



PAPER

Above (or beneath) the Salt?

Summary: What rules or customs govern the presence of those seated on the Top Table.

As bemused and breathless new Masons, our first introduction to the 'Top Table' maybe on the night of our Initiation when, placed alongside the highly respected Worshipful Master, our Proposer mentions in his Toast that, '*you will not sit again on this table until you have passed through the Chair of King Solomon*' (or words to that effect). The impression gained was that seating on that particular dining table was reserved for a very special few. Who then were these very special few and what rules or customs governed their presence there?

Formal Evenings

Grand Lodge was created to exercise authority over all Masons by reserving the right to issue a Lodge Warrant and demand that Lodges comply with its Book of Constitutions. It reserved the right to impose discipline. Every man who applies to become a Freemason today still willingly accepts these conditions. The Grand Master's authority is total and is reflected variously in the golden regalia he wears, in the titles and salutations of his reception, in the Toasts we drink, in respect for those such as the Provincial Grand Master (ProvGM) to whom his authority is delegated, and the Worshipful Master over whose Installation the ProvGM has presided. The intention then from the earliest days was that the Worshipful Master should be placed in a central position, as a reminder of his own delegated authority, on his own Top Table.

By early Masonic tradition the Top Table has always been reserved for the Rulers of the Craft, '*Supreme and Subordinate*',¹ a category that can include all Grand Officers, Provincial Grand Officers and certain Senior Lodge Officers. In short, anyone who has or had responsibility for ruling or assisting in the ruling of a Craft body.

The number who are invited to sit alongside the Worshipful Master on the Top Table will depend, in practise, on the length of the table (and spacing of the place settings or table legs). By custom from Biblical times (Christ sits on the right hand of the Father) the trusted and privileged guest sits by his host's sword arm (normally the right) therefore the seats on the Worshipful right are always allotted to the Provincial Grand Master or his representative, to other Grand Officers and Provincial Grand Officers. Seats on his left are allocated to the Immediate Past Master, not as 'officer' but an 'adviser', and to the Worshipful Master's own Lodge officers bearing responsibilities on the Worshipful Master's behalf.

This defines the central three places. From then on the seat allocation proceeds with fiendish simplicity. An Assistant Secretary (to whom organising the dining is sometimes delegated) need only note that the next important senior Grand Officer goes on the next right, the next most senior Lodge officer on the next left, and so on, in descending order of



seniority across the table and down the adjoining sprigs until all the places are filled. This formed the basis of early Provincial guidance to Lodges for their formal visits and so has been local practise ever since. (It certainly eases the Secretary/Assistant Secretary's problem of having to decide which who should sit where.)

The decision on where to seat a Past Grand Sword Bearer as opposed to a Grand Superintendent of Works can be left to the pay grade of the Lodge Secretary or Director of Ceremonies, who have easy access to the Book of Constitutions. It is not the responsibility of the Assistant Secretary. The relative seniority of the Lodge Offices should already be well known.

Informal Evenings

What is the guidance on a 'normal' Lodge evening when the Provincial Grand Master's Team isn't present? This depends very much on whether or not the Worshipful Master still wishes to retain a Top Table. He has several options, depending on the degree of formality he requires. He may choose separate tables or a herring bone pattern or a 'box' with seating around the outside etc. A wise Lodge will also consult their caterer to ensure easy table service.

Due to its symbolic importance, however, if a Top Table is chosen, it remains restricted to Past Masters and above only; for the reasons shown in the first paragraph. For those with duties on the evening, e.g. the Immediate Past Master, Chaplain, Secretary and Director of Ceremonies, it has been found simplest locally if they occupy their normal places on the Master's left. To the right of the Worshipful Master the vacant chairs may be filled by any senior Past Master, but again those who have active Provincial Grand rank should take precedence as a small courtesy with the most senior placed next to the Worshipful Master. In this way the Top Table as well as the Second Toast remain a reminder of the Grand Master's authority.

Often there will be Grand Lodge visitors, or Lodge officers who, glad to be off the Top Table, will wish to sit with personal guests or other friends. Often too they will wish to chat with the younger Masons. With their chair now vacant, the sensible option is simply to draw on the next senior Mason present and invite him to join the Top Table, shuffling the places according to order of seniority.

Seating on the sprigs is informal and normally a matter of recognising friendships and grouping them together whenever possible. Customs change, but current Lodge practise is to seat the Stewards and junior officers on the Junior Warden's sprig. For those elderly Masons who visit infrequently, in order to make their evening the more enjoyable, they should be placed amongst men of their own generation or with the more convivial Masons who can add to their evening.

Social Events

For social events there are no guidelines set out. It is improbable that the Worshipful Master will wish the formality of a Top Table and the happiest evenings arise if Masons and their partners are grouped roughly according to age.



Grand Masonic Banquet, 1917, © Cobalt Silver Heritage Trail 2020

Traditions

Guidelines for seating were designed both to heighten the Master's authority and to offer proper courtesies for 'senior visitors' or officers. Should we ever consider changing our traditional pattern of seating? Society itself has altered significantly since WWII and Freemasonry has changed with it. Remember the Extended Second Degree Tools: *'although distinctions among men are necessary to preserve subordination, yet ought no eminence of situation make us forget that we are Brothers'*.

It follows that both the Provincial Team and local Brethren can gain from occasionally being able to mix and converse over Dinner. This practise has been approved by Grand Lodge. There are some points to bear in mind though. A tradition affecting all members of the Lodge (especially any dating from the Founders) can never be changed on the whim of any single Brother, Worshipful Master, Secretary, Director of Ceremonies or Preceptor, etc. If it is felt that such traditions merit change then all Lodge members must be able to have a say. This is perhaps best accomplished through a minuted Motion discussed in Open Lodge after due consideration by the Lodge Committee. Secondly if the departure from the tradition is infrequent then common-sense suggests that local traditions can well survive these exceptions.

After due consultation the Worshipful Master should decide on the table layout and on the degree of formality required. The Lodge Secretary then has responsibility for liaising with Province (if necessary), agreeing the outline seating plan and for overseeing his Assistant Secretary, if not a Past Master, in its execution. It is invariably courteous and advantageous for the Director of Ceremonies to be consulted and for his advice to be sought on the evening's protocol.

Whatever the pressures on the night, if the Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Director of Ceremonies form an easy, open and effective partnership this will normally ensure every evening remains not only trauma free but happy and rewarding for all concerned, as Freemasonry should be.

Further Reading

Redman, G., 2012. *Masonic Etiquette Today*. Hersham: Lewis Masonic, pp.153-170.

Endnotes

1. Anderson, J., (1723), *The Constitutions of the Free-masons : Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity*, p. 52, Printed by William Hunter, for John Senex at the Globe, and John Hooke at the Flower-De-Luce over-against St. Dunstan's Church , in Fleet-Street, London

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation unless otherwise specified.

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