners arrived at Bridge Street Manchester, many meeting for the first time. Thanks to name tags, it was possible to put faces to those names which were only known on-line. After an informal gathering with refreshments and another vocal appeal for prospective officers to make themselves known, everyone solemnly lined up and signed the petition. We all went to the Derby Room, where the Consecration was due to take place and where David Stower took the first of what were to become a number of group photographs. A defining moment for Internet Lodge!

Fees were also agreed with the new treasurer and a formula for calculating individual meeting costs was created. Because the intention was to meet at noon (masonically symbolic) in order to allow for members to travel fairly long distances to attend, catering choice was important. It was felt that tea or coffee and biscuits should be provided before meetings and a suitable lunch menu selected. A difficulty was the provision of wine. Since many members would be driving to and from the meetings it was felt inappropriate to provide wine for all including it in the meal costs. The exception was the Consecration when the founding DC (who has a share in a French vineyard) arranged for a ‘supply’ of unlabeled red and white wine. Chris White collected this from Boulogne (where it was delivered) and produced and attached Chateau Internet labels. This wine was served at the Consecration banquet and every founder was presented with a (full) bottle to take home as a souvenir. Similarly, Rich van Doren coming over from the USA presented every member with a Masonic shot glass.

Another worthwhile innovation was tried at our early meetings when, at lunch, there was only a small top table and circular tables were set for those attending. A Lodge member was at each table and they moved tables after each course, thus enabling the creation of new friendships. The lack of formality was to become a keynote of the Lodge. There was no ‘pecking order’ in the Lodge room seating – except for the Installation. Brethren sat wherever they fancied.
There were no formal processions, apart from the WM and Officers at the opening; wine takings were reduced to “members of the Lodge” and “all our guests”; the toast to Absent Brethren was given at 3pm, or as close as possible and the time was notified on the web site and meetings were planned to end early enough for brethren to catch trains or drive back in time to take their partners out for the evening.

Thus was Internet Lodge brought into being. It was by no means an easy birth, but the founders felt it worth while. It is inevitable that the Lodge will eventually find it’s own traditions and form and will probably move further from the hopes and aspirations of the founders than many would wish. This, hopefully, gives a flavor of the events which led up to the first years. Hopefully, the Lodge will survive long enough to warrant the production of a ‘history’ and, more importantly, it is hoped that the Lodge records will survive intact and that those who wish to ‘avoid upsetting the Province’ or some individual ‘grandees’ will refrain from ‘modifying’ or ‘mislaying’ them.

I have simply tried to paint a picture of the effort that goes into the formation of a new Lodge. It was certainly different from that of another Lodge with which the writer was involved. There it was simply a case of brethren from an old established large Lodge simply creating a ‘new child’ in the image of its’ parent, retaining customs and traditions, so coming seamlessly into being. It just goes to show that history doesn’t always repeat itself.

Footnote. The writer has subsequently resigned from Internet Lodge, but not as a result of any disagreement with the Lodge.

“The trouble with the future is that it usually arrives before we’re ready for it.”
- Arnold H. Glasow