

The choppy waters of the Royal Ark Mariner Degree

The history of this degree, as with many orders in Freemasonry, is somewhat unclear but this degree certainly ebbs and flows and has had a turbulent past before finding calmer waters to become the degree we know and love today.

We have recently celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Mark Benevolent Fund and to mark that occasion Grand Lodge dedicated the inaugural lecture 'the Canon Portal Lecture', to mark the legacy of the Rev. Canon Portal who, as Grand Master, instigated the Mark Benevolent Fund. But that wasn't the only legacy the Rev. Canon Portal instigated which is still relevant today. It was during his term as Grand Master that the Royal Ark Mariner degree finally came under the control of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons.

As a Mark Master Mason we are informed of the opportunity of becoming a Royal Ark Mariner. Once advanced, a Mark Master Mason is then eligible to join the Royal Ark Mariner degree and when presenting a Royal Ark Mariner certificate the candidate is informed that the Royal Ark degree is under the jurisdiction of the of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons and is governed by the Grand Masters Royal Ark Council, but why?

This is something that has intrigued me, as there is no reference to the Royal Ark Mariner degree in Mark masonry but in many provinces, a Royal Ark Mariner meeting precedes a Mark meeting on the same evening, before dining. So what is the connection? So let's start at the beginning. If we go back to the 1750s we would find that masonry would not be as we know it today. This is mentioned in the first section of the delivery of the Royal Ark Mariner tracing board which quotes "not only the origins of the ancient and honourable fraternity of Royal Ark Mariners but also episodes and symbols relating to other orders in Freemasonry, some of which cannot be explained to you this evening" which suggests it may well have been a mix of workings in lodges in different parts of the country at that time. This all came to a head when the ancients and moderns joined forces to form craft lodges and the holy royal ark chapter excluding all other workings in 1751. But it is worth noting that in craft masonry, the Deacons wands and aprons display the dove bearing an olive branch, an influence which one can assume has come from the Royal Ark Mariner degree.

The history of the Degree is obscure and a somewhat difficult subject with a number of historical facts that have emerged over the years being limited. As a result, the precise origins of the Royal Ark Mariners Degree are unknown. We believe that the Degree is around 200 years old and as its namesake has a nautical flavour taking for its setting the circumstances leading to the great flood and the steps taken by Noah to build the ark by which mankind was preserved from perishing in the universal deluge.

Like the Mark Master Masons Degree which is based on the fact of the construction of the temple at Jerusalem, so the Degree of Royal Ark Mariner is also based on an actual happening, the great flood.

The legend of Noah, his sons, the ark and the deluge were enacted in the mystery plays of the 17th century and continued as catechisms in many of the early Masonic rituals. Throughout history, floods have occurred and would have been a relevant basis for a story. Indeed, today we have serious floods in Karala in India and Hawaii. By the 1750s, there was a Degree of Noachites or Prussian Knights. The first authentic record of the Degree appears in the minutes of a meeting held in Bath in 1790. Numerous records exist throughout the country of the ceremony of elevation being performed since that date.

Whilst the Degree seems to have been practiced in a variety of ways and in a host of different lodges, there was almost certainly no Grand Lodge presiding over the Degree.

In 1793 one Thomas Dunckarly who was an important figure in many Degrees in Freemasonry, had described himself as Grand Commander of the Society of Ancient Masons of the Diluvian Order of Royal Ark Mariners. Dunckarly was known to work the Degree in Portsmouth in 1780. It was Dunckarly who appointed one brother, Ebenezer Sibley, another man of considerable ability in many fields, as his deputy. Now, Ebenezer Sibley was a Bristol man. In 1793 all records of the Diluvian Order of Royal Ark Mariners were lost when fire destroyed the home of the Assistant Grand Noah, Robert Gill. However, a dispensation issued by Gill in 1796 can be found in Mark Masons Hall. Shortly before Dunckarly's death it was Sibley who introduced Lord Rancliffe as the next great Commander. Rancliffe held that office until 1799 after which the Grand Lodge gradually withered and died.

The Degree, however, survived in a number of places and in 1843 an attempt by Bro. John Dorrington to revive the Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners had less of an impact than the previous attempt.

Brother Dorrington, although a very old man, doggedly kept his claim to be Grand Commander and it was Dorrington who appointed one Morton Edwards as his Chief Confident and second in command and in July 1870 signed a new warrant and named Morton Edwards as Grand Commander Noah which is quite surprising as Edwards had only been elevated into the Degree two months earlier.

Morton Edwards, as Grand Commander Noah, seems to have been fired with the ambition to revive the Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners and accordingly a meeting was held on 13th May 1870 at the house of Bro. Dorrington and it was agreed to constitute a Grand Lodge. A number of Mark Lodges had also begun to work the Degree, causing some conflict with the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons which had been formed in 1856 some 14 years earlier. As a result, the Grand Master and other high ranking Mark Master Masons were all elevated into the Degree in June 1870 and the Grand Master installed into the Chair of Noah. It disowned Edwards and his Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners and took the Royal Ark Mariner Degree under its protection, first conferring the Degree in any regular Mark Lodge, but later deciding in the best interests of both Degrees to keep them entirely separate so at that time we had two rival Grand Lodges of Royal Ark Mariners.

The conflict and descent continued well after 1870 until the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons simply purchased the Degree from Morton Edwards for the sum of £25. The receipt for this transaction is still kept at Mark Masons Hall.

To this day, the Grand Masters Royal Ark Council controls the Royal Ark Mariners Degree and in 1991 decided that the November meeting of Mark Master Masons should be given over entirely to the Degree of the Royal Ark Mariner under the Grand Master's Royal Ark Mariners. It is a shame that original documentation of the origin of the Degree cannot be found and it may well be that what are different degrees today, may have been more interlinked in ages passed.

We can only speculate the reason why Mark Lodges practised Royal Ark Mariner workings. But we are privileged to be members of both the Mark and Royal Ark Mariner Degrees, due in no small way to the Rev. Canon Portal.