

HAIL, SIR KNIGHT! WHENCE COME YOU?

A personal view of how the degree of Knights Templar came to Essex

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The development of the Masonic degree of Knights Templar in Essex owes a lot to the strategic position of the town of Colchester, which has been a garrison town since before the Romans came. But, perhaps of equal importance is its coastline as will be seen as the story develops.

The origins of the degree as with so much of freemasonry are shrouded in mystery. Bro John Hamill suggests that the degree probably originated in France in the 1740's. There is support for this theory from Ladislas de Malczovich in a paper given at Quatuor Coronati Lodge No 2076 the premier lodge of research and published in AQC 5 in 1892. Here he states that Chevalier Andrew Ramsey in his oration of 1737 connected, without historical foundation, freemasonry with the Crusades and with the Chivalric Orders that arose therefrom. Malczovich goes on to say that *'Ramsey established three degrees viz., Ecossais, Novice and Knight Templar.'* However he adds nothing to support that statement. Bro Frederick Smyth in his book *"Brethren in Chivalry"* accepts that the degree probably came from the Continent and after examining several possibilities, including Ramsey, considers the Rite of Strict Observance as a strong candidate. This Rite played on a familiar theme by suggesting that certain medieval Knights Templar who had found asylum in Scotland after their brutal suppression in the fourteenth century possessed occult knowledge that could ultimately be acquired by its members. The story of this Rite is quite fascinating and deserves greater consideration than can be given here. Bro Jacques Litvine gave a paper on the Rite at Quatuor Coronati Lodge No 2076, in 1997, which is published in AQC 109. However not every Masonic scholar shares that Brother's view of the Rite. The one thing that must be emphasised here is that despite Ramsey and the claims of Strict Observance, there is no conclusive link between the medieval order and the Masonic degree of Knights Templar as practised today.

The first conclusive record of a Masonic Knight Templar being made is in the Minutes of the St Andrew Royal Arch Lodge Boston Mass., in 1769 although it was taken up enthusiastically in lodges in Ireland around 1764/5. It can be assumed that if the degree was being worked in Boston at that time then it was also being worked elsewhere. Interestingly soldiers from the 29th Regiment of Foot were members of that lodge and this provides a clue to the answer to the next question.

How did the Masonic degree of Knights Templar get from Europe to America and back to Essex?

The answer lies in the turbulence of the eighteenth century. Britain was at war with France, not for the first time and certainly not the last. The Seven Year War raged not only on the Continent but also in the Colonies and in Ireland. Later it was necessary to put down the rebellion in Ireland which resulted from

the Act of Union. It was a time when the British Army was called upon to fight on many fronts and their role was not restricted to fighting the King's enemies overseas. Since there was not a recognised police force in existence they were often called upon to put down riot and keep law and order generally throughout the kingdom, as well as assisting the Revenue men against smugglers. And here lies the key, for in his Prestonian lecture of 1990 Bro Frederick Smyth states that to satisfy the desire of freemasons among British servicemen and the administrators and businessmen, who accompanied them, freemasons lodges had been held within regiments of the British Army from about 1728 onwards. The first purely military lodge was established in that year in Gibraltar and was like any other lodge stationary, but in 1732 the Grand Lodge of Ireland issued the first ambulatory warrant to the lodge in the 1st Regiment of Foot (Royal Scots). This was to set a precedent for, recognising the unsettled nature of a service career, the warrant prescribed that the lodge should meet within a specified army unit rather than being committed to a fixed location. Over the years the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland all warranted peripatetic regimental lodges, whilst a Provincial Grand Master warranted some if the regiment was serving overseas. Under the English Constitution both the Antients and the Moderns warranted regimental lodges, although the majority were Antients. Typically lodges formed for officers were Modern lodges whilst those for other ranks were Antients. Sometimes a regiment would have more than one lodge warranted perhaps under a different Constitution; it often depended on the location of the regiment at the time of forming its lodge. For example, the 56th Regiment of Foot (later the West Essex Regiment) had two lodges. The Grand Lodge of Scotland warranted the first as Lodge King George III in 1760 when the regiment was in Aberdeen, whilst the Grand Lodge of Ireland warranted the other in 1765 when the regiment was in Dublin. A similar situation arose in the 44th or East Essex Regiment. As they carried out their military duties the brethren of the regimental lodges would have been exposed to "new" Masonic ideas and practices wherever they were garrisoned, so that even if they had not picked up the degree of Knights Templar on the Continent they would have learned about it from the brethren with whom they fraternised in Ireland as it was widely practiced there. When stationed in England they undoubtedly visited lodges in the garrison towns and introduced those ideas and degrees to them.

Of particular importance to this story is the Lodge 426 warranted in the 1st Regiment Kings Dragoon Guards. The premier Grand Lodge of England, (the Moderns), warranted this lodge in 1780, whilst the regiment was stationed at Exeter. Like almost every other unit of the British Army the regiment served on the Continent of Europe and Ireland as well as in the UK and so would have acquired knowledge of the degree of Knights Templar in its travels.

Kings Dragoon Guards regiment was no stranger to East Anglia for there is a record of the regiment being in Colchester in 1754 and again in 1767. On this latter occasion no doubt the traders welcomed them with open arms for each man had just received £3.10.6 $\frac{3}{4}$ as his share of contraband seized in Kent where they had recently been stationed. As mentioned earlier, amongst their other duties, troops of the regiment were often used to assist the Revenue

men in patrolling the coast for smugglers. Given the nature of the Essex coastline no doubt they carried out similar duties here. The role was not exclusively given to Kings Dragoon Guards, of course. There were, for example, troops of 3rd and 4th Regiment Dragoon Guards in the area at various times. They would all have taken their turn on the marshes, a quite profitable, if a rather cold and damp duty. The Digest of Service of the Kings Dragoon Guards states that on 29 May 1784 the regiment marched for Chelmsford Colchester and Ipswich. It is not known how long the regiment spent in the towns or whether the entire regiment stayed together. Given the nature of their duties it is very likely that some troops of the regiment, (a troop was about twenty men), were deployed in the towns and villages around the coastline. Towards the end of the year it is known that the regiment moved to Ipswich for there is a Minute in the Grand Chapter dated 12 November 1784, which reads;

“Order (upon application of M.E. Dunckerley) for a Chapter to be held at Ipswich, by the name of Prudence. Brothers Robert Manning Z., James Garrod H., Robert Cole J., to be addressed to Bro Dixon, Trumpet major of the 1 Regiment of Dragoon Guards at Ipswich.”

Brothers Manning, Garrod and Cole, were all members of British Union Lodge, which continues to meet in the town to this day. This Minute is important for two reasons. Firstly, until Thomas Dunckerley took on the role of Provincial Grand Master it was customary for the ‘higher’ degrees, including the Royal Arch, to be carried out within the lodge under the lodge warrant. The Antients warrants specifically allowed this whilst the Moderns did not recognise any degree beyond the three degrees of the Craft and the Royal Arch. Secondly, it shows the involvement of a regimental lodge, and in particular Brother Dixon, in the affairs of a civilian lodge. There are records of several visits by the regimental lodge to British Union lodge around that time. Although it is known that by 1791 the regiment had a separate Knights Templar Encampment called Fortitude, it is not known when that Encampment was formed. What is clear however, is that the degree, whether worked in lodge 426 or in a separate Encampment by Kings Dragoon Guards was soon adopted by the Royal Arch Masons in Suffolk.

So that was the situation in Suffolk, but what was happening in Essex at the time?

There is only one lodge in the Province of Essex still in existence that was working in 1784, and so perhaps that is the place to look for an answer. That lodge is, of course, Angel lodge No 51, which was warranted under the Antients Constitution. Its Minutes show that on 28 September 1784 Brother Edward Blinkworth was exalted into the Royal Arch and on the same evening made a Knights Templar. Kings Dragoon Guards were in the Colchester area at the time as were elements of 3 Dragoon Guards, amongst others. In fact, Lexden Heath just outside Colchester was a hive of military activity, which is not surprising given the hostilities of the time. Given their enthusiasm for the degree – there were only eight Encampments in the country at the time - it might be expected that members of lodge 426 would have been present at the

meeting as they were to be in Suffolk, later in the year. Unfortunately there is no record in the Minutes of Angel lodge of a brother from the regimental lodge ever visiting them, which seems quite strange, although it must be said that not all meetings were recorded. Those records that do exist are rather sparse and written, according to the current Secretary, on poor paper and with cheap quills. So if not from Lodge 426 then how did Angel lodge acquire the knowledge to make the Knight Templar? Unfortunately, at present it is impossible to say with any certainty, but the facts as known are set out here. The Master's Chair on that occasion was occupied, not by the reigning Master of the lodge, but by the Senior Warden, Bro Angus, who was a bandsman serving in 3 Dragoon Guards. Who Brother Angus was and what qualified him to preside over such an important meeting is not known for certain. He was not initiated into Angel lodge nor was he initiated into the lodge in his regiment since the regiment did not have a lodge at the time. In fact it is not known where was he initiated. There is a record of a Bro John Angus as a member of a lodge in Scots Greys or Royal North British Dragoons that met in Edinburgh on 6 March 1770 but there is no proof that this is the same man and from this distance in time and with the scant information available it is doubtful if his Masonic antecedents will ever be traced satisfactorily. He first made his appearance in Essex freemasonry as a visitor to Angel lodge in November 1783 and seems to have attended regularly for at some stage he joined the lodge to become its Senior Warden, although he was never made Worshipful Master. However, there is a curious entry in the lodge Minutes for Sunday 29 February 1784 that may give a clue as to his qualification to act as Master on that day in September 1784. The Minutes show that on this day he was made a Royal Arch Mason in the Lodge *at his own request*. Now whilst this may be a strange way of putting it the following hypothesis should be considered:

Henry Sadler's book on Thomas Dunckerley makes it quite clear that Dunckerley corresponded regularly with Trumpet Major Thomas Dixon whom he regarded as a friend as well as an enthusiastic freemason; Thomas Dixon stayed with him at Hampton Court Palace in 1791, for instance. Dunckerley may also have been present at the consecration of the regimental lodge in Exeter, although there is no proof of that, but in any case he later appointed Dixon as his Assistant Grand Master for the North of England. Thus it seems that Dixon was a well known freemason at the time and it is likely that Bro Angus would have known that, and known him. Dixon was initiated into freemasonry in Musselburgh in 1770 and if Angus was a Scotsman they may both have been initiated into the same lodge, (the Dragoon Guards lodge mentioned earlier, perhaps), or their paths may have crossed in their army duties. In any case, he may have been aware that Kings Dragoon Guards were coming to Colchester in May 1784 and that Bro Dixon would be in the area at that time. It might then be suggested that he sought to be exalted into the Royal Arch in Angel lodge in February so as to be able to visit the regimental lodge No 426 when it came to the town where he could be installed a Knight Templar. He could then pass on the degree to members of Angel Lodge. Unfortunately, all this is purely hypothetical since the lodge 426 had ceased to exist by the cessation of hostilities and its records lost. But it is one explanation as to how the degree of Knights Templar came to Essex.

Despite the best efforts of Thomas Dunckerley Angel lodge clung to their traditional rights and continued to work the higher degrees within the lodge under their Antients warrant. They did eventually pass a resolution allowing for a separate meeting of Royal Arch freemasons and for Knights Templar freemasons although still working under their lodge warrant. In fact it was not until after Dunckerley's death that there was to be a separate Royal Arch Chapter in Essex. In 1807 three members of Angel lodge applied for a warrant to form Patriotic Royal Arch Chapter. Within a year the members of that Chapter formed a Knights Templar Encampment, to be known as Patriotic No 24. Unfortunately, that Encampment did not survive for very long and was probably erased at the end of hostilities.

From all this can be seen the importance of the coastline of Essex with its windswept inlets and marshy creeks. It brought squadrons of the Dragoon Regiments, to assist the Revenue protection men. In turn Kings Dragoon Guards and its regimental Lodge 426 brought the degree of Knights Templar to the Province, albeit in a round about way – at least that is one view anyway. There is, however, another possibility and that is that the first Knight Templar in Essex was not made in Colchester at all, but a few miles away at Maldon. Freedom lodge No 430 met in Maldon, a thriving port in the eighteenth century that had had a Customs House in the town for many years. The coastline of the area would have made it ideal for a spot of smuggling in those days and almost certainly troops from Kings Dragoon Guards, amongst others, were deployed there. It is possible that brethren of lodge 426 visited Freedom lodge and could easily have made the first Essex Knight Templar there. There is some support for this view in that in a letter from Thomas Dunckerley to Benjamin Craven of 1791, when he appointed him his Asst Grand Master for Essex he refers to “... *Knights at Maldon*”. Unfortunately, since Freedom lodge was erased in 1785 and its records lost the matter cannot be resolved one way or another. Nevertheless, whichever view is taken it is almost certain that the regimental lodges, and most likely the lodge in Kings Dragoon Guards played a significant part in bringing the Masonic degree of Knights Templar to Essex.

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