

Good morning, everyone, thank you for the opportunity to speak at this Light Blue Forum.

I've always found these events to be very informative and beneficial to furthering my Masonic knowledge so to be given an opportunity to share my experiences with you all is fantastic and I've been really looking forward to this.

First things first, please allow me to introduce myself, I am Jonathan Edwards, a master Mason of Hardshaw Lodge in St. Helens, which is in the Mersey Valley Group and about 15 minutes from where we are now.

I'm 34 years old, born in Ormskirk and grew up in the small village of Burscough, in West Lancashire, and moved with my wife to St. Helens.

My wife, Anna, is from Formby and works as a primary school teacher in Seaforth. This - as you can imagine - can be quite challenging at times, it's a difficult and thankless job that requires countless hours of planning, marking, learning and teaching. It also presents the perfect opportunity to escape to lodge meetings, so every cloud.

For work, I am a production manager in a workshop that builds saunas, steam rooms and other leisure facilities for gyms, and this work has enabled me to work all over Europe and the British Isles.

When I'm not donning my black suit, I enjoy watching plenty of sport and I am blessed by only supporting the best teams in their respective fields across the land. In particular, the greatest ever Rugby League side, that being St Helens of course and the soon to be champions of England, Liverpool Football Club and Newcastle Falcons are the by far best Rugby Union side in the whole of..... Newcastle.

My most enthusiastic hobby is absolutely now Freemasonry. It's brilliant and I have loved every second of being a member of this ancient and honourable institution.

I was first introduced to Freemasonry via my uncle, Sandy Kean, he had been a member for quite some time but had not been as active in Craft but more in another Masonic Order. Once he joined Hardshaw Lodge in St. Helens, little did I and his son-in-law know, our fates were sealed.

Sandy explained to us the benefits of being a member and showed us medals, jewels, capes and most important of all - SWORDS!

I absolutely love history, it's a passion of mine so once I saw the regalia of some of the orders, I was hooked.

Now looking back, Sandy was the perfect mentor for a would-be suitor of Freemasonry, he would explain any and all questions that I had whilst also advising caution, not to seek out anything on the internet that would spoil the experience, and also how Freemasonry needs to fit around your life and that the order must always be: family, work and then Freemasonry.

Nothing ever felt forced on to me, but a natural progression that felt organic and I always felt and still feel that he has only ever had mine, and every other Brothers' interests at heart.

Hopefully I can be the same. He also told me of my grandfather's involvement in the Order and that he had been the custodian of his regalia since his passing until one of his grandchildren were able to join.

So, if you've ever seen me visiting or see me visiting in the future and think, "Jeez that guy's apron has seen better days," it's because it has. My grandad was raised on the second of May 1962 and I wear his apron as a badge of honour.

After many questions, in many pubs across St. Helens, over many weekends, finally Sandy invited myself and his son-in-law to his house for a "serious discussion" about joining Freemasonry at his house. When we arrived, we found 14 bottles of Highland Whisky and Caribbean Rum and a couple of P forms already partially (by that I mean almost completely) filled in.

Needless to say, we sampled each different whisky and rum (sometimes more than once, just to be absolutely sure we liked them of course) and filled the forms in, thus starting our Masonic journey.

The next step for us was to go for our interview, I'll never forget that feeling, waiting to be called into one of the lodge rooms. Then entering and seeing about 15-20 professional-looking gentlemen sat behind tables formed in a U shape. Like Britain's Got Talent or X Factor.

How daunting, except it absolutely isn't. You're greeted as a friend and all your fears melt away. After the necessary questions were asked and new (none whisky-smelling) P-forms completed, we were offered a tour of the St. Helens Masonic Hall where we were assured once i's were dotted, t's crossed and black balls dodged, it would be a place we could call home.

This, however, would prove to be my first example of friendly masonic advice as the now sadly departed then secretary Ken Knott, counselled against going into the temple until my initiation. This advice was expert as if any of you brothers here have visited St. Helens, the temple is fantastic and quite breath-taking and only having it revealed to me on my initiation elevated the experience and exacerbated the profound sense of awe the ceremony is quite rightly deserving of.

I was initiated on the 9th of December 2021 by my uncle Sandy, who was in the chair of King Solomon thus adding to the sentimentality of the ceremony.

Having been to a couple since, I know it was performed in an exemplary manner although at the time - as I'm sure you'll all agree - can be quite discombobulating. So much so in fact, I don't think I got my left and my rights correct the whole evening.

As if the ceremony wasn't confusing enough already, once the blessing of light had been restored to me and as I was led around the temple, one of the first faces that I noticed was that of my dad who, unbeknownst to me was not only a Freemason, but who had been invited to my initiation in secret. I was thrilled. And not long after, my dad joined Hardshaw Lodge and returned to Freemasonry after his lodge, Lodge of Stability handed in their warrant in the early 90s.

I was told that you will always remember the junior deacon at your initiation and in a lot of ways, it can be the most important role for all new members. The absolute faith you place in the junior deacon when you are at your most vulnerable demands trust and obedience from the offset and on an individual level indicative of the unseen bond of fellowship between all brothers.

The relationship that you have on your initiation symbolically parallels our journeys through Freemasonry, being led by better men for the betterment of our own selves, our lodges and society as a whole whilst not always being privy to what exactly is going on, but given the opportunity to learn that knowledge through our own industry and self-betterment.

As I mentioned previously, Gareth (that's Sandys son-in-law) and I were brought through at the same time so we had a joint initiation, but it was not done at the same time but one after the other.

This allowed me to watch Gareth's initiation effectively immediately after becoming an entered apprentice. This was amazing, to see the ceremony so soon after and to see what had literally just been done to me. I would always encourage any brother to find the nearest ceremony that you've just been through via your lodge's secretary and visit.

The ceremony of your initiation is also totally unifying, in that you quickly find out that every single brother, regardless of position, has at some point been through exactly what you've been through. Even our very own Provincial Grand Master.

In our lodge, we take it in turns to read the ancient charges from a lectern in the lodge. This was my first introduction to any form of ritual and the funny, oldie way in which Masons speak. As an entered apprentice, I found this to be really helpful to ease into the unfamiliar meetings whilst getting used to public speaking.

At Hardshaw Lodge, we practise every Tuesday and it is well attended by our light blues and dark blues. I cannot overstate how valuable it has been to have those dark blues there to share all of their knowledge and experience. We realise how lucky we are to have the opportunity to practise as often as we do, and that is in no small part to the commitment of our director of ceremonies, Paul Brunskill, who endeavours to make us the best that we can be, which at times is easier said than done. I think he's described it as "herding cats" more than once.

Paul is our only dark blue officer this year as from WM to tyler are all light blues. I myself, am currently junior warden of our lodge, a position I have thoroughly enjoyed this year as we have had initiations and passing ceremonies.

When you're a deacon, the chair feels so far away, but as I took my place in the south on our installation, it really did dawn on me how soon the master's chair will be upon me.

But instead of feeling overwhelmed by the prospect, I instead feel eager and enthusiastic for my time in the chair. This is in no short part due to the support that we receive from all our members who only ever want to see us do well.

My time in the chair will also coincide with Hardshaw Lodge's 50th year. So, a very special year indeed, not only for myself and to the lodge, but also to Brian Dagnall who was Hardshaw Lodge's first initiate in 1977 and is still an active member now. There's still plenty of ritual to get through before we get to that though.

As far as ritual I have done so far, the first thing I learnt were the working tools, the first for our installation, the second long for a passing and the third for a lodge's installation that I was visiting.

Learning the first tools, with them being my first piece to learn, I found the most challenging. Even more so than the second degree tools as you're getting to grips with the processes of memorising text and the unfamiliarity of the syntaxes.

My first role within the lodge was as a steward, where it was my responsibility to attend practices and fill in the ceremonies for any brother unable to attend. I ended up doing quite a lot of deacon work as our senior deacon at the time was working away a lot. And also, to help clear the temple after meetings, helping do the raffle and collecting the money.

I'm currently attempting to learn the charge after initiation, which is a lovely piece and when executed with gusto, can be a really profound piece of ritual.

The most effective way I have found to learn ritual is by reading my book over a pint or two of Guinness at the pub or the more wife-approved method of listening to audio. So, before I had my little blue book, I was sent over the ritual I wanted to learn via email, I'd then copy and paste that into an app on my phone called "Text to Speech"

which then allowed me to listen to the ritual on my commutes to and from work. If anyone would like me to show it to them, I'd be happy to.

With regards to learning the ceremonies, I have found visiting to be not only the best way for me, but also the most enjoyable.

It also helps me to remember the way that we do things as everyone does everything slightly different. That is a good thing as it makes no two ceremonies the same. I also really enjoy when you go to visit places and they utilise a number of different brothers over the course of the ceremonies.

I really do enjoy visiting and I implore everyone to do it as much as you are able. Since I was raised on the 9th of February 2023, I've visited around 20 different lodges - sometimes on my own and sometimes with a little contingent - but one thing that is always consistent is quality of company and the most fraternal welcomes.

My favourite lodge to visit is of course Provincial Grand Lodge in the Winter Gardens in Blackpool. To see all the pomp, pageantry and ceremony is really appealing to me and if you've not been before, all I can say is that it is impressive: the scale and the grandeur is just fantastic and it's brilliant to support people in your lodges, groups and province in their promotions.

At the last Provincial meeting, the Mersey Valley Group were made stewards for the day and I volunteered to assist. I was honoured by being asked to be vice-captain of the stewards that day and I was really proud to be a part of making that day so special for so many people. It was also amazing to be part of the light blue procession into the hall before the meeting.

I have of late made a more conscious effort to visit the lodges in St Helens on a more regular basis as to become a more familiar face to the light blues, to impart what little knowledge I have attempted to attain. I hope that this will benefit myself but also the Light Blues of St. Helens as I was made the Light Blue Lead for the area.

The Mersey Valley Group has a Light Blues Club and, in the summer, we were able to organise a meet up of about 30 of us for a curry and pints at St Helens Masonic Hall. Despite its success, it has proven challenging to co-ordinate events in a group that is larger than some provinces. We do remain dedicated to developing a robust and successful Light Blues Club for the Mersey Valley Area and it would be brilliant if there are any Light Blue Club members from other groups that wouldn't mind sharing their thoughts with me after.

The future of Freemasonry is light blue and we have a responsibility to work together and to take on the responsibilities of our lodges, this can start by simply being enthusiastic and supportive.

Attend your committee and past masters' meetings, not only to have a say in how your lodge is run but also to start to get an understanding of how it is run.

Ask your lodge about having Light Blue Assistant Officers -not only will this help to share the load of work, but it will also help us to identify where your skills best suit your lodge and what you enjoy doing. This would also make it less of a shock to the system when someone is required to take over a role.

We all engage in Freemasonry because we enjoy it and it is a fantastic hobby, but a lot of hard work goes on behind the scenes and we can and should help so that our fraternity that has existed for 300 years continues and thrives for the next 300.

Moving forward, my own personal aims for Freemasonry are to keep progressing in Craft to the chair, by continuing to learn the ritual and ceremonies to the best of my ability, to complete my journey in Freemasonry by joining the Royal Arch.

To continue to listen and learn from my mentors to be a better person and Freemason, and then to share that knowledge to others to attempt to elevate their own experiences.

I'd very much like to assist the group and Province by helping with joining members' phone calls.

I'd also like to establish a successful Light Blues Club in the Mersey Valley Group that will create an enduring legacy that will be to the benefit and betterment of all.

I'd like to (time permitting) engage more with our charity steward to help our local communities and be a positive representation of Freemasonry in said communities.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to continue to have fun and to be seen to be having fun, that I can continue to spend quality time with my brothers and fully enjoy this fraternity to the fullest extent.

Thank you everyone for coming today and thank you for listening to me. I look forward to seeing you all in the bar afterwards. Does anyone have any questions? I'd be more than happy to answer.