

Chasin' masons

*They've been viewed with suspicion for centuries, but **Luke Alsford** finds Freemasons are just normal people*

It is a building famed for housing secrecy and hidden rituals, yet I walked straight inside.

In fact, anyone can saunter in.

The location? The United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) – home to 170,000 Freemasons, who have been at the centre of conspiracies for centuries.

Inside we saw rooms where members practice 'play-like' ceremonies, form bonds and raise millions for charity.

Our guides were two Freemasons at the centre of efforts to attract more young members to their ranks.

We met them at the masons' HQ, a short distance from Covent Garden. The ornate building boasts marble lobbies, sweeping staircases and mosaic floors. Its many, many rooms feel both majestic and eerie – perhaps that is why it has been used as the set for secretive locations in films like *Sherlock Holmes* and *James Bond*.

Inside, men in black ties from all walks of life are gathered. One is Nando Caicedo, a charity director who came to the UK from Colombia when he was eight.

He joined six years ago after struggling with his sense of identity and belonging.

'London is one of the loneliest cities in the world to live in,' he said. 'But I am not alone because of the Masons. It gives me something I had not found in any other walk of life... that social connection.'

He is a member of the West Kent lodge – one of more than 7,000 in the UK.

Lodges are where members meet fellow masons to enjoy meals and drinks.

Fellow host Mitch Bryan, 36, became a mason 14 years ago.

'More people are masons than you think,' he told Metro.

When newbies go to their first meeting, they take part in an initiation ceremony – a 'show prepared for you' by the established members, Nando explains.

'It's almost like a

play. Each part has a different teaching within it, like morality and value,' he

added. These 'plays' are serious business. Mitch rehearsed his parts while walking the dog and riding on the bus.

I didn't see any first-hand, but I did stumble across halls ready for meetings.

What the candles, books, hammers and blocks of stone mean in the ceremony, Mitch and Nando won't tell me. The same goes for members' mysterious hand shake.

My hosts appear almost exasperated when I asked about it.

'The secret handshake is one of the duller things in Freemasonry,' Mitch said. 'Back in the day, it was a way of just communicating your skill and ability in medieval stonemasonry.'

Nando adds: 'Look it up online. But if you want to become a Freemason don't... it's like skipping to the end of the movie.'

While info about the rituals is readily available, conspiracy theories continue to abound about the society. More than 300 Met Police officers were this year forced to declare an involvement in Freemasonry.

The decision stigmatised Freemasons said UGLE, but the Met insists it will improve public trust in the force.

However, despite conspiracy theories and funny looks, it is clear secrecy around the society is part of the allure.

Mitch said: 'People take the mick but it's nice to be a part of something bigger, something you can always learn from.'

When you join, you are handed gloves, papers and a white apron, to indicate you are at the bottom of the ladder.

But slowly you work your way through three levels – Enter Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason – acquiring rosettes, squares and other ornaments to

signify your growing rank.

If you're as eager as Mitch and Nando, you can then start taking on different roles in your lodge, such as master, warden or assistant.

Lodge meetings, which the pair attend about seven times a year, are fundraising machines for charities. In 2020 alone, the Freemasons contributed £51.1million to charitable causes.

While Nando and Mitch are fresh-faced model members, it is clear walking around UGLE they are the exception.

The building is swarming with what must be said are older members.

But adverts on Facebook and Instagram to attract younger members are working, Mitch tells me.

'There has been a huge revival on younger masons,' he explains.

'They come together and go bowling, to the cinema, on pub crawls.

'It has helped membership greatly because they're bringing more masons in.

'Everyone says it is full of old people but they were 25 once.'

■ Visit ugle.org.uk to find out more.



Next generation: Nando Calcedo is leading effort to attract younger members and says Freemasonry has found him friends

Behind closed doors: Mitch Bryan (below) showed Metro around ornate rooms at the HQ of Freemasons – the United Grand Lodge of England

