

Durham2029 MBF Festival – address by Festival Chairman at launch event on Sat 21/1/2023

Ladies, Gentlemen and Brethren, I consider it an honour and privilege to be Chairman of the Durham2029 festival for the Mark Benevolent Fund. Permit me to explain why.

When David Hanson invited me to take on the role, I looked back at my personal experiences of the Mark Benevolent Fund.

Just over a decade ago in 2012 I'd just became Vice Chairman of Durham Benevolence, the Craft charity for our Province and we were actively supporting The Oaks School in Spennymoor. They required an additional minibus to help transport their pupils with special educational needs and on hearing of the need, the MBF bought it outright for them at a cost of £45,000.

Most of you are aware of my enthusiasm to ride as a volunteer for Northumbria Blood Bikes. When our then ProvGM Peter Croft found out he encouraged me to submit a funding application to the MBF and, in what seemed like a short timescale, they agreed to buy a Honda Pan European motorcycle for the charity, also paid for it to be fully equipped for emergency volunteer service and fully funded the first year's operational costs. A grant of £18,000. That bike, "Blood Bike Mark Master Mason" was the first blood bike in the United Kingdom to be fully funded by masonic charity and since taking it to make a guest of honour appearance at Mark Grand Lodge later that year, September 2016, the MBF allocated a further £440,000 to blood bike charities across England and Wales, purchasing another 16 blood bikes and 10 blood cars including the BloodRun EVS bike you saw on arrival this evening, a vehicle carrying out life-saving missions in the south east part of our province 365 days every year.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, public fundraising by charities like blood bikes was completely suspended so when the NBB radio provider ceased service it was literally a lifesaver when the MBF agreed to pay for the replacement of the entire communication system at a cost of £23,541.

I was well and truly aware from personal experience that the motto of the Mark Benevolent Fund founder, the then Grand Master, the Rev George Portal

“He gives twice who gives promptly” is as relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as when he founded the MBF in 1868.

Of course, the MBF doesn’t only support community causes; through a well-established system of Provincial and Lodge Almoners, it gives speedy assistance to Mark Masons and their dependents in distress, but let me quickly give you a few more examples of recent MBF grants to charities in our region.

£15,500 to the Great North Air Ambulance for a rapid response vehicle.  
£107,628 to replace an aging kitchen in St Oswald’s Hospice at Jesmond.  
£36,475 to install piped Oxygen into each room during the refurbishment of Willowburn Hospice in Lanchester.

And in the last year, 2022 alone

£24,561 to replace out of date communication equipment for the Cleveland Mountain Rescue Team.  
£55,715 to purchase Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade a second rescue vehicle and radios  
£37,500 to replace the North of Tyne Mountain Rescue team’s Landover.

The St John Ambulance vehicle on display outside this evening is one of 53 Ambulances, Treatment Centres and Support Vehicles in use by that charity from a £3.4 million MBF grant.

I trust by now you all agree with me that the MBF is a significant force for good in the name of Freemasonry but to continue their exceptional work they need continued funding.

Like all Masonic Charities, their funds come from members like you and I, predominately through annual festivals. Unlike the Craft where each Province hosts a festival about every 11<sup>th</sup> year, the MBF has one province per year, so Durham’s turn, like all other Provinces comes round only once per 36 years.

Our first festival was in 1924 when we raised £10,637  
31 years later in 1955 we raised £28,464 and 38 years after that in 1993 the total raised was £347,736.

36 years after our last festival, our Provincial Grand Master has accepted an invitation from the MBF to host the 2029 festival. You can see from the gaps between these festivals, for most Mark Masons it’s a once in a masonic

lifetime opportunity to be part of a festival and I invite you all to come on this 6 year journey with us.

Some of you might be waiting for a big reveal of the 2029 target. Sorry to disappoint, we aren't setting a target. We know we enter on this journey when at a time of economic uncertainty for many, so we will share our aspirations as to how much we can help the MCF with their funding.

In our Province we have 790 members in 40 Lodges.

We aspire for most of these members to qualify as a Festival Steward for a personal donation of £100 and on payment of that £100 you will be issued with this high-quality jewel, to wear at all Mark and Mariner Lodge meetings in this Province (only) until July 2028 and then at any Mark Lodge anywhere for the final year of Durham2029. If this is your first donation to the MBF you will also qualify as a Life Governor and receive another breast jewel.

We aspire that 50% of our members will become a Patron of the MBF. That's a lifetime contribution of £500, the steward's fee of £100 counts towards this and on receipt of your donation you'll receive this MBF Patron collarette and jewel.

Wives and partners are also welcome and encouraged to become Festival Stewards and MBF Patrons. For non-members the qualification amount is only 50% and qualifying females receive their jewel in a velvet pouch with the option of wearing it as a broach or on the supplied 18ct gold plated neck chain.

We also have an aspiration that by 2029 every Mark Lodge in the Province will qualify as Grand Patron Diamond and therefore the Province will also hold that esteemed status. For a Lodge to achieve Diamond Patron status they must have already donated £2,500 to be Gold Patron. Every Lodge in our Province holds Gold status and an additional £5,000 is required to become Diamond.

We will reward Lodges with the presentation of a Durham2029 lapel pin for each £1,000 increment, Bronze for £1,000, Silver for £2,000, Gold for £3,000 and Platinum for £4,000. I have some helpful news for you, since qualifying as Gold Patrons every Lodge had donated at least another £1,000 to the MBF and some have donated over £2,000 so the aspiration is not as challenging as you might think.

Based on these aspirations we hope the total raised, which will be announced at the end of festival gala banquet on – save the date - Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2029, will be in excess of half a million pounds, if it's closer to a million you will have most certainly marked well.

I need to be clear, unlike the Craft festivals where individual donations count towards Lodge donations, in the MBF system, they are separate so to make it easy we are asking individual members to sign up for 60 months of regular giving into a relief chest scheme. If you're able to pay the £100 stewards fee up front and get a jewel immediately we suggest £6.50 per month and if you'd prefer to share the entire donation equally, we suggest £8.00 per month. That's less than a pint of beer or a commercial coffee per week.

Forms are on the website and will be available via your Lodge Charity Steward or any member of the festival team. Tax payers are strongly encouraged to complete gift aid declarations so the charity benefits with an additional 25% tax payment from HMRC.

But, a big part of the festival is to have fun while fundraising, this is where Lodge donations might come from. Hopefully every Mark Lodge or Masonic Centre where Mark Lodges meet will organise events. Socials, sporting activities, raffles, coffee mornings, the only limit is your imagination. As a starter, in partnership with Durham Benevolence, the PGL Craft charity, there will be a sponsored Coast and Castles cycle ride from Edinburgh to Durham in September 2023.

Over the next few months members of the Provincial Executive and/or the Festival Team will visit your Lodge to give further information and answer questions but for now, please enjoy this launch event, hopefully a little more inspired to all be ambassadors for the MBF and Durham2029.

As the profile and awareness of the MBF increases in our Province during the festival period we anticipate a significant increase in local good causes being identified to benefit from MBF support and remember, "Giving is not just about making a donation, it's about making a difference." Thank you for your Support.