

# The Non-Masonic Uses of Freemasons' Hall, 1775–1885

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**F**OR MANY YEARS FROM 1775, AND ESPECIALLY INTO THE FIRST HALF OF THE nineteenth century, the new Freemasons' Hall and the adjoining Tavern (in brief, FMH) in Great Queen Street provided the largest and most convenient public hall space available for hire in central London. Consequently, many kinds of organization, including for example those involved with trade, civil and political and religious matters, and musical societies and the like, hired the hall on either an ad hoc or more regular basis.

From 1831 another hall, Exeter Hall in the Strand,<sup>1</sup> larger than FMH, was also available for hire. However, such was the need for public space at this time that there seems

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<sup>1</sup> Exeter Hall, completed in 1831 and pulled down in 1907, to be replaced by the present Strand Palace Hotel, was designed as a large public hall. It had two auditoria, one of which could contain 1,000 people and the larger which could cater for 2,000. Initially it seems to have appealed more to those of the burgeoning temperance movement - there was no tavern to go through to get to the hall - but of course it was also used by many of the same organizations as FMH. Especially in the earlier days, when FMH was already established as a venue for many, there are fewer references to event bookings at Exeter Hall in *The Times* than at FMH over the same period. Unlike Exeter Hall of course, for FMH the non-Masonic hire business was an optional extra to its main purpose, albeit one that brought in very welcome financial support.

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to have been plenty of room in the market for both venues. Important public meetings were held in both.

By later Victorian times new public venues (for example the Royal Albert Hall) and the opening of new theatres had taken away much of the musical and performance based business, and the success of the social and technological changes forced through in the first half of the century had altered the way public debate was most often conducted. In addition, the rapid huge increase in the number of Freemasons meant that space in FMH was needed for more Masonic activity.

A little exploration into which organizations had used the premises in earlier years has revealed how diverse these organizations were, and this paper is intended to provide a summary of these findings.

The records now in FMH are limited; time and fire damage are the main causes, and for Grand Lodge how their premises were used, provided they were paid, was essentially ephemeral, so one should not expect detailed records. However, newspaper cuttings advertising future or reporting past events are now reasonably accessible online, which makes the search for evidence much simpler and quicker than it can ever have been; but these are only the hires for which a published notice may have existed, and there are likely to have been many other hires for which no record now exists.

### The Non-Masonic Uses Made of the Building

It is probable that many Freemasons going to FMH, just like most passers-by in Great Queen Street, do not notice, or if they do, do not really register, two plaques on the wall about twenty yards west of the entrance to the Connaught Rooms. The recent one records that in 1807 the Geological Society held their inaugural dinner in the Freemasons' Tavern. The older, blue plaque, records that the Football Association came into existence at a meeting in Freemasons' Tavern in October 1863. *The Times* reported in 2013 that the 150th anniversary celebration of this inauguration had been held, and that the Civil Service Football Club was then the only surviving club. At the time of writing it is still in existence. This may for some be just a confirmation of the common prejudice that whatever else happens in politics, sport or society as a whole, bureaucracy continues; however, the skills needed to persuade at least eleven people to turn up in one place at one time on a cold January day should not be underestimated by anyone who has not attempted this feat.

Quite a number of other interesting organizations still in existence happened to start in FMH. For example, the Freemasons' Tavern was chosen in January 1888 as the venue for the founding of the British Lawn Tennis Association.

Far fewer will know of another seminal organization, similarly important to some but also still flourishing and in a very different milieu. The Hellenic Society also held

its inaugural meeting in the Freemasons' Tavern, in this case on 28 October 1879. It was founded, to encourage professional archaeological excavations in Greece, by an eclectic group of scholars from the nearby British Museum and the universities, including bishops and others interested, such as the future Prime Minister, A.J. Balfour, and a certain Bro. Oscar Wilde. The success of organized excavations led in due course to increased popular interest in Greece and in the history of the Mediterranean, and now over the past forty years to the current familiar mix of cultural and sun and sea tourism. Perhaps this stretches much too far the law of unintended consequences arising from a decision which helped to pay for FMH, but it is nevertheless an interesting thought.

There were many others, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time of great social and political change, who used FMH for their meetings. Slavery and the common right of all, whatever their origin, to be free as citizens is again much in the news. Freemasonry of course is an organization open to those who are free and of age, but for the purposes of this paper it is the extensive use made two hundred years ago of FMH for anti-slavery meetings, including the famous World Anti-Slavery Convention held in FMH in 1840,<sup>2</sup> which is of interest.

It can therefore perhaps be held that even Freemasonry's chosen meeting venue has indirectly helped facilitate developments in British society. In practice all these developments happen often to be complementary to Freemasonry's wider ethical values.

None of this came about because of any especial willingness of Grand Lodge to be associated with what might loosely be described as 'good works'. It was just that the Freemasons happened to have suitable premises independent of vested interests (such as the Church of England) and many of the organizations who hired FMH were connected with the massive social and political changes (most would say, for the good) of the early nineteenth century. A large public hall in London was an ideal venue for these meetings, and that the venue happened to be FMH was just Grand Lodge's good luck. Grand Lodge was perennially short of money and happy to hire out their premises for income.

However, an unintended consequence of this necessity was that Freemasonry also received publicity since the great and the good of the time, and the many others, passed and mixed with Freemasons going to and from their meetings. They even sat in the same rooms that the Freemasons used for their ceremonies. All this had the effect of helping to make Freemasonry more transparent all over the country and therefore more likely to be regarded as a normal activity of well-intentioned people.

<sup>2</sup> It is unfortunate that the caption of B. J. Haydon's well-known painting in the National Portrait Gallery of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 shows the venue, incorrectly, as Exeter Hall, despite the mistake having been drawn to the NPG's attention. This may also be why the Wikipedia references are also incorrect. The reality, as all the many newspaper references of the time make clear, is that the main meetings were held in FMH. Possibly Exeter Hall provided space for some spill-over meetings; if so, this could be why a confusion has arisen.

During much of the twentieth century, for reasons that have often been discussed elsewhere, FMH was not available for hire. It was only in 1985, after the Grand Master instituted a more open policy on relations with the public and press, that the Hall was re-opened to non-Freemasons. Masons today take it as read that the premises are shared with others; and partly as a result of this, while FMH earns its keep, Freemasonry is finding again a place within normal social discourse.

**The Venue being Hired: Freemasons' Hall and Tavern over the Years**  
The current Freemasons' Hall, or Masonic Peace Memorial Building, as it was originally designated when conceived just after the First World War,<sup>3</sup> only just touches, at its most eastern end, the sites on which from 1775 the earlier Grand Lodge halls were built, for the history of the halls used by Masons and non-Masons alike until now is complex. For much of the time too, building and re-building works were in progress, and there were a number of fires, including a very serious one in 1883. So it is not as if throughout the period it was, as we might think of the present building, just there, awaiting hires from the public. It was only available for hire when that was possible, and the way the space was set up in 1790 was mostly different from the way things were done a hundred years later.

In 1768 the 1717 Grand Lodge had decided in principle that rather than continue to hire venues in London taverns etc. as needed, they should build a suitable hall. Thomas Sandby RA, a distinguished architect at the time and Freemason, was appointed as their 'Grand Architect'. After the purchase in 1774 of premises suitable for redevelopment he built a hall in the garden of No. 61 Great Queen Street, behind a 'front' house and a smaller 'back' house (with a yard between them) on the frontage of what is today roughly the eastern end of Freemasons' Hall and the main entrance to the Connaught Rooms. The ground floor of the house was let to a Freemason tavern keeper and became the Freemasons' Tavern and Coffee House. The upper rooms and the back house were adapted for committee rooms and offices.

The new premises, hall and tavern, were inaugurated by a Masonic ceremony on 3 May 1776. When they were not being used for Masonic purposes, the premises were available for hire.

Sandby's Great Hall continued in use throughout the nineteenth century and was only demolished when the present Freemasons' Hall was built, but long before that it had proved too small for its main purpose. It had begun to be referred to as the 'Grand Temple' in the middle of the nineteenth century, when lodge rooms and Masonic halls generally started to be badged as 'temples'.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed story of the site, see the publications which trace in detail the architectural history: *Freemasons' Hall - the Home and Heritage of the Craft* (London: UGLE publication, 1983); *The Hall in the Garden; Freemasons' Hall and its place in London* (London: The Library and the Museum of Freemasonry, 2006); J. W. P. Campbell, 'Studying Masonic Halls', *AQC* 129 (2016), 13–39.

In the intervening years there were building developments to the east (the Connaught Rooms side) of No. 61. First, in 1812 the Hall Committee of the Society of Free-Masons<sup>4</sup> appointed John Soane, then one of the country's leading architects, to extend the existing premises eastwards and to tidy up of the site surrounding Sandby's hall. This led to Soane becoming a Freemason and the first 'Grand Superintendent of Works.'<sup>5</sup> Soane was then asked to acquire the additional ground to the east (Nos 62 and 63 Great Queen Street) and to assess and to build a new kitchen for Sandby's hall.

However, in the years immediately after the unification of the two Grand Lodges in 1813 the overriding need was for repairs to Sandby's hall. By October 1821 the stairs leading to it had been declared unsafe for use, and Soane replaced and reconfigured them. Working directly to the orders of the Duke of Sussex, the Grand Master, and without going through formal Grand Lodge approvals, he also re-ordered the way the main space could be used and repaired leaky roofs and decaying floors.

In 1828 Soane started work on a new hall on the land covered by Nos 62 and 63. This site was smaller than that which Sandby had had. It was completed in 1831 (the year Soane was knighted) and was officially declared open as the new 'temple' at a Grand Festival on 23 April 1832. Sandby's hall and the tavern were to continue to be used for non-Masonic hires.

With two halls to choose from (Sandby's and Sloane's) plus the tavern, Grand Lodge had plenty of potential space to manage. In practice however, and despite Soane's ingenuity and the architectural merit of his building, his hall quickly proved too small for its purpose.

In 1838, just over a year after Soane's death, his successor, Philip Hardwick, extended it, but was unable to provide a satisfactory solution. Roughly twenty years later, the next Grand Superintendent of Works, Frederick Cockerell, decided to demolish all of Soane's building and the old Freemasons' Tavern and the Georgian houses by it,<sup>6</sup> intending as part of the scheme that his new hall should also be used for non-Masonic business.

The foundation stone for this second Freemasons' Hall was laid in 1864, and by 1869 Freemasons' Hall had at last its own frontage on to Great Queen Street with a façade in classical style leading to a new banqueting hall. We know this now as the entrance to the Connaught Rooms leading to the great banqueting room; it was then known as the Freemasons' Great Hall or Temple. Sandby's hall still stood, adjacent to the new temple, and was reserved for Masonic use. It was almost entirely destroyed in a disastrous fire in 1883, but was restored within a year.

<sup>4</sup> Meeting of the 'Hall Committee of Free-Masons held at Free Masons Tavern, Thursday 19 October 1812. See Footnote 7 for location details of the Minutes for these meetings.

<sup>5</sup> For more detail see J. W. P. Campbell, 'Sir John Soane and Freemasonry', *AQC* 133 (2020), 25–80.

<sup>6</sup> *Grand Lodge 1717–1967* (London: UGLE, Oxford University Press, 1967).

Eventually in 1899 the remaining old tavern buildings to the west of the Connaught Rooms were demolished and rebuilt to match the rest of the Connaught Rooms complex; and in 1909 the 'Freemasons' Tavern' name was finally done away with.

The next major development was the building of the present Freemasons' Hall, which includes the current Grand Temple, mostly to the west of the old site, in 1927–33. As the building neared completion, what was left of Sandby's 1775 hall was demolished and disappeared under an extended Connaught Rooms east wing.

### The Decision to Make the Hall Available to Hire, and the Booking Process

Masonic lodges had always met in the back rooms (if available) of inns and taverns, and originally eating and drinking took place at the same time. Gradually it became the custom for the ceremonial part of the meeting to take place separately from the refreshment but, as nowadays, the need to provide food and drink conveniently and on time remained crucial. Hence having the Freemasons' Tavern on the Great Queen Street frontage and the hall behind, conveniently entered via the tavern side entrance, was in theory an ideal solution.

Over the years, however, the needs of commerce and the skills the innkeeper and his staff had, so that the arrangements worked, inevitably changed. Luke Reilly, the Tavern's first innkeeper, was asked to surrender his lease in 1787 after twelve years, but it seems it took until 1790 before two wine merchants, Michael Richold (or Richbold) and John Mollard, had taken on a new lease, this time with a new kitchen provided by Grand Lodge. The next ten year period, during which Britain was constantly at war with France, was not a good time for business, and in 1801 they gave up their lease. Various leaseholders were tried until in 1808 John Jackson Cuff with two colleagues took on the business. Gradually business improved and members of the Cuff family and later one of their employees became the proprietors of the tavern. For the second half of the nineteenth century there were a number of new leaseholders, and changes were made as modernizing ideas and new expectations about refreshments took hold.

Two factors were constant: anyone coming to the hall had to pass through, or at least by the side of, the tavern premises to get to the hall, and, of course, the first impressions of any venue are critical to its continuing success. Not only did the Hall Committee and its successors need to ensure the halls and tavern remained viable for Freemasons and their lodges, but having delegated the day-to-day management of non-Masonic bookings to the tavern leaseholder, they needed people with the right skills to make a success of it.

The Grand Lodge Hall Committee had started to consider how to recoup some of their costs by allowing non-Masonic organizations to use the premises even while Sandby's new Masonic hall and the rooms around it were being completed.

On 19 September 1775 their Minutes record they agreed to 'receive a company who propose to have a Dancing Company in the Committee Room.'<sup>7</sup> The tavern innkeeper, Reilly, assured the committee he would take responsibility for 'any damage that might arise to the Society's rooms.'

In September 1776 the Committee were offered twenty guineas 'for the use of the Hall for a select musical meeting once a week for ten weeks.' This offer was at first rejected on the grounds that the hall was 'not yet finished, nor in a proper state for the reception of company', but in November 1776 they accepted a revised proposal. Grand Lodge needed the money, and must have been pleased that offers for use were coming in, even if they were not quite ready for them.

Shortly afterwards, in January 1777, the Committee put in place their rules for hiring the hall. These reveal interesting aspects of the concerns of the day:

The Hall was not to be let 'for the purpose of any dancing masters ball';  
'Nor for any concert or ball for a less sum than ten guineas a night.'

That 'whoever shall take the Hall shall at the time of the agreement give satisfactory security to the Committee to repair any injury that may be sustained, during the time the Hall is let to them.'

In the mid to late eighteenth century dancing events, which often dancing masters organized for their clientele, were extremely popular. Yet crowds of dancers and the attendant hangers-on could easily lead to over-enthusiasm and careless behaviour and worse, so hosting such events could backfire. Perhaps the key criterion was to ensure the hirer was as reliable as possible. On 24 January 1778 it was agreed that the Annual Ball of Dancing Masters should be permitted in March 1778 for a 15 guinea fee.

In March 1778 too the Hall Committee recorded that the Hall 'had been let to Mrs Harop for her benefit at the sum of 15 guineas' . . . Resolved that whenever the hall is let for Concerts etc it shall be delivered to the party either by Bros Hull or Berkley.'

Perhaps by this time it had become clear that it was important that only certain named persons took responsibility for bookings.

In 1778 also the Committee debated the times they should let 'the Gentlemen of the Middlesex Hospital' have the hall; possibly this was about a regular series of meetings of supporters of the Hospital, which at the time was based in Windmill Street, very close to the hall.

<sup>7</sup> The Minutes of the Grand Lodge Hall Committee survive in the Museum: GBR 1991 FMH MINS/1-4; the Minutes of the Moderns Hall Committee 1773–1813, ref: GBR 1991 FMH MINS/1, and five volumes: *Transcripts of the Hall Committee Minutes*, Library ref: BE 140 MOD Fol. Much, but not all, of the detail that follows was first published in *The Hall in the Garden*. See Footnote 4.



At the same meeting they considered and agreed that only tea, coffee, and 'other refreshment' would be allowed and that 'to preserve the Hall from injury' a member of the Committee should attend each meeting of the hirers.

During this period too a standard agreement for those who wished to use the hall was set up. Gradually a regular pattern of hall fees, including reduced fees for regular events, was established.

One regular organization was the Academy of Ancient Music, which from 1784 began to use the hall for a series of public concerts. It was in response to a request from them that Grand Lodge installed an organ in the hall (at the cost of 200 guineas), and so, by chance really, instituted the tradition of an organ available for use at lodge meetings.

### The Organizations which Hired FMH

As indicated earlier, once the principles of using FMH for non-Masonic hires had been established, there are few records in existence at FMH of who actually hired it. What do exist more profusely, however, are the records in newspapers of those organizations etc. which advertised their forthcoming meetings etc. at FMH, and/or sometimes the newspaper's report of the event (if it was one likely to have been of more general interest). On occasion too just sheer chance has turned up a reference, but of course hall hirings were only incidental matters for the organizations themselves, so it is only because there were so many of them over such a long period of time that some patterns can be identified.

One aspect which often remains unclear is whether, from the records we have, the organization hired, for example, Sandby's hall (or indeed, after 1832, Soane's hall) or just a room or so in the tavern. Sometimes the newspaper record actually states 'tavern', and if it sounds as if the meeting is, say, a committee meeting, maybe that is what is meant; however one cannot know. Similarly, there are many records of dinners of all kinds of organizations. It is surely not unreasonable to assume that in at least some of these cases the organizations would have comprised, say, no more than twenty to thirty people, in which case we may guess they were using the tavern facilities rather than hiring a whole hall.

In 1840, of course, for the World Anti-Slavery Convention, Sandby's hall would have been used, and probably Soane's as well, and many of the rooms in the tavern; but we just do not know. A key fact we do know is that Sandby's hall could hold up to 800 people, and with the organ it was especially suitable for musical performances. In 1831, just after Soane's hall opened, there is a reference to a non-Masonic event where 1,500 people were expected for what may have been a talk. Soane's hall might have been too small for its full Masonic use but this is surely an occasion where the plan was to use both halls. In the absence of modern-day technology, no doubt the tried and tested method of placing loud-voiced people strategically to repeat and to pass on what was said would have been used.



There are around 2,000 references to notices, events etc. at the 'Freemasons' Hall and Tavern' in 'The Times Archive', and a rather indigestible further 270,000 records from other British newspapers.<sup>8</sup> Many entries of these latter, of course, are duplicates.

In the eighteenth century most of the newspaper bookings seem to have been for concerts and musical events, theatrical shows, charity events, and talks. The meetings also include some by organizations which seem to be from a pre-fully industrialized society. After about 1810 there are roughly fifty years of major political, social, and ecclesiastical meetings (plus of course the regular musical events, talks etc. continuing). However, after the middle of the century the major political and religiously prompted battles of earlier days had mostly been won (or at any rate the meetings were no longer held in FMH). Society had changed, and the railways (and the hotels springing up next to them) were also changing the way contacts were made and developed. By 1900 what is left is mostly Masonic use and smaller (tavern?) use, regular charity events with some musical events, and literary dinners.

Of about 2,000 mentions of FMH in *The Times* only about 500 are from earlier than 1875, and what is most interesting is the nature of the advertisements. About 25% of the references are about Masonic events, meetings etc. In principle these are not of interest to this study. However sometimes, and especially in the case of charity concerts and dinners, deciding whether a particular event is Masonic or non-Masonic is not entirely clear. Up until his death in 1843 the Duke of Sussex, the Grand Master, used FMH extensively for both Masonic events and the meetings of the host of charitable organizations with which he was associated. There must also have been many other occasions where there would have been Freemasons on the committees of those organizations seeking to find venues at affordable rates for meetings and dinners.

After 1875 some of the old favourites of the first hundred years continue, notably the Academy of Ancient Music concerts, and the Literary Fund, but there are very few 'political' major causes items (as will be seen from the details below). In fact the majority of the references and indeed the huge majority of references to the Hall in *The Times* from 1875 (and especially since 1967) are because *The Times* records the daily Court Circular: 'the Grand Master opened Grand Lodge at Freemasons' Hall on . . .'

From the more general 'British Newspapers Archive' the scale of the references seems to increase exponentially, especially after the 1840s. There were about 37,000 references before 1860, and then about 30,000 for each ten year's tranche up until 1910, after which the number of entries reduce sharply. Obviously many are duplicate references, one for each local newspaper, but one gets the impression that there were non-Masonic hirings in FMH at least two or three times a week. Sampling suggests that after about 1870 the content had changed in much the same way as that of *The Times*. During the 1860s espe-

<sup>8</sup> Newspaper Archives researched: The Times Archive; The British Newspaper Archive.

cially there are quite a number of references to the tenders and the building works of Cockerell's hall (something which seems not to feature in *The Times*). After about 1870 there are a much higher proportion of notices about public Masonic events than seems ever to have been the case with *The Times* record. This must be recording the ubiquity of interest in Masonry across Britain (as opposed to the more London-focussed *Times*).

No real attempt has been made to count the numbers of notices etc. of particular hiring organizations precisely; rather, from the records reviewed, the next sections set out the names and types of just some of the most interesting sounding organizations recorded, including where it may not be that well-known, a few lines setting out what they stood for. For the sake of completeness it is worth recording that no newspaper appears to have been asked to publish a notice about the foundation meetings of the organizations referred to at the start of this paper.

### Concerts, Piano Recitals, Choral Evenings, Literary Talks, etc.

Special mention has already been made two very long-standing hirers: the Academy of Ancient Music (where in the 1780s the musical Directors were also Freemasons) for over a century were regular hirers of the FMH; and the Literary Fund (founded 1790 and from 1842 the Royal Literary Fund). This was another very long-standing supporter of the premises, holding its regular meetings and also its anniversary dinners there for many years.

However, and especially in the early days, public concerts by various organizations and individuals provided Grand Lodge with a regular income. It is noticeable that the newspaper record does not seem to mention any 'dancing master' events. The high fashion for these seems either to have waned by the turn of the century or else there was no need for dancing masters to advertise their events at FMH.

### Charity Events Generally

Charitable dinners, events etc., of either Masonic or non-Masonic origin, include regular anniversary meetings and other concerts held. Some were Masonic in origin, e.g. the Royal Cumberland Freemasons' School for the Daughters of Deceased and Indigent Freemasons. (There is a well-known painting depicting the girls parading around the hall to sing during intervals of the concert). Others, for example the Artists' Benevolent Society, are focused on particular social needs.

We know Charles Dickens attended a charity public dinner at the Freemasons' Hall on at least two occasions, but (as his inimitable text 'Public Dinners' in Chapter 19 of *Sketches by Boz* makes clear) his first description is intended as simply an example of the kind of experience a mid-nineteenth century gentleman might expect at a charity dinner.

The *Sketches* chapter was reprinted from the newspaper report the young journalist had had published in the *Evening Chronicle* of 2 April 1835.

Let's suppose you are induced to attend a dinner of this description – 'Indigent Orphans' Friends' Benevolent Institution' . . . you deposit yourself in a hackney-coach, the driver of which – no doubt that you may do the thing in style – turns a deaf ear to your earnest entreaties to be set down at the corner of Great Queen Street, and persists in carrying you to the very door of the Freemasons, round which a crowd of people are assembled to witness the entrance of the indigent orphans' friends. You hear great speculations as you pay the fare on the possibility of your being the noble Lord who is announced to fill the chair . . .<sup>9</sup>

Dickens describes the bustle, the semi-organized chaos for the cloakroom, finding his place at one of three long tables ('with knives and forks which look as if they have done duty at every public dinner in London since the accession of George the First'), the company, the dinner, the interminable speeches, and the entry of stewards with a plate in their hands into which sovereigns and special donations are deposited. And so on.

The other newspaper entry spotted which identifies Dickens is from the *Waterford News* of 10 April 1863. Now Dickens himself as speaker is the reason people will attend 'The Stage; the Anniversary meeting of the Royal General Theatrical Fund Society' to be held at FMH.

The Benevolent Society of St Patrick founded in 1783, for the relief of poor, needy or distressed persons with Irish forbears, regardless of religion, were also regular hirers of FMH for their anniversary dinners. Another regular was the Philanthropic Society, later the Royal Philanthropic Society. This was founded in 1788 to address the problems of homeless youngsters who could only make a living through crime. It is still in existence. During the early 1800s they habitually used Freemasons' Hall for their meetings.

### Political meetings of many kinds

As mentioned above, the early nineteenth century was a period of major political debate and FMH hosted many meeting and dinners of this kind. They included:

- **Friends of the People – Meeting April 1792 to 1795 'for Parliamentary Reform'**  
This group of Whig politicians were seeking a middle way between radicalism and oppression at the time when the French revolutionary Terror was at its height and affecting British politics. They used FMH for meetings at least five times before the political debate moved on and no satisfactory middle way was found to be viable.

<sup>9</sup> C. Dickens, *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People* (London: Odhams Press, n.d.), 142.

- **Anti-Corn Law League**

The League met at FMH for a number of meetings in the early 1840s until in 1846. It achieved the repeal of the corn laws, which did away with the old protectionist agricultural arrangements and opened Britain up to free trade from across the world. Of course, after their cause was won, their bookings ceased.

- **Central Agricultural Association**

This association was set up in the late 1830s to bring together those who were in favour of the then existing agricultural system and opposed what the Anti-Corn Law League stood for. They also met fairly regularly in FMH during the 1840s; one presumes probably not on the same days as the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers.

- **Anti-Slavery meetings**

Some might say these should be included within the political category since the issues were certainly not non-political. But they were very welcome regular hirers of FMH facilities.

As is now fairly well known, during most of the eighteenth century, provided that sugar and other luxuries from the West and East Indies arrived in Britain, no one much cared (or wished to know) that their provision depended upon slave labour. Eventually, thousands of men and women, mostly west Africans, were being shipped in appalling conditions to the locations and then worked until they died. Gradually, during the latter part of the eighteenth century, and especially by the efforts of the group of people known as the Clapham Sect, whose parliamentary leader was William Wilberforce, the position changed. By the end of the century the problem at the political level was more about the risks of financial loss and civil disorder, if the slaves were freed, than the morality.

Quite probably FMH was used for meetings of the anti-slavery ‘lobby’ both before and after 1807, but the first newspaper report identified as connecting FMH with this subject is the *Morning Post* of 17 April 1807. This is just days after the Act abolishing the carrying of new slave labour on British ships was passed (25 March) and before it came into effect (1 May 1807). The meeting was called by ‘a very numerous and highly respectable {group of} noblemen and gentle-men for the purpose of concerting the opportunity presented by {the Act} for promoting innocent commerce and civilisation in Africa.’

FMH was the venue for packed abolitionist meetings in March and June 1814,<sup>10</sup> but the next newspaper reference identified is much later – June 1821 – when Wilberforce chaired a meeting concerned about continuing slavery in Asia and Africa. In May 1830 2,000 people packed FMH (presumably both Sandby’s and the soon-to-be-completed Soane’s hall) when the Anti-Slavery Society met in FMH and demanded the complete

<sup>10</sup> W. Hague, *William Wilberforce: the Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 412; 420.

abolition of slavery. This led to the *Abolition of Slavery Act 1833*, just before Wilberforce's death. Over the next fifteen years there are records of quite a number of bookings and meetings. However, the most important one was extensively reported by many newspapers in June 1840. This was the great World Anti-Slavery Convention of 12–23 June 1840 at FMH which planned the way forward for the future. A year later B. J. Haydon painted the portraits of as many of the principal participants as he could in a large painting now in the National Portrait Gallery. It is not possible to judge whether the hall in the portrait was in any way a true reproduction of FMH at the time; that was not the purpose of the portrait.

*Meetings of religious and missionary societies*

Prompted to some large extent by concerns about their fellow man, whether slave or living in what then were remote parts of the world, and with members of the Clapham Sect prominent, various societies of a missionary nature were formed in the early nineteenth century. Many of these still exist and it may have been partly because they tended to attract membership from the non-conformist churches that FMH first became a favoured venue for their meetings. Clearly however the usefulness of the venue continued even after some of the original reasons may have changed; at any rate for many years FMH continued to attract regular bookings from, for example:

- the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (originally founded in the early eighteenth century to bring Christianity to the slaves in the West Indies plantations).
- the Church Missionary Society, founded 1799.
- the Bloomsbury and St Pancras Auxiliary Bible Society (founded in FMH in 1813).
- the British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804 to produce bibles in Welsh (first FMH notice, 1815).
- In 1846 FMH hosted the Great Evangelical Alliance Conference, which was the inaugural conference bringing together Church of England and Free Church evangelicals, who previously would hardly talk to each other. The Alliance set up then is still in existence. They may well have used FMH facilities again, though this study has not identified relevant newspaper advertisements.
- The Protestant Alliance, founded about 1845 aimed to try to ensure that the Church of England maintained a balance between its evangelical wing and the catholic wing (including those who after the 1829 *Catholic Emancipation Act* wished to get closer to Rome). For a number of years from 1852 it too regularly held its annual meeting at FMH.

- As Exeter Hall would not have them, in 1839 the controversial Daniel O’Connell, MP, addressed a large meeting of London Catholics about Catholic Emancipation.

*Here are a few more typical hires from various societies etc. over the years*

- **1802, 1803.** In the early years there were hires for such day-to-day issues as the sale of furniture at auction.
- **From 1803.** Dinners were held to raise money for the wounded and the families of those killed during the Napoleonic Wars (Lloyds Patriotic fund).
- **1804.** The Wheelwrights, Coachmakers, and Harness Makers (a London Livery company) met to discuss their need for financial assistance.
- **1807** (and regularly again for at least most of the nineteenth century), the Smithfield Cattle Club Show Dinner in the Tavern.
- **1811** and for a period of about ten years following, it seems to have been the practice for certain schools (Reading School, Ealing School, the Carlisle House School, etc.) to hold anniversary dinners at FMH. In 1811 Pembroke College, Oxford also held a dinner.
- **1817.** The Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms’ Waterloo Anniversary Dinner.
- **1824.** The Governors of the London Fever Hospital.
- **1830.** Foundation of the General Cemetery Company (which still exists) by public meetings in the tavern at FMH. The old burial practices around London could no longer cope as London expanded. Private citizens, HM government and the Church of England (which for the first time took account of non-conformist needs) combined to try to create a cemetery at Kensal Green modelled on that of Père Lachaise in Paris. For many years Shareholders Meetings continued to be held at FMH.
- **1831.** A Burns Night dinner was advertised. Surely these must have been fairly regular events.
- **1831.** Grand Ball held in July to collect funds to relieve distress in Ireland.
- **1831.** The Yorkshire Society. Also at different times regular meetings of the Society of Ancient Britons (Welsh) and the Hibernian Society (Irish) etc.
- **1836.** An open meeting was called to express sympathy with sufferers from the great conflagration of New York that December.
- **1840.** General Pensions Company meeting. Possibly this refers to the company, founded in 1836, which developed to become Legal and General.
- **1844.** The Royal Humane Society, founded in 1774, with the aim of trying to save those near death from drowning, met in venues other than FMH, but by the middle of the nineteenth century they began to use FMH for their annual dinners. This is probably why there is a record that in **1867** the British Swimming Associ-

ation chose to hold their Annual Awards in FMH. The press report commented that on this occasion the attendees were noticeably younger than was the norm at FMH. We do not know if this became a regular event.

## Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief paper may have shown how, undoubtedly purely by chance, the decision of Grand Lodge in 1768 to build a Freemasons' Hall, and then to re-coup some of their outlay by the mundane and logical activity of trying to hire out the premises when not needed for their main task, has enabled a host of other organizations (which needed to meet in London) to hold their meetings conveniently, and thereby achieve their objectives.

That there is still (presumably) a need for so many of these organizations within British society two hundred years later is both interesting and in some cases, perhaps, reason for a pause for thought. It is, however, probably merely fortuitous that these developments helped bring Freemasonry within the day-to-day knowledge and sight of the British people, and so assisted Freemasonry to provide a window on itself to the watching world.

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