

Elias Ashmole and the Warrington Lodge

by Peter Clatworthy



Elias Ashmole was born in Breadmarket Street, Lichfield in Staffordshire on the 23rd May 1617. His father was a saddler and his mother was the daughter of a wealthy Coventry Draper. He attended Lichfield Grammar School and was a chorister at Lichfield Cathedral. He went to live in London in 1638 and became a Solicitor. He married Eleanor Mainwaring (1603–1641) a member of the poor but aristocratic family. Eleanor died whilst pregnant.

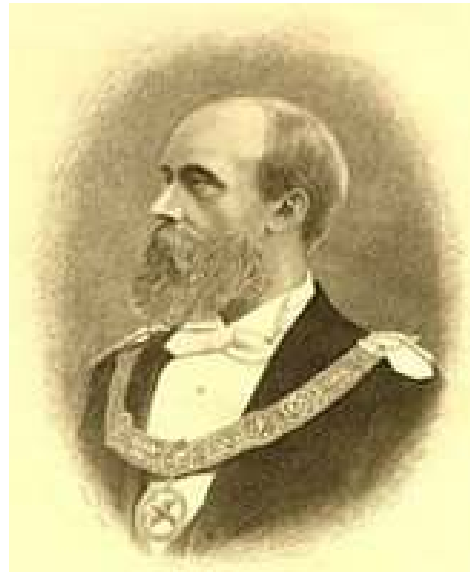
Elias Ashmole supported Charles I in the Royalist cause and at the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642 he left London for the house of his father-in-law at Smallwood in Cheshire.

He was appointed King's Commissioner of Excise at Lichfield in 1644. Soon afterwards he was given a military post at Oxford where he served as an ordnance officer for the King's forces. During this time he studied mathematics and physics at his lodgings, Brasenose College.

In 1645, he left Oxford to accept the position of Commissioner of Excise at Worcester. Elias Ashmole was given the additional military post of Captain in Lord Astley's Regiment of Foot, part of the Royalist Infantry. In July 1646, he retired once more to Cheshire after the surrender of Worcester to Parliamentary forces. Three weeks previously he learned of the death of his mother from the plague. On October 16th, 1646 he was initiated a Freemason at Kirmincham, Warrington.

Elias Ashmole's initiation has been claimed to be the first recorded initiation of a "speculative" Freemason. If this be true we must remember that he died on the 18th May, 1692.

To put the initiation of Elias Ashmole into context, we rely in this article upon Robert Freke Gould, who in his *"History of Freemasonry Its Antiquities, Symbols, Constitutions, Customs, Part 2"*, deals with the question of Elias Ashmole's initiation into Freemasonry as follows:



"Although the admission of Elias Ashmole into the ranks of the Freemasons may have been, and probably was, unproductive of the momentous consequences which have been so lavishly ascribed to it, the circumstances connected with his membership of what in South Britain was then a very obscure fraternity - so little known, indeed, that not before the date of Ashmole's reception or adoption does it come within the light of history - are, nevertheless, of the greatest importance in our general enquiry, since, on a close view, they will be found to supply a quantity of information derivable from no other source, and which, together with the additional evidence I shall adduce from contemporary writings, will give us a tolerably faithful picture of *English Freemasonry* in the seventeenth century.

"The entries in Ashmole's "Diary" which relate to his membership of the craft are three in number, the first in priority being the following:-

"1646, Oct. 16, 4.30. P.M. - I was made a Free Mason at Warrington in Lancashire, with Coll: Henry Mainwaring of Karinham in Cheshire. The names of those that were then of the Lodge [were] Mr Rich. Penket Warden, Mr James Collier, Mr Rich. Sankey, Henry Littler, John Ellam Rich: Ellam & Hugh Brewer."

The "Diary" then continues :-

"Oct. 25. - I left Cheshire, and came to London about the end of this month, viz, the 30th day, 4 Hor. post merid. About a fortnight or three weeks before [after!] I came to London, Mr Jonas Moore brought and acquainted me with Mr William Lilly: it was on the Friday night, and I think on the 20th of Nov."

"Dec. 3. - This day, at noon, I first became acquainted with Mr John Booker."

"It will be seen that Ashmole's initiation or admission into Freemasonry, preceded by upwards of a month, his acquaintances with his astrological friends, Lilly and Booker.

"In ascending the stream of English Masonic history, we are deserted by all known contemporary testimony, save that of the "Old Charges" or "Constitution," directly we have passed the year 1646. This of itself would render the proceedings at Warrington in that year of surpassing interest to the student of Masonic antiquities. That Ashmole and Mainwaring, adherents respectively of the Court, and the Parliament, should be admitted into Freemasonry at the same time and place, is also a very noteworthy circumstance. But it is with the internal character, or, in other words, the composition, of the lodge into which they were received that we are chiefly concerned. Down to the year 1881 the prevalent belief was, that, although a lodge was in existence at Warrington in 1646, all were of the "craft of Masonry" except Ashmole and Colonel Mainwaring. A flood of light, however, was suddenly shed on the subject by the research of Mr W. H. Rylands, who, in perhaps the very best of the many valuable articles contributed to the now defunct *Masonic Magazine*, has so far proved the essentially *speculative* character of the lodge, as to render it difficult to believe that there could have been a single *operative* Mason present on the afternoon of October 16, 1646. Thus Mr Richard Penket[h], the *Warden* is shown to have been a scion of the Penkeths of Penketh, and the last of his race who held the family property.

"The two names which next follow were probably identical with those of James Collyer or Colliar, of Newton-le-Willows, Lancashire, and Richard Sankie, of the family of Sonkey or Sankey, as they were called, landowners in Warrington from a very early period; they were buried respectively at Winwick and Warrington - the former on January 17, 1673-4, and the latter on September 28, 1667. Of the four remaining Freemasons named in the "Diary", though without the prefix of "Mr," it is shown by Rylands that a gentle family of Littler or Lytlor existed in Cheshire in 1646; while he prints the wills of Richard Ellom, Freemason of Lyme [Lymme], and of John Ellams, husbandman, of Burton, both in the County of Cheshire - that of the former bearing date September 7, 1667, and of the latter June 7, 1689. That there were the Ellams named by Ashmole cannot be positively affirmed, but they were doubtless members of the same yeoman family, a branch of which had apparently settled at Lymm, a village in Cheshire, about five miles from Warrington. Of the family of Hugh Brewer, nothing has come to light beyond the fact that a person bearing this patronymic served in some military capacity under the Earl of Derby in 1643.

"The proceedings at Warrington in 1646 establish some very important facts in relation to the antiquity of Freemasonry, and to its character as a speculative science. The words Ashmole use, "the names of those who were

then of the lodge," implying as they do either that some of the *existing* members were absent, or that at a previous period the lodge-roll comprised other and *additional* names beyond those recorded in the "Diary," amply justify the conclusion that the lodge, when Ashmole joined it, was not a new creation. The term "Warden," moreover, which follows the name of Mr Rich. Penket, will of itself remove any lingering doubt whether the Warrington Lodge could boast a higher antiquity than the year 1646, since it points with the utmost clearness to the fact, that an actual official of a subsisting branch of the Society of Freemasons was present at the meeting.

*"Finis p me
Eduarda : Sankey
decimo seato die Octobria
Anno Domini 1646"*

"Commenting upon the proceedings at the Warrington meeting, Fort remarks, "It is a subject of curious speculation as to the identity of Richard Sankey, a member of the above lodge. Sloane's MS, No. 3848, was transcribed and finished by one Edward Sankey, on the 16th day of October 1646, the day Elias Ashmole was initiated into the secrets of the craft." The research of Rylands has afforded a probable, if not altogether and absolute, solution of the problem referred to, and from the same fount I shall again draw, in order to show that an Edward Sankey, "son to Richard Sankey, gent.," was baptized at Warrington, February 3, 1621-1.

"It therefore appears that on October 16, 1646, a Richard Sankey was present in lodge, and that an Edward Sankey copied and attested one of the old manuscript Constitutions; and that a Richard Sankey of Sankey flourished at this time, whose son Edward, if alive, we must suppose would have been a young man of four or five and twenty. Now, as it seems to me, the identification of the Sankeys of Sankey, father and son, with the Freemason and the copyist of the "Old Charges" respectively, is rendered as clear as anything lying within the doctrine of probabilities can be made to appear.

"I assume then, that a version of the old manuscript Constitutions, which has fortunately come down to us, was in circulation at Warrington in 1646. Thus we should have, in the year named, speculative, and, it may be, also operative masonry, co-existing with the actual use, by lodges and brethren, of the Scrolls or Constitutions of which the Sloane MS, 3843 (13), affords an illustration in point. Upon this basis I shall presently contend, that having traced a system of Freemasonry, combining the speculative with the operative element, together with a use or employment of the MS, legend of the craft, as prevailing in the first half of the seventeenth century - when contemporary testimony fails us, as we continue to direct our course up the stream of Masonic history, the evidence of manuscript Constitutions, successively dating further and further back, until the transcripts are exhausted, without apparently bringing us any nearer to their common original, may well leave us in doubt at what point of our research between

the era of the *Lodge* at Warrington, 1646, and that of the *Lodge* at York, 1355, a monopoly of these ancient documents by the working masons can be viewed as even remotely possible.

The remaining entries in the "Diary" of a Masonic character are the following:-

"March 1682

"10. - About 5 P.M. I recd: a Summons to appr at a Lodge to be held the next day, at Masons Hall London.

"11 - Accordingly I went, & about Noone were admitted into the Fellowship of Free Masons.

"Sr William Wilson Knight, Capt. Rich: Borthwick, Mr Will: Woodman, Mr Wm Grey, Mr Samuel Taylor & Mr William Wise.

"I was the Senior Fellow among them (it being 35 years since I was admitted) There were present beside my selfe the Fellowes after named,

"Mr Tho: Wise Mr of the Masons Company this present years. Mr Thomas Shorthose, Mr Thomas Shadbolt, xxxxx Waindsford Esq., Mr Nich: Young, Mr John Shorthose, Mr William Hamon, Mr John Thompson, & Mr Will: Stanton.

"Wee all dined at the halfe Moone Tavern in Cheapside, at a Nobledinner prepared at the charge of the New = accepted Masons."

From the circumstances, that Ashmole records his attendance at a meeting of the *Freemasons* held in a hall of the Company of *Masons*, a good deal of confusion has been engendered, which some casual remarks of Dr Anderson, in the Constitutions of 1723, have done much to confirm. By way of filling up a page, as he expresses it, he quotes from an old Record of *Masons*, to the effect that, "the said Record describing a *Coat of Arms*, much the same with *that* of the LONDON COMPANY of *Freemen Masons*, it is generally believ'd that the said *Company* is descended of the ancient *Fraternity*; and that in former Times no Man was *Free* of that *Company* until he was install'd in some *Lodge* of *Free* and *Accepted Masons*, as a necessary Qualification." "But" he adds, "that laudable Practice seems to have been long in Dissuetude."

Preston, in this instance not unnaturally, copied from Anderson, and others of course have followed suit; but as I believe myself to be the only person who has been allowed access to the books and records of the *Masons'* Company for purposes of historical research, the design of this work will be better fulfilled by a concise summary of the results of my examination, together with such collateral information as I have been able to acquire, than by attempting to fully describe the superstructure of error which has been erected on so treacherous a foundation."

In summary, we can clearly see from Robert Freke Gould's writings on this subject and also from revisiting his researches and sources, that Elias Ashmole was not *"the first recorded incident of the initiation of a speculative Freemason in England"*.

Ashmole was initiated into an English Speculative Masonic Lodge in Kermincham, Warrington, on October 16th, 1646. The Lodge at Kermincham, Warrington was clearly a speculative Freemason's Lodge of some long standing.

In March 1682, Ashmole travelled to London to be made a Fellow of the Craft, the ceremony took place in another speculative Freemasons' Lodge meeting in the *hall* of the *Masons' Company*.

The Lodge at Warrington could not have been a stand-alone *independent* Lodge as others have claimed. Ashmole's initiation was attended by *"an actual official of a subsisting branch of the Society of Freemasons"*.

Ashmole's initiation was considered to be entirely regular, by the Freemasons of that London *Lodge*. This could only have been the case if the Lodge at Warrington, Sankey's Lodge, and the London Lodge all worked in accordance with *"The Constitutions of Masonrie"* recognising the original Ancient Landmarks of a Free Mason.

Robert Freke Gould was a lieutenant in the 31st Regiment, English Army. He later qualified as a barrister. From 1868, he is best remembered as an early proponent of the authentic school of masonic research and for his three-volume History of Freemasonry (1883-1887)

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