

Scotland's Masonic culture has long been a

Secrets kept in store but no Holy Grail

■ SANDRA DICK

WITH a deep sigh and a roll of his eyes Bob Cooper leans forward in his chair, clears a small space on his cluttered desk and insists he doesn't actually have the Holy Grail.

"You wouldn't believe the amount of time I spend explaining to people that, no, we don't keep the Holy Grail here and that we don't know where it might be either."

"Honestly," he continues with a smile, "it's almost as if they expect me to open a cupboard and, 'oh yes - there it is!'"

Admittedly, it doesn't seem that likely that the Holy Grail might be found in a grand, yet outwardly rather anonymous, building on George Street.

But then again, this is the Freemasons we're talking about. And doesn't Bob have his office in one of the most mysterious locations imaginable - deep within the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Scotland?

In fact, despite the myths and the mystery, the speculation and the secrecy, the Grand Lodge

turns out to be just another office HQ, with two busy receptionists juggling buzzing phones at the enquiry desk, empty wood-paneled boardrooms and a function suite laid out with tables in preparation for the arrival of Lodge Eight, the Lodge of the Journeyman Mason - one of Edinburgh's 40 Lodges - which celebrates its 300th anniversary there at the

about. The date of the next Orange Walk? Wrong organisation.

Ascertain "boys only" club to help you climb the greasy ladder to success? No, insists Bob with a sigh.

An organisation built on the principals of brotherly love, morals and equality might not sound as thrilling, but according to Bob it's at least closer to the truth. Just try telling that to the American tourist who wants to arrange a time when they can pop in and see the Holy Grail.

"One of the most time-consuming things I have had to deal with in past years is the number of inquiries from all over the world from people who have just read the Da Vinci Code," says Bob. "They want to know if it's true what it says about freemasonry," he continues. "Frankly, I have spent a lot of time correcting Dan Brown's mistakes."

The bestselling book - which suggests the Knights Templar designed Rosslyn Chapel and that Freemasons hold the key to its mysteries and secrets - has simply become the bane of Bob's life.

But then again, it could be their own fault. After all, aren't the Freemasons infamous for their zealously guarded secrets, their mysterious rituals and their bizarre initiation ceremonies? They have their own private handshake, coded language and a shadowy image of brothers scratching other brothers' backs.

So if they haven't got the Holy Grail, what exactly do they have to hide? Nothing, insists an increasingly frustrated Bob, a Freemason since 1984 and now the curator of the Masonic version of the "grail", the museum tucked inside the Grand Lodge of Scotland where ageing lodge minutes - one contains Robert Burns' signature alongside his fellow "brothers" - are stored alongside jewel-encrusted Masonic insignia and the largest collection of French Masonic literature anywhere.

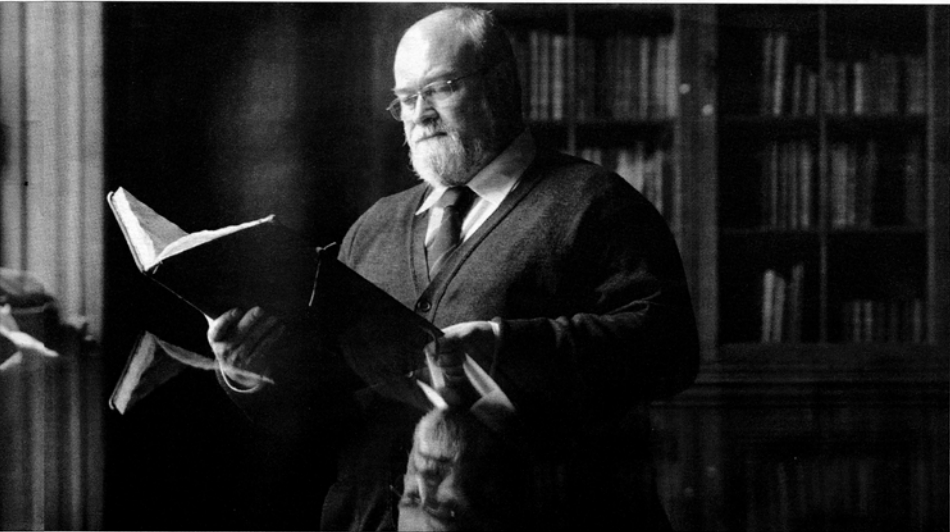
"We are not a secret society," he stresses. "But yes, we have certain elements of what we do that we keep private - otherwise no-one would bother to join!"

He has a burning hot phoneline with enquiries from delegates to the first International Conference on the History of Freemasonry. Around 200 from all corners of the Earth are due to descend on the George Street building later this month to hear speakers present more than 70 papers on the craft.

Between that, the renewed interest in Freemasonry courtesy of the Da Vinci Code, around 500 years of history to fall back on and brothers such as Sir Walter Scott, Sir Winston Churchill and Robert Burns in their ranks, and it sounds like the masons of today should be on a roll.

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source of curiosity, but in reality is not so mysterious



Grand Lodge curator Bob Cooper looks over some of the historic documents kept at the George Street premises. Below, Robert Burns' signature in a minutes book

WATCHFUL EYE: Edinburgh

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THE FACTS

■ Freemasonry is believed to have begun its evolution 500 or more years ago in Scotland, among bands of skilled stonemasons - such as the craftsmen who would have created Rosslyn Chapel.

■ Freemasonry is not a religion. There is no Masonic god and you don't have to be a Christian to be a Freemason. However, Masons do believe in a "supreme being", referring to

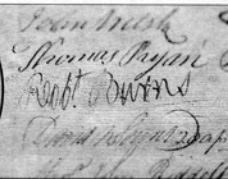
the creator of the world as the "divine architect".

■ Freemasonry uses the metaphor of a stonemason's tools and crafts to describe an esoteric system of morality. The square and compass is the key symbol of Freemasonry. Some believe it is a metaphor for the need for moral responsibility balanced by reason.

■ There are three degrees of Freemasonry. Freemasons begin as Apprentice, and

progress to Master, then Grand Master.

■ Freemasons are expected to keep the rituals and ceremonies of the Masonic Lodge secret, though they are free to make it known to others that they are Freemasons. They can use special handshakes, signs and words to identify each other. Phrases such as "give him the third degree" and "pillar of the community" both have their roots in Masonic lodges.



lodges in Scotland and around 70,000 masons, with around 6000 in Edinburgh attending 40 Lodges - considerably lower than in years gone by.

"Membership overall has been steadily declining," admits Bob, a Freemason for 23 years who has run the Grand Lodge library and museum for the past 16.

"Yes, a few lodges have closed but to be honest we're not very concerned about that decline. This was never meant to be a mass organisation anyway - at one point there were just a few Freemasons in the whole of Scotland."

And there's no question of the Freemasons suddenly reinventing themselves or even tweaking the rules in a desperate bid to stay afloat.

"We have to stay true to our origins and if that means we become extinct, then so be it," shrugs Bob. "One of the things that people enjoy is the fact that the Freemasons is unchanging. I can sit down and look at the minutes of the Lodge meeting in which Rabbie Burns joined and I could have been there, the process is the same today as it was then."

"And that's an incredibly stabilising force."

slick@edinburghnews.com

dulum is simply swinging and a new generation is coming through."

They sign up, explains Bob, to become part of an international brotherhood with a moral map as its template, raised in Scotland and exported around the world. Corruption - one of the stigmas that has plagued the modern Masonic movement has been the popular perception that Freemasons actively help "brothers" progress in work, in legal situations and in every walk of life - is certainly not on the agenda.

Bob is quick to dismiss that particular myth: "Freemasons have always been in a small minority in Scottish society. Perhaps if there had been huge num-

bers of Freemasons all in influential roles, then all of that might have happened.

"But if people join the Freemasons thinking that it will help them get on in life, then they will very quickly be disillusioned."

"But we live in a world where everyone wants to blame someone else. I've not been promoted because of them, I'm not rich because of them. The masons are the ideal scapegoat."

And, certainly until a particular book hit the shops a few years ago, not very fashionable either.

The number of Freemasons in Scotland has fallen dramatically over the last ten years - down around 50 per cent.

Today there are 660 Masonic



IF WALLS COULD SPEAK: The Lodge's function suite has been a meeting point for generations