



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

Fred & Charlie ask.....



Premier Grand Lodge

But why in 1717?

Premier Grand Lodge - Why 1717

It was a miserably grey and misty day on which even the birds were walking and any trappings of Covid were distinctly unwelcome. Meetings outside 'the bubble' had by now become forbidden fruit. Zoom however permitted some, shall we say, 'scrumping' and Charlie dialled up Fred to see if the 'Old Chap' was still alive and 'firing on all four.' After they'd exchanged the usual pleasantries and family news Charlie peered at Fred in the Zoom screen and, with a mock bow of the head, demanded: *'Oh Ancient One. Are those little grey cells still working?'* Fred may have thought 'cheeky young pup' but more constructively responded *'What's up now?'*

Charlie decided respect might pay bigger dividends. *'Premier Grand Lodge was formed in 1717, Fred? Why? What made the four London lodges decide to unite just then? Had anything happened?'*

Fred's reply was remarkably brief - but also remarkably accurate. *'Survival, Charlie, sheer survival. That's what happened.'*

Charlie was immediately intrigued This all smacked of a hidden past not yet revealed to the 'light blues.' He sensed a murky mystery.

Fred's question however was to the point. *'What do you know of the Stuarts and the English Civil War in the C17, Charlie?'*

Charlie looked at Fred quizzically. *'Diddly squat, squire. Our history lessons dealt with the C20, the two World Wars, the rise of Nazism, the Holocaust, the United Nations - that sort of thing.'* He added with mock solemnity: *'Why, did anything important happen before then?'*

'A little, just a little, my boy.' Fred began to feel in an expansive mood. *'In the mid-1600s England was so bitterly divided between Protestants and Catholics and between the 'Cavalier' supporters of the king and the 'Roundheads' favouring the supremacy of parliament that a long and calamitous civil war broke out - dividing religions, communities and even families.'*

'Like the Democrats and Republicans, you mean?'

.'No, this one was really brutal. The casualty rate, pro rata, was greater than during the Second World War!. Peace was finally achieved but only on the clear understanding that Parliament and the Protestant religion were to remain supreme over king and Catholicism.'

'Sorry, Fred, but am I missing something? Quite what has all this got to do with the Masonic Grand Lodge?' Charlie added somewhat defensively, *'I can easily get confused!.'*

September 1714

'I'm just trying to set the scene for you, Charlie. You can't possibly understand why a Grand Lodge was necessary in 1717 unless you're aware of all the religious and political pressures on the social scene. Just bear with me.'

'During the time leading up to the year 1717 the Catholic royal family (of James Stuart – popularly known as 'the Jacobites') had remained exiled in France close to Paris but they still believed vehemently that they remained the legitimate rulers of England and, with the Pope's Blessing, were destined to restore the English nation to the true Catholic faith.'

'Around 1700 England, Holland and Germany (Protestant nations) were at war with France and Spain (Catholic nations) over trade, colonies, royal succession, religion... take your pick. Within the two English political parties

the Whigs (or Liberals) strongly favoured the other Protestant nations but many ministers and noblemen in the Tory government, although nominally supporting the war against France and Spain, had also been travelling regularly to the French Court in Paris for commercial and political discussions.'

'...But, er, Grand Lodge...?' pleaded a troubled Charlie, now approaching information overload.

'Stay with it, Charlie. We're getting close. September 1714 was a critical month. The Queen died childless. In accordance with tradition the closest Protestant relative, Prince George of Hanover, was invited to take the throne. However the prospect of a German-speaking Prince as king was deeply unpopular across the nation which, following the hardships of the long War on the Continent, was becoming increasingly restless.'

'Aware of King George's unpopularity and the English unrest, the Jacobites - using French financial support and Dutch mercenaries - planned to ferment an early rebellion to re-install a Catholic king on the English throne.'

'Peace eventually returned to Europe after signing the final Treaty of Utrecht in that same month, September 1714, so the Tory Government promptly started to down-size the English army. The Whig Opposition however observed with some alarm that the Government was disbanding only those regiments with leaders allied to the Whigs but retaining regiments with officers of a Tory (and therefore potentially Jacobite) persuasion. They smelt a Catholic plot.'

'To counter any such attempts at Catholic insurrection the Whig Opposition quietly created an informal army of armed followers, some 30,000 strong. They meant business.'

'The arrival of King George however would almost certainly imply the installation of a Whig government favouring the Protestants. For their part the existing Tory ministers also became apprehensive. Because of the Tory connections with the Catholic Jacobites and the French Royal Court during the war, those links with the enemy might now be seen as treasonable acts. The penalty for treason in 1717 was castration followed by partial garrotting and, while still alive, quartering of the body on a butcher's slab. While Bishop Heber might pen that all prospects please and only man is vile, such a penalty might well be considered a prospect that was distinctly unpleasing and without any doubt rather vile. Tory resolve became stiffened'

'Finally on 20th September 1714 – a busy month - it was recorded that "King George entered London most magnificently" and he soon installed a Whig government. The country was now tinder-box dry and, still fearful of a Catholic insurrection and an ensuing civil war, it waited apprehensively for the spark that would set it all ablaze.'

'The conflagration came in September 1715 when the Jacobites at last struck with the assistance of French ships and money and 5,000 Dutch troops who landed north of Edinburgh and along the Devon coast. James Stuart, the king-in-waiting, arrived in December and sought strenuously to raise additional support from the northern Catholic and other sympathetic Tory families. It was ill fated. The attempted rebellion was brutally suppressed in April 1716. Please note the date, Charlie!'

May 1716

'Date noted, Fred...but, now, what about Grand Lodge?' said a quiet voice.

'We're almost there, Charlie. To quell any trace of support for the invaders the new Whig government had placed their spies everywhere. Coffee houses, private gatherings, dining clubs - none was above suspicion as a possible source of support for the Catholic cause. This inevitably included Masonic lodges which, through their oaths of secrecy, could well be doubly suspect.'

'Throughout the second half of the C17, during the Age of the Enlightenment, Masonic Lodges had generally enjoyed a quiet life, well away from the turbulence of the political scene. There were though four Lodges located in the heart of the Capital which were perhaps dangerously close to events. Three were located at The Goose and Gridiron of St Pauls with 22 members; at the Crown Inn of Drury Lane with 21 members; and at the Apple Tree Tavern of Covent Garden with 14 members. In general they were apparently formed from 'commoners' without any member who might become a political or Catholic threat. There was a fourth Lodge however of which the Whig government had every reason to be fearful.'

'Which was?' enquired Charlie, anxious to play his part.

'This was the Rummer and Grapes Lodge located at the very heart of Westminster...'

'What's a Rummer,?', Charlie interjected.. *'A large mediaeval drinking glass'*, responded Fred somewhat sharply, momentarily thrown off stride.

He continued. *'This fourth Lodge had over 70 members, was both widely popular and politically highly relevant. It was packed with men of clear leadership potential including MPs and the aristocracy, well able to influence events. Members included 10 noblemen, 3 lords, 4 baronets, 7 colonels, 2 clergymen and 24 'esquires' – that is influential young men of noble families, one rank below a knight. They would certainly be politically worldly-wise. To a Whig government, knowing of the Lodge's Tory-leaning composition and that all their discussions and activities were cloaked in secrecy, this particular Lodge could be seen – rightly or wrongly – as a highly probable source of revolt. A nervous government might well wish to close it down without delay and arrest its members.'*

'Certainly Whig reaction to the rebellion so far had been severe. Twenty six captured Scottish and English army officers were executed. Seven Lords were tried for treason by their peers and sentenced to death (albeit several were pardoned). Other nobles were to endure imprisonment in the Tower of London.'

'The members of the Rummer and Grapes Lodge would have appreciated all this only too well and with admirable urgency sought the surest and swiftest means of survival. While we may never know their actual plan, Charlie, we may reasonably assume that, stiffened by a strong military presence on the lodge committee, rational men would have made a rational appreciation of events.'

'They would have realised that as the first step to survival their loyalty to the Protestant King George must not be in question. This meant his immediate, emphatic and above all public recognition as king. (An additional insurance might be to attract members of the Royal Court into Freemasonry.) A second maxim surely was safety in numbers. A large, widespread but disparate group of Lodges would blur the Whigs' focus and so divert attention from any one in particular.'

Charlie was now following all this very closely. *'How on earth could just one Lodge achieve all that, Fred?.'*

'From small acorns big oak trees grow, Charlie. A first step might be if all four London Lodges declared themselves as a national authority. Secondly if they then claimed sole power to promulgate any further Masonic development in England their organisation would grow apace. To be credible though such a nation-wide organisation needed common constitutions, regulations and ritual. Also, learning from the recent civil unrest they would be very wise to appeal to all and alienate none by firmly barring political discussion and respecting God but without favouring any particular religion.'

'Sounds very reasonable, Fred. How did they make the first move?'

'With the Jacobite rebellion crushed by April 1716 (...you remembered that date, Charlie, well done...) the coast was now clear so a month later, in May, a meeting of the London lodges was organised. Although Rummer was by far the largest, it was also the most politically prominent. Cannily therefore they kept their heads below the battlements, so to speak, meeting at the smallest of the four Lodges, the Apple Tree in St Paul's Yard.

'The meeting having agreed a union they now needed a politically acceptable leader. A very inoffensive and, in that august company a probably rather startled, small bookseller from the Apple Tree was proposed as the first Grand Master. Anthony Sawyer was chosen evidently as a 'straw man' to test the waters and assess the likely response of the Whig government.'

24th June 1717

Anderson records: "Accordingly on St John Baptist's day in the 3rd year of King George 1 AD 1717 the Assembly and Feast of the Free and Accepted Masons was held at the Goose and Gridiron Ale House. Before Dinner the oldest Master Mason in the chair proposed a list of proper candidates; and the Brethren by a majority of Hands elected Mr Anthony Sawyer, Gentleman, as Grand Master of Masons..."

Fred reflected: 'After this event suggested the coast was now clear unsurprisingly perhaps everyone who later took any leading part in the early years of Grand Lodge was closely connected with this politically powerful Rummer and Grapes Lodge – never from the other three Founding Lodges.'

'Almost certainly it was the talented team from the Rummer Lodge that turned an early ambition into a flourishing reality within a remarkably short time. George Payne followed as Grand Master in 1718, John Desagulier in 1719 and after a return of Payne in 1720 came their master stroke – the appointment of John, Duke of Montagu, in 1721'.

'Why a master-stroke, Fred?'

'Simply put, Charlie, he made the Premier Grand Lodge respected and respectable, above political suspicion and worthy of later Royal Patronage. He was a highly regarded member of King George's Royal Court – a Knight of the Garter, a member of the Order of Bath and a Privy Councillor to boot and, further – to emphasise his intellectual strengths – a Fellow of the Royal Society and a Fellow of the College of Physicians. What a CV!'

'Was he was a good Mason, though', murmured Charlie.

'Certainly was. He encouraged the welfare of black children – training one as his butler and sending another to be educated at Cambridge. Later in 1739 he was a prime mover in creating the Foundlings' Hospital for abandoned children in London. Today we'd call him a good bloke as well as a great Mason.'

'Who else helped?'

'The first five years were as busy as they were dramatic. In 1721 George Payne drew up some common Regulations and then in 1723 a talented Scotsman, Dr James Anderson, compiled the first set of Constitutions – aided and abetted by George Payne. Dr Theophilus Desagulier shaped a common ritual from the mass of workings around the country. Although a Christian Doctor of Divinity he recognised that trying to tread a fine line between the Protestant Whigs and Catholic Tories was a hostage to fortune. His decision to strip out all Christian references from the operatives' traditions and favour a non-religious Deist approach made remarkably good sense, especially in a multi-Faith community.'

'That's certainly some story, Fred. Where does the Royal Family fit in though?'

'The Premier Grand Lodge went from strength to strength. By 1737 even one of King George's grandsons, Frederick Lewis, was persuaded to join a Private Lodge. Indeed after the Duke of Montagu all future Grand Masters to the present day were drawn either from the aristocracy or the Royal Family. From that time on the Premier Grand Lodge was to hold a secure and highly respected place in English society.'

After a lengthy pause digesting all he had heard, Charlie finally mused: 'So from that small acorn, Fred, there grew a tree with branches spreading over the entire world. That Lodge of Rummer and Grapes back in 1716 seems to have succeeded beyond its members' wildest dreams, Fred. They did rather well, didn't they?'

'Yes, Charlie, they did rather well indeed.'

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