

Bridging the gap

The Iron Bridge Lodge in Shropshire is attracting younger members with a blend of social media, streamlined ceremonies and core masonic values, as **Peter Watts** discovers

On 1 February 2016, something happened in Shropshire for the first time in more than a century. At a meeting room in Telford town centre, three new members were initiated into Freemasonry at one lodge on the same day. This was so exceptional it required a change in the rules. ‘The laws say you can only initiate two at once,’ says Andy Delamere of the meeting at The Iron Bridge Lodge. ‘We had to seek special dispensation from the Provincial Grand Master.’

What makes it more extraordinary is that one of those new masons was only 20 years old. Could the future of Freemasonry be blossoming in this corner of England?

It has been an impressive first 12 months for The Iron Bridge Lodge, No. 9897, which is named after a local landmark and created specifically to cater to the preferences of younger masons. In January 2015, The Iron Bridge Lodge became the 34th lodge to be consecrated in Shropshire and the first new lodge anywhere to join the Universities Scheme.

Launched in 2005, the scheme was created to attract students into Freemasonry, an idea inspired by the existing lodges at Oxford and Cambridge. While The Iron Bridge Lodge is not affiliated with any university, it welcomes all students to join its meetings.

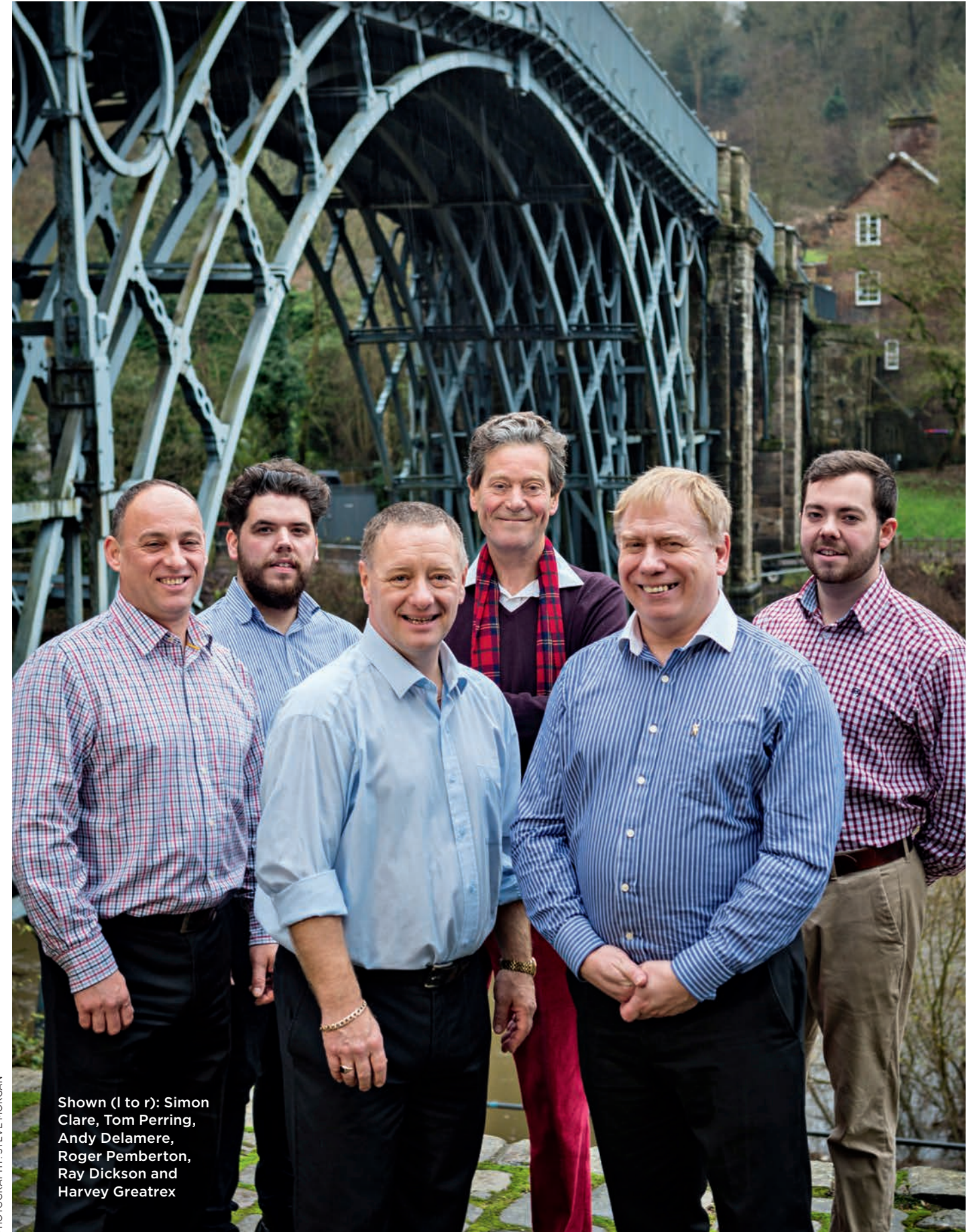
One of The Iron Bridge Lodge’s new masons is student Tom Perring, 28, who says he has been ‘interested in Freemasonry for as long as I can remember’ – an interest nurtured by reading copies of *Freemasonry Today* donated to him by an elderly mason. Tom explored various options until he heard about The Iron Bridge Lodge being set up.

‘I followed them on Twitter and they followed me back, saying thanks for the follow and if I was interested in Freemasonry I should ask,’ recalls Tom. ‘I told them I was, and it went from there.’

FINDING NEW CHANNELS

Embracing social media is just one way that The Iron Bridge Lodge is trying to appeal to a younger generation. When Shropshire’s Deputy Provincial Grand Master Roger Pemberton found that 27 per cent of new masons in his Province resigned within five years, he knew that making changes to recruit and retain young masons was key, but wanted to do so without diminishing the gravitas of the ceremony.

Roger was among those trying to find a way to marry the procedures of Freemasonry with the responsibilities of contemporary life. ‘We want to make Freemasonry attractive to young men and students in Shropshire, and one way to do that is to make it possible for them to be there,’ he explains. ▶



Shown (l to r): Simon Clare, Tom Perring, Andy Delamere, Roger Pemberton, Ray Dickson and Harvey Greatrex

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE MORGAN

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Tom Perring

Lodges traditionally meet at 5pm, when many people are still at work or looking after children. ‘We therefore start at 7pm and finish by 9.45pm so people can get home at a reasonable hour. We’ve also made it a more attractive, simpler ceremony,’ says Roger.

Proceedings have been streamlined by circulating reports and minutes by email before the meeting, rather than reading them out. A buffet-style Festive Board has also replaced formal meals. This is more relaxed and provides an opportunity for masons to socialise.

Roger was convinced that these measures would bear fruit. ‘If you have a market stall and you put it where people can’t see it then nobody will buy anything,’ he explains. ‘But if you have something attractive that’s easy to see, then people will be interested. It’s about presentation – making sure people feel welcome when they join and that this welcome is maintained. None of it affects the central tenets of Freemasonry, which are brotherly love, relief and a personal journey to truth.’

Ray Dickson, The Iron Bridge Lodge Secretary and a member of the founding committee, explains the journey that Shropshire Freemasons have been on. ‘We could see younger people live in a very busy environment where everything is needed yesterday, so finding time simply to attend meetings is difficult. We looked at how we could provide a meeting place that accommodates modern life.’

STUDENT RECRUITS

As well as identifying ways to simplify the ceremony, the lodge founders contacted the Universities Scheme. ‘It sat with our ideals – bringing in young people, embracing and encouraging them,’ says Ray. ‘It seemed to be a good match with the principles we had started to build at The Iron Bridge Lodge and how we were organising and structuring things.’

The founders visited three Universities Scheme lodges in Leicester, Oxford and Nottingham to see how they operated, and contacted others via Twitter and Facebook. The results have been impressive. The Iron Bridge Lodge had 70-odd

attendees at each meeting in 2015 and initiated seven new masons, some attracted by social media.

The Iron Bridge Lodge was the first Shropshire lodge on Twitter, with its young members eagerly sharing information with their friends. ‘It puts it out there, the good we do, and that sparks an interest and shows this is a vibrant lodge,’ says Andy.

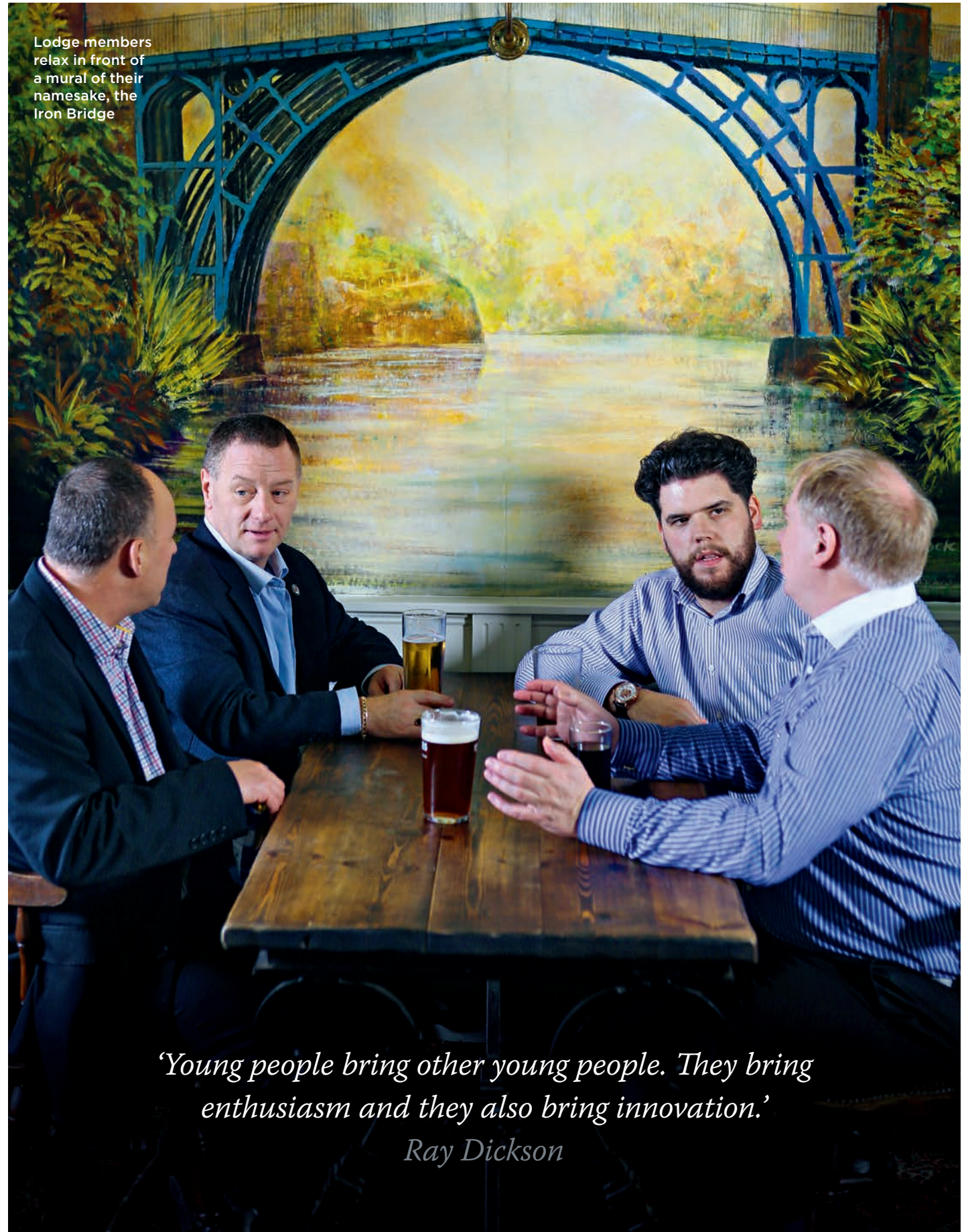
The younger masons have also brought ideas of their own and new members into the fold. ‘Young people bring other young people. They bring enthusiasm and they also bring innovation,’ says Ray. ‘We don’t have a physical banner or tracing boards, we use projections – little things like that come from having younger people around. They are very enthusiastic with social media. That’s good for the lodge, Shropshire and Freemasonry in general.’

Tom is a fine arts student with an interest in film, so he’s made reels for the lodge and plans to make another for the Universities Scheme. He feels Freemasonry has much to offer men of his generation: ‘Society is very fast and unstable; Freemasonry offers a strong, decent core that can help people,’ he says.

For Tom, Freemasonry provides young men with the opportunity to give something back. ‘We’re learning confidence and manners, becoming better people and meeting people we’d never otherwise rub shoulders with. It makes you want to return the favour, using whatever talents you’ve learnt at work and university.’

Tom is just one of the new recruits who will take Freemasonry forward. Harvey Greatrex is a 21-year-old student who discovered The Iron Bridge Lodge via the website. He is looking forward to finding out more about the Craft and its values. ‘Some of the older masons tell us that we are still going to be in Freemasonry in 20 years,’ he says.

Harvey’s journey in The Iron Bridge Lodge is something that Roger hopes will be emulated elsewhere in Freemasonry. ‘A lodge needs experienced people to start it off and run the main office until you get a cohort of masons who understand what it is about. We are two or three years away from that, but in about five years, this lodge will be entirely run by new young men.’



Lodge members relax in front of a mural of their namesake, the Iron Bridge

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