

**EXCLUSIVE**

By James Murray

# INSIDE FREEMASONRY'S VERSION OF THE VATICAN

It's long been one of the most secretive places in the country, but ahead of this weekend's Open House Festival, JAMES MURRAY gets an exclusive peek behind the imposing art deco facade of Freemasons' Hall, the spiritual home of 'The Craft'



**SACRED SPACE:** The dazzling Grand Temple and Grand Master's Throne, open to the public for the first time

FOR decades it has been one of the most secretive places in the country. Freemasons' Hall, the imposing art deco building which stands sentry on Great Queen Street, in Holborn, central London, is the headquarters for English and Welsh freemasons and home to the United Grand Lodge of England.

Since it was built in the early 1930s, tens of millions of people have walked past the outside and, in recent years, the public has been permitted into the Museum of Freemasonry in the same building.

But only masons themselves are usually allowed into the inner sanctum – the Grand Temple itself.

However, this weekend, as part of the Open House Festival (a London-wide celebration of intriguing buildings), non-masonic visitors will be invited into the Grand Temple.

There will also be guided tours through their adjoining lodge rooms. It's all part of the Freemasons' attempts to eradicate the mystique and scotch the conspiracy theories surrounding this historical organisation devoted to fellowship and moral discipline. Which is how I found myself joining a special tour of this impressive building, where the Duke of Kent is Grand Master in a lodge that dates back to the early 1700s.

Entering the building, it feels like you're stepping into the set of an Indiana Jones film. The vast bronze doors, 12ft tall and 4ft wide, each weigh more than a ton. Surrounded by white marble, they were designed by the sculptor Walter Gilbert, with panels depicting the building of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem in biblical times.

On the bottom left-hand panel is Solomon's master mason, Hiram Abiff, supervising his craftsmen as they move stones. The story goes that Abiff was killed by thugs when he later refused to divulge secrets of his trade.

On the inside panel of the doors are six winged seraphs, from the Old Testament, adding a mystical quality to the work.

ONCE the doors are opened, the scale of the Grand Temple becomes apparent. At 123ft long, 90ft wide and 62ft high, it can easily accommodate 1,700 Freemasons, yet it still feels homely, cosy even.

As I look up, I can see Michelangelo-like artwork depicted on the ceiling.

"You are looking at one of the largest mosaics in London," explains museum curator Mark Dennis. "It was created by Italian craftsmen between 1927 and 1933."

The mosaic on the east side of the building shows two pillars, with the Ark of the Covenant and Jacob's Ladder. The ladder bears a cross, an anchor and a burning heart, the respective symbols for faith, hope and charity.

On the south side is an equally arresting mosaic, with a painting of the sun god Helios driving his chariot across the heavens and a giant eye looking down between two columns. Below these, on the floor of the temple, are three throne-like chairs.

"Every lodge room is set up with three chairs," says Dennis. "The one in the east is for the master and the other two are for the junior and senior wardens – the management team of the lodge. The master rules the lodge and controls it for his year in charge."

These chairs frame a carpet patterned with large black and white squares, representing good and bad fortune in life. The



**PIONEER:** Livia Ferreira is soon to join one of the two women's lodges

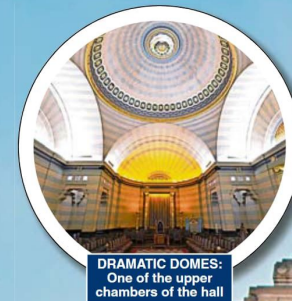


**HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE:** Writer James Murray holds one of the revered ashlar stones from Jerusalem

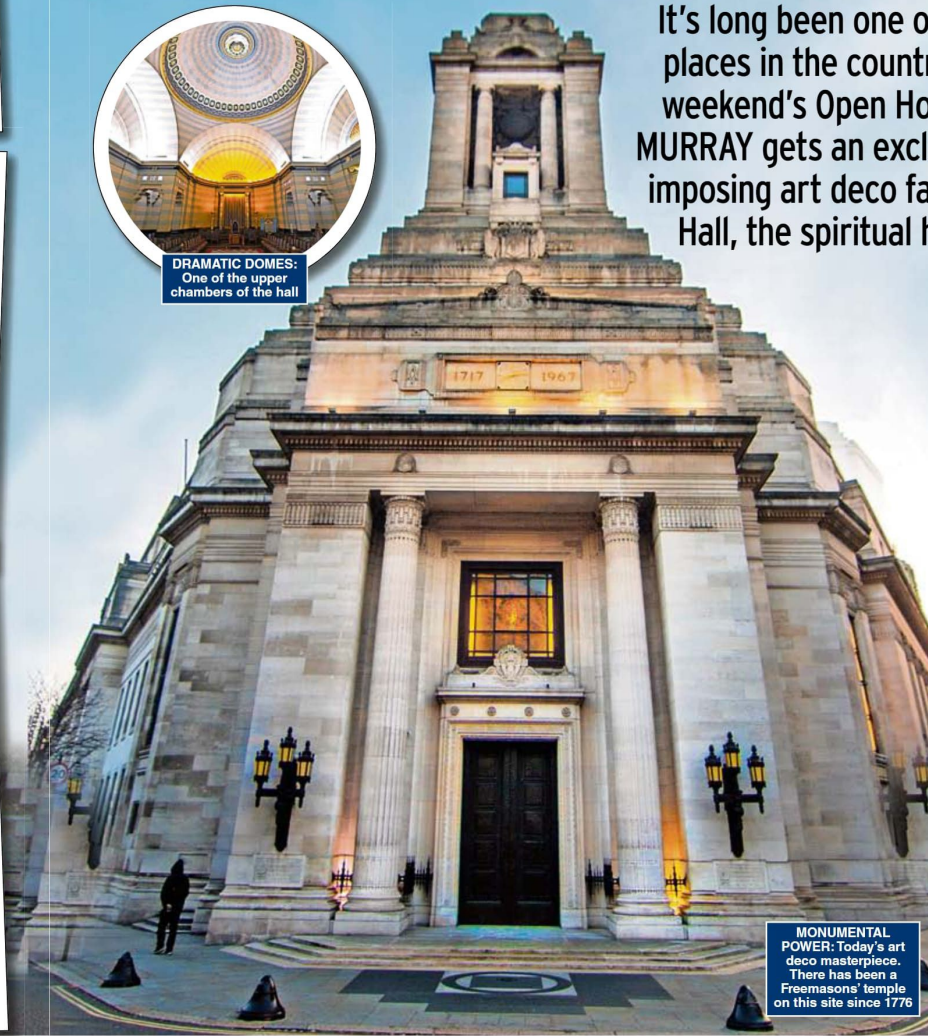
famously secretive Freemason initiation ceremonies are conducted on the carpet while lodge members look on. They are never filmed or photographed and even Dennis, one of the world's foremost experts on Freemasonry, is not permitted to know

exactly what happens as he is not a Freemason himself.

The Craft, as insiders call it, has been a global phenomenon since it was founded in London in the 18th century. There are thought to be about 400,000 Freemasons in the UK, with more than a million more



**DRAMATIC DOMES:** One of the upper chambers of the hall



**MONUMENTAL POWER:** Today's art deco masterpiece. There has been a Freemasons' temple on this site since 1776

members in the US. One estimate puts the number of Masons worldwide at six million. You'll find lodges everywhere from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Circle.

A host of famous men from all walks of life have been Masons: Walt Disney, Wolfgang Mozart and Rudyard Kipling;

"Buffalo Bill" Cody and Sir Alf Ramsey; Duke Ellington and the Duke of Wellington, to name but a few.

According to Professor John Dickie, author of *The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World*, Freemasons' Hall is the "holy of holies of English Freemasonry

– the nearest thing the Masons have to the Vatican". But the United Grand Lodge of England was first established in June 1717 at the Goose and Gridiron alehouse in St Paul's churchyard in the City of London.

The original building no longer exists. In the early 1770s Freemasons bought

land for their current hall on Great Queen Street. When it first opened in 1776, it was also used for concerts and lectures, but by the 1860s only masonic meetings took place here. However, it was demolished in 1932 because of structural problems and replaced with Freemasons' Hall on pretty much the same site.

As well as the Grand Temple, there are also 24 lodge rooms for ceremonies and meetings.

As part of my tour, I am allowed to visit Lodge Room Ten.

"This is sometimes called the Egyptian or Indian temple because of its unique style," explains Dennis. "It has eastern-style domes and lighting showing dawn, dusk and the midday sun. All the furniture is built especially for this room."

In another lodge room, I'm allowed to hold the hugely symbolic ashlar stones, hewn from limestone in Jerusalem.

One of them is rough and uncut while the other is a perfect cube. Together they symbolise the journey that Freemasons take in order to reach what they call "enlightenment".

THIS weekend, visitors (on a first-come, first-served basis) will also be able to learn more about the organisation in the museum and library.

One of the most precious museum exhibits is an apron which once belonged to Sir Winston Churchill, who was initiated into the Studholme Lodge, now the United Studholme Alliance Lodge, in 1901. He became a master mason the following year.

Also in the museum is a massive throne, easily big enough to seat three people. This was built for the portly King George IV, a huge supporter of Freemasonry who was installed as Grand Master himself in 1791.

There are also two women-only lodges on the site and marketing manager Livia Ferreira is soon to become a member of one of them. Women were only recently allowed to join the Freemasons, and they refer to each other as "brothers".

As Livia adds: "The museum has wonderful pieces of masonic art from all around the world. There is so much to see."

For more information, visit [ugle.org.uk/freemasons-hall/events/open-house-london-2023](http://ugle.org.uk/freemasons-hall/events/open-house-london-2023)