

THE ANCIENT ORDER OF FORESTERS



A Member of the Ancient Order of Foresters in full costume, circa 1910

The Ancient Order of Foresters is one of the oldest friendly societies, with its origins in Yorkshire. The earliest verifiable evidence of the Foresters' existence is in 1790, for which date a list survives of the members of Court No 1 of the Order which met at the Old Crown Inn in Kirkgate in Leeds. (In Forestry the word 'Court' is used instead of 'lodge'; the metaphor is of the law courts of the royal forests, which since the Middle Ages had met to administer the special forest laws.) This inn was also the meeting place of the Masonic Lodge of Fidelity, and several members of this lodge were also members of Court No 1, the first on the list being John Smithson of Knaresborough, from a well-known Quaker family. It is not known how long this Court had already been in existence; there are hints that a group called the 'Royal Foresters' had been meeting in Knaresborough in 1745, but no definite evidence survives, and even if it had that would not necessarily mean that the two groups were directly connected.

In 1813 a Court No 2 was established in Knaresborough; gradually more courts were opened. Court No 1 renamed itself Supreme Court of Antiquity in 1815 and became the controlling body of the Order until it ceased to exist in 1858.

At this time the society was called the 'Royal Ancient Order of Foresters'; it is presumed that the word 'Royal' was derived from the Royal Forests, of which Knaresborough was one. Philanthropy and virtue featured prominently in the principles and ritual of the Society. 'The object of Forestry is to unite the virtuous and good in all sects and denominations of man in the sacred bonds of brotherhood so that while wandering through the Forest of this World they may render mutual aid and assistance to each other'. Just as its lodges were called Courts, the officers of the society used the titles of officials of the medieval forest courts, such as Ranger and Woodward. However, the order blended this mediaeval idea with the notion of Adam as the first Forester. A pamphlet dated 1847 in the British Museum states that 'Forestry claims antiquity from Adam whose disobedience of the Commands of the Almighty brought upon himself his expulsion from the ever-blooming Gardens of Eden into the rude, uncultivated forests of the world', and describes how Adam made himself a club to defend himself from wild animals. It is notable that the date of the dispensation for the formation of Court No 1 in 1813 was given as 'in the year of Forestry 5817' – this calculation is based on the seventeenth-century theory that God had created the world (and Adam, the first Forester) in BC 4004.

In the early years of the Foresters, new members had to 'prove themselves' in combat before gaining admittance. At the beginning of the 19th century swords were used for the combat; these were later changed for clubs or cudgels, until in 1843 the trial by combat was dropped. As well as testing the mettle of the initiate this combat was also symbolic of Adam's contending with the savage beasts of the field, and the Forester's contending with the world, the flesh and the devil. It may also have functioned as a primitive health check; in the days before formal medical examination became a standard requirement for friendly society membership, a candidate who could acquit himself creditably in a mock fight was probably reasonably fit to work and support himself. The initiation ceremony also included prayers, an anointing with oil, and a solemn oath to help fellow Foresters and not to reveal secrets of the organisation to outsiders.

The RAOF was already unequivocally a benefit society by the early nineteenth century and probably was so from the beginning. Membership was too expensive for the average industrial worker, and the order probably consisted mostly of skilled artisans and tradesmen.

Discontent grew with the autocratic powers of the officers of the Supreme Court of the Royal Ancient Order of Foresters, and in 1834 a major secession took place at Rochdale; the majority of courts of the Order seceded and set up the Ancient Order of Foresters. The RAOF continued in being, and limped on into the 1890s, but in very small numbers; in 1896 it had only twenty-two courts, mostly in SW Yorkshire, by which time the AOF had nearly five thousand.

In the 1834 reorganisation the AOF introduced a new set of signs and passwords to distinguish itself from the old Royal Order, and a new, slightly revised ritual was published. It was very biblical in tone – for example, a question on why the bugle horn formed part of the regalia was answered 'it is considered the most ancient instrument of music ever used, and attached to huntsmen and foresters in all ages. It seems to have been held almost sacred by the Jews, being blown by their High Priests every full moon, and on their solemn feast days, and we read that at the sound of the ram's horns the walls of Jericho fell to the ground.' The ritual book also contained a form of service for use at a member's or a member's wife or widow's funeral; the custom of holding funeral ceremonies for members continued into the twentieth century.

The AOF created a problem for itself at its first High Court Meeting in 1834 by deciding to have its meetings held in different towns on successive years, with officers appointed from the locality. This meant that a completely inexperienced set of executive officers took post every year and had to learn their jobs from scratch. This proved very unsatisfactory, and eventually this practice had to be dropped and a permanent secretariat appointed. The early records are inconsistent and incomplete, partly for this reason and also because the High Court found it very difficult to get complete and accurate records from subsidiary Courts; this tendency continued even after the new Friendly Societies Act of 1850 enabled the AOF to register for the first time. Nevertheless, the AOF's membership went from strength to strength. In 1845 they had 1,456 Courts and 65,909 members. By 1898 they had 4,899 Courts and 731,442 members and the Court funds amounted to £5,119,842. (Not all these new Courts were brand-new groups; many were existing village benefit societies that decided to become Courts of the AOF.)



A selection of Past Chief Ranger Forester Jewels, to the left is a jewel dated 1849, in the centre is a Past Chief Ranger Jewel dated 1867 and on the right is a jewel dated 1911

By the 1860s the AOF's financial state was healthy enough for it to be able to engage in general charity work as well as providing financial support for its members; Foresters regularly raised money for the lifeboat services and the provision of lifesaving apparatus on seacoasts, and in 1862 they voted to raise £500 to help depressed textile manufacturing regions.

Members had to have their characters vouched for and (after 1865) pass a medical examination. Workers in some high-risk occupations were excluded altogether. Sickness, travelling, funeral and benefits for members' widows and orphans' were all provided. In the mid-nineteenth century most Courts met in pubs (it is likely that many pubs today called 'The Foresters' Arms' were once the home of a Court of the AOF), and kept their funds in a box with several locks and several keyholders. From 1840 juvenile Forestry Courts began to be founded. The main attraction of these was the provision of medical benefits for children.

In the late 19th Century Forestry spread over the world, particularly to the British colonies but also to the USA. In 1874 a large proportion of the American and Canadian Foresters seceded and set up the Independent Order of Foresters, which became widespread and prosperous in the USA and

Canada. It took on a markedly American flavour, some Courts adopting a military-style uniform. The IOF eventually spread back into Britain and gained substantial membership.

In 1892, in England, a proposal was put forward to open the Order to women by allowing the formation of female Courts. There was some disquiet about this among the membership, not so much because female membership was felt to be inappropriate but on account of fears that women, whose earnings were on average so much lower than those of men, would prove a financial burden on the society. Reassured on this point by the financial buoyancy of the Rechabites, who had had female branches since 1856, and the success of the United Sisters Friendly Society Suffolk Unity, whose president was a honorary member of the AOF, the Order went ahead with the reform, altering the emblem of the order to include the figure of a female forester.



Forester sashes of differing ages, showing the change in the supporters of the emblem

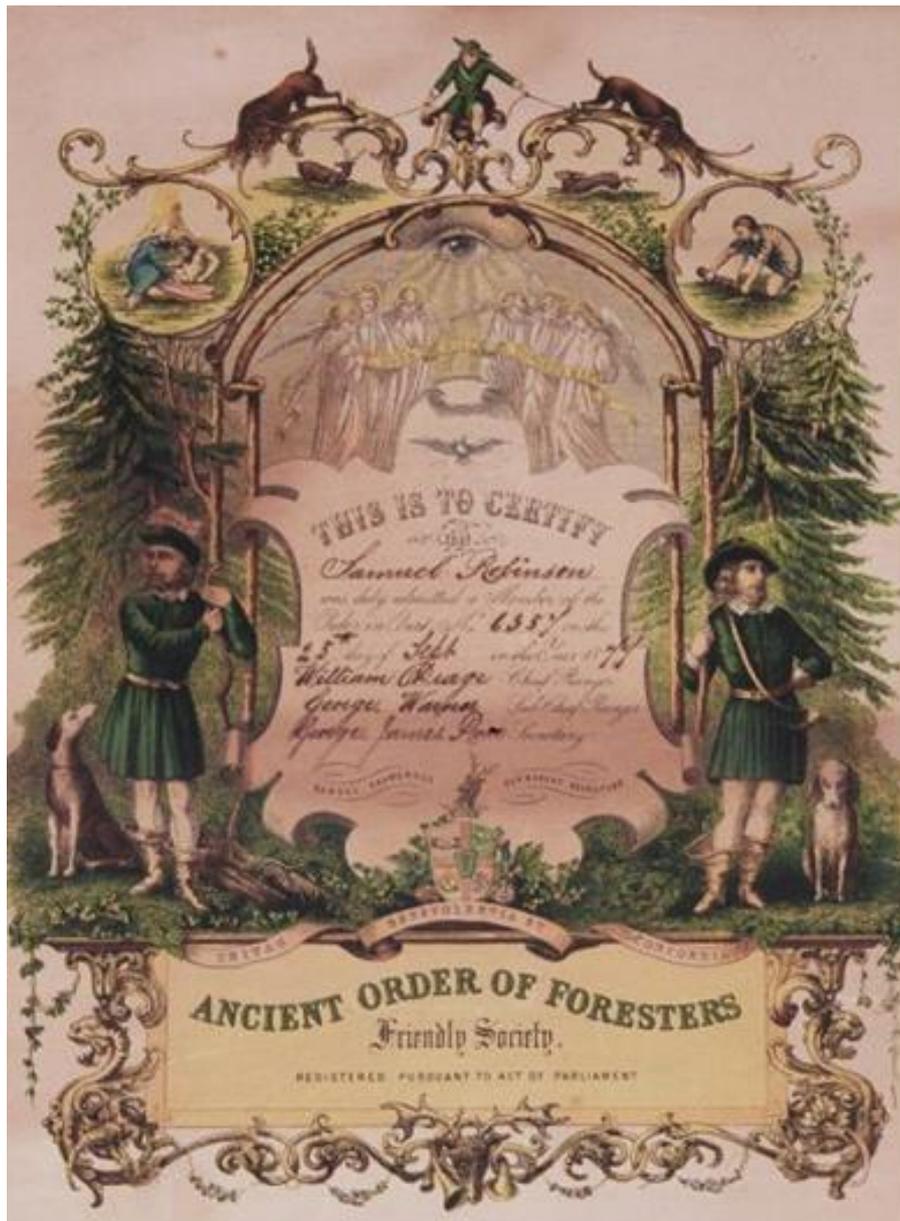
Between the World Wars the AOF was an Approved Society operating within the National Health Insurance Scheme, so it had both voluntary and State members. Unlike many others it survived the slump in friendly society membership after the creation of the National Health Service in relatively good order, and still flourishes today, under the name of The Foresters Friendly Society, offering both financial services and social activities, just as it did at its inception, as well as supporting a variety of charity work.

Emblems and symbols

Early artefacts of the Royal Ancient Order of Foresters tend to include a tailcoated forester shooting a bow; a bugle horn; a bow and quiver of arrows.

The 1834 membership certificate of the Foresters included God walking in the garden, confronting Adam and Eve in their leaf aprons, and a family scene symbolising unity, benevolence, and concord.

In 1835 the AOF emblem was devised. It consists of a shield divided by a cross; an escutcheon in centre with bugle horn and bow and arrows. In the top left quarter of the shield is a pair of clasped hands; in the top right quarter, three running stags; in the lower left is a chevron, a lamb and flag above the chevron and a bugle horn below; in the lower right quarter is a quiver over a bow, arrow and bugle horn. Above the shield is a stag's head issuing out of a coronet; flanking it are the figures of two foresters (both male before 1892, one male and one female thereafter). The motto is 'Unity, Benevolence & Concord', sometimes given in Latin as 'Unitas, Benevolentia, Concordia'.



Ancient Order of Foresters certificate, dated 1877

Apart from the 1892 change the emblem is very consistent in all essentials; but the colours and details such as the foresters' dress can vary widely. Sometimes the All-Seeing Eye surmounts all; often there are extra symbolic decorations (such as rose, thistle and shamrock).

AOF items generally tend to be in an ornate High Victorian decorative style, especially the certificates, which often include vignettes representing charity (Good Samaritan), unity (man tries to break bundle of sticks), obedience (Adam and Eve) and the Peaceable Kingdom (lion, lamb, child). Where the nature of the artefact does not allow for the whole emblem, the characteristic motifs are a forester; a bow and arrows; a bugle horn; a stag, or a stag's head issuing from a coronet. Oak and acorns also tend to feature.

Regalia and artefacts

The form of the personal regalia was laid down in 1834 and included:

- a sash, sometimes known by Foresters as a 'scarf', 6 inches wide and 2 ¼ yards long, worn over R shoulder and tied at L waist. It followed on a similar form used in the RAOF. The stag's head, the insignia of the order and the initials of the office held were embroidered in gold thread, or shown on an attached panel with the emblem woven or printed in colour or black & white and/or a neck ribbon, 2 ½ inches wide and 1 ½ yards long.

These were the colours given in the rulebook of 1898:

Officers of the High Court –

Sash: green, trimmed at the ends with gold fringe

Neck ribbon: green with gold stripes at the edges. Past High Chief Ranger's ribbon to have a white stripe in the centre.

Officers of District Courts –

Sash: green, trimmed at the ends with silver fringe

Neck ribbon: green with white stripes at the edges. Past District Chief Ranger's ribbon to have a white stripe in the centre.

Officers of Subordinate Courts –

Sash: green, trimmed at the ends with scarlet fringe

Neck ribbon: scarlet with green stripes at the edges. Past Chief Ranger's ribbon to have a white stripe in the centre.

Members who have not served office –

Sash: green, trimmed at the ends with green fringe

Neck ribbon: green.

'All greens used to be Lincoln green.'

All-black sashes and ribbons were prescribed for Forester funeral ceremonies.

By the mid-twentieth century:

A Past Chief Ranger's scarf was red with green edge stripes and a narrow white central stripe. Or he could use an ordinary scarf with metal letters P.C.R. attached to save expense.

The neck ribbon colours were:

High Court Officers: Green and gold

Districts: Green with pearl-white edge stripes

Subordinate Courts Scarlet with green edge stripes

Ordinary members Green

Past Chief Rangers (PCRs) wore a silver medal attached to the ribbon at centre front.

By the 1980s the sash was no longer worn, the neck ribbon was being worn on its own with a tassel at centre front (two for Chief Rangers).

Courts were guarded by two Beadles, whose regalia included bugle horns (real cow horns) slung from the left shoulder, and wooden axes. Other Court officers included a Senior and Junior Woodward, whose job was to serve all summonses, visit the sick, dispense allowances and take charge of all court property, each likewise carried axes.

Much of the regalia carries initials indicating the office and rank of the member who wore it. Example of this are-

H C R- High Chief Ranger
D C R- District Chief Ranger
P H C R- Past High Chief Ranger
P D C R- Past District Chief Ranger
C R- Chief Ranger
P C R- Past Chief Ranger
S C R- Sub Chief Ranger
S W- Senior Woodward
J W- Junior Woodward
S B- Senior Beadle
J B- Junior Beadle
H M- Honorary Member

Further reading-

Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies by Victoria Solt Dennis, Shire Books, 2005

Useful Websites-

<http://www.forestersfriendlysociety.co.uk> -the Foresters own website

<http://www.aoforestersheritage.com> –the website of the Foresters Heritage Trust

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