

## THE RESTORATION LODGE OF CHESTER

The Reverend Neville Barker-Cryer, delivered at the November Conference of the Cornerstone Society 2002

For some 20 years I have held the firm conviction that there was, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a distinctive and home-grown English Freemasonry of an increasingly speculative kind. During that period the fact of the known Restoration period lodge at Chester has been of interest to me but only in the last year, and then only because of where my much longer studies of Old York Masonry at the same period were clearly leading me, have I returned to detailed research on this topic. What I lay before you today will take account of what others have written but will also add some fresh material that will set this Chester Masonic institution more in context, and offer further insight into how 17<sup>th</sup> century English Masonry developed. In the Millennium history of Cestrian Lodge No.425 and elsewhere we note the many local building projects of the five centuries before 1540. The Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburgh, the Whitefriars and Greyfriars priories, the fine churches of St. John, St. Peter and St. Mary, the Castle and the town walls, to name but the major works, ensured regular employment for the operative masons. A royal order of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1354 stated: "Letters of protection (are) to be made for 12 of the carpenters, masons and other workmen who are continually employed by the abbot and convent on the works of the church, so that that number at least may be reserved for the said works and not withdrawn by the Prince's ministers" (Burne: p. 90)

Chester, like York, could fully justify having its undisturbed locally resident body of stone craftsmen for civil as well as ecclesiastical works and did not need to rely on wandering craftsmen. Under Henry VIII, however, Chester stonemasons experienced dismay, as did those across the Pennines. The cessation of local castle construction or maintenance, the closure of all religious houses and their hospitals, the dismantling of chantry chapels and the growing preference for domestic brick and timber construction meant the end of most, if not all, the former operative sites lodges. The absence of records for such bodies does not mean postulating undue secrecy. As those site lodges disappeared so did their records. Yet the Chester Masons had an alternative to hand. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Masons here had formed a Company or Guild. We know this to be so because we have from that period onwards their Ancient Charges and Regulations that were required by royal authority and produced, in the form of the Cooke MS, as a pattern for the 1717 Grand Lodge by Chester-born George Payne, its 2<sup>nd</sup> Grand Master. The Chester Masons Company also produced, in cooperation with the Goldsmiths, a waggon play (or pageant) to be included in a public procession on or after Corpus Christi Day in June each year. The plays here presented were compiled from material supplied c. 1375 by a Chester monk, Sir Henry Francis. The shared Goldsmiths and Masons play was 'The slaying of the children of Israel by Herod', whose content was appropriate to both traditions as this extract can testify: (The three Kings were seen bearing precious gifts, including gold)

There came to us kings three

And told us their intent

To seek a child that born should be

That was said by prophecy

That should be King of Judee

And many another land.

We gave them leave to search and see

(All companies had this right)

And come again to this city,

And if he were of such degree

We would not him withstand.

But if they had come back again

All three traitours should have been slain. (part of the masons' tradition)

Lack of time prevents my dilating further upon the implications of this production which took place in Chester for at least 200 years. What has to be recognised is that at a time when devout and prominent citizens of Chester were deprived, by two Tudor monarchs, of their parish and Saints Guilds it was not only natural but instinctive that those who still valued and desired such Fraternity life and religious practice should gravitate to those trade guilds that were still permitted and which, in any case, were the mainstay of local government. The traditions and customs of the Masons Company clearly attracted members who were non-operatives but who were willing to pay the required dues and abide by their regulations. But that was not all.

To a Guild like that of the Masons there became attached something distinctive which had now been largely lost as a result of their depleted operative work, the tradition of holding a lodge. Hence some non-operatives who joined the Guild would, as time passed, request also the privilege of being accepted as members of the Lodge, with all the special aura that that seemed to possess.

There might even be some members of other Guilds who joined only the lodge, though no one could join the Lodge who was not already a Freeman of the city. The question for those admitted to such a lodge was not therefore, "Are you a free man and of the full age?" but "Are you a Freeman?" for then you would naturally be recognised as of full age. Is it any wonder that the recorded Guild Lodge in Chester, to which we now turn, was so replete with significant local citizens, primarily but not only of the building trades?

It is at this point that we encounter a man called Randle Holme III. Being an heraldic painter by trade and also a deputy officer of the College of Arms, as were his father and grandfather before him, it is hardly surprising that in 1649 he should begin to assemble material for a comprehensive work entitled "The Academie of Armourie" which was finally published in 1688. In this volume he intriguingly drew attention to the existence of "that Society called Freemasons" of which he was himself a member. Whilst it is again impossible in the time available today to draw out all the implications of what he wrote in that work there are some details of contemporary Masonic practice which we need to identify. He speaks of his high regard for "the Fellowship of Masons because of its Antiquity". Whilst he nowhere identifies precisely what he meant by 'Fellowship' or 'Antiquity' he does however give us a description of "A Fraternity, or Society, or Brotherhood, or Company; (as) such in a corporation, that are of one and the same trade, or occupation, who being joyned together by oath and covenant, do follow such orders and rules, as are made, or to be made for the good order, rule and support of such and every of their occupations. These several Fraternities are generally governed by one or two Masters, and two Wardens, but most Companies with us by 2 Aldermen, and 2 Stewards, the lat(t)er, being to receive and pay what concerns them." My research has revealed that only three Chester Companies had a Master and Wardens - the Goldsmiths, Masons and Bricklayers. The similarity of the first two eased their cooperation. Whatever else may be deduced from this contemporary statement, by one who was himself an active member of the 'Society of Freemasons' in Chester, it is quite clear that we are not talking here, as we might be at the same period in Scotland, about what was, or had been, a solely operative masons' lodge connected with work on a building site. What is being described here is something connected to a Fraternity that is also a recognized Company of a local civic community where other trades also preserve their Guild identity. In addition, however, and peculiar to this trade, there is this attached Lodge to which selected members of this, or a, Guild are admitted, whether they are working masons or not. We are thus not dealing with an old operative 'site lodge' which is turning into something else but a new body which can only be called a Guild Lodge. The details, such as we have, of the Lodge membership confirm that this is what we are dealing with, though time again limits detailed mention of them. If that is correct, then the 'Antiquity' of which Randle Holme III speaks would not refer to the age of the operative craft but must be the length of time that the Masons' Guild and Lodge has existed. We know, for example, that the Masons' Company bore heraldic arms in public in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Randle Holme III then remarks: "In being conversant amongst them I have observed the use of these several Tools following some whereof I have seen borne in Coats of Armour." He then proceeds to list them in three separate passages: a square-bottomed shovel to temper mortar and dig foundations; a hand hammer, a chisel, a pick, axe, punch, mallet, mattock and trowel, a Mason 'Commander' or great maul, a triangle and square. In addition there are 'the rule or ten-foot rod, moulds, fillets, Pillars (which)', and here he passes from practical to allegorical terms, 'are the Hieroglyphics of Fortitude and Constancy.. and to Limit out the Bound (and) sometimes for Ornament, as those of the Temple" and the Columns, of which he adds, "I shall, in two examples, set forth all their words of Art used about them; by which any Gentleman may be able to discourse a Free-Mason or other workman in his own terms."

This latter statement could be interpreted to mean that a Gentleman with some building project on his property could engage a working mason in useful discussion about it. In the light of what we now know about the earliest York practice, it could also mean that as there were both gentlemen and working masons in the same Guild Lodge they could sensibly converse about the same things when meeting there. We are also introduced to other terms referring to the stages of stone working that certainly became steadily familiar in Masonic ritual: the "Rough stone, or Penny stone, such as are rough cut out of the Quarry and are without any shape or form to make work (or use) of; Perpin or Perpend (that) are less than the size of Ashlers; Ashler (which) is a stone, a Yard long and 8. 9, or 10 inches square."

In uncovering the matters relating to emergence and demise of this kind of Lodge it will be useful to begin by looking in more depth at the background of the provider of what we have already learnt. Randle Holme III's father and grandfather, says the Cestrian Lodge History, "were very eminent men of their time, being genealogists, historians and leading citizens, (both of them) being Mayor."

Randle Holme I was apprenticed on 10 January 1587 to a Thomas Chaloner who was a Freeman of Chester and the local Deputy to the College of Heralds, "a painter, poet and Antiquary as well as a member of Lord Derby's company of players." (AQC Vol. 42, p. 313) This latter fact is important for it provides a rare proof of a link between those involved in post-mystery play production and known speculative Freemasons. After Chaloner's death in 1598 Randle Holme I married his late master's widow and by also becoming Deputy Herald for Cheshire and other counties he so built up the business that the Randle Holmes II, III and IV all benefitted from the foundation laid by Thos. Chaloner. What has not been perhaps recognised hitherto is that the Norroy, King of Arms, to whom Randle Holme II became Deputy for Cheshire, Lancashire and North Wales, was Sir William Dugdale, the father in law of another Freemason, Elias Ashmole. Randle Holme III also became his Deputy when Sir William was made Garter King of Arms. Nor is that all.

Though it may seem a slight diversion it is, I believe, important to record that Daniel, son of Thomas Chaloner, became a Freeman of Chester as a sculptor and freemason having served his apprenticeship as a stone cutter in London where he also became a Freeman and died in 1636. His will states clearly that he was a 'Citizen and ffremason of London' and, most revealing of all, he was "Warden of the (London) Masons' Company while Nicholas Stone was Master'. There is thus a strong likelihood that Daniel was also a member of the London Acception as the lodge attached to the Company

there was known. Moreover, at the edge of the Chaloner monumental inscription in St. Michael's Church, Chester, there is a triangle pointing downwards surmounted by a circle having a point at its centre. If nothing else it was certainly Chaloner's mark.

What all this suggests is that the Randle Holmeses grew up in a circle where Guild life, with the possibility of a speculative Masonic attachment, was a real option. The emergence of an actual Guild Lodge in Chester was not a lone phenomenon but part of a natural development across the land. The claim of Dr. Plot, another student of heraldry, about Freemasonry being spread countrywide has to be recognized as more than a casual remark.

The Randle Holme III MS states that this Chester lodge dates from 1650 and if, as seems likely from the memorial panel in St. Mary's on the Hill, Randle Holme II was also a member of it, for exactly the same reasons as his son, then this is perfectly feasible. Some have argued that on the basis of the evidence now known about the members recorded in the handwriting of Randle Holme III this list must be from c. 1673 but that does not rule out the earlier premise. There is something else. We can now understand why there were operative Masons in such an English lodge as well as gentlemen and employers. The working masons were there by right because of their trade and they would be able to regulate the form of the lodge work and ensure the retention of its traditional history. Other members brought their share of new knowledge, social influence, finance and piety. The Lodge would steadily change. Its form might be stable but its content would start to alter. The transition from practical masonry to philosophical Temple building begins, even though the Guild still had to bring out a Midsummer play in the public domain and do so until 1673. What it begins to do is to transfer role play into ritual of a new kind. As Randle Holme III correctly deduced, the very tools that appeared in his 'Academie' book were now presented as moral examples. What happened to this Restoration period Lodge? That is still an area where more research is continuing along lines that are similar to those on York. We know that "growing economic prosperity (in Chester) was reflected in the amount of new building which took place after the Restoration. In part this was due to the continued reconstruction of buildings damaged or destroyed during the Civil War but there was also considerable new building with changing social patterns and architectural taste." (Peter Carrington. "Chester". 1994 pp. 92f). The new stately buildings are symbolised by the Common Hall, in brick with stone quoins, finials and facings. The Walls of Chester also needed regular attention. As the stonemasons' trade thus recovered so the operative masons sought again a Guild for themselves alone and it is interesting that in 1691 six named working masons of Chester applied for a new Charter of incorporation. This seems to show that these masons regarded their older company as no longer serving their purpose or of having been transposed into something quite different. Hence they needed a new trade Company. What is revealing is that at least one of these masons, William Wood, was a member of the Restoration Lodge that we have been considering. Yet if the older Guild still existed, having members of some consequence in City affairs, is it not likely that they would have opposed any separate new Masons' company being formed? What happened was that the masons were authorised to incorporate with the Bricklayers and Carpenters. This must mean that the previous Guild was no longer the channel for the stone-building trade but simply a formal basis for their 'accepted' Lodge. As it was, those Lodge members who survived 1700 started to find a new format and a new home. The search for a place to hold a lodge elsewhere, without the demands of a Guild, was now on. By the time the changeover in Chester took place the family ties with the first lodge might have been weakened. And yet, I find certain pieces of linkage very interesting indeed. There is still more to be discovered but the following examples especially give us food for thought.

Alderman Street, a Freeman Beerbrewer, was a member of the Restoration Lodge and died in 1696. His daughter, Alice, married Roger Comberbach, the Recorder of Chester, and their son, also a Roger and Recorder, was a member of the lodge at the Sun Inn in 1725 and Provincial Grand Warden in 1727.

Other connections appear in the other Chester lodges mentioned in the first minute Book of Grand Lodge for 1725 and now regarded as 'Time Immemorial'. A Bro. Gamull, Junior Warden of the Castle and Faulkon Lodge, was a close relative of Bro. Harvey of the earlier Restoration Lodge and at least three other direct relatives are involved. What is certainly intriguing is the Randle Holme succession.

Randle Holme IV sold his heraldic painting business to a Mr. Bassano who was a Freeman in 1711 and the producer of a book specially designed to record the subsequent Provincial Grand Masters of Cheshire. His apprentice and the next owner of the firm was Edward Orme, the first Worshipful Master of the Lodge formed in 1738, the forerunner of Chester's current oldest Lodge, Cestrian. Randle Holme IV's grandson was initiated in 1755. All these links cannot be just sheer coincidence and who knows what else was inherited besides marriage, trade and property papers? 17<sup>th</sup> century Chester Freemasonry, it seems, had been alive and fruitful.