

# The Real History of the Ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' in Bristol

Bro. Antony R. Baker

**A**CEREMONY OF 'PASSING THE VEILS' IS COMMON THROUGHOUT SCOTLAND, Ireland and the United States of America, although it may be part of a separate degree in some places, called either Excellent Master, Most Excellent Master, or Super Excellent Master. It is, however, unknown in England except in the Province of Bristol, where it forms an integral part of the Exaltation ceremony. It is performed by every one of the twelve Chapters at every Exaltation ceremony and is the way by which the Companions, including the Candidate, gain entry to the Chapter room.

There is a generally held view that the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' was re-introduced in Bristol in about 1900–10. Hawkyard and Worts, writing in *AQC* in 1949,<sup>1</sup> for instance, stated that 'it was revived and restored by the Beaufort Chapter, No. 103.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Hawkyard & F. R. Worts, 'The Ceremony of Passing the Veils', *AQC* 62(1949), 186–93.

<sup>2</sup> *AQC* 62 (1949), 186.

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In 1972, Harry Carr reproduced in *AQC*<sup>3</sup> a paper on the Veils, written in 1932 in Bristol by Sir Ernest Cook. When introducing this paper, Harry Carr described it as: ‘a useful account of the revival of that Ceremony, in c.1910, in Bristol.’<sup>4</sup> I suspect that he chose the date 1910 because in the whole of Powell and Littleton’s *History of Freemasonry in Bristol* of that year, there is not a single mention of ‘Passing the Veils.’

A careful examination of all the available evidence shows that both these statements in *AQC* are incorrect. The idea that the ceremony of ‘Passing the Veils’ was reintroduced in Bristol in 1900–10 is not correct and is almost certainly the result of a misreading of Sir Ernest Cook’s paper. Hawkyard and Worts concluded their notes on the Veils with the statement: ‘It would be valuable to have information from Bristol prior to the revival there of the ceremony in 1899.’<sup>5</sup> The aim of this paper is to provide that information from Bristol. The fact is that there was no revival; a ceremony of ‘Passing the Veils’ has been worked continuously in Bristol since well before 1835.

### History of the Ceremony of ‘Passing the Veils’ in Bristol

One of the earliest references that we have to English Royal Arch Masonry occurs in the Minutes of a ‘Moderns’ Lodge, No. 220, meeting at the Crown Tavern in Christmas Street, Bristol, in August 1758. And, as pointed out by Bernard Jones, the current Bristol Royal Arch working contains passages very reminiscent of surviving 18th century manuscript rituals.<sup>6</sup> For instance the Bristol ritual states:

... when death the grand leveller of all human greatness shall have drawn his sable curtains around us; when the last arrow of our mortal enemy hath been dispatched and the bow of this mighty conqueror broken by the iron arm of time; when the angel of the Lord shall declare that time shall be no longer; and when by this victory, God hath subdued all things unto Himself, may we receive the blessing of His mercy ...

and so on. So the ritual that we work in the Holy Royal Arch in Bristol today is certainly very old and it is readily apparent to any visitor to a Bristol Chapter that even without the Veils ceremony the Bristol Royal Arch working is substantially different from other English Chapter workings.

From the point of view of the origins and history of Royal Arch rituals, it is first necessary to emphasise that the Exaltation ceremony of the Royal Arch has evolved and been deliberately changed several times over the last two hundred and fifty years. We

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Cook, ‘Origin of the Ceremony Known as “Passing the Veils” as Practised in the Bristol Province’, *AQC* 85 (1972), 325–30.

<sup>4</sup> *AQC* 85 (1972), 325.

<sup>5</sup> *AQC* 62 (1949), 193.

<sup>6</sup> B. E. Jones, *Freemasons’ Book of the Royal Arch* (London: George G. Harrop, 1957, Reprinted 1980), 168.

have a great deal of information about some of these alterations but, of the origin of the ritual and of many of the changes that have been made, we know precious little. What we do know, however, is that the original Royal Arch ritual, like the Craft rituals began as a series of catechetical lectures – delivered in question and answer form, probably around a dining table. By the middle of the 18th century a form of ceremony similar to our own was emerging but at this stage it was Christian, as was the whole of Craft Freemasonry.

The specifically Christian elements were removed from the English Craft rituals<sup>7</sup> and the process was completed at about the time of the Craft Union in 1813. The Royal Arch was subjected to much the same treatment a short while later, and the Union of the Antient and Modern Grand Chapters took place in 1817. A complete revision of the English Royal Arch ritual then took place in 1835, when amongst other things the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' was removed.

A very full *History of Freemasonry in Bristol*, published by Cecil Powell and Joseph Littleton in 1910, relates that the Royal Arch ritual being performed at that time was the form adopted in 1836, the year after the edict from Grand Chapter which largely standardised Royal Arch workings in England. There is, however, not a single reference to a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' in the whole of the book, either before or after the changes made in 1835. On the other hand, there are almost no references to ritual working in the book at all.

There is an old manuscript Royal Arch ritual<sup>8</sup> in the Bristol Provincial Library. Although it is undated, the paper on which it is written carries a watermark giving a date of 1817. It is likely, therefore, that it was written soon after 1817, and from the ink and the style of the handwriting no later than c.1850. It contains a ceremony of Passing three Veils and the Password for the third veil is 'The Rose of Sharon and the lily of the vally' [*sic*]. This clearly alludes to Christ, showing that it must date to before the 'de-Christianisation' of English Royal Arch rituals in c.1835. It also demonstrates that there was a Veils ceremony being worked in Bristol at this early date.

Some of the more recent history of the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' in Bristol has been recorded in two Bristol papers. Sir Ernest Cook wrote a paper in October 1932, entitled 'Origin of the Ceremony Known as "Passing the Veils" as Practised in the Bristol Province: Personal Recollections' (which was the paper reproduced in *AQC* in 1972). Cecil Powell has also left us a 'Memorandum on "Passing the Veils,"'<sup>9</sup> which he must have written at about the same time. These two papers record the way in which the actual physical curtains – first the three coloured ones in 1899 and then a fourth white

<sup>7</sup> J. R. Clarke, 'The Change from Christianity to Deism in Freemasonry', *AQC* 78 (1965), 49–73.

<sup>8</sup> Bristol Provincial Masonic Library – Ref No. 408.02.

<sup>9</sup> This is bound together with another paper dated 4 December 1919, but its contents show that it must have been written at least ten years later, since it describes events that Sir Ernest Cook records as happening in 1929.

veil in 1929 – were placed in the ante-room in Bristol. Powell ventured the opinion that although ‘there is every reason to believe that “Passing the Veils” has formed part of the Royal Arch ceremony in Bristol ever since it has been practised ... it is not probable that actual material Veils were used in Bristol before 1899.’<sup>10</sup>

And in giving the reasons for writing his paper Sir Ernest Cook stated: ‘I think it advisable to place on record exactly what has been done.’ His paper also gives us many hints as to what *was* being done in Bristol in earlier times. Dr (as he was then) Ernest Cook was exalted in the Beaufort Chapter in September 1890. At that time, Royal Arch Chapters in Bristol were opened in a different way from the method we are familiar with today. A manuscript ritual book,<sup>11</sup> dated 1842, in the library at Freemasons’ Hall in Bristol records the following under the heading ‘Opening of the Chapter’:

The usual method to open it is as follows. The Comps having assembled in the room in which the previous Lodge is held, the 3 Principals retire into the Chapter, clothe, take their Sceptres.’ – and so on.

The three Principals opened the Chapter alone and then summoned the Janitor to admit the Companions. The Minutes of the Beaufort Chapter for 22 September 1846, for instance, are typical of the time and read: ‘The Chapter was opened by the Principals at 7 o’clock pm and the Companions were then admitted.’ Similarly the Minutes of the Chapter of Charity for 1 March 1860 read: ‘The Convocation was opened in due form by the 3 Principals – at 7.50 pm – and the Companions were then admitted.’

By the time of Sir Ernest Cook’s Exaltation in the Beaufort Chapter (1890) the Past First Principals were also present at the opening of the Chapter but the rest of the Companions were not admitted until that part of the Ceremony where Zerubbabel addresses the Principal Sojourner.<sup>12</sup>

The 1842 Manuscript ritual book<sup>13</sup> gives this part of the ceremony as follows, and interestingly Zerubbabel first addresses the ‘Junior Sojourner’:

Z           Comp J. Soj<sup>r</sup> your duty in the Chap<sup>r</sup>?  
 An J. So    To guard the first Veil, & to allow no one to enter but those who are in possession of all the Ps.W’s Sns etc belonging thereto, & not then until first acquaintg the Senr Soj<sup>r</sup>.  
 Z           Comp S. Soj, your duty in the Chap<sup>r</sup>?

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Powell, ‘Memorandum on “Passing the Veils”’, Provincial Masonic Library, Park Street, Bristol, File No. 82.01, page 1.

<sup>11</sup> Bristol Provincial Masonic Library – Ref No. 408.07, presented by N. Harris, Moira, 4–5.

<sup>12</sup> It was not until an edict of Supreme Grand Chapter in May 1902 that ordinary Companions were permitted to be present for the Opening of the Chapter. See Jones, *Freemasons’ Book of the Royal Arch*, 169.

<sup>13</sup> Index No. 408.07, presented by N. Harris, Moira, 5–7.

- An S Soj To guard the 2<sup>nd</sup> Veil & to allow no one to enter but those who are in possession of all the etc etc & not then until first acquaint<sup>s</sup> the Principal Soj<sup>r</sup>.  
Z Comp Prin<sup>l</sup> So your duty in the Chap<sup>r</sup>?  
An P So To guard the 3<sup>rd</sup> Veil & to allow no one to enter but those who are in possession<sup>n</sup> of all the etc & not then without first informing the 3 Principals.'

So there was a Veils ceremony in Bristol in 1842 and the three Sojourners clearly stated that their duties included being guardians of three Veils. This declaration of the Sojourners' duties is, however, not a part of our ritual in Bristol today and it may be that this section was left out when the Fourth Veil was introduced.

Sir Ernest Cook, writing in 1932, recorded that in 1890:

There were no Veils, but the Principal Sojourner and his two Assistants were asked to retire, as at present: 'and put the Candidate through the first portion of the Ceremony known as "Passing the Veils"'. The Principal Sojourner and Companions then retired to the ante-room, and the work was done almost exactly as at present, but without Veils.

It is most important to note here that Sir Ernest Cook is stating that the words and actions of the Bristol ceremony of Passing the Veils are *substantially the same* as they had been, at least in The Beaufort Chapter, since before 1890 (and probably before 1835) – in his words: 'the work was done almost exactly as at present.' It was only the actual physical veils – the furniture of the veils room – that they either introduced or reintroduced.

In his Memorandum, Cecil Powell has recorded:

I was the Principal Sojourner [of the Chapter of Charity] in 1898, I had to say to the Candidate: 'This part of the ceremony should be performed in a room having three veils suspended, and you would be admitted within the entrance of each on giving the necessary sign and password.'<sup>14</sup>

At that time the Veils were imaginary, as is the Vault today in most Chapters and of course the Grave is imaginary too in the Third Degree in almost all Craft Lodges. Just because we do not have an actual Vault does not mean that we do not perform the ritual of the discovery; similarly, just because we do not have an actual grave does not mean that we do not perform a Raising. No, a Veils ceremony was being performed in 1890 and 1898 but without actual Veils. The 1842 Bristol Royal Arch ritual book<sup>15</sup> goes on to give a full description of the Veils Ceremony.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, 'Memorandum' No. 82.01, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Index No. 408.07, presented by N Harris, Moira, 29–30.

Sir Ernest Cook recorded that, what he described as ‘the initiation or resuscitation’ of the Veils, began in 1899 as a result of the enthusiasm of several Past First Principals of The Beaufort Chapter (No. 103). He wrote that in the ritual:

The allusion to the “Passing of the Veils,” and “three Veils suspended of the colours of blue, purple, and crimson,” *etc., etc.*, induced certain Companions to ask particulars of the Ceremony, and, after one meeting of The Beaufort Chapter, the matter was discussed at great length. It transpired that no-one – not even the oldest Companion – could tell us anything about them. As several of these had been exalted forty years previously, it may be confidently stated that, although referred to, the Veils were not in use in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

They determined to install Veils and Sir Ernest Cook related how he wrote to the Grand Chapter and received from the Grand Scribe E, Sir Edward Letchworth, the reply that he knew nothing about Veils and was not aware of any Chapter in England where the ceremony was in use.

Knowing that Veils were in use in Ireland and Scotland, Sir Ernest Cook and Most Excellent Companion Cullimore went over to Ireland. Their trip, however, was not very well planned because they could find no Chapters meeting during the time of their stay, where the Veils were in use. Undaunted, they decided to go ahead with installing Veils in Bristol anyway.

The first difficulty they encountered was as to colour and it was finally decided that the best thing to do was to imitate as closely as possible the colours of the apron and sash. Cecil Powell commented in his Memorandum: ‘By good luck they chose the correct’ [colours]. So Veils, poles, cords, and supports were all made. The final arrangement was that the three Veils were suspended across the ante-room adjoining the Lodge room, at about equal distances from each other, dividing the room into four equal portions. The Companions sat around the sides; the Principal Sojourner’s desk was near the door of the Chapter; the Candidate, Director of Ceremonies, and Janitor were at the opposite end. The Veils at that time were entirely closed at first; each one being drawn fully back after the Candidate had passed it.

We know when these three Veils were installed because the Minutes of the Chapter of Charity No. 187 for 2nd March 1899 read: ‘Thro the kindness of the Beaufort Chapter the Veils were used in the ceremony of “Passing the Veils,”’ clearly implying that the ceremony was normally performed at their meetings, but previously without the use of actual Veils.

Sir Ernest Cook recorded that: ‘the impressiveness of the ceremony greatly pleased the Companions, and shortly afterwards every Chapter in the Province<sup>16</sup> adopted it as

<sup>16</sup> There were only three Chapters in the Province at that time: The Royal Clarence Chapter (No. 68) warranted in 1807; The Beaufort Chapter (No. 103) warranted in 1846; and the Chapter of Charity (now No. 187) warranted as No. 9 in 1769.

part of the ceremony of Exaltation.' As to the words of the ceremony, Sir Ernest Cook's paper states that the necessary ritual was compounded of what had been in use in the Province for many years (though without the actual Veils), and what could be found in a few books and old Royal Arch Rituals. It is, however, important to note that Cecil Powell, in his 'Memorandum,' recorded that only 'A very slight change had to be made to the words spoken by the Principal Sojourner, now that the actual Veils had been obtained, but I believe the work in the Chapel is otherwise unchanged.'<sup>17</sup>

When Excellent Companion Cullimore was installed as Most Excellent Grand Superintendent in and over the Province of Bristol in 1910, one of his first acts was to appoint a special committee<sup>18</sup> to stabilise the whole ritual and the procedure of "Passing the Veils." Their work was completed on June 20th 1910 and this is the ritual that is still worked in Bristol to this day.

### The Fourth Veil

So that was the situation at the end of the 19th century and it pertained for some thirty years. Towards the end of 1929, however, several influential Companions, led by Cecil Powell,<sup>19</sup> felt that the addition of a fourth Veil (of White) would add to the beauty of the ceremony. They had realised that both in Ireland (whose Craft rituals are very similar to those of Bristol) and also in Scotland four Veils were in use: of blue, purple, red, and white, suspended across the Chapter room itself in that order. Powell stated:

It occurred to me that the door leading into our Chapter room clearly took the place of the Fourth Veil found in Irish Chapters, and was only passed after a fourth test. I therefore came to the conclusion that we in Bristol virtually had the equivalent of the extra Veil [...]. I therefore suggested to our Grand Superintendent that a White Veil hung before that door would be appropriate, and would add to the visible and symbolic effect of the ceremony.<sup>20</sup>

A formal application was made to Sir Ernest Cook (who was by this time Most Excellent Grand Superintendent) to permit such a Veil to be placed in the ante-room. Again enquiries were made of the Supreme Grand Chapter and the Assistant Grand Librarian<sup>21</sup> replied as follows: 'The ceremony of the Veils is now obsolete in England ... The Veils were doubtless a part of the early ceremony of the Arch degree and the working of the same was discontinued I believe at the Union in 1817.'

<sup>17</sup> Powell, 'Memorandum', 2.

<sup>18</sup> This committee consisted of Excellent Companions A.C. Powell, J.C. Gilmore, W.K. Thomas, J. Littleton, and Worthy Companion J. Gard.

<sup>19</sup> Powell, 'Memorandum', 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Powell, 'Memorandum', 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Excellent Companion F. A. M. Taylor.



Letters were also sent to the forty-three other Masonic Provinces in England asking whether a Veils ceremony was being worked anywhere else. In every case the reply confirmed that no Chapter was working the Ceremony. Some related traditions that such a ceremony had been worked many years ago, but that it had been abandoned.

The Grand Chapters of both Ireland and Scotland were contacted and both very helpfully sent copies of their rituals, including their ceremonies of 'Passing the Veils.' These rituals were found to agree in many particulars with that worked in Bristol but also differed in several others. The most notable points were:

1. Both in Scotland and Ireland there are four Veils in use – Blue, Purple, Crimson and White.
2. The Veils are stretched right across the *Chapter room*, but are held back at the sides, except when the Candidate is passing through them. In both cases the White Veil is placed in front of the three Principals, and shields them from view until the proper moment.
3. In Scotland the Veils are continuous across the chamber. In Ireland they are slightly opened in the middle, leaving a clear view of the council chamber, but not of the Principals, who are inside it, screened from view by the White Veil.

They then looked to published Masonic books for authority but they only found four references to 'Passing the Veils':

THREE VEILS—

*The Text Book of Freemasonry*, 1870;

*The Perfect Ceremonies of the Royal Arch Degree*, Lewis, 1907;

*The Secret Societies of all Ages and Countries*, C. W. Heckethorn, 1897;

FOUR VEILS—

*The Mysteries of Freemasonry*, John Fellows M.A., 1877.

Sir Ernest Cook, however, emphasised that all the books containing any reference to 'Passing of the Veils' were entirely unauthorised, and had no official sanction whatever. He described their authors as: 'either Masons who had betrayed their trust, or "Cowans" who had pieced together scraps of information obtained from unworthy brethren.' After careful consideration, however, he came to the conclusion that the addition of a Fourth White Veil might be allowed, provided it was placed just in front of and covering the door leading from the ante-room into the Chapter room. His paper publishing this decision is dated November 1932.



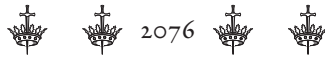
In the course of his researches, the author of this paper came across a copy of Sir Ernest Cook's paper, which he has presented to the Bristol Masonic Library, inside the cover of which a Companion by the name of Percy Phillips has written:

N.B. I was exalted in this Chapter<sup>22</sup> on Thursday 6.4.33 and was the first Candidate for a ceremony at which the fourth veil was in use. This was given by M.E.C. Cecil Powell.

We, therefore, know precisely when the Fourth Veil was actually added – April 1933.

### Conclusion

That is the history of the alterations that were made to the Bristol Royal Arch working in 1899 and 1933. There was a Veils ceremony being worked in Bristol from at least around 1817 but by 1890 it was being worked without actual Veils. The Beaufort Chapter first added the three coloured Veils of Blue, Purple and Crimson in the ante-room in 1899 and later, in 1933, they added the fourth White Veil on the door into the Chapter room. Although the ritual of "Passing the Veils" was 'stabilised' in 1910 to adjust it to the presence of actual physical Veils, what we do in Bristol today is essentially what was being done in The Beaufort Chapter in 1890 and probably long before.



<sup>22</sup> Presumably the Beaufort Chapter, No. 103.



**Bro. Antony R. Baker**

Tony Baker was born in Welshpool, Powys, in 1953 and educated at Shrewsbury School, Cambridge University, and St. Thomas' Hospital. After training in Leicester, where he gained an MD, he moved to Bristol where he practises as a consultant vascular and general surgeon. He was initiated in Powis Lodge No. 7355 in Welshpool in 1984 and was exalted in Welchpool Chapter No. 998 in 1986. He was WM of The St. Vincent Lodge No. 1404 in Bristol in 1999, and First Principal of Jerusalem Chapter again in Bristol in 2004. He loves the Bristol Ritual in both the

Craft and the Royal Arch. He served as Provincial Grand Chaplain in 2005, and as Provincial Senior Grand Warden in 2008 and is currently Provincial Grand Orator and Mentor in Bristol and Third Provincial Grand Principal. He was honoured with the rank of PAGDC in 2011. He has occupied the Chair in a total of nine other Masonic Orders. His main interest is in the interpretation of what the Masonic ceremonies might mean, what they might be trying to tell us, rather than the history of the origins and administration of Freemasonry.

**BRO. ROBERT L. D. COOPER, WORSHIPFUL MASTER, *WROTE*:** I apologise for my delay at the airport, which meant that I did not arrive in time to hear the paper or take part in the discussion.

I consider this to be a most interesting paper which adds to our store of knowledge regarding the 'Passing the Veils' (known as the Excellent Masters in Scotland) in England and particularly Bristol. The author makes a convincing case that this ceremony was not re-introduced into Bristol the early part of the twentieth century. However, I would have liked to have seen more of the actual documentation supporting the argument than it was possible to present in this paper. It is just possible that rather than a full blown 'degree' the Passing the Veils' prior to c.1900 may have been a vestige left over from when it was decided to drop this ceremony in England in the early part of the nineteenth century. It would be interesting to know why that decision was taken. It would be most useful if the rituals (or what there is of them) in use in Bristol prior to c.1900 were made available and ideally reproduced in *AQC*.

On the basis of the information presented here Bro. Baker's case appears to be valid. This writer's knowledge of the Royal Arch ceremonies (including 'Passing the Veils' and perhaps other ceremonies now no longer associated with the Royal Arch) is limited

and so I take the precaution of suggesting that this paper is a most helpful starting point for further research.

Bristol was a major seaport during the period under discussion and therefore had contact with many other ports both here and overseas. It has been suggested that contact with Ireland may well have been a source of 'cross fertilization' regarding any or all of the ceremonies then part of the Royal Arch series. This seems quite possible given that the earliest reference to the Royal Arch in Ireland is from 1744 from work by Dr D'Assigny and discovery by the later Bro. William J. Hughan of Torquay as cited in Bro. D. Murray Lyon's *History of the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel), No.1.* (1900) page 315. Frustratingly our forbears rarely gave detailed explanations of what precisely they were discussing and preferred catch-all terms, most commonly the 'Royal Arch'. Despite this, perhaps this is another avenue worthy of further investigation?

The first reference to the Royal Arch from a Scottish perspective is found, oddly, not in Scotland at all but in the Lodge of Fredricksburg, Virginia, USA in 1753. This was the year after Bro. George Washington was initiated in that lodge but there is no evidence that he became a Royal Arch Mason – although I would be delighted to be corrected. The reason this is mentioned here is simply because there appears yet another avenue worth of exploration. Fredricksburg is located at the highest navigable point of the Rappahannock River and is a short distance overland from the Potomack Estuary (with access to the Atlantic). Given Bristol's accessibility to a multitude of ports, the route for the transference might easily have been, during the eighteenth century, from Ireland to Bristol and hence to all other places. It would be interesting indeed to see where the Royal Arch (with or without the 'Passing the Veils') first appears and if those places are seaports.

The writer would like to thank Bro. Baker for his stimulating paper and regrets not making a more substantial contribution at this time.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** The manuscript Royal Arch ceremonies in the Bristol Masonic Library, from which I have quoted parts of the Veils workings, are full ceremonies and not 'left-over vestiges.' I would be happy to transcribe them for publication in *AQC* but I am sure that there would be reasonable objections to publishing the ritual for 'Passing the Veils' currently worked in Bristol, so that no useful comparisons could be made.

The decision to drop the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' was a part of the major revision of the Royal Arch ritual in 1835 in which the ritual was de-Christianised and the three long Lectures were added at the end.

Certainly Bristol was a major seaport and the Bristol Craft ceremonies bear many similarities to the workings of Munster and Cork in Ireland. We often forget that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was easier and safer to travel by sea from Bristol to Ireland than by road from Bristol to London. The Irish Royal Arch ceremony

however, perhaps surprisingly, uses a different legend from the English one. Ireland does however work a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils'.

I quite agree that it is highly likely that Freemasonry in many of its Degrees and Orders spread from Bristol, from Ireland, or from Scotland.

**BRO. E. JOHN T. ACASTER, SENIOR WARDEN, SAID:** It is usual for the Master to begin the comments on any paper delivered in the lodge, but in this instance the speaker and Master in the chair are one and the same. It therefore falls to me to start our discussion on Bro. Baker's paper, which I do gladly and with thanks, though without much direct knowledge.

Although it was proscribed, chapters in the north of England in particular, did continue to work the Veils ceremony until quite late in the nineteenth century. In my recent presentation to the International Conference on the History of Freemasonry (ICHF), I took as my theme the examination of the Moderns' Royal Arch as opposed to the Antients' Royal Arch – a matter which has not been studied sufficiently.

My task was greatly aided by a document associated with the North of England, the *Tunnah MS* – which happens to be stored in the Grand Lodge Library in this very building. When examined it can be seen to represent, in its Royal Arch sections, the essence of what the Moderns' wanted to put across in their Royal Arch ceremony, as distinct perhaps from what the Antients did. It is interesting to distinguish between the two. When it comes to the matter of the Veils, this is not alluded to in a dramatic form, as such – no Veils are actually referred to at all! However, the sequence of events which the Veils represent – the miracles associated with Moses – are alluded to exactly and treated considerably. In consequence it makes one just wonder if originally Veils were used, or not, which is one of the essences of Bro. Baker's paper. The Grand and Royal Chapter of the Moderns was formed in 1766 and by 1774 it had issued its first publications. The *Tunnah MS* mirrors exactly what was written into the 1774 publication so one can identify pretty well that it was regular according to the Moderns' working.

The four-part Second Section of the *Tunnah MS* is headed 'Super-Excellent'. Indeed, in the Royal Arch writings of the Moderns in the early days the members were referred to as Super-Excellent Royal Arch Masons. In the *Tunnah MS* the circumstances of each of the three Veils were treated in sequence. Moses was even stated as having been the first Super-Excellent Royal Arch Mason, having been made so by God Almighty. It states where he was made, and how he was made (which has to do with the Burning Bush). There was a communication of the words and signs, and these were spread downwards eventually through Aaron and others to the elders of Israel. There was no mention of passwords but the biblical sequence of events which the ceremony contains is clearly visible.

I wonder if the concept of a series of miracles associated with Moses was perhaps obtained from the Antients, or whether it was an inspiration of the Moderns? In any case what is the earliest date we can ascribe to a definite knowledge of Veils' material – not necessarily the use of any physical Veils themselves – coming into our Royal Arch workings? I just wonder whether Bro. Baker has, in the course of his investigations in Bristol, had any clue as to when the earliest indication of the Veils exists in our corpus at all. With that, Brethren, I once again extend my congratulations to our speaker, for his presentation of what I consider to have been an excellent paper and propose a Vote of Thanks.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** I quite agree that the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' is based on miracles associated with Moses. It is, of course, anathema to discuss what our ceremonies might mean, in this lodge, but these were miracles which God instructed Moses to perform before the Elders of Israel to show that he (Moses) really had heard the Word of God. The candidate, therefore, in passing the Veils represents Moses.

I have looked for evidence of how old the Bristol Royal Arch ritual might be. How many of you, I wonder, know what is written on the scroll in your chapter? Is it the first words of the book of Genesis, as was common in the chapters of the Moderns, or is it the first words of the Gospel according to St. John, as was the practice of the Antients? In Bristol, of course, the scroll does not have either; it reads: 'I am that I am'!

In preparing this paper I have referred to the earliest documentary evidence I have found so far in Bristol. However, one of the main problems one encounters in doing Masonic research in Bristol is that the Bristol Masonic Library was completely destroyed, in November 1940, by the Luftwaffe. Fortunately some items of particular value were preserved, by being in the homes of several Brethren at the time, but our records are now sadly incomplete. What we have now is just what was on loan in the houses of individual Brethren at the time of the bombing together with what we have managed to collect subsequently.

I am sorry to say, therefore, that I do not have any information on when a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' came into Bristol Masonry.

**BRO. ROEINTON KHAMBATTA, ACTING AS JUNIOR WARDEN, SAID:** It has been some time since the Quatuor Coronati Lodge has had a paper relating to the Royal Arch – and this whiff of fresh air is most welcome.

'Innovations' are not usually welcome in Masonic ritual. Bro. Baker has served us well in demonstrating, in so convincing a manner, that the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' is actually older and was practised earlier than most of us had thought. In fact, he has produced good evidence that this ceremony was not 'revived' in the early days of the twentieth century but has been part of a continuum. We do know that this ceremony is

an essential preliminary to the Royal Arch ceremony in Scotland and Ireland (in Scotland, known as 'Excellent Master' degree). I remain surprised that some of the northern provinces in England did not take up this ceremony. Why was it that the Province of Bristol has been the only one of the English provinces to institute this ceremony?

The ceremony of 'Passing the Veils', as practised in Scotland (and with which I am familiar) often made me wonder whether there was a reference to the Holy Trinity. Tonight we have heard the reference to the 'Rose of Sharon and Lily of the Valley' – was this ceremony different in the 'de-Christianising' period?

One final question: does the ceremony as performed in Bristol originate in Bristol, thus ante-dating the ceremonies in Scotland and Ireland? Or did it take over the ceremony from these two constitutions and meld it to form the Bristol Working?

It is my great pleasure to support the Vote of Thanks so ably moved by Bro. Acaster. We have had a truly delightful insight into this much-neglected subject.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** I certainly cannot answer the question of whether Bristol had its Veils ceremony before or after Scotland and Ireland. In fact I think there is some evidence that the whole Royal Arch actually originated in France.

I think that a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' was widespread in Chapters of the Antients Grand Lodge prior to the Union. I am certainly aware of evidence of the working of a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' in patches all over the country – particularly in Lancashire and Yorkshire among other places.

I am not sure where the Veils ceremony originated and do not know whether Bristol had it before Ireland and Scotland but obviously I would like to think so!

The aspect that I was most interested in, as I did this research, was trying to understand why it is that the Veils ceremony was wiped out elsewhere but that Bristol still performs it. Some authorities suggest that Bristol was given special permission by Supreme Grand Chapter to reintroduce it, but there is absolutely no evidence to support this contention at all. I think the reason that Bristol kept a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' is because Bristol was, and is, a peculiarly independent and isolated city. I do not originate from Bristol, I was born in mid-Wales, so I can say that they are a peculiarly independent and determined lot!

As an example, let me quote from Powell and Littleton's *History of Freemasonry in Bristol* (1910) on the Bristol Royal Arch ritual under the heading:

#### THE PRESENT RITUAL ADOPTED IN 1836.

This method of working, which was introduced between 1817 and 1822, was continued until 1835, when [...] the M.E.Z. (Comp. J. Keyser), and Comp. F. C. Husenbeth, P.Z., were deputed to attend the Grand Chapter. At the next meet-

ing, on September 3rd "The M.E.Z. stated that agreeable to the resolution of this Chapter he had attended the Grand Chapter in London and received the necessary instructions to enable him to communicate the same to this Chapter. That form of opening, closing, and exaltation was quite different from the form that had been adopted by this Chapter." [...] Comp. Keyser "went through and explained the whole form of opening, exalting, and closing, as promulgated by the Grand Chapter in London." The cordial thanks of the Chapter were tendered to the M.E.Z. for his trouble in going to London, and also "for the masterly manner in which he had given the instructions," and the Treasurer was instructed to pay the expenses of the journey. The Companions did not however adopt the new working in its entirety, but resolved [...] "that while preserving our ancient landmarks, [...] we would still adhere as near as possible to the new form." The amended ceremony was first worked on January 7th 1836 ...'

Later on, Powell and Littleton state that:

The modified form of the official ritual which had been adopted by the [Chapter of] "Charity," and which is practically identical with that still used by them, appears to have been a return to that used before the pressure of United Grand Chapter had caused them to introduce the ceremony of passing the Chair.

**BRO. IMANUEL IMANOTTE SAID:** Congratulations on your paper: it was very interesting to me. I have experience of Scottish Masonry and a lot of things that have been said here, relating to Bristol, are actually extremely similar to what you see in the Royal Arch in Scotland.

What I want to say is not specifically about Bristol, but it relates to what I think should be a sense of progression in historical, chronological, and biblical teaching, in the ceremonies of the Craft and the Royal Arch. Historically we know that at the time the Premier Grand Lodge was established in 1717 we did not have the Hiram legend as it is today. So the third degree was not as it is now. In the past it was necessary to be a Past Master before you could go on into the Royal Arch. Masonry should be a pathway of improvement, if you like, but the pathway would be a lot clearer if we took the degrees in a logical order.

Certainly the seven capitular degrees of the Craft as practised in the USA are pretty much in the order that I am talking about. Everything appears, in my view, a lot clearer and more logical. It gives a great deal more sense to what people experience in the different degrees, if only by making a logical connection in moral thought.

We are celebrating the Royal Arch this year in the UK, probably because it is the centenary of the technical separation of that degree from the Craft. We may not now have the full, original, Royal Arch, but what we have is neither half of an original third



degree nor a fourth degree. It is an extension and has nothing to do with the Hiram legend of the third degree.

I can see why people maybe fail to understand it and find it difficult even to join because there is really nothing that drives you there: there is such a big gap between the third degree and the Royal Arch that, in my view, does not make any connection easy to understand.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** For me the connection between the Third Degree and the Royal Arch is clear and indivisible. From a ritual point of view, I would point out that some of the degrees now included in the Order of the Royal and Select Masters do fill in the gap.

I find it extremely hard to understand how any reasonably intelligent man can feel satisfied after being raised to the third degree. After all, he went into it professing to 'seek for that which was lost' – the genuine secrets of a Master Mason – and gets fobbed off with another step, some more signs and a couple of words – more substituted secrets. The only difference is that in this degree he is actually told that these are not the real secrets only substituted ones. How can he possibly think he has got to the end of his Masonic journey. I just do not understand that. The Pro Grand Master recently expressed this very well, using the analogy of a four-part television drama: 'what is the point of watching the first three episodes and then ignoring the fourth when all is revealed? It's bound to be unsatisfying.'

I also agree that the Royal Arch ritual is very confusing because, of course, the ceremony of Exaltation is all about clearing away the rubbish of the first temple that the poor candidate was supposed to be building in the third degree. So the temple that he was building when he left the Craft has been destroyed and the Children of Israel have been in captivity in Babylon for seventy years – a lot has happened between the two degrees.

The ritual of the Passing of the Veils makes his confusion even worse, because the Exaltation ceremony is all about the release of the Children of Israel from their captivity in Babylon, when they were led out by Zerubbabel; but the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' is about their release from a much earlier captivity in Egypt, when they were led out into the wilderness by Moses. It is bound to confuse the candidate. It is important, however, to realise that all the degrees are symbolic, so the fact that they do not run in a continuous historical narrative is less important than the lessons they are trying to communicate.

**BRO. DAVID SLATER SAID:** Bro. Baker, I would like to share with you and the brethren some information on the Excellent Master Degree or Ceremony of the Veils as practised by the United Supreme Grand Chapter of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, which I hope will be of interest to those present. In 1980 the Royal Arch degree and the Mark degree were combined under the one body, together with the Cryptic series of degrees, the Royal Ark Mariner and the Red Cross of Babylon

or Babylonish Pass degrees. The Mark, Excellent Master and Holy Royal Arch degrees could be considered to be the cardinal degrees which the candidate takes, in that order, before being eligible as a candidate for the other degrees. The United Supreme Council brought together chapters that had previously been under English and Scottish jurisdictions and to date has used two sets of ritual for the cardinal degrees.

My chapter follows the English ritual but it also has an Excellent Master Degree which, from the description that Bro. Baker has given regarding the setup of the room for this degree, including the position of the screens, would appear to be based on the Scottish ritual. Our United Supreme Grand Chapter is at present introducing ritual that it hopes all chapters will adopt and has so far introduced this for the Mark Master Mason degree and both the Mark and Holy Royal Arch installation ceremonies. One can assume that eventually there will be new Excellent Master and Holy Royal Arch degrees produced. Bro. Baker, I thank you for your insights into the ritual used in Bristol and I am happy that I can relate this to the ritual used in my own jurisdiction.

**BRO. BOB BROWN SAID:** Worshipful Master, first of all, congratulations and thank you for such an illuminating lecture. I would like to make an observation and to ask a question. First of all I was interested in your observation that you thought that the Royal Arch might have originated in France, because in my own chapter the ritual is in two languages – those of English and French. It has always intrigued me as to why that should be. My question is: in Bristol do you have a jewel that is presented to the candidate after he has passed the Veils? [*Bro. Baker indicated that in Bristol they do not have such a jewel*] We do – in fact I am wearing it. As you can see, it is in the form of a pentalpha and is in fact the Scottish Excellent Master's jewel. You also get a certificate or diploma in Scotland but not in my chapter. We are allowed to wear the jewel in the Craft in Scotland, together with the Scottish Royal Arch jewel, but I wear an English Royal Arch jewel when I am in England.

**BRO. TONY AYRES SAID:** It is not a question, just an observation. A ceremony of 'Passing the Net' occurs in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* where again the candidate has to know passwords. He does not get asked any questions, but the idea obviously pre-existed and could have been read about after the Egyptian inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone had been deciphered [in 1822].

**BRO. ANGUS RHODES SAID:** Worshipful Master, an excellent paper, as ever. I am, of course, also a member of the Bristol Masonic Society and I just wanted to add to what you said – that it is very difficult to under-estimate how independently-minded Bristol is on the topic of ritual. During my own researches, as the Worshipful Master knows, it

became apparent that during the twentieth century the Writing Table in the Bristol first degree came under scrutiny by Grand Lodge, who made great objection to it and asked Bristol to remove it. Bristol simply said 'No!' and indeed it is still a part of the Bristol first degree working today.

Bristol was also one of the last provinces to keep the penalties in the obligations for the longest until 1990. I think the final blow was struck by Grand Lodge at the installation of Dr Dennis Henry Fox as Provincial Grand Master [on 4 October 1990].

**BRO. MIKE HEARN SAID:** Worshipful Master, congratulations on a wonderful paper. I would just like to clear up a few points that have been raised. As an Excellent Master – somebody who has done the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' in Scotland – it is very interesting to note some of the differences and also the similarities. The Scottish Royal Arch brethren first of all must have the Mark qualification in order to go through the ceremony of 'Passing the Veils'. Usually a Scottish brother has done his Mark in a Craft lodge, or it can be worked in a Scottish chapter. There is no Mark Grand Lodge in Scotland. It is a matter of historical interpretation as to why the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons was in actual fact formed south of the border in England.

When a companion has done his Excellent Master degree, he is entitled to wear the pentalpha jewel, which we have seen. He is also entitled to the certificate, which is presented to him and, after that, he goes on into the ceremony of exaltation, in which he actually sees the burning bush, so to speak. It is a wonderful ceremony and it is also very different from what is done in England.

I was also very interested in your explanation as to why Bristol retains its independence. My memory cast me back recently to the year 2009, when we had a demonstration here, in Supreme Grand Chapter, of the Bristol ceremony of Passing the Veils. The interesting thing about that was that the then Director of the Board of General Purposes for the Royal Arch stood up and said 'It is only a concession (those were his words – I wrote them down on my little crib-sheet) by which Bristol operates the Passing of the Veils ceremony, otherwise known as the Excellent Master Degree, because you cannot pass the Veils without opening a lodge of Excellent Masters first of all. The ceremony is actually taken within the Excellent Master degree.'

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** As I have said, I am not aware of any such concession or any evidence for one having been given.

The regional variations in Freemasonry are very complex and in Bristol the arrangement is entirely different. In Bristol, as I explained in the paper, we pass the Veils at every exaltation ceremony. The chapter is opened in the chapter room and then the companions withdraw into the Veils room, leaving the Three Principals behind in the chapter

room. The Principal Sojourner presides over the Veils ceremony and when the candidate has passed the Veils, he is hoodwinked and remains behind, while all the companions re-enter the chapter room by passing through the Veils, giving the passwords. When they have all entered, the chapter is again under the control of the three Principals and the candidate is admitted with formal ritual as in any other degree.

In fact, in Bristol, we open a lodge of Excellent Masters to perform the Inner Working of the ceremony of Installation of a new Worshipful Master of a Craft lodge. Again all Installed Masters withdraw, with the Master-elect, into a separate room – the chapel – in which this part of the ceremony is performed. They then return to the Lodge room for the rest of the ceremony.

Grand Lodge now understands that these little differences up and down the country are interesting and add to the pleasure we all find in visiting other lodges and provinces. I am sure we are all glad that there is no longer any desire to force a uniformity of ritual working either on the Craft or the Royal Arch in the English Constitution.

**BRO. HUGH O'NEILL SAID:** I am not sure that there was a union of Antients and Moderns Grand Chapters, because there was only one in the first place – the Moderns Grand Chapter. Secondly, I mentioned to you that we had a manuscript ritual down in that hotbed of Freemasonry in Chichester [*laughter*], dated somewhere between its watermark of 1817 and about 1825, in which the Veils is mentioned, together with some words, which I have already given to you. I am not sure how they tie in with what you have in Bristol but I think it is very interesting.

Before 1825 they were opening the chapter without the companions present, but at that time one of our Minutes shows that they then went in and the chapter was opened with everybody in there. It looks as though our brethren and companions were as independent as yours. So, anyway, we have the Veils being worked in Chichester at that time.

Finally, with reference to the diagram you showed of the Irish chapter room: I was over there last year and the Provincial Grand Master of North Munster showed us around. He showed us the chapter room and he described exactly what you showed us. Of course some, as you have said, will know that the legend in Ireland is an entirely different one from the one we have here in England. I do not know which one is used in Bristol.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** It is a common belief that there was only one Grand Chapter before the Union – the Moderns Grand Chapter – but it is actually not quite correct. I realize, of course, that the Antients worked the Royal Arch in their lodges and that their Grand Chapter might have been only nominal, but it did actually exist. In fact on 18 March 1817, in a procedure very comparable with the Craft, the two Grand Chapters opened in separate rooms in Freemasons' Hall; they then adjourned to a third room

where they were received by HRH the Duke of Sussex and the United Grand Chapter was formed. It was known by this title for only a short time, from 1817 to 1821, when it was styled the Supreme Grand Chapter.

With regard to his comment about the Three Principals opening the chapter with or without the presence of the companions, the Supreme Grand Chapter decided in 1835 that a chapter should be opened by the Three Principals alone. That is why the ritual says 'When we three meet and agree.' In fact this was the only change that Bristol made to its ritual after the visit Keyser made to Grand Chapter. So in Bristol, as elsewhere, the companions were not present at the opening of the chapter until 1902, when the Supreme Grand Chapter decreed that all companions henceforth should be present.

From the point of view of the legend used in Bristol, the Bristol Exaltation ceremony is based on the Zerubbabel legend – the same as in the rest of the English Constitution. We in Bristol, though, refer to the Third Principal as Jeshua rather than Joshua. I cannot explain why but, after all, the Hebrew of the Bible is a consonantal language, so we can use whichever vowels we choose!

**BRO. MIKE KEARSLEY SAID:** Worshipful Master, I would like to thank you for a most interesting paper. I would just like to pick you up on one thing, if I may, and that is the colours of the veils. It struck me as typically English that the Bristol companions decided to take a trip to Ireland and found nobody there, so they made it up. The reason there was nobody there, of course, was that they were all in London! Did they never think of asking one of the thousands of Irish Masons, who wander through here on a regular basis: 'By the way, what colour are your veils?'

So they made this up and I think you said that: 'by good luck they chose the correct' colours.' Now, am I right in thinking that the order of the colours of the veils is the same order as that of the three Principals' regalia – blue, purple, crimson, and then the white? That is the situation in both Ireland and Scotland. I have been to quite a lot of Royal Arch Chapters and many of them seem to have variations in the colours of their regalia. This is not just because they have faded; they are actually different colours – a very bright red, for instance. So, is there a rule laid down as to what the colours actually are and what they are called?

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** That is correct – the order of passing the Veils in Bristol is Blue first, then Purple, then Crimson, and finally White into the Chapter room.

I am not aware of any rule as to the colours – no definition, or wavelength specification!

**BRO. A. N. NEWMAN SAID:** Worshipful Master, can I join in thanking you for the paper? All good papers ought to stimulate further work and, as far as I am concerned,

what this has stimulated is the realization that London might in the 1820s and 1830s have been trying to lay down uniform patterns of ritual and regalia etc. for the entire country. I think there is a great deal of work to be done in looking at provinces, not only Bristol, but the provinces of the north of England as well, who were equally 'bloody-minded'! The whole history of the Mark Degree, in the 1850s, shows the bloody-mindedness of the provinces against the dais. So, Worshipful Master, you have stimulated us yet again to do a great deal of further work.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** There are several comments in *The Freemasons' Quarterly Review* of the period which show that dissemination and promotion of the new working was not universally successful. As well as Bristol, there were at least two other places where they were not doing what they were told either.

*The Freemason's Quarterly Review* for 31 March 1837, for example, included a letter from one Robert Leigh in Taunton entitled 'On the Present State of Royal Arch Masonry,' in which he quoted the process as planned by Supreme Grand Chapter as follows:

to give notice to the several Chapters of the times and places of meeting, in order that the Principals and Past Principals thereof, may attend for the purpose of receiving instruction; and their attendance is accordingly enjoined, that uniformity of practice may prevail throughout the several Chapters of the Order.

He then continued:

... as I apprehend the attendance of Principals from the remoter parts of the kingdom was very limited, the uniformity of practice, thereby proposed, has not yet been very extensively inculcated.

Indeed it was scarcely reasonable to expect, that sufficient number of Principals from remote provinces as would be necessary for the diffusion of a uniform system throughout the kingdom could attend. And whoever is acquainted with different Chapters in the provinces, must be aware that many of them have derived little or no advantage from the mode of promulgation which has been tried, and that [...] they are not at this moment in a situation to adopt the Revised Ceremonies and Regulations of 1835.

*The Freemason's Quarterly Review* for 31 December 1835 also states:

A report of the Committee of General Purposes was read; [...] with a communication from the principals of a London Chapter, which reported that a first principal-elect, had intimated his intention to work the Chapter according to an old and not according to the recently promulgated system; and that, under the circumstances, the said principals prayed for advice and direction.



So Grand Chapter clearly had some trouble across the country in exerting its authority to achieve uniformity of ritual working. I have shown that it did not succeed in Bristol but clearly Bristol was not the only place that refused to adopt the new ritual.

**BRO. RICHARD AINSWORTH *WROTE*:** As the performance of 'Passing the Veils' was stopped in the early 1820s, was that action connected with the denial of the Mark Degree by UGLE, which occurred at about the same time? I am aware that in the late 1850s UGLE made overtures to Mark Grand Lodge to re-unify and it appears that it was the Mark which held back. I sometimes hear relevant remarks in Birmingham because, from my unreliable memory, Lord Leigh was Provincial Grand Master of the Warwickshire Craft and Grand Master of the Mark degree at the same time. This may be worthy of some research but it has probably already been done. Bob Russell, past long-time bearer of provincial chains in Warwickshire Mark, was well informed on these matters.

**BRO. BAKER *REPLIED*:** It is difficult to answer the question of whether one change was connected with another. Certainly the Mark was not accepted as an essential part of the Craft at the time of the Union, in 1813, while the Royal Arch was. This was, therefore, twenty years before the major revision of the Royal Arch ritual in which 'Passing the Veils' was removed.

**BRO. CHRIS POWELL *WROTE*:** First, I would like to thank Bro. Baker for a most interesting and thought-provoking paper. I am particularly interested in the 'Veils', being a Royal Arch Mason in Scotland as well as in England, and therefore having passed through the Veils myself.

As Bro. Baker stated in his paper, the traditional historical view of Bernard Jones et al. has been that the Veils ceremony was re-introduced into Royal Arch Masonry in Bristol at the beginning of the twentieth century. I suggest, in spite of Bro. Baker's comments in his paper, that this may be still the correct interpretation of the evidence he has presented to us in his paper.

The degree of Excellent Master in Scotland is a separate degree in which the candidate passes through three Veils arriving at a fourth, white Veil, behind which sit the Sanhedrin. In other words, the white Veil hides a Royal Arch chapter from the candidate's view. When he is exalted into the Royal Arch in Scotland, the candidate is first tested by the Guardians of the Veils he encountered in the previous degree to check that he is an Excellent Master. However, this time, in the opening ceremony of the Royal Arch, there are no physical Veils present as in the Excellent Master degree ceremony. The guardians simply ask the candidate for the passwords and signs associated with each Veil to prove himself.



I suggest this is what remained in Bristol after 1813. The Bristol Royal Arch Masons gave up working the degree of Excellent Master after the Union, but retained the 'Veils' opening in their Royal Arch chapters which was removed from the post-1835 Royal Arch ceremonies elsewhere in England. This accounts for the presence of the Guardians of the Veils in the 1842 manuscript quoted by Bro. Baker, but with no physical Veils being present. I further suggest that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bristol Royal Arch Masons decided to add physical Veils to their Royal Arch opening ceremony since they had no degree of Excellent Master and that this is the correct explanation of the evidence presented by Bro. Baker in his paper.

I should also point out that the Royal Arch ceremonies in Bristol and in Scotland today are still different. The 'Veils' in Scotland is still a separate degree – that of Excellent Master – and a direct descendent of the two eighteenth century degrees of Excellent Master and Super Excellent Master, as referred to in the *Sheffield MS* etc., whereas the 'Veils' in Bristol is an early twentieth century elaboration of the traditional opening of a Royal Arch chapter.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** As I have already said, in Bristol we open a Lodge of Excellent Masters to perform the Inner Working of the Installation of a Master of a Craft Lodge. The Bristol Lodge of Excellent Masters has its own opening and closing rituals and its own sign. It has an obligation and a legend involving the Queen of Sheba. Before closing the Lodge of Excellent Masters however the ritual is careful to state that: 'Although for the purpose of an Installation, we open a lodge of Excellent Masters, it must be clearly understood that no further degree in Masonry is conferred.' In Bristol none of what happens in the Lodge of Excellent Masters has anything to do with the Royal Arch or 'Passing the Veils'.

As I have also said, the manuscript Royal Arch rituals, from which I have quoted, are full ceremonies and not left-over vestiges. If a decision is taken to publish them in *AQC*, then Bro. Powell will be able to see this for himself.

In the Bristol ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' now, as in all the other Veils ceremonies I have studied, the candidate is given the relevant information at each Veil and is then immediately tested to see whether he has received and understood it correctly. This is what happens in many other degrees in Masonry and certainly in all three of the Craft degrees in Bristol. He is not being tested to see whether he still retains information that he was given in a previous degree, he is given the relevant information and then immediately tested. In fact, at the very beginning of the Bristol Veils ceremony, the candidate is tested in the three degrees of the Craft to ensure that he is qualified to pass the Veils.

I thought I had presented a powerful argument in favour of my hypothesis that in Bristol a ceremony of 'Passing the Veils' has been practised from c.1817 at least. I can-

not think what other evidence could persuade Bro. Powell to my view short of a time-machine which would allow us both to travel back to the early nineteenth century together and witness what was actually done!

**BRO. BRIAN PRICE WROTE:** In recent years a number of provinces have seen demonstrated a 'Passing the Veils' ceremony, and a number of versions can be heard of the relevance (or otherwise) of this ceremony to English Freemasonry. It is therefore pleasing to have a definitive history of this one aspect of a complex story, and Bro. Baker is to be commended on his paper.

He states that: 'A ceremony of "Passing the Veils" is common throughout Scotland, Ireland, and the United States of America, although it may be part of a separate Degree in some places, called either Excellent Master, Most Excellent Master, or Super Excellent Master. It is, however, unknown in England except in the Province of Bristol ...' While I do not disagree with his general introduction, it is, perhaps, useful to state that two of the degrees he mentions are very well known in England, and to set the record straight for the casual reader, it should be recorded that Most Excellent Master and Super Excellent Master are constituents of the Order of Royal and Select Masters.

The author highlights the practice of 1842, in which the three Principals opened the chapter alone and then summoned the Janitor to admit the companions, and goes on to state that by 1890 the Past First Principals were also present at the opening of the chapter but the rest of the companions were not admitted until later. While I cannot confirm the dates, there are chapters in Yorkshire where a similar practice was followed, and there are at least two chapters working today where only Principals and Past Principals are present at the opening.

I find the history of the debate about the number of Veils and their proper colours interesting, particularly in view of the history of my American Royal Arch chapter. Today the chapter symbolizes four Veils by use of the ensigns to be found in English chapters bearing the symbols of Man, Lion, Ox, and Eagle. However, the earlier ritual, dating from at least 1830, was specific in that there were four Veils and that their proper colours were white, scarlet, purple and blue. In respect of the origin of their ritual, my American colleagues seemed to be in no doubt that their rituals originally came from Europe and were essentially in place by c.1830, and this fits well with Bro. Baker's statement that 'a ceremony of "Passing the Veils" has been worked continuously in Bristol since well before 1835'. The ceremonial for the veils quoted from the 1842 ritual is certainly similar in most respects to early American rituals. Moreover, the general view in my American chapter is that the working was almost certainly influenced primarily by military lodges, and therefore it would be interesting to learn if there is any evidence in the Bristol history of specific military units in Bristol, or of those embarking for the

New World from that port, which had such workings. If so, it would certainly be strange if they took with them a Royal Arch practice that was not common in Bristol. Perhaps the author could comment on the existence of lodges working the Royal Arch degree attached to Military Units before, say, 1830.

Finally, I mention the role of the three 'Masters of the Veils' in the American ritual associated with the York Rite, in which the Royal Arch Degree is preceded by the degrees of Mark Master, Past Master, and Most Excellent Master. I have heard it suggested that this reflects the English Antients' working where a Mark Degree and a 'Passing of the Chair' were requisites for the Royal Arch; the role of the Masters of the blue, purple, and scarlet veils were to open the Craft lodge, a Mark lodge, and a lodge of Most Excellent Masters. In the 1842 Bristol working these positions are specifically aligned with the three Sojourners, and as the author did not mention any Bristol evidence of influence from Antients' working, I wonder whether he could comment on whether such evidence exists.

I too wish to be associated with the Vote of Thanks given in the lodge, and commend Bro. Baker for setting the record straight.

**BRO. BAKER REPLIED:** I am not aware of any evidence of military lodges either based in Bristol or embarking from Bristol.

It is true that the degrees of Most Excellent Master and Super Excellent Master, as currently worked in the Order of Royal and Select Masters, share the names of two of the degrees in which Veils are passed in other Masonic Constitutions. Although the history of their legends fits historically between the third degree and the Royal Arch, neither of these Degrees, as worked in the Royal and Select Masters, contains a Veils ceremony.

The degree of Most Excellent Master commemorates the completion and dedication of King Solomon's temple. Its legend is, therefore, historically at least, associated with that of the Mark degree.

The degree of Super-Excellent Master describes the time when Nebuzaradan's army was about to descend on Jerusalem and the steps that were then taken to protect the Ark of the Covenant.

Although there were both Antient and Modern lodges in Bristol prior to the Union, I'm afraid I cannot comment on how much influence the Antients might have had on 'Passing the Veils' in Bristol.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the brethren who made comments in the lodge and those who made written comments subsequently, for the interest they have shown in the paper I presented.

