

## **WOMEN AND FREEMASONRY**

Traditionally freemasonry under the United Grand Lodge of England has been restricted to men. When freemasonry was first organised, in the early eighteenth century, the position of women in society was different to today.

At present there are, in England and Wales, two Grand Lodges solely for women. Informal discussions take place between the United Grand Lodge of England and these Grand Lodges from time to time on matters of mutual concern.

There are also Grand Lodges which admit both men and women to membership.

The origins of these Grand Lodges can be dated to 1882 when a well known writer on women's suffrage, Maria Deraismes, was initiated in a lodge in Paris. She later became the Grande Maîtresse of the Grande Loge Symbolique Ecossaise Mixte de France, founded in 1893, which established a lodge admitting both men and women called Le Droit Humain. The first Englishwoman to be initiated in this lodge was Francesca Arundale in 1895. She was active in the campaign for women's rights and also a member of the Theosophical Society. By 1902 a lodge of what became known as Co-Masonry, governed by a Supreme Council in France, had been established in London. Annie Besant was the first Master of this lodge.

In March 1908, the Ancient Masonic Union (later to become the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Masonry and now the Order of Women Freemasons) seceded from the Supreme Council to establish a new order and successfully established its first three lodges for men and women. Its first Grand Master was a man, the Rev William Frederick Cobb (Rector of St Ethelburga—the-Virgin in the City of London from 1900-1941). The United Grand Lodge of England forbade its members to associate with this order and over time the number of male members decreased. Since the 1920s the Order of Women Freemasons has only admitted women.

A second order of women freemasons was formed in 1913 – the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons- and this also remains in existence.

### **Masonic Organisations for women:**

#### **Order of Women Freemasons**

27 Pembridge Gardens  
London  
W2 4EF  
Tel: 020 7229 2368  
[www.owf.org.uk/](http://www.owf.org.uk/)

#### **The Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons**

402 Finchley Road  
Childs Hill  
London NW2 2HR  
Tel: 020 8942 6025  
[www.hfaf.org](http://www.hfaf.org)

## A LIBRARY AND MUSEUM OF FREEMASONRY INFORMATION SHEET

The following organisations admit both men and women:

### **Grand Lodge of Freemasonry for Men and Women**

[www.grandlodge.org.uk](http://www.grandlodge.org.uk)

### **The International Order of Co-Freemasonry Le Droit Humain British Federation**

Hexagon House

37-39 Surbiton Hill Road

Surbiton

Surrey

KT6 4TS

Tel: 020 8339 9000

<http://droit-humain.org/uk>

### **Historical Information**

In eighteenth century France organisations developed in which, under the protection or “adoption” of a Masonic lodge, women- or men and women together- met and practised some form of ritual. The Order of the Eastern Star (which is particularly active today in North America) and the Order of the Amaranth are two modern organisations on similar lines to which men and women can both belong.

In eighteenth century Germany, a society was formed without an oath of secrecy but preserving a fraternal relationship. Its members called themselves the Order of Mopses, from the German word “mops” meaning a pug dog which symbolised fidelity and love, and women were admitted. The Meissen porcelain factory produced a series of figures of men and women with little dogs to mark the existence of the society which no longer exists. There are a number of examples in the Library and Museum collection.

There are a number of stories about the initiation of women into lodges for men. One of the earliest concerns the Honourable Elizabeth St Leger (1693-1773) (later Mrs Aldworth). In about 1710 she fell asleep in the library of her father’s house in County Cork in Ireland. When she woke up she found that a ceremony of some kind was being conducted in the adjoining room. The wall between the two rooms was under repair and she was able to see and hear the meeting of the Masonic lodge that was going on. She was discovered by the Tyler (who is responsible for guarding a lodge meeting) and her father and brothers believed that she had to be initiated in order to be bound not to divulge what she had heard and seen. She never attended another meeting but her Masonic apron still exists as does a chair traditionally associated with her membership.

### **Further Reading**

Ann Pilcher-Dayton, *The Open Door: the History of the Order of Women Freemasons 1908-2008* (London, 2008)

Ann Pilcher-Dayton, *Freemasonry and Suffrage* (in two parts), *Freemasonry Today* Issue 48 Spring 2009 and Issue No 49 Summer 2009 (<http://www.freemasonrytoday.com/48/p12.php> and <http://www.freemasonrytoday.com/49/p15.php>)

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[www.freemasonry.london.museum](http://www.freemasonry.london.museum)

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