



PAST TIMES
Ancient Free Gardeners
Rose of Roscommon Lodge No 263
Seaton Ross

The heyday of the friendly society and benefit club was during the Victorian and Edwardian era when they spread widely and provided a useful outlet for reformist energies, and offered facilities for saving and some small degree of security against losses caused by sickness and death.

The main purpose of a friendly society was to act as a benefit club in times of sickness and death, but some societies built halls to provide social and educational facilities, and some lent money for mortgages. They met regularly at the village alehouse and provided many working-class men with their first opportunity to hold public office. The annual club feast was often the social highlight of the year in villages and market towns. Many old photographs survive of feast-day processions, with bands and banners.

The Rose of Roscommon Lodge No. 263 of Ancient Free Gardeners was founded at Seaton Ross on the 1st June 1839 and met regularly – usually every two weeks at The Blacksmiths Arms Inn, North End, Seaton Ross. Its purpose as a friendly society was through membership and subscriptions, to provide assistance in the event of sickness, incapacity or death. Membership was originally open only to men involved in gardening and assistance given in particular to aged and infirm gardeners interested in horticultural pursuits and their widows. Eventually, membership became more open and men who were not gardeners (known as Free Gardeners) began to be admitted into the order. Several of the early members were James Kempley (Farmer), Thomas Stubbings (Farmer), John Sykes Jr. (Victualler, Blacksmith's Arms Inn), Rev. Thomas Terry (Curate of Seaton Ross) and William Watson (Farmer & Land Surveyor) to name but a few. The Yorkshire Gazette of the 6th June 1840 reported on the 1st anniversary celebration of the lodge and the following is an extract from the newspaper report:

SEATON ROSS – “The brethren of the Rose of Roscommon Lodge of Ancient Free Gardeners commemorated their anniversary on Thursday last, in a spirited and very appropriate manner. Arrayed in the insignia of the order and accompanied by Walker’s brass band, with beautiful district banner, the members, together with a numerous body of friends, proceeded to Everingham Hall, the seat of Charles Maxwell, esq., where the whole party were regaled with an ample supply of true old English ale. They were then joined by the Rev. Mr. Terry, the worthy rector of Seaton Ross, and proceeded to the parish church, where the rev. gentleman preached a most powerful, brilliant, and faithful sermon from 2 Peter, c1, v. 5, 6, 7. The service being concluded, the dinner was next resorted to; here profusion, good taste, and excellent order truly prevailed. The company being so large, upwards of a hundred, it was found requisite to erect a marquee, which was tastefully and appropriately decorated with flowers and evergreens. After toasts and speeches, the company separated at an early hour, highly gratified with the day’s proceedings”.

It is uncertain how long the Rose of Roscommon Lodge No.263 existed, as records are very limited and it appears to have lasted only a few years. Often membership of benefit clubs was too small and too unstable for success, members would fall out in bad times, and as a result income often failed to match outgoings and financial collapse ensued. No evidence has been found to suggest this was the case at Seaton Ross and perhaps membership dwindled for a variety of reasons. Friendly Societies have been sadly forgotten in the past and should be remembered as they played a very important role in the lives of working class families such as the Ancient Free Gardeners of Seaton Ross, Rose of Roscommon Lodge No. 263.

The illustration shown above was part of the ceremonial regalia of the order namely, the square and compasses accompanied by a gardener’s pruning knife.

Malcolm Young