



## The Almoner

### almoner

[ˈalmənər, ˈämənər]

NOUN

*historical*

1. an official distributor of alms.

#### Historical

The alms-chest was a box provided in church to receive contributions; in a Masonic lodge it is the charity box which provides the funds with which the lodge Almoner relieves any Brother, sometimes members of Brother's family, which need help. Originally the Almoner was an officer in a monastery. At St Paul's Cathedral in London, he distributed the Alms, had the care of the burial of the poor, and educated boys in music and literature for the service of the church. The Almonries in the 4 principal monasteries were often great establishments, with accommodation for the poor and infirm.

Many of the old guilds regularly relieved distressed Brethren and their families, and there are records in the fourteenth century of an amount of seven pence per week being allowed for a member of the Lincoln Guild of Tailors.

In a Sheffield lodge in 1764, and probably much earlier, there was a rule that

*“on each Stated Lodge meeting every Mem’ shall spend and put Sixpence into the Chest for the relief of distressed Freemasons. That the Junior Warden shall keep an exact acct of the reckoning... upon his negligence or omission he shall be accountable for the deficiency.”*

The early lodges of the eighteenth century had their own methods of raising charity funds for we find the Old King’s Arm Lodge, No. 28, ordering in October 1733 in October 1733, a ticket to be bought in

*“the present Lottery in hoped of success as heretofore for the sake of Charity. “*



The Almoner, originally, an officer responsible for distributing alms to the poor, usually connected with a religious house or other institution but also a position with some governments. In the 13th century, almoners were attached to the French court to distribute the royal alms, and in 1486 the office of grand almoner of France was established. The grand almoner was a high ecclesiastical dignitary who was in charge of the clergy attached to the court and who supervised charitable works. The office was suppressed in France in 1790, revived by Napoleon I and again by Napoleon III, and finally abolished in 1870. In England the offices of hereditary grand almoner and high almoner still exist, as part of the Queen’s Household. The high almoner, usually a bishop or other prelate, distributes the royal alms on Maundy Thursday.

In modern times the term almoner has also been used in Britain for a trained social worker, usually a woman, qualified to work in a medical setting. In this sense “almoner” was superseded in 1964 by the title medical social worker, the term also used in the United States. Medical social workers are employed by hospitals and public health departments.

## Almoner's Jewel



Almoners Bag with heart

### **Almoner Today**

Nowadays the role of the Lodge Almoner can more properly be described as that of the Lodge Welfare Officer. He is the focal point or coordinator of information regarding the well-being of the Brethren, their dependents, and widows of past members of the Lodge. He should be able to assist and advise, and, where necessary, enlist the support of Masonic and outside organizations to obtain financial and other assistance for those who need it.

The nature of the work of the Almoner is often confidential so much of what he does will be unknown to the brethren. The role itself requires tact, diplomacy and discretion; distressed circumstances are not an easy thing to admit to a close friend and brother. It often hurts to admit what appears to be failure and inability to cope. Health worries are often kept hidden from others. This is where confidentiality and a caring approach can be the key.

The Almoner's report is a regular item on every meeting agenda. The regular report will keep the Lodge up to date with the welfare of members and dependents, will emphasize the caring role that the Lodge is practicing and may stimulate a widening of Almoners role within the Lodge.

The very nature of Freemasonry makes every member a potential Almoner, and certainly, we should all try to help in our own way.

We all know that the masonic movement gives support and financial assistance to society at large through its charitable and philanthropic work, but there's another aspect, which is the aid that an almoner, sometimes called a 'caring officer', provides for lodge members and their families in time of need.

A job that's quiet and often unsung, an almoner needs to be an adviser, supporter and friend. Crucially, they also need to detect that help is required in the first place. Almoners embody the spirit of Freemasonry; their community work is not performed for show but because of a concern for others.

Someone who has experienced this is Paula Kilshawe-Fall. Seven years ago, the kindness and advice she received from local almoners helped her to rebuild a life that was falling to pieces. It's a story of stoicism, hope and bravery.

Ernie Greenhalgh is Provincial Grand Almoner for the Province of West Lancashire. 'Between the Craft and the Royal Arch we have just over 500 almoners,' he says, 'and their role has been to look after members' widows and their families, those who are elderly or in difficulties, to help with the filling in of forms and to dispense grants.'

Ernie believed that filling in forms was getting in the way. 'Now we have a team that focuses solely on admin, which frees up the almoners to focus completely on pastoral care.'

Being an almoner can be demanding, requiring time and perceptiveness. 'Lodge members and their families have a sense of privacy. They don't want to need assistance,' says Ernie. Which is where an almoner needs to be alert, to notice things. In winter, is the house cold? Why isn't the heating on? 'So an almoner sits down for a chat, and often the real story will come out.'

'I used to call him my fairy godfather – he gave me advice and emotional support.' Paula Kilshawe-Fall

It can be hard to find the right people to be almoners. 'You're looking for someone with tact, patience, humour and compassion – and who listens actively, searching for the meaning underneath what's being said.' So do you have to be a saint?

'Not exactly. But you need dedication and discretion, because people will tell you heartbreaking things, and you must keep those to yourself.'

The plus side, of course, is that almoners are making a difference. 'There's an incredible upside,' says Ernie. 'To be able to say, "We've got a grant for you," or "We've got you a chance to have that operation earlier" – it's wonderful. Whatever I've done in my life, I've done something here that's worthwhile, that's made a change for the better.'

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Seven years ago Paula's husband Adam died unexpectedly. He was 39, she was 34, and their children, Sarah and Adam, were four and three.

Adam Snr had run a property maintenance firm and it was only when he died that Paula realized how badly things had been going. Within weeks, she began to be harangued by creditors. 'I didn't realize the extent of the debts until Adam died. When he'd gone, I saw how he'd shielded me from the truth.'

Paula and the children lost their home and sought refuge with her parents. Worse was to come, though, because Adam had used that house as collateral and soon it, too, was swallowed in the debt. 'My parents lost the home they'd been in for 40 years,' says Paula, whose father died soon after.

She was alone. Or thought she was. After Adam's death, Paula had written to his lodge to notify them. The lodge contacted the Provincial Grand Almoner and, within days, almoner Brian Mason visited Paula. He saw that the family needed financial and emotional support if they were not, despite Paula's best efforts, to sink.

First, Brian took Paula through the state benefits she was entitled to. Next, he helped her to apply for grants from the masonic charities. She received awards from both and cried when she found out. 'The masons had become our guardian angels,' says Paula. A one-off grant from West Lancashire Province lifted the family out of homelessness.

'I was desperate to get some stability for the children. We're now in a rented council house, but I've made it pretty inside, and it's ours.'

There were still unpaid debts, however, and Paula was told that the only way forward would be to declare herself bankrupt. Brian supported her by going with her to court. She could finally start anew.

Paula is an upbeat, resilient woman, glowing with pride in her daughter and son, who are able to go on educational trips thanks to help from the masonic charities. 'I thank God every day that my husband had a connection with the Freemasons.'

As for Brian? 'Well,' she laughs, 'I used to call him my fairy godfather. He gave me advice and emotional support – he was like the kindest uncle.'

Brian recently handed over his role to a younger almoner, Tom Bradfield-Kay, who sees Paula regularly. According to Tom, he has one of the best jobs. 'When I retired last year, I needed something to give me the stimulation I got from my career, and the satisfaction you get from helping is immeasurable.'

For Paula, the future is hopeful. 'The Freemasons – well, to us, they're a family. My son wants to become a mason one day, and I'd like that. It seems such an amazing thing to be.'

## Assignment

Although the position of Almoner is not widely used in our jurisdiction, do you think this position would be a benefit to the lodge. Yes or no?