

Bared chests and nooses: an evening in the secret world of the Oxford freemasons

The ancient male-only society is shedding some of its fabled mystery in an effort to attract younger members. Katie Tarrant was the first outsider in 200 years to be invited to dinner before a swearing-in ritual at the university

It's a wild Saturday night on the town in Oxford, and I'm watching students wearing one shoe, with their shirts unbuttoned and a slipknot of rope around their necks walk blindfolded into an initiation ceremony.

This is not the latest dangerous TikTok trend or mad college drinking game – it's the swearing-in process for the freemasons, an ancient chapter of the society that meets six times a year at the Randolph Hotel. Last month, I was the first outsider in the Oxford University society's 200-year history to be invited for dinner with the group.

Freemasonry is a controversial, opaque, 600-year-old international institution. Its advocates describe it as a benevolent brotherhood that seeks to promote mutual understanding and co-operation. Its detractors, over the years, have viewed it as a sinister and conspiratorial – even satanic – force, pulling strings and manipulating events to its own ends.

So what are the freemasons like today? As part of my mission to bring in a younger cohort and shed a stuffy reputation, this secretive organisation is starting to come out of its oak-panelled shell. It is promoting itself at freshers' fairs and has launched a podcast.

And, surprisingly, it has invited me to dinner and to attend Oxford's Apollo Lodge for its swearing-in ceremony. Not knowing what to expect, I'm apprehensive as I'm led

through dark green corridors in the Randolph Hotel to a private room. Apollo Lodge is the oldest student freemason group in the country and its rituals are always conducted behind closed doors. Men in trenchcoats throw open black briefcases carrying clothing and regalia, as members hurry to enter an oak-panelled ballroom with Titanic replica chandeliers and checkered floor. No women are permitted.

I meet a former "master" of Apollo, the member elected to manage a lodge, Alexander Yen, 25, who was born in Hong Kong and moved to Oxford for university. He is dressed in white tie and wears a gold pocket watch.

As a shy-tailed Oxford fresher, Yen met a friend for lunch in a pub, who started to talk about a new society he had just joined. "I had heard of it before so I was interested. I told him as much, and he said all I had to do was to write to the secretary, which I duly did."

Unlike Yen, the majority of the men at Apollo Lodge found freemasonry through their fathers or grandfathers. But knowing a mason is not an essential criteria to join. You can also email and ask to become a member. As Yen puts on his ceremonial attire – white gloves and a white and blue apron embroidered with the familiar gold insignia of compass and set square – he explains why he became a freemason. "It has a certain *je ne sais quoi* appeal about it, don't you think?"

Freemasonry still



Alexander Yen, left, and Chris Noon, centre, at the Apollo Lodge at Oxford University

“**He removes one shoe and rolls up his trouser leg to show that he is a free man**”

maintains an aura of history and mystery. The organisation dates to the 14th century, when groups of stonemasons formed guilds to self-regulate. It grew through the Enlightenment period (Voltaire was initiated a month before his death, Rousseau was a mason, too) and saw a golden age in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The movement has counted world leaders among its ranks including Winston Churchill, George Washington, 13 other US presidents and five kings of England, including George VI. But in the post-

war years it became mired in controversy, accused of sowing corruption in politics, the police and the judiciary. During the era of McCarthyism, theories spread that freemasons and the supposed Illuminati secret society were the driving forces behind an "international communist conspiracy".

I'm not permitted to witness the formal part of the ceremony, which involves the blindfolded candidate swearing an oath on his own choice of sacred text, including the Bible, Quran or Torah, promising never to write down the secrets of

masonry. He is then presented to the senior officers of the lodge, who certify that he is "of good report".

In the bar next to the ballroom I meet Max, a history undergraduate in his early twenties, one of the six undergraduates and master's students formally becoming members tonight. As part of his induction, he is asked to bare his chest to prove that he is not a woman. He removes one shoe and rolls up his left trouser leg to show he is unshackled, a free man.

Another tradition involves a long rope with nooses each of which is placed around a boy's neck – they then walk blindfolded into the lodge to mirror a move "from darkness to light". It is said to create a bond among the brotherhood.

Max says he joined the Oxford masons' dinner because "it sounded like a good way to meet people". But there's a reason why people have come here and not the college bar. Part of the appeal is the club's elitism, which draws ambitious students to other selective clubs such as the Bullington – the only with a £100-a-year membership fee and about £60 per dinner, the masons are a good deal cheaper than a set of "Buller" tails.

Beyond elitism, however, is the sense of secrecy and mystery that shrouds the masons. The historian John Dickie wrote that it was "the engine of fascination and suspicion that [has] always surrounded the freemasons" that kept curious men

knocking at the door of lodge.

For some members, they like the focus on morality outside of organised religion. For others, though, it's also just a nice way for men to find some pals. "This is not supposed to be a secret society, but we've been driven to it because there's still a stigma towards us," says Matt, 32, an engineering PhD student, originally from Sunderland, who joined aged 21. "We're just normal blokes. Dressing up is just a bonus."

To become a mason, candidates have to be interviewed three times to show that they have "good character". They are also tested on whether they agree with the organisation's three principles: brotherly love, truth and relief (the practice of charity). Members must believe in a "supreme being" and discussing politics and religion is banned.

After the hour-long initiation, in which I'm assured no animals were sacrificed, Max joined the ranks of 175,000 members registered with the United Grand Lodge of England, the governing Masonic Lodge in England and Wales. The grandmaster of the United Grand Lodge is the Duke of Kent, who has performed the role for more than 50 years, continuing a long royal tradition. Although some countries have introduced co-masonry – where women and men meet and perform rituals together – this has not happened here. "The order of women freemasons" was founded in 1908, now has more than 4,000 members and works closely with the men's grand lodge. Maxine Besser, 75, deputy grandmaster of freemasonry for women, is keen to insist that men's freemasonry is "not a boy's club".

The student outreach programme launched in 2005 is working – the grand lodge says it has about 3,500 student members. In Oxford,

studying degrees such as engineering, mathematics and history, sip champagne alongside members in their eighties, lecturers, scientists and a former police officer, among others. Clearly there are opportunities for networking, although I am assured repeatedly that joining for this purpose is against the foundations of the group.

After the ceremony, candlesticks, pedestals and marble cubes are replaced with round tables to seat 60. There are a mix of former state and public school boys, with the group claiming that the appeal of the society is that "members come from all walks of life and meet as equals".

Between three courses of burrata, chicken with roast potatoes and chocolate cake, some said they joined because they didn't feel like they fit in elsewhere. The organisation claims to have seen a boost in young membership since Covid, when students were stuck in their rooms and felt isolated.

After dessert the master of the lodge is called out to give a speech and knock against the tablecloth, then he rises. "The master will now take wine," announces a 27-year-old former student, now a London banker. He toasts his new initiates, his wardens and, with a nod in my direction, his non-mason guest. Like a university drinking game, they drink wine after every toast.

It's quirky and frankly a bit bizarre, but with every influence, bit once wielded, there's no sense that this fraternity holds the strings of world affairs in its hands. The evening is best summed up by the lodge secretary, as I sit looking confused while men draw geometric right angles in the air with their fingers, as if conducting an orchestra. He catches my eye and with a wink and says: "It's just a bit of fun."

ADRIAN SHERRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES