

## **FREEMASONRY IN OMAGH**

**There are at present four Craft Lodges meeting in the town of Omagh, viz:  
Concord No 332, St John's No 334, Cappagh No 350 and Victory No 689.**

These are the only lodges to have ever been formed in the town. Rather, it would be more correct to say that only lodges bearing these numbers have operated as the three older lodges 332, 334 and 350 have all had at least one break in their continuity since first being formed. However, when the lodges were revived some years later they succeeded in retaining these original numbers. Thus, we find two words used in local lodge histories which seem to be almost unique to Omagh;

HIATUS: meaning a break in the continuity of the lodge during which time the lodge had ceased to exist or hold meetings.

RESUSCITATION: meaning that a lodge was again formed and managed to secure the original number which had been forfeited some years ago on their new warrant. One of the lodges in fact managed to have its original warrant re-issued to them. More about that later.

I propose to deal with the four lodges in historical order according to the issue of their first warrants.

### **LODGE NO 332:**

Lodge 332 was the first officially warranted lodge to be formed in what is now the Masonic Province of Tyrone and Fermanagh. However there is some evidence that masonry was practised in Omagh prior to the formation of Grand Lodge in 1725 and its subsequent issue of warrants in February 1732.

In the previous December, lodges had been ordered by advertisement to "take out true and perfect warrants and be enrolled in the Grand Lodge Book or they will not be deemed true and perfect lodges".

Many lodges which had been working under no authority but that of "time immemorial" did apply for warrants and consequently have lost all idea of their origins - our oldest lodges going back far beyond 1732. Lodges in Ulster were the most reluctant to submit and up to the end of the century there were instances of "clandestine" or "hedge masons" without a warrant. As early as 1724 a lodge was being held in Omagh. Documentary evidence was published in Dublin at that time in the form of a pamphlet entitled "A Letter from the Grand Mistress of the Freemasons", authorship of which has been attributed to Dean Swift. In this skit mention is made of a Freemasons' Lodge at Omagh in Ulster.

Warrant number 332 on the roll of the Grand Lodge of Ireland dated 6th September 1759 is recorded as the earliest warranted lodge in Co Tyrone, in the town of Omagh, empowering "Pat Hamilton Esq., James MtGomery, John Hall and nine others" to form themselves into a

regular lodge. It can be assumed this was the date the lodge was regularised and these brethren had been meeting prior to that time.

Lodge 332 therefore rightly claims to be the "Premier" lodge in the town of Omagh. It also claims to be the "Premier" lodge in the province of Tyrone and Fermanagh. In fact we read in an appendix to the Bye-laws of the P. G. L. of Tyrone and Fermanagh (formed in 1868) as follows:

"The first Provincial Grand Master RW Br Sir John Marcus Stewart, Bart, designated Concord Lodge No 332, Omagh, as the Provincial Grand Master's Lodge, this being the oldest lodge in the province with a continuous existence. It was constituted in 1759, but there is a hiatus of five years in the records at Grand Lodge between 1843 and 1848. No doubt this admitted of satisfactory explanation as the circumstances must have been well known to many local masons when the Provincial Grand Lodge was being organised. A similar but longer hiatus occurred in the case of Cappagh Lodge No 350, also of Omagh, from 1843 to 1867. In the latter year a new lodge was started with the same number, but no continuity with the earlier lodge can be established in this case."

However to state that there was a "hiatus" of only five years in the continuous existence of this lodge prior to 1848 does not tally with Grand Lodge records which record that the warrant was firstly "compounded" for arrears in 1799.

This term "compounded" refers to a course of action frequently taken by Grand Lodge in those times, whereby a lodge could have its arrears reduced to an agreed figure and be allowed to continue operating and retain their warrant.

When it was actually surrendered to Grand Lodge is not recorded, but no trace of the original can be found today. The lodge made no annual "Return of Officers" to Grand Lodge from 1818 to 1821, but was resuscitated in 1822 when a new warrant bearing the 322 number was issued on the 19<sup>th</sup> July of that year to WM Alex Campbell, SW George Smith and JW John Hamilton, all recorded as previous members. Grand Lodge minutes record that in October 1836 an application had been received from the secretary of the lodge requesting that dues be remitted as the lodge had not met for some years. No "Return of Officers" had been made since 1832. This warrant was eventually cancelled on the 7th September 1843, and returned to Grand Lodge by Br Commander Charles Scott, along with the warrant of Cappagh Lodge No 350, which was surrendered in the same year. This warrant is still stored in the archives at Molesworth Street.

Lodge 332 was resuscitated in 1848 with the new name added of "Concord" and a new warrant issued on 17th October 1848, under which the lodge still operates to WM John Hamilton, SW Thos Hamilton and JW David Denny.

The designation of Concord 332 as the Provincial Grand Master's Lodge by Sir John Marcus Stewart first Provincial Grand Master seems to have been influenced by the fact that he already belonged to this lodge. Although 332 was the first warranted lodge to be formed in what was now a province it most certainly had not a "continuous existence".

The oldest lodge in this Province with a continuous existence is Green Lodge No 470 which was warranted to work in Coagh, Co Tyrone on the 3rd August 1769. It moved its place of meeting to Cookstown in 1814 but this is a relatively short distance (five miles) and was probably to facilitate the majority of its members. That is a continuous existence of 222 years as this warrant has never been surrendered or cancelled.

Newtownstewart No 547 which was warranted in 1777 to work in that town can claim to be the oldest lodge in the province to continue working in the same town or place for all of that time, now 214 years.

However, 332 is without doubt the "premier" lodge in Omagh Town having had continuous working since 1848. Tragically no minutes of the lodge can be found prior to that time; the only information available is in the "Annual Returns" sent to Grand Lodge and correspondence to the lodge from Grand Lodge during that period. The earliest recorded meeting place of the lodge was in a house in Campsie belonging to Elizabeth and Mary Hamilton. The meeting place was moved to the "White Hart Inn" on the corner of High Street and John Street, in approximately 1860. It is recorded that they moved to a larger room at the rear of the hotel in 1872. This was to comply with an old Grand Lodge ruling of the previous century now being more strictly enforced by the newly formed Provincial Grand Lodge of Tyrone and Fermanagh (1863) that lodges were not allowed to meet in a public house. This room at the rear of the White Hart Inn had a separate entrance door and was therefore not deemed part of the licensed premises. Whether or not there was an internal communicating door I cannot say. One can only guess!

The lodge continued to meet in this room, which was consecrated with corn oil and wine and dedicated as a Masonic Lodge Room in December 1872 which they shared with their sister Lodge Cappagh 350 who moved there in 1873, and lodge 334 after it was resuscitated in 1889.

Lodge 332 over the years has drawn its membership mainly from the business and professional men of the town and district. All the other lodges tend to regard it as "well heeled" to use a local expression.

It is interesting to note that as far back as December 1858 Bro James Orr, SW of Lodge 334 in a letter to Grand Lodge said "Our difficulties are in part attributable to the re-establishment of 332 the brethren of which are in comparatively easy circumstances".

### **CAPPAGH LODGE 350**

Less than one year after 332 was granted its first warrant (6th September 1759) a warrant was issued to form a new lodge at Cappagh on the 7th August 1760. "Cappagh" is the name of a parish which includes a good part of the town of Omagh the other part being in the parish of Drumragh. The masonic hall in Omagh is in Cappagh Parish, the boundary line being Campsie Bridge.

The lodge had its home within the boundaries of the Parish of Cappagh for the first years of its existence and seemed to meet in the homes of the worshipful masters of the period, its most permanent place being a barn at Strathroy provided by W Br Commander Charles Scott and more recently occupied by the late Mr Patrick Cunningham. The barn was erected on land conveyed by Lord Mountjoy to John Stewart in the year 1685 the first year of the reign of James II.

This lodge had its "hiatus" from 1843 to 1866 a break in continuity of 23 years. But 350 managed to secure the return of "its" original warrant, probably due to the influence of Commander Chas. Scott at Grand Lodge which decision was described as "exceptional and not to be taken as a precedent" in a letter from Grand Lodge to Commander Chas. Scott dated 17th December 1866. The letter also stated that although the original warrant was being restored to their custody they would still have to pay the cost of a new warrant (£7) to Grand Lodge.

After the lodge's resuscitation in 1866 several places were explored in the years 1868-1872 to find a suitable hall in the area. Amongst them was the newly built Protestant Hall on the Mountjoy Road. This was not acceptable to Provincial Grand lodge so rooms were taken in the house occupied by a Br Dennison in Coneywarren where the lodge sat for about a year. Finally in the year 1873 on the recommendation of Provincial Grand Lodge a joint tenancy was agreed to with Lodge 332 for the rooms occupied by them in the White Hart Inn which had the previous year been consecrated as a masonic hall. This meant, however, that the lodge was no longer meeting in the parish of Cappagh. The lodge sat there until the year 1913 when the upper portion of the Y.M.C.A. building was leased to the masonic lodges.

Although many of the lodge records throughout the years have been lost the original warrant dated 7<sup>th</sup> August 1760 has been preserved in good condition and now graces the masonic hall at Campsie Road, Omagh and the lodge enjoys the distinction of holding the oldest warrant in the Masonic province of Tyrone and Fermanagh.

In their bi-centenary year 1960 the lodge deposited the warrant in a specially constructed display case fitted with roller shutter so that when the lodge is not at labour, light can be excluded and the parchment preserved for future generations.

Although 332 is an "older" lodge having been warranted 11 months before; Cappagh 350 is in possession of the oldest warrant in Omagh.

Unfortunately the minutes only date back to the date of resuscitation but some interesting facts are recorded. During the early years after resuscitation, the lodge had many ups and downs both as regards membership and finance. Numbers fluctuated and dues charged at a rate of two shillings per month, a large sum in those days, were difficult to collect and many arrears are noted. The minutes record that at one time the finances were so low that the lodge was two years in arrears with the rent and threatened with eviction, when the worshipful master saved the situation by advancing out of his own pocket the amount of the outstanding rent.

On another occasion a brother who had the responsibility of dispensing the charity absconded with the money and was brought back to Omagh under police escort. It is interesting to note that some of his brethren of the lodge made good the deficiency in order to avoid court proceedings. For doing so they were subsequently charged in lodge with unmasonic conduct but on their explanations being considered satisfactory the charge of unmasonic conduct was withdrawn.

The cash records of the lodge which extend back for over 120 years reveal the fact that although the finances of the lodge were often low charity efforts were well to the fore and it is recorded that in the early years charity was distributed almost entirely on a local basis.

### **LODGE 334**

The warrant for Lodge No 334 was first issued by Grand Lodge in the year 1759 to a lodge in Portarlinton, County Offaly (King's County). A duplicate warrant was issued in 1797 but was surrendered by that lodge in 1821. The number was next given to a lodge in the Omagh district, which was formed in 1823, known as Gilleygooley, subsequently changed to Lodge Union in 1861. The warrant was issued to James Bloomfield (the first WM) William Carson and Henry Todd on the 5th June 1823 and was eventually sent in to Grand Lodge by the secretary of the Prov. Grand Lodge of Tyrone and Fermanagh on 28th September 1870. No record of the minutes of the lodge during this period can be found.

The lodge met originally somewhere in Gilleygooley (now spelt Gillygooley). This is a well known townland some three miles from Omagh and its present day landmarks are a Primary School an Orange Hall and a Presbyterian Church and Manse. The Manse no longer belongs to the church and is in private ownership. No trace or record of the actual meeting place can be found but it was most probably a room in a private house. At that time there was also a lodge which met at Castletown known as Gortanigan No 832.

Concord No 332 was the only lodge at that time which sat in the town of Omagh. The warrant for 832 was surrendered in 1847 and a number of the brethren transferred to 334. They were frequently referred to as the "Castletown Brethren".

In 1850 the lodge decided to move into the town of Omagh and from about 1850 to 1865 the lodge held its monthly meetings in the Eagle Hotel, No 1 Dublin Road Omagh, on the corner of Dublin Road and Market Street (now Nicholl & Shiel's shop). The proprietor was Mrs Margaret Clements, widow of a former member of the lodge David Clements, initiated 27 December 1826 died 1853, and mother of a very famous Omagh mason David A Clernents, who was initiated into Cappagh Lodge 350 in 1883, became its wM in 1888 and was one of the three brethren who were responsible for the resuscitation of Lodge 334 in 1889.

He was also a very famous citizen of Omagh and served for many years as councillor, and then as chairman of the town council during the early part of this century. In the Omagh street directory in 1890 he is listed as occupying Nos. 3-5 Dublin Road (next door to the Eagle Hotel) and described as a "butter and egg merchant" and advertised "commodious stabling for 200 horses in the Ulster Hall Arcade" which was on the opposite side of the

street. He took over the Eagle Hotel on the death of his mother 4th Oct 1891 and continued to run it until 1900 when it was sold to the McCloskey family who continued business as The Eagle Bar until about 1940.

Shortly after the lodge moved into Mrs. Clements's Eagle Hotel the name of the lodge was changed to Lodge Union with the permission of the Grand Lodge and bore this title until its demise in 1870.

It is not recorded why the lodge decided to move from Gilleygooley to the town of Omagh. We can only presume that it hoped to gain an increased membership coupled with the comfort of the Eagle Hotel and the availability of 'refreshments' after labour.

However the fact that the lodge met in these licensed premises was always a bone of contention between the old 334 and Grand Lodge and subsequently the Provincial Grand Lodge of Tyrone and Fermanagh (formed 1864). According to a ruling of Grand Lodge made in the previous century lodges were not allowed to meet in public houses. Many of the lodges during the last century flouted this rule and the old 334 was no exception.

After receiving a complaint in 1861 Grand Lodge informed 334 that they would have to find alternative accommodation. Many pleas were made to have dispensation from this ruling including a letter to Grand Lodge from the Provincial Grand Master himself who pointed out as follows:-

1st -"The house is well situated for the purpose and that it is most respectably kept by the widow of a very worthy brother".

2nd "That it will if carried with effect most materially affect the interest of the lodge if not have the effect of breaking up the membership".

3rd "That on inquiry we cannot find a single instance of misconduct either on the part of the party owning the house or of any individual member of the lodges meeting here."

This letter was also signed by a number of masons of Lodge 9 Dungannon and Marcus Gale, a past master of lodges 9, 52, 81, and a member of the P G L of Derry & Donegal being the brethren who had accompanied Sir John on his inspection. This request by these eminent brethren must have found favour with Grand Lodge who allowed 334 to continue to sit in comfort in the Eagle Hotel for the time being.

However it would seem that in 1864 a number of brethren decided to remove the lodge to accommodation at the White Hart Inn and share a room with their sister lodge 332 which had quite recently moved in there. A number of the older brethren were not at all pleased about this and there is no doubt that the quarrels and dissension which occurred within the lodge and failure to make returns to Grand Lodge from 1867 to 1870 led to its hiatus from 1870 until its resuscitation in 1889. The original warrant was seized by the Provincial Grand Secretary of Tyrone & Fermanagh A S Nicholson of Dungannon, who travelled to Omagh by train to do so on 29th August 1870, and subsequently delivered it to Dublin. It is still there in the archives but in very poor condition. A copy has been made and is now displayed in the masonic hall in Omagh.

When Lodge 334 was resuscitated in 1889 (approx. 19 years later) of the 10 founder members 5 are listed as members of 332, 4 members of 350 but one founder member is listed as John Hamilton (334 old). He is the link between the 'old 334' known as 'Gillgooley' which in later years changed its title to 'Lodge Union' and the present St. John's Lodge 334, Omagh.

It is rather strange that the 'old 334' survived during the famine years when the two other Omagh lodges had their warrants surrendered for a period (332 and 350) and Gortanigan 832 was permanently cancelled. Freemasonry during the 1870 – 1880 period was thriving in Ireland and many new lodges were formed.

The lodge continues to work under the new warrant issued on the 1st November 1889 as 'St John's Lodge'. The lodge marked the Centenary of its Resuscitation in 1989 by a church service, a special Centenary Communication and Dinner and a visit to the Grand Lodge of Instruction in Belfast where they gave an exemplification of the Fellow Craft Degree.

These three Lodges 332, 334 and 350 continued to meet in mutual agreement and good harmony in the White Hart Inn until 1913 when they jointly decided to lease at [30 per annum the upper portion of the Y.M.C.A. building in Market Street which is now the site of the Omagh District Council's Information Office. Extensive alterations costing £182.00 had to be carried out to make it suitable as a masonic hall.

As early as 1925, discussions were taking place within the three lodges and between the three lodges of the possibility of building their own masonic hall. However owing to the problems of getting the enthusiastic consent of all the lodges and the differing opinions as to the most suitable site, not to mention the problems of acquisition this was not eventually achieved until 1956.

Before that a very important event in the masonic history of Omagh took place by the formation of a new lodge in 1945, and this was formed with the unanimous consent and approval of the existing three lodges.

It seems that freemasonry was so popular at this point in time that, even with full attendance, it was only after 20 years membership that a brother could reach the chair of an Omagh lodge. Therefore in order to stem the requests for affiliations to other lodges, it was decided to form an additional lodge in the town.

### **VICTORY LODGE NO 689**

According to Phillip Crossle's Irish Masonic Records the number 689 was originally warranted to a lodge in Dungannon on 17th July 1788, but was cancelled in 1813. It is strange that the warrant number was not re-issued until December 1944 when it was allocated to this lodge in Omagh.

Being the youngest lodge in the town does not mean that it has not got an interesting history.

The first WM was VW Br Thomas Mansell who for many years was Provincial Grand Secretary, He and his successors with other officers have established and maintained high standards in ritual and in the general conduct of the affairs of the lodge.

Its present WM is W Br Reverend Sam McVeigh and it is interesting to note that no fewer than three of its past masters have been ordained clergy. Members of this lodge have also played a very active roll in the affairs of both Provincial and Grand Lodge. The first affiliate to the lodge RW Br McCrum Miller was Prov. Grand Master for a number of years and the present Provincial Deputy Grand Master RW Br W J E Dukelow belongs to this lodge and was its secretary for a period of years.

It is a very active and thriving lodge and attendances are always good.

### **OMAGH MASONIC HALL**

A joint committee of Omagh lodges and chapters was held on the 9th August 1944 and a further meeting on the 14th with a view to acquiring a site for a new masonic hall.

After much discussion the various sites suggested were turned down for various reasons but it was unanimously agreed "that the committee explore for further sites with power to acquire a suitable one, and further that each lodge and chapter immediately proceed to create a Building Fund and that such members of the present Hall Management Committee as are not on the Site Committee be added to the Site Committee".

In October 1945 the committee had selected a site in the garden of First Omagh Presbyterian Church Manse but it was objected to by some members of the congregation and therefore the proposition was dropped. However W Brs F J Johnston, Quigley

and Fyffe had inspected several sites in the Campsie area and had found three suitable:-

(a) Miss Fleming's field on Asylum Road;

(b) part of the garden of Clonavon on the Killyclogher Road which had been lately purchased by Br J R A Pollock;

(c) the plot on Dr McCauley's lands adjoining his avenue, and it was proposed that the chairman and secretary approach the owners as to terms and price on which they would sell or lease.

On the 9th January, 1946, it was reported that in the annual election of officers there had been alterations to the Hall Management Committee, and that the recently constituted Lodge 689 and the Council of Knight Masons had nominated members. The chairman and secretary had investigated the three sites recommended and had them inspected by Messrs. Ferguson & McIlveen, Architects, and as a result decided on the Clonavon site. Br Pollock expressed his agreement to sell the site required at a price to be agreed by Brs Dick and Holmes after inspection, but on condition that if the site was not required for the building of the hall, it should be reconveyed to him or his nominee at the same price for which he sold it, and requested in writing that the committee make an offer of price. An offer of £200 was made and accepted by Br Pollock. It was decided that each lodge be



requested to contribute £50 toward the purchase price. Conveyance was then taken in the names of two trustees each of lodges 334, 332, 350, 689 and RAC 332.

An appeal was made to all lodges to proceed to raise funds for building.

On 22nd September 1947 VW Br R T Newell was appointed treasurer of the building fund and an account was opened in the Ulster Bank, Omagh for this purpose. It was reported that a bazaar run by the Entertainment Committee in June last raised in the region of £860.

On 16th November 1950 the fund treasurer VW Br R T Newell stated that the total sum actually subscribed was £2,057.

At this meeting considerable discussion took place regarding a more convenient site for building since several members thought that the proposed site was too far from town. It was subsequently proposed by Br J Aiden, and seconded by Br T Hastings "Should a more suitable site for the new hall become available it be purchased." and this resolution was adopted.

On 23rd September 1953 it was reported that premises at 10 Market Street were for sale with vacant possession, but upon investigation and after discussion on the subject, it was decided that the asking price was too high.

However, on 21st February, 1954, it was reported that the Greer Estate was prepared to sell the dwelling house and garden in Campsie at present occupied by the Misses McAdam which could be vacated at an early date. The site was inspected and the committee were of the opinion that the garden was the most suitable site for the new hall. It was proposed by W Br R K Henderson and seconded by VW Br T Mansell that "VW Br Fyffe, secretary, be authorised to purchase at a price in the region of £2,000 and this was passed unanimously.

It was necessary now to dispose of the plot in Killyclogher Road in accordance with the arrangements laid down in the purchase, and as W Br Pollock was a trustee, it was arranged to have the plot conveyed to his wife.

On 17th September 1954 the secretary reported that the dwelling house and garden had been examined and the architect was of the opinion that a suitable hall could be erected in the garden and that the dwelling house yard and office houses could be sold. Having completed the deal for the new property, and taking credit for the disposed site, the building fund stood at £1,341.

The Site Committee then met the architects Messrs Ferguson & McIlveen in Belfast, inspected some masonic halls with them, and asked them to prepare draft plans for consideration. A further appeal for funds was made.

Draft plans were examined on 10th February, 1955, and it was resolved that "the building be a two-storied one". In the meantime the Royal Air Force Association had inspected the dwelling house and yard and were interested in the purchase. Another appeal was made for building funds.

On the 20th April 1955 the treasurer advised that he had in hand £2,532 and that the McAdam house and yard should realise in the region of £1,650 and lodges and chapter funds should bring the total to £4,700. The secretary reported that the architects estimated building costs were £10,000. The building of the New Hall now being firmly under way further arrangements were made via increased subscriptions to meet the total cost of building.

On 27th May 1955 revised plans were received for further discussion. The secretary advised the meeting that he had received an enquiry from the Constitutional Club as to the possibility of acquiring a site for a club building to the eastern side of the hall site.

Plans (5th edition) had been sent to ten interested building contractors and prices had been returned from six of them the lowest being £11,221-11s-7d, from W J Crooks of Union Street Cookstown which was finally settled at £11,300-7s-11d.

The Entertainments Committee were invited to organise a Monster Sale to raise further funds.

Arrangements for the ceremony of laying the foundation stones of the new hall were made and two stones were laid on Monday 25th June 1956 by RW Br Lt-Col R Clifford JP the Provincial Grand Master of Tyrone and Fermanagh, and RW Br Capt W H Fyffe OBE, Provincial Deputy Grand Master.

Numerous meetings took place throughout the following fifteen months prior to the opening and many decisions had to be taken regarding seating, carpets, electrical fittings and installation, earthing, finishes etc., Eventually the new hall was opened on 13th September 1957. It is now the meeting place of four lodges, two chapters, one council and one preceptory, all of whom have representatives on the hall Management Committee.