

Assembled Freemasons watch  
a ceremony in London, 1992



Out with the  
old boys'  
network...



Freemasons Daniel Spencer, Vasil Blackwood, Gaëlle Ndanga, David Starling, Roshni Patel, Tony Patti and Mitchell Bryson



# in with the millennials and vegans

## Welcome to the very modern Freemasons

Can efforts to make Masonic groups more transparent and inclusive rid them of their shadowy, cult-like reputation?

By Joe Shute.  
Photography by Caitlin Chescoe



**D**avid Staples was a first-year biochemistry student at the University of Oxford's Magdalen College when he entered the world of Freemasonry. Born in south-east London to a working-class family, the young Staples was already trying to make sense of the archaic rituals of the university when he noticed a housemate slipping out twice a term for a clandestine appointment, and returning late in the evening.

Eventually Staples asked where he was going, and was invited to see for himself. A while later he was presented with a date and a time to arrive at the nearest Masonic lodge, with no further instructions.

The evening of his initiation, the weather was particularly foul. The now 46-year-old Staples recalls pulling on his suit and wondering if he could actually be bothered to cycle four miles away down the Banbury Road. 'It's funny,' he says, stirring tea in an armchair in his grandly appointed office at Freemasons' Hall, 'how with those little decisions you take early on in your life, you have no idea how they will turn out.'

Fast-forward a few decades and he is now grand secretary and head of one of the UK's most enigmatic organisations, and spearheading sweeping change within the notoriously conservative institution, formed in 1717 and long cloaked in secrecy and cult-like rumours.

In 2017, Staples – who is married with an 11-year-old daughter, and works one day a week as a consultant physician in acute internal medicine at Peterborough City Hospital – was announced as his organisation's first ever chief executive officer. Ever since his appointment to what is a full-time and paid role, he has set about bringing Freemasonry into the modern era.

Most people's idea of the Freemasons is that it is a closely guarded old boys' network of secret handshakes, long robes, chanting and antiquated ceremonies – be they in grand Masonic halls or the back room of the local suburban golf club. Staples, however, has been busy chipping away at this.

He has rewritten the guiding principles to appeal to a younger audience, invited transgender members to join, and opened up the organisation to modern scrutiny. He has taken out adverts in national newspapers declaring 'Enough is enough' to address the ongoing rumours about Freemasonry, and written to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to make the case that Masons are stigmatised and face discrimination.

His mission is personal. When he was announced as CEO, he says he was asked to step down from the board of a charity he was a trustee of because of his Masonic connections. 'If I was black or Irish or gay or any protected characteristics they wouldn't have

been able to do that,' he says. 'But because I'm a Freemason I didn't have any recourse.'

In the spirit of greater transparency, United Grand Lodge of England (which encompasses the Freemason lodges of England and Wales, and is known as UGLE) has just published its first annual report. The report states that UGLE received an income of £10.6 million (£7.7 million from member dues) and raised more than £42 million for charitable causes in 2020.

According to its accounts, it currently holds more than £75 million in fixed assets, including a London property portfolio

'We are the antithesis of woke. We have a very proud history of respecting people'



UGLE grand secretary David Staples

worth £58 million, which comprises a decent chunk of the Covent Garden street upon which stands its art deco headquarters, Freemasons' Hall. The building was originally opened in 1776 and rebuilt after the Great War. A warren of snaking corridors and wood-panelled rooms frequented by men in dark suits carrying briefcases, its ornate Grand Temple sits within a courtyard hidden by its outer walls. Much like the Freemasons themselves, secrecy permeates the fabric of the building.

The UGLE has recently completed a £150,000 refurbishment, with a café and bar opening at Freemasons' Hall this summer. It is hoped to become part of the London tourist map, trebling the 225,000 people who already visit each year. A new shop has also opened on the first floor of the building, where visitors can purchase Masonic regalia, Toby jugs,

ritual books and branded cut-throat razors. The organisation of secret rituals and rolled-up trouser legs that once counted Winston Churchill and Arthur Conan Doyle as members (as well as centuries of royals) now boasts an Instagram account and a heady whiff of corporate polish in the air.

Staples admits it is a move born out of necessity. Following a post-war boom, with demobbed soldiers keen to recreate the camaraderie of life in the Armed Forces, in recent decades Masonic membership has been in steady, and some fear fatal, decline.

According to the UGLE 2020 report, current membership stands at around 193,000. It has been estimated that figure has declined by about 150,000 in the past 20 years. While there has been a notable rise in younger members, there are efforts underway to attract more. In fact, so keen is the organisation for new blood that talks are ongoing to establish an exclusively under-35 lodge for London-based millennials, focusing in particular on the environment and mental health. Its successful establishment of university lodges continues to expand, with more than 3,400 students currently members.

The modern-day version of Freemasonry that the UGLE wishes to present is ethnically diverse, split across genders and tolerant of all – one markedly different to its reputation as the preserve of middle-aged men busy lining each other's pockets with business deals. Though of course the Freemasons themselves insist the organisation has always stood for much more noble aims: self-improvement, charity and brotherhood.

**T**he existential problem facing the Freemasons is presented starkly in the membership demographics. Nearly 50 per cent of members are aged between 61 and 80. There are twice as many aged 80 or over as there are between 31 and 40. Just 1.93 per cent of members are between 18 and 30.

Everyone agrees that something needs to be done. But in these divided times of culture wars and intergenerational conflict, as the organisation changes to attract young blood there is an obvious risk of alienating its base. Indeed, with all the moves to make it more inclusive and diverse, there have been criticisms among the old-school 'party faithful' that the organisation has gone woke.

'We are at our core the antithesis of woke,' Staples insists. 'We have a very proud history of respecting people for being people and not worrying about how much money they have, the colour of their skin, or what religion they are. We did that 300 years ago. It is not a woke reaction. It is fundamentally who Freemasons are and have been for a very long time.'

At 31, Mitch Bryan is one of the millennial Freemasons and has encountered hostility



from older members at meetings. 'They sit back and might do a bit of tutting and stuff but tradition has to change,' he says. He likens the detractors to an 'old guard', and one which you 'will get in any institution and any club'.

Bryan, operations manager for an on-demand grocery company, has been a Freemason for the past eight years. He says that when he joined a lodge in his native Wiltshire, he was the youngest member in the province. Since then, though, he has witnessed ever more younger people coming through the ranks.

Aside from an ex-partner's dad and a friend he watches rugby matches with, he had no connection to what is termed 'The Craft'. The charitable aspects particularly appealed – every lodge meeting will raise about £400 for charity (through a raffle and collection) – while he is also drawn into the Masonic ideal of self-improvement. 'There is plenty of personal advantage but no business advantage,' he says.

Bryan was attracted, too, to a search for wider meaning and belonging in Freemasonry, as well as a myth and mystery that resonates among a generation raised on *Harry Potter*.

About 18 months ago the Masonic core values of 'brotherly love, relief and truth' were updated to 'integrity, respect, friendship and charity', to appeal to modern minds. Last year it was announced the Grand Lodge of Scotland (a separate entity to UGLE) had amended a centuries-old tradition to allow vegan Masons to wear vinyl aprons rather than the traditional lambskin (the aprons are a key part of Masonic regalia).

Alan Borsbey, the owner of Scottish Masonic outfitter VSL Regalia, says wearing such an item would be a step too far. 'For me there is a significance in it and we will always stick with tradition,' says Borsbey, who has been a Freemason for 31 years and insists 99 per cent of the aprons he sells are still lambskin. 'It is in the rituals about having a lambskin apron.'

That said, he admits he would happily sell a vinyl apron to anyone who wants one, and acknowledges a degree of flexibility is required to keep Freemasonry alive. 'In the modern era, if they don't change, some lodges will die,' he says.

Other more senior members, such as 90-year-old

Cliff Halsall – who is master of Mold Lodge in North Wales, where the average age of members is in the mid-60s – are delighted to see the institutional changes taking place. 'Something had to happen because we were clearly not appealing to the younger generation,' he says.

**B**ecoming a Mason is known as 'being on the square', a reference to the universally recognised symbols of Freemasonry: the square (which represents conduct) and compasses (a reminder to modify that conduct). It is, members say, a

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The Duke of Kent at a ceremony in 1992



Actor and Mason Vasta Blackwood

journey of self-discovery, combining philanthropy, philosophy and social activities.

Pre-pandemic, meetings were held about once a month. They are closely guarded affairs where members wear regalia and observe arcane rituals steeped in allegory. Traditions vary from lodge to lodge, but there may be lectures from members followed by an evening meal known as the festive board, at which songs are sung and toasts raised.

One ritual present in every lodge revolves around a rough stone next to a polished slab known as an ashlar, denoting the journey each Mason must

take. Stonemasonry is the overall metaphor here, explains Professor Andrew Prescott, who was director of a centre for research into Freemasonry based at the University of Sheffield between 2000 and 2007. Ceremonial aprons represent those once used by old stonemasons, and the white gloves also worn symbolise the garments presented between tradesmen as gifts. Prof Prescott, who is not a Mason, describes it as a 'structured form of sociability and moral education that uses myths associated with stonemasonry in order to impart moral essence and do good in society'. And also, he adds, to have fun.

While in recent years the Masons have permitted documentary crews to observe some meetings, the initiation itself remains sacrosanct. It revolves around three individual ceremonies relating to the biblical story of Solomon's Temple. The first concerns birth, the second self-improvement and the third mortality, where initiates are said to be put blindfolded into a coffin-like box. Despite it being an avowedly secular affair, Masons describe their own initiations as if having undergone a form of religious conversion.

The actor Vasta Blackwood (best known for his role as Rory Breaker in Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*) has been a Freemason for more than two decades and recalls his initiation with glee, although he won't reveal any details. 'It was very macabre,' says the 58-year-old. 'Like something out of an *Indiana Jones* movie.'

Blackwood was first exposed to Freemasonry on a trip to his family's native Jamaica (there are estimated to be six million Freemasons around the world) and was later recruited by a Lebanese restaurant owner in London's Hampstead, where he lived. Did he become a member to help his acting career, I wonder? 'Nah they were all accountants when I joined,' he grins. Instead he says he pursued it in the hope of attaining some higher meaning and 'balance' in his life.

David Staples similarly demurs when I ask if Freemasonry has helped in his career. 'You meet people with expertise but the concept you will get a job or leg up the ladder with someone because you are in a lodge together is just nonsense,' he says.

What about the rumour Freemasons only employ others who are on the square? 'I go with tradesmen who offer the best quote and who I trust,' he says, before adding, 'Now you can trust Freemasons...'



The roots of Freemasonry stretch back to the Middle Ages and a group formed by the master masons who built the great castles and cathedrals of Europe. Originally, says Prof Prescott, it was intended as a royalist movement supporting the newly crowned Hanoverian King George I. The idea of Freemasonry becoming a social network, and one that oiled the wheels of business, developed over the 19th century as the brotherhood spread across the British Empire. By 1900, some 2,800 lodges had formed worldwide.

For 183 years the Freemasons have boasted a royal connection – 23 male members of the Royal family have been Masons, eight of whom have been grand master. The Queen's father, King George VI, was a Mason; so too her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh. In Prince Philip's final years, fellow Masons of Navy Lodge, of which he was a member for 68 years, would regularly visit for a chat and a cup of tea. Prince Michael of Kent, meanwhile, remains an active Mason, and his brother Prince Edward, Duke of Kent is the longest-serving grand master in UGLE history, having taken up the position in 1967.

The Masons also have a close connection with the Armed Forces. In 2019 the Duke of Kent unveiled a remembrance stone at Freemasons' Hall honouring the more than 200 Masons who have been awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest award for gallantry. An estimated 14 per cent of all VC holders are Freemasons.

A few years ago I wrote an article for the *Telegraph* detailing the extraordinary number of Freemasons to have been awarded a VC, and soon after I received an anonymous email. 'It would be interesting and useful to know,' my correspondent inquired, 'how many of those who decided on the awarding of the VC were themselves Freemasons?'

Accusations of Masonic back-scratching have always dogged the organisation. Two lodges were established at Westminster for lobby journalists and MPs almost a century ago, though UGLE has said none are currently members of them. It has said about 10 MPs are Freemasons.

The police, too, have long been suspected of being rife with Masons. The inquiry into police actions following the Hillsborough disaster led by the Independent Office for Police Conduct is actively assessing what role if any Freemasonry might have played.

A few years ago, during new inquests, the match commander, then chief superintendent David Duckenfield, admitted he had been a Freemason since 1975 and became a worshipful master – head of his local lodge – the year after the 1989 disaster. Investigators are now examining whether Masonic links between senior officers influenced their decision-making and will detail their find-

ings when the final report is published.

In late 2017, the then outgoing chair of the Police Federation, Steve White, alleged that Freemasons were 'an old boys' network' blocking reform and frustrating the progress of women and officers from black and minority ethnic communities. 'I found that there were people who were fundamentally against any kind of change and any kind of progress,' White said at the time, 'and they always happened to be Freemasons.'

Daniel Spencer, 47, is a retired Metropolitan Police officer (his final post was civilian manager in the control room at Scotland Yard) and Freemason of some 21 years. Currently one of four assistant provincial grand masters in West Kent, he was invited to join, he recalls, by a colleague at Catford police station. At his

*'In the modern era, if they don't change, some lodges will die'*



The gift shop at Freemasons' Hall, London

initiation, he was surprised to see so many faces he recognised from work. All the same, he insists, the idea of police corruption being linked to Freemasonry is 'all a big fallacy'.

During the 1990s, when Paul Condon was commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Spencer was one of 28,000 officers to receive a letter requesting they officially declare whether or not they were a Freemason. 'He got 28,000 replies,' he recalls. 'Each saying mind your own damn business.'

**I**n order to join the UGLE, you are expected to have a religious belief (it does not matter which one), and be of good character, aged 18 or over and proposed by two members. And also, you must be male.

There are two separate female-only grand lodges in the UK, which have about 5,000 members based here and abroad. The lodges can trace their histories back more than a century, but though they observe the same routines and follow the same rituals, they remain

separate to the UGLE. Staples insists he has no plans to introduce mixed-sex lodges, although he acknowledges that in the future they could share some 'back-office functions'.

There is another, distinct branch called the International Order of Freemasonry for Men and Women, which does permit mixed meetings. The order, which is present in about 60 countries, has its UK headquarters in Surbiton, Surrey, and has several hundred members based across 21 lodges nationwide.

Among them is Julian Rees, 85, who lives near Croydon. A former member of UGLE, he says he broke away in 2010 to pursue what he describes as a more esoteric and philosophical form of Freemasonry. 'UGLE seems to me as very much a club,' he says. 'It's very much a male-orientated thing that is fun for the boys. That aspect of it I've always been a little bit uncomfortable with.'

The pandemic could have accelerated the decline of Freemasonry. Not least as early on it was reported Masons had refused shifting their ceremonial activities and initiations on to Zoom for fear this could discriminate against older members unwilling or unable to go online. But it thrived. Between March 2020 and April 2021, UGLE Freemasons raised and distributed £3.2 million in grants and funds to local Covid-19 relief projects.

Being local and well connected, they were able to mobilise quickly in the Covid effort. Masonic centres from Barry to Tunbridge Wells were rapidly converted into vaccine centres. Elsewhere, Masons rolled up their sleeves and established food banks and volunteer kitchens, and supported the homeless and young carers.

Not a week went by without a report in a local paper of a Mason's philanthropy. Such prominence in the pandemic is casting Freemasonry in a new light. Recent UGLE polling suggests people under 34 are the most positive of any demographic about the organisation.

Staples says the response to his modernising agenda among members has been overwhelmingly positive. Throwing open the doors of Masonic institutions is, he says, blowing away the cobwebs and rehabilitating them in the public eye. 'When you are a shadowy organisation that people don't know terribly much about, it is easy to see ghosts and invent stories.'

New millennial Masons are proof of this success and still possess the zeal of their forebears. 'It's about leaving the world a better place in every aspect,' says 35-year-old London-based property broker Gaëlle Ndanga, who is a member of the all-female lodge Freemasonry for Women. 'Sometimes when there is a lack of communication people depend on their imagination, but now people can really see our purpose.'