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# EXCLUSIVE What happened when I went behind the curtain of the secretive Freemasons: SARAH RAINEY gains entry to the male-only headquarters of the British Masons - and discovers even the t drinks are shrouded in symbolism...

SARAH RAINEY

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They designed the pyramids, plotted the French Revolution, covered up the sinking of the Titanic – oh, and they’re secretly running the world.

Conspiracy theories – from the outlandish to the downright ridiculous – have been associated with the Freemasons for almost three centuries.

And for most of that time, this ancient organisation, which has 250,000 members in the UK and six million around the globe, hasn’t done much to set the record straight.

Until now – and it’s all down to **TikTok**.

In what might be one of the most unexpected marketing moves of the 21st century, this enigmatic and once-deeply conservative group has turned to social media to freshen up its image, attract new members – and, they say, debunk those myths once and for all.

Earlier this month, a satirical clip on the video-sharing platform, posted by the **London Freemasons** (who themselves boast 24,000 followers), racked up almost 250,000 views.

In the one-minute video, members poke fun at their own traditions, from the lambskin aprons and white gloves they wear, to their love of the national anthem – and that infamous handshake.

It is, explains Shaun Butler, the 31-year-old director of membership and communications at the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE), the society’s British

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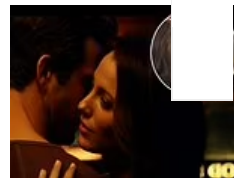
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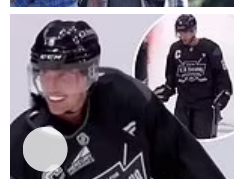
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HQ, a deliberate attempt to 'open up' Freemasonry to outsiders.



Conspiracy theories have been associated with the Freemasons for almost three centuries. (L-R) Ingrid Hulbert, Matthew Christmas, the Mail's Sarah Rainey, and Paul Asante



Freemason Shaun Butler shows Sarah a stained-glass window

band's frontman of beating her up in furious public spat



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Their all-seeing eye even appears on the US dollar bill

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...le have a lot of preconceptions and, in the past, we have been poor at ering that,' explains Shaun.

You can say that again. With its secret handshakes, elaborate regalia and indecipherable symbols, not to mention invite-only ceremonies that are **shrouded in mystery**, the Freemasons have long been revered as one of the most secretive societies in history.

For conspiracists, the theory goes that shadowy cabals like the Freemasons, the Illuminati, and wealthy dynasties like the Rothschilds are engineering a one-world government by hijacking financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank and global organisations such as the United Nations. Some say they're even behind the rise of digital currencies.

Wilder conspiracies posit that economic crashes, political instability - from the French Revolution to the assassination of John F Kennedy - and even pandemics have been carefully designed to push the world closer to accepting a new world order.

And can you blame them when the Freemasons have counted everyone from Winston Churchill to King George VI among their members - and insist on using eerie symbolism like the all-seeing eye - as appears on the US dollar bill - and intriguing references to the number 33, said by some to be sacred?

Speaking to Shaun, an affable father-of-one who's been a member for almost ten years, these theories seem rather far-fetched.

'You could look at what we do as "silly customs" or you could look at them as part of our tradition,' he tells me.

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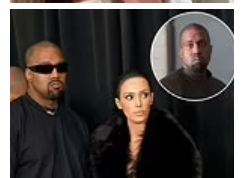
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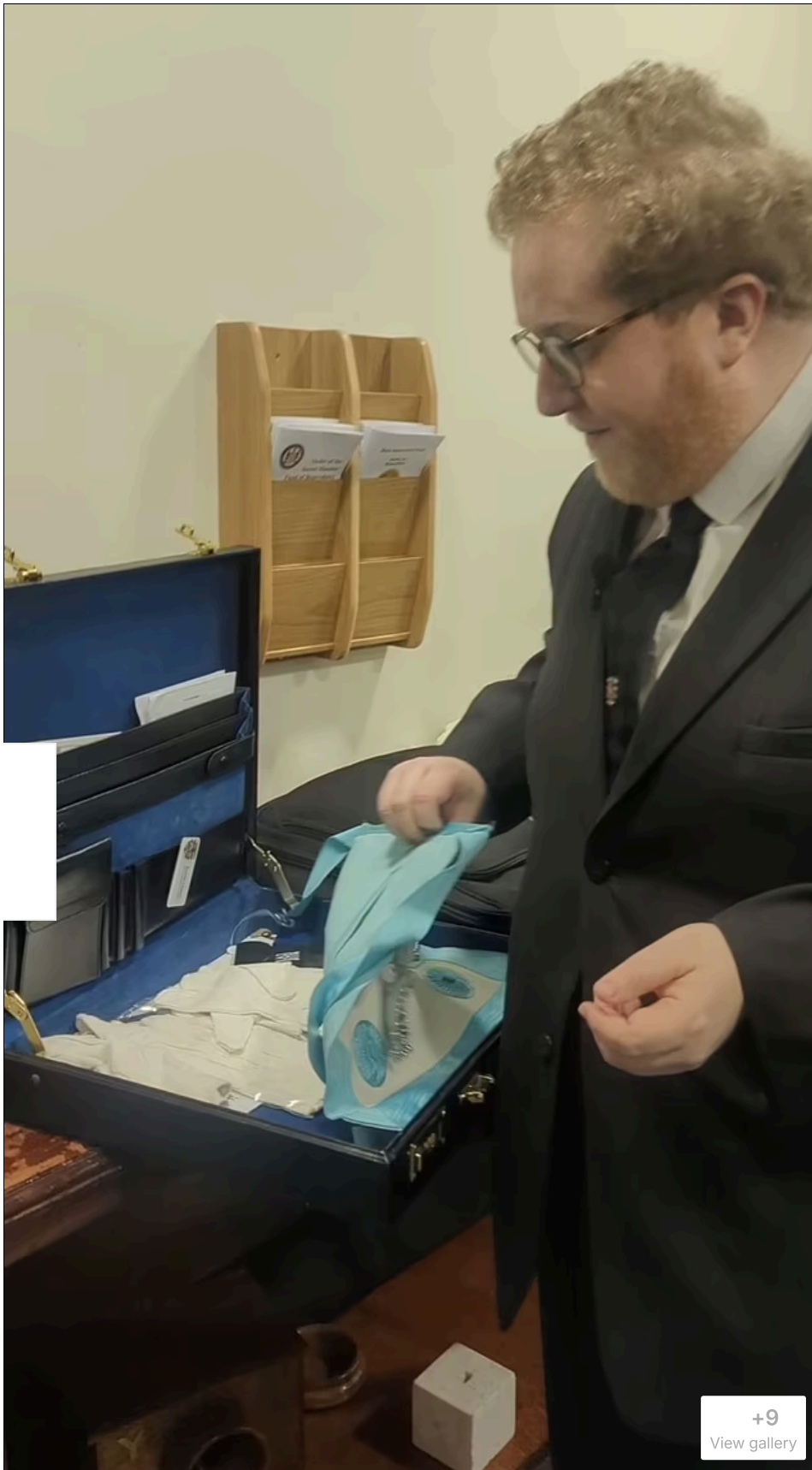


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'Take the investiture of Parliament and all the rituals that are involved in that. Every little bit means something - it's the same here.'



TikTok has seen the Freemasons open up a little

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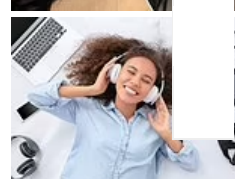
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▶ **He's the son of a beloved game show icon** who recently became the internet's new heartthrob with a viral cooking video - can you guess who?



**Zara McDermott** sets pulses racing in a brown bikini as she plugs her new swimwear RISE line



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Mr Asante says being a mason has given his life structure



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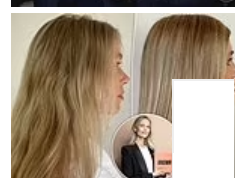
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And so I find myself sitting at a table in the UGLE café – yes, it has its own café, and a bar, both open to the public – with Freemasons of all ages and backgrounds discussing what made them want to sign up to this shadowy society.

Masonic symbols are everywhere: on tie pins, jewellery and staff members' aprons. There is, somewhat disconcertingly, a masonic star dusted on top of my hot chocolate.

The star, explains Tom Currie, 38, originally from Preston, who was 23 when he joined the Freemasons, represents virtue and striving for greatness – both key tenets of the society's beliefs.

'I've always been interested in service and tradition,' says Tom, who works as a walking tour guide in the capital and regularly stops outside Freemasons' Hall, UGLE's central London location, to tell tourists what it's all about.

'I've never come up against any animosity,' he insists. 'People tend to have lots of questions, and they're interested to hear the answers.'

Like many who sign up, masonry runs in his family – his father and grandfather were members – and Tom says it has lived up to expectations from the start.

'It really opened up the social side of my life and I've met so many people, from different backgrounds and with different outlooks on life,' he says.

Paul Asante, 50, a London warehouse manager who's originally from Ghana, agrees. He says being a Freemason has given his life structure.



Gaining access to the society has never been easier, says Sarah

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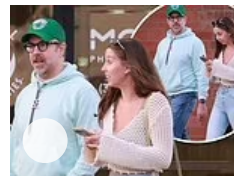
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The Masons are notorious for their secret handshake - but they won't say how to do it

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▶ Britpop legend Damon Albarn and his daughter Missy cut trendy figures in streetwear as they step out to the Burberry fashion show during LFW



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Mr Butker shows Sarah Sir Winston Churchill's regalia from his time with the Freemasons

'When I joined I was in my 30s with a young family, and it gave me something to do around work and being at home with my children,' he explains.

In the 16 years since he became a mason, Paul says, the organisation has changed for the better.

'It had traditional beginnings but today we're really open-minded,' he adds. 'The old, -daddy reputation has to go; it's not who we are.'

om playing down their affiliation, both Tom and Paul are proud Freemasons – on't keep the fact from family, friends or work colleagues.

are not only remarkably normal, but also welcoming, tolerant of outsiders' ance and happy to answer my questions without being preachy.

Freemasonry, I learn, is based on guilds created by stonemasons in the 14th century. They wore the gloves and aprons for protection. The square and compasses, trowel and plumb level, which appear in masonic insignia, were their tools.

By the late-17th century, there were several masonic lodges – the name **given to regional branches of the Freemasons** – in Britain, and it was in London that the first 'Grand Lodge', with its own constitution, appeared in 1717.

Freemasons' Hall, the lavish art-deco building I'm standing in, with its chequerboard floors and intricate stained-glass windows, was built in the 1930s.

Four times a year, 1,600 members gather here to meet in the Grand Temple, a cavernous worship hall with masonic beliefs etched in a glittering mosaics on the ceiling and 1.5-ton bronze doors.

Since its beginnings, very little about the organisation has changed – including the three-stage initiation ceremonies newcomers must go through to become fully fledged Freemasons.

And there is, in fact, a secret handshake – but they couldn't possibly tell me what it is.

'In ancient times, the handshakes – or the "grips", as they were known – were ways to show you were a stonemason, and to recognise your level of experience,' Shaun explains.

'But it's strictly forbidden to give the handshake outside the lodge.'

Also forbidden, at least in the Grand Lodge, are female members.

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▶ Jerry Hall looks effortlessly chic as she joins daughters Georgia May and Elizabeth Jagger at the London Fashion Week Burberry show



▶ Kate Ferdinand, 33, and her husband Rio, 46, make a stylish arrival at the star-studded Burberry show during London Fashion Week





Looking around, I feel somewhat conspicuous as the only woman in a sea of gruff black suits – until I meet Ingrid Hulbert.

Dressed in a chic black satin blouse and skirt, topped with a powder-puff beige coat, Ingrid isn't a member here – like most lodges, UGLE is men-only – but she's one of almost 5,000 'Lady Freemasons' worldwide.

Though it's still **perceived as a boys' club**, masonry has been open to women since 1913, when Freemasonry for Women, one of two female branches of the organisation, was set up. It was followed in 1935 by the Order of Women Freemasons.

Ingrid, 50, who works in skincare for Estee Lauder and lives in Derbyshire, is one of the newer members, having joined four years ago after losing a family member.

'My mental health took a huge hit,' she says, tears welling in her eyes. 'I couldn't get out of bed. I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.'

'Someone close to me suggested I look into Freemasonry, as a way of managing my grief and finding a support network.'

She phoned up Coventry Lodge, now her 'Mother Lodge', she tells me, spoke to the woman in charge (the 'Worshipful Master') and was invited to dinner.

'I've never looked back. It was everything I hoped it would be – uplifting, inspiring and joyful.'

'I've made new friends for life. They're like my second family.'

Though only a tiny proportion of Freemasons are female, Ingrid – who's wearing a bejewelled diamante necklace with the masonic star – says they still feel part of the main organisation and often work together on charity projects.

In some parts of the world, there are even mixed-sex lodges - though not everywhere offers these.

Getting access to this once-secretive society has, it seems, never been easier.

'We've got black-cab drivers, plumbers, electricians, waiters, accountants, managing directors – you name it, they're here,' says Matthew Christmas, 57, a former teacher from Surrey who's been a Freemason for 37 years – and holds the rather grand title of 'Metropolitan Grand Secretary'.

So transparent is the membership process that prospective applicants can now fill in an online form, after which they're invited to an informal face-to-face chat.

There's no tap on the shoulder or wink across a crowded room – it's disappointingly mundane.

Members will join an illustrious list: from politicians (George Washington and Benjamin Franklin) to royals (the late Duke of Edinburgh and current Grand Master, HRH The Duke of Kent) and public figures (Ernest Shackleton, Alf Ramsey and Peter Sellers).

It's even rumoured there are some Hollywood A-listers in there – media mogul Simon Cowell was spotted on a jetski bearing the masonic star, while actor Ashton Kutcher wore a Freemasons' cap – but those in the know can't confirm.

To get the nod, applicants must be of 'good character' and believe in a 'Supreme Being' (any god is fine, irrespective of religion, but they won't accept atheists). The only other thing that rules you out is a criminal record.

Once in, you must subscribe to the four 'Cardinal Virtues' of Freemasonry: temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice.

And, of course, pay the annual fee – around £500 – for membership, social events and the outfit.

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Members meet several times a year to discuss new recruits, plan charity work (they donate several million to charities every year, most recently £3million to the London Air Ambulance) and practise masonic ceremonies in special rooms.

This is where everything becomes a little more mysterious.

Because, as a non-Mason, there are only certain things that can be divulged to me about what goes on in the three 'degrees' – the different stages at the heart of Freemasons' ritualistic practice.

'We've got to have some secrets,' smiles PR officer Livia Ferreira.

'Imagine you're going to see a film at the cinema, and someone tells you how it ends before you go in. We don't want to give everything away – it would spoil it.'

Based around the Biblical story of the building of Solomon's temple, the first degree is called the 'Entered Apprentice', the second the 'Fellow Craft' and the third the 'Master Mason'.

These are akin to amateur dramatics, with members dressing up in formal garb and reciting lines from a book inside a locked room.

Rumours abound about the details and, while some sound like slapstick (candidates are blindfolded and must roll up one trouser leg), others have more sinister undertones (at one point, apparently, a noose is fastened around a date's neck and a dagger pointed at chest).

Particularly gruesome line, in which members pledged to have their 'throat cut across' and their 'tongue torn out' if they broke the masonic oath, was removed in the UK in the 1980s – for fear it was alienating new members.

Still, it is not something to take on lightly.

'I can still remember the apprehension; it was like stepping into the unknown,' recalls Tom Currie of his first degree ceremony. 'But once I went through it, I wanted to do it again.'

And the traditions, bizarre as they may sound, are all part of their cachet – and enduring appeal.

The Freemasons have seen a spike in younger members, buoyed by a prolific network within universities (you'll see their stalls at freshers' fairs) and youth-specific branches, such as London's Connaught Club, which is for under-35s.

They, too, are on TikTok and regale followers with videos from their social events – everything from ski trips and family picnics to minigolf and shooting weekends.

It all seems very at odds with the Masons' dark reputation. The group has long been associated with corruption, specifically among high-ranking police and members of the judiciary.

From 1999 to 2009, new judges were required to publicly disclose Masonic affiliation. Police officers still have a voluntary obligation to tell their superiors.

In 2016, the IPCC announced it was investigating whether Freemason membership had influenced police officers after the Hillsborough disaster. And last year historian

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Clueless heartthrob Justin Walker looks

Russell Edwards alleged the serial killer Jack the Ripper was protected from conviction because he was a Mason.

But Shaun Butler insists modern Masons have a zero-tolerance policy, with any sniff of exploiting masonic connections for gain 'strictly forbidden'.

'People may have tried in the past but, where we've exposed them, they have been kicked out immediately,' he says.

However conservative its roots, Freemasonry is certainly looking to the future.

Today, this historic hall is a tourist destination - with a museum and gift shop that attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors a year. Several are milling around, admiring the £7.50 souvenir keyrings, £10 notebooks and £6 rubber ducks dressed in masonic aprons.

You can try on a pair of white cotton gloves (yours for £12.50), or snap up a tie with the UGLE crest on the front (£22).

They rent the Grand Temple to film crews and threw the doors open to the public last autumn at a 'Discover Freemasonry' day. There's even a podcast, called Craftcast, on Spotify.

'It's incredibly rare to find a space where people can be together without politics or religion - both of which are banned conversation topics - causing division,' says Shaun.

'In 2025, we need a bit of tradition. People's lives move so quickly, so a chance to pause and enjoy something that's been pretty much unchanged for 300 years is quite unique.'

...e them not a convert, but definitely more open-minded about an organisation not, as I'd suspected, a cult, but a group of earnest, decent people who've somewhere they belong.

...secretly running the world?

'You should see me trying to get 30 Freemasons to attend a dinner on the same night,' says Matthew Christmas, with a laugh.

'I wish we were organised enough for world domination.'

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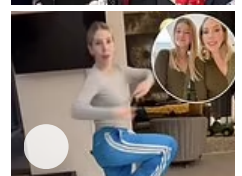
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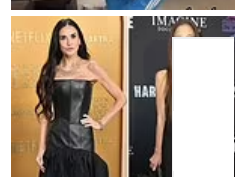
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