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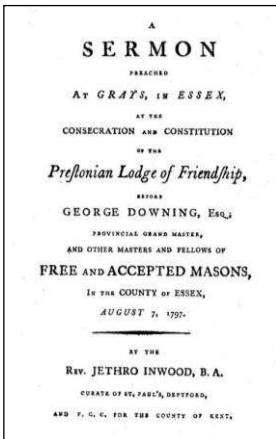
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# Thurrock's Earliest Freemasons

## Malcolm Chase

### Introduction

In 1980 Panorama published an article, 'Freemasons in Thurrock'.<sup>1</sup> It was based on a typescript of a document from the 1790s about which little was known, other than it listed freemasons of that era that met at the King's Arms, Grays, Essex. John Hayston, having then recently retired as the editor of the journal, found the list among his papers and passed it to his successor, Randal Bingley.



Around the same time I bought, from a Brighton street market, a book by Jethro Inwood, curate of Deptford parish church: Sermons; in which are explained and enforced the religious, moral, and political virtues of freemasonry. Preached upon several occasions ... in ... Kent and Essex. I purchased it because it included a sermon preached at the consecration and constitution of a freemason's lodge at Grays, formally constituted as the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship, which took place before George

Downing, Esq., Provincial Grand Master, and other Masters and Fellows of Free and Accepted Masons, in the County of Essex, August 7, 1797.<sup>2</sup>

I can only apologise that it has taken me the best part of four decades to marry up these two sources, but at least I can now offer clarity about the mystery document previously published in

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<sup>1</sup> 'Freemasons in Thurrock', Panorama 24 (Winter, 1980), 61-63.

<sup>2</sup> Jethro Inwood, Sermons; in which are explained and enforced the religious, moral, and political virtues of freemasonry. Preached upon several occasions, before the provincial grand officers, and other brethren, in ... Kent and Essex (Deptford, [1799]). The Grays sermon occupies pp. 149-73. The British Library's copy of the whole volume is freely available on the internet at [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=75thAAAAcAAJ&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=75thAAAAcAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

Panorama. It is a transcription of personal details taken from six manuscripts in the archives of the United Grand Lodge of England (the governing body of English freemasonry).<sup>3</sup> These give the names of all members (and their professions, place of residence and admission date) of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship.



King's Arms, Grays

These six documents confirm that the Lodge met at Grays in the King's Arms public house (in the old High Street, running down from the parish church towards the river). The earliest of the documents is dated 9 May 1797, but the Grand Lodge had

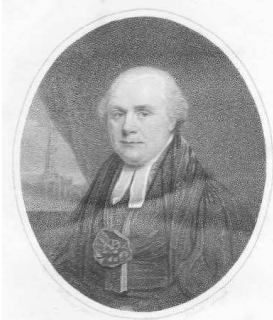
issued its warrant to constitute the Lodge on 18 February 1797, while another source states that the Lodge was functioning by 1796.<sup>4</sup> In the May 1797 document, the Lodge returned details of all its members. This information was then updated on five subsequent occasions, the last in 1817. The result is a valuable insight into the social history of Thurrock at the turn of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> United Grand Lodge of England, Freemasons' Hall, Great Queen St, London, Library and Museum of Freemasonry: GBR 1991 AR/1318 – Annual Returns of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship, No. 582. Facsimiles of these returns are available on-line via [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk).

<sup>4</sup> United Grand Lodge of England, Warrants and Charters Register (I am grateful to Susan Snell, Archivist and Records Manager at the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, for providing this and other details from the Register).

John Browne, *The Master-Key through all the Degrees of a Free-Mason's Lodge; to which are added, eulogiums and illustrations, upon Free-Masonry; theology; astronomy; geometry; architecture; arts; sciences; & c. with a correct and complete list of all the modern regular lodges, Shewing when Constituted, and when and where held* (London, 1798), p. 20.



Rev Jethro Inwood,  
who preached at the  
consecration of the  
Prestonian Lodge, Grays

The use of the word *Prestonian* in the title of the lodge at Grays is puzzling. Many masonic lodges founded in the 1790s took patriotic titles like ‘Loyal’, ‘Constitutional’ or ‘True British’. Others preferred anodyne terms such as ‘Amity’ or ‘Friendship’. The Grays title rather stands out, especially given that Preston has no local resonance. The likeliest explanation is that it honoured a name that is still of some importance in masonic history. William Preston (1742-1818) was the manager of the London printing firm that produced Johnson’s *Dictionary* among other notable books. He was a prominent freemason whose 1772 book, *Illustrations of Masonry*, was influential in standardising masonic rituals.<sup>5</sup> He subscribed to Inwood’s sermons and may well have been present at the inauguration of the Lodge that appears to have taken his name. Preston had dedicated *Illustrations of Masonry*, to Lord Petre (1742-1801) of Ingatestone, the last Roman Catholic to hold the office of Grand Master of English freemasonry.<sup>6</sup> Lord Petre was also central to military mobilisation in south Essex against the threat of French invasion in the 1790s, setting up both a company of light infantry and a pioneer corps from the workers on his Thorndon Park estate.<sup>7</sup> This is a point of significance to which this article will shortly return.

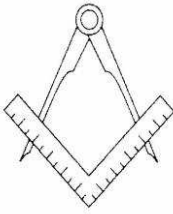
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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Professor Andrew Prescott (University of Glasgow) for his comments on several aspects of this article, and particularly for discussing Preston’s significance with me.

<sup>6</sup> H. R. Tedder, ‘Preston, William (1742–1818)’, rev. Jeffrey Makala, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/22734>, accessed 5 April 2016]; D.A. Bellenger, ‘Petre, Robert Edward, ninth Baron Petre (1742–1801)’, rev. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/37847>, accessed 5 April 2016].

<sup>7</sup> R. Bingley, ‘The Barstaple and Chafford Yeomanry, Part 1’, *Panorama* 50 (2011), p. 48.

## General background to freemasonry



Present-day freemasonry essentially has eighteenth-century origins, and some 'back story' might be helpful.<sup>8</sup> Medieval stonemasons had developed an elaborate culture of ritual and socialising. Their seventeenth-century successors maintained these in their 'lodges' – effectively prototype trade unions. Secret passwords, signs, handshakes and ceremonies (learned on completing an apprenticeship) helped these often itinerant workers regulate who should work as a stonemason. This ritual culture was also used to recognise properly trained but unemployed stonemasons as they travelled the country looking for work (a practice known as tramping). In each town they visited on the tramp, unemployed 'brothers' would receive practical help and a small sum of money. Many early trades unions operated tramping systems. However, the ritual of the stonemasons, rooted in building the great medieval cathedrals and churches, was especially rich, evoking and elaborating on the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, as described in the Old Testament.

In the seventeenth-century some stonemasons' lodges began to accept non-masons as members; this boosted their income and limited the financial risk if a trade depression threw large numbers of members out of work. A few other workers' societies would later do the same. None, however, could offer such a compelling intellectual and cultural life as the stonemasons, and widening their lodge memberships swiftly became the norm. The ritual that marked a worker's acceptance as a 'free' mason, once he completed his apprenticeship, seemed to offer a window onto deep antiquity – one that appealed especially to those who were book-educated, curious about ancient history and/or whose attitude to religion might be described as one of critical piety.

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<sup>8</sup> The following paragraphs are based on pp. 15-18, 20, 48 and 95 of Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 2012) and sources cited there. See also Andreas Önnersfors, *Freemasonry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 11-20.

A considerable time passed before freemasonry completely lost its work-a-day character: in 1717 or 1721, when the United Grand Lodge of England was founded (the birth of modern freemasonry) its senior officers still included a stone cutter and carpenters.<sup>9</sup> However, new lodges proliferated that had no connection with the building trades. By the end of the eighteenth-century freemasonry had largely transformed into a pursuit of the polite and ‘middling sorts’ – small businessmen and the professions – and, even, of the gentry and aristocracy. Participation also required disposable income: masonic regalia were expensive; monthly dining had to be paid for; there were lodge dues to be paid; and freemasons were expected to give generously to charitable causes.

### **The Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship**

This was the culture of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship. We can see from the appendix that one, but only one, of its founding members was indeed a stonemason. Many members’ occupational details are ambiguous about their employment status. For example were the four ‘carpenters’ employed by others, self-employed or even running their own firm? But even if these and every other ambiguous description are excluded, the predominant social composition of the Lodge is clear:

Self-employed or employer	35	(40%)
Professions	13	(15%)
Gentlemen	9	(10%)
Ambiguous	30	(34%)
Not known	2	(1%)
Total	89	

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<sup>9</sup> Until recently 1717 was the accepted date but 1721 is more likely. See A. Prescott and S.M. Sommers, ‘Searching for the Apple Tree: Revisiting the Earliest Years of English Organised Freemasonry’ in *Reflections on 300 Years of Freemasonry*, ed. John S. Wade (London, 2017), pp. 681-704.

## Why form a masonic lodge?

This is not to claim that those who joined the Lodge were no longer motivated by intellectual curiosity or piety as the first freemasons had been. Clearly, however, by the 1790s freemasonry was fulfilling other functions as well. The eighteenth century had seen the rapid development of what is often termed ‘the public sphere’ – a range of activities, outside the reach of either the state or organised religion, in which men socialised discussed the matters of the day and (to use a modern term) ‘networked’. Closely linked to this was the rapidly developing media: newspapers, cheaper books and the arts. Typical institutions within this ‘public sphere’ were coffee houses, libraries and reading rooms and a wide range of voluntary associations dedicated to intellectual pursuits – music, philosophy, the sciences and antiquarian enquiry.

These, however, were activities most readily sustained in large urban communities. Grays in 1801 was a town of only 677 people. However, its lord of the manor had attempted to revive the manorial court in the 1750s and built a new market house, also known as the Court House, in West Street in 1774 – described in the manorial Court Leet records as a ‘handsome erection for the benefit of the Markett Inhabitants of Grays and other persons resorting to and trading in the town’.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of freemasonry in Grays two decades later is of a piece with this growth in local civic pride. In urban communities large and small, masonic lodges typically fulfilled a key role in the development of the ‘public sphere’ and of the ‘urban renaissance’, to use another term favoured by many historians of the Georgian period.

The institutions of the public sphere were socially exclusive, most obviously of women and those with very limited or no disposable income. It was this, rather than any overt social prejudice, that tended to exclude wage earners from freemasonry. Tradesmen, skilled artisans and master craftsmen might well secure admission,

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<sup>10</sup> The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Essex, Volume VIII (London, 1983), pp. 35, 47; Randal Doyle, ‘New light through old windows: museum newsletter, no 5’, Panorama 14 (1971), pp. 11-12.

though, and our 'ambiguous' membership category would have included many from this background, for example the watchmakers and the shipwright, soap-maker, and hat-maker. A clear example is Elfred Blaker, tailor, listed as residing at Long Acre in central London. It is inconceivable that a tailor's employee would have made the London-Grays return journey each month. This is borne out by the social status of the other member with the same unusual surname, to whom Elfred was presumably related. John Blaker is listed as a coal merchant and subsequently appears in directories as a barge owner; the Blaker family were subsequently ship owners and business partners of the Grays brewing family, the Seabrookes.<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that membership for many of these freemasons was at least partly a matter of social and economic calculation. It may be too cynical to suggest that the Lodge's brewers, innkeepers and victuallers benefited from socialising with the two excisemen and customs officer who were also members. But there must have been clear benefits for many of these freemasons regularly to drink and dine with each other, especially as the Lodge included members of the local political and social establishment. For example, Thomas Green, 'Gentleman', can confidently be identified as the Lord of the Manor of Little Thurrock, residing at Tyrells Hall.<sup>12</sup> Many of the eight other 'Gentlemen' would have been landowners. One of them, John Gilbie of West Thurrock built a mill on his land adjoining St Clement's Reach, insuring it for the staggering sum of £999.<sup>13</sup> The farmers and millers must have had much to talk about. Shopkeepers (especially the perfumers), the four surgeons and a lawyer would have extended their potential client base, and

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<sup>11</sup> I.G. Sparkes, 'The Pinnock Charities and Old High Street', *Thurrock Local Historical Society Journal* 5 (Autumn 1960), p. 17; S.A. Chase, 'Thames barges and coastal craft of Grays', *Thurrock Local Historical Society Journal* 6 (Autumn 1961), p. 36; William White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the County of Essex* (Sheffield, 1848), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Benton, *Rising Boldly from the Marshes: A History of Little Thurrock and its People* (Grays, 1992), p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> K.G. Ferries, 'West Thurrock Windmill', *Panorama* 15 (1972), p. 61.



similarly the freemasons whose business interests (e.g. as a shipwright, carpenter or coal merchant) intersected with barge owners.

The most eye-catching of the occupations listed, ‘comedian’ would have benefited from networking with the licensed trade. This was an age when many theatrical performances were presented in barns or the large rooms of public houses and hotels. Thomas Trotter, the comedian freemason, was almost certainly the actor-manager of the Southend Theatre, which he operated on a circuit that included Sheerness and Gravesend. In 1803-4 he oversaw the transition of Southend’s theatre, from the assembly room within the Royal Hotel to a purpose-built structure on the Eastern Esplanade.<sup>14</sup> Trotter must have regularly travelled to London to seek out new plays and actors and his residence in Grays makes sense in that context. Masonic benefit performances were also a prominent feature of eighteenth-century theatrical life, and again Trotter’s involvement in the Lodge may reflect a mixture of personal interest and economic calculation.

The picture that emerges from the membership of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship is how integral the relationship between Grays and the Thames was. Seventeen of its number came from Kent and the river was also almost certainly how its four London members, and the Leigh-on-Sea customs officer, would have travelled to and from Grays. By contrast the Lodge only mustered twenty Essex members from outside Thurrock. The choice of Jethro Inwood, the masonic Provincial Grand Chaplain for Kent, to preach the consecration sermon underlines the geographical context further; and when published it was the only sermon delivered in Essex (Inwood had preached the others before lodges in Kent maritime towns).<sup>15</sup> The importance of the River Thames to the Lodge’s members is also clear in their choosing the Royal Humane Society (then known as the Society for the Recovery

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<sup>14</sup> J.K. Melling, *Southend Playhouses from 1793* (Letchworth, 1969), pp. 28, 35-6.

<sup>15</sup> Chatham, Dartford, Feversham, Gravesend, Maidstone, Northfleet, Ramsgate, West Malling (near Rochester) and Woolwich.

of Persons Apparently Drowned) as their only non-masonic charity.<sup>16</sup> Regular contributions were also made to a masonic charity, the Royal Cumberland School for the orphaned daughters of freemasons, part of an obligation always to assist brother masons in distress.

In this respect each masonic lodge was similar to a friendly society (another type of voluntary association that took-off in the eighteenth century). Many larger friendly societies likewise operated within an elaborate ritual culture: a decision to join either a society or a masonic lodge would have combined social and personal financial calculation. However, lest this seem too-reductionist, it should also be pointed out that freemasonry appealed in an age when religion mattered greatly. Membership involved a solemn affirmation of religious belief that transcended sectarian boundaries. Though increasingly socially exclusive, freemasonry was notably inclusive where religion was concerned, emphasising ‘tolerance and belief in God but no particular God’.<sup>17</sup> In his dedicatory sermon, Inwood referred to Christians twice and Jesus Christ not all; but he repeatedly referred to God as well as using phrases such as ‘the first grand architect’ and ‘the Builder of the Universe’.

Because overt political debate was forbidden inside a lodge and a non-denominationally specific natural religion promoted alongside religious tolerance, these were potentially places where dissenters and Roman Catholics could mingle on equal terms with members of the Church of England. At a time when neither Roman Catholics nor protestant dissenters enjoyed full civil rights (and were also barred from many public offices and English universities) this was a significant benefit of masonic membership. Freemasonry became an important medium through which members of religious minorities integrated into the establishment. Although the Vicar of Grays did not belong, another prominent local Anglican did. This

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<sup>16</sup> Inwood, p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), p. 242.

was Lockhart Leith, Rector of South Ockendon and domestic chaplain to the Countess of Holderness (one the Queen's Ladies of the Bedchamber).<sup>18</sup>

Even more striking is the founder membership of at least two freemasons of Jewish heritage: Saul Mordechai of London and watchmaker Moses Magnus of Orsett House.<sup>19</sup> Moses Adams, listed at the constitution of the Lodge in February 1797 but not in subsequent records, may also have been Jewish. A second watchmaker and another founder member, Phillip Phillips, also gave his residence as Orsett House. If not himself Jewish, Phillips clearly had close links to London Jewry, for his apprentices had included one Samuel Levi.<sup>20</sup>

### **Freemasonry and patriotism**

We can draw these analytical elements closer together by considering the relationship of freemasonry to national politics. The formation of the Thurrock's first masonic lodge fits into a broader pattern of the region's masonic history. The rate of growth in the number of masonic lodges (calculated as new formations minus closures) in the Kent and Channel counties (Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset) had increased steadily from the 1760s and peaked in 1811-15. For East Anglia (defined as Essex, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk) a peak was reached in the 1770s, after which the rate of growth fell back, reviving again in the

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<sup>18</sup> Information taken from the Clergy of the Church of England (1540-1835) Database at

<http://db.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/persons/CreatePersonFrames.jsp?PersonID=35090> and the Institute of Historical Research, Household of Queen Charlotte 1761-1818 <http://www.history.ac.uk/publications/office/queencharlotte#d>

<sup>19</sup> Saul Mordechai, who lived in the City of London, swore his oath as a Jew when testifying in a court case in 1807: see Joseph Chitty (ed.), *A Practical Treatise on the Criminal Law*, Volume 2 (London, 1816), pp. 358-60.

<sup>20</sup> Register of Apprentices of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers of the City of London from Its Incorporation in 1631 to Its Tercentenary in 1931 (London, 1931), p. 180. Previously based in Aldersgate Street, Phillips' business was listed at 10, St John's Square, Clerkenwell, by Kent's Directory .... Containing an Alphabetical List of the Names (London, 1803), p. 156

1790s.<sup>21</sup> How should we explain interest in freemasonry increasing during the wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France?

Freemasonry had different meanings in different countries. One of the few academic historians to take freemasonry seriously explains that ‘in England it tended towards political neutrality. Its ethos of amity and non-sectarian solidarity between members of the “craft” (provided they could demonstrate the material wealth and educational culture demanded of Masonic brethren) could be a source of cohesion.’ In Ireland and on the continent, however, where religious loyalties powerful underpinned political identity, ‘the non-sectarian character of Freemasonry had quite the opposite effect. Freemasonry, with its emphasis on brotherhood and virtue, veered towards radicalism of the most subversive kind’.<sup>22</sup>

We get a whiff of the latter in the background of the first Master of the Grays lodge, David Assiter, a Gravesend stonemason (described in 1813 as a ‘Stonemason, Dealer and Chapman’).<sup>23</sup> Assiter knew Alexander Galloway, one of the leading members of the London Corresponding Society, the principal organisation mobilising English sympathy for the French Revolution.<sup>24</sup> He may also have been the anonymous ‘Citizen’, whose Gravesend home was regularly visited by leading members of the Corresponding Society when they toured Kent to promote its principles.<sup>25</sup> In 1798 Assiter certainly procured a horse for a London-Irish revolutionary called John Binns, when the latter was trying to smuggle James O’Coigly, a leading Irish insurgent, across to France. O’Coigly planned to present a formal address to the French government,

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<sup>21</sup> John Money, ‘Freemasonry and the fabric of loyalism in Hanoverian England’, in Eckhart Helmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), 270.

<sup>22</sup> Chris Evans, *Debating the Revolution: Britain in the 1790s* (London, 2006), p. 65

<sup>23</sup> *London Gazette*, 2 April 1814, p. 717.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Proceedings of the Trial of James O’Coigly, otherwise called James Quigley, otherwise called James John Fivey, Arthur O’Connor, Esq., John Binns ... Maidstone, [21, 22 May, 1798]’, in William Cobbett (ed.), *A Complete Collection of State Trials*, volume 26 (London, 1819), col.1343.

<sup>25</sup> John Gale Jones, *Sketch of a Political Tour through Rochester, Chatham, Maidstone, Gravesend, &c* (London, 1796), pp. 29-30, 49, 51-2.

assuring it of popular support in Britain if France invaded to maintain ‘the sacred flame of liberty’. The plot was exposed when Binns was arrested at Margate attempting to hire a boat; O’Coigly was hanged at Maidstone.<sup>26</sup>

This extraordinary episode should not deflect attention from the general character of English freemasonry, which was integrally linked to loyalism (so integrally that one wonders if, in joining, Assiter was seeking to shore-up his patriotic credentials). Freemasonry in the militia, army and navy expanded steadily from the 1770s and reached a climax during the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>27</sup> Two members of the Lodge were employed at the Gravesend depot of the Royal Ordinance; three others joined the Barstable and Chafford Yeomanry when it was raised in 1798: John Gilbie, West Thurrock’s gentleman miller, John Green (farmer of West Tilbury) and Thomas Green of Tyrells Hall.<sup>28</sup> Freemasons often took a lead in such volunteer regiments, and their reasons for doing so typically combined fear both of invasion by France and of unrest at home: as the obituary of the senior Essex freemason, George Downing, observed: he enlisted ‘when the threats of the enemy, and the still more alarming menaces of internal faction, rendered necessary the incorporation of the loyal and brave inhabitants of the kingdom’.<sup>29</sup>

Membership of a masonic lodge therefore quietly emphasised one’s loyalty to Crown and government. Furthermore freemasonry generally helped consolidate political stability. It brought together property-owners of various types, from small tradesmen to local magnates. It provided a space in which they could meet on equal terms, limiting scope for disaffection among educated members of the middle classes who were otherwise excluded – socially and

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Proceedings of the Trial’, col. 1343. The clearest account of this murky episode is Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 27-33.

<sup>27</sup> This point is well-made in one of the displays in the East Kent Museum of Freemasonry, Canterbury. See also Money, ‘Freemasonry and the fabric of loyalism’, p. 261.

<sup>28</sup> R. Bingley, ‘The Barstable and Chafford Yeomanry Part 2’, *Panorama 51* (2013), pp. 65-8.

<sup>29</sup> *European Magazine and London Review* 39 (February 1801), p. 86.

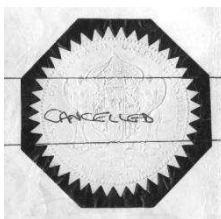
politically – from the local elite. There was limited opportunity for members of this social strata to mix with their ‘betters’ outside of the Church of England (if they belonged), which was itself highly stratified. Only the ‘gentlemen’ who belonged to the Lodge are likely to have had the right to vote in parliamentary elections. Inside the Lodge, however, all were brothers and the more senior positions of Master and the Wardens of the Grays Lodge were typically filled by those from lower down the social scale, as this list of the known office holders confirms:

David Assiter (Warrant, 18 Feb. 1797)	Master	Stonemason, Dealer and Chapman
GC Bishop (1800 and 1804 Returns)	Master	soap maker
John Blaker (1803 and 1804 returns)	Senior Warden	coal merchant
John Coverdale (1800 Return)	Senior Warden	brewer
John Dell Children (1800 Return)	Junior Warden	surgeon and apothecary
Thomas Cribb (1817 Return)	Junior Warden	carpenter [‘late victualler’]
Lockhart Leith (Warrant, 18 Feb. 1797)	Warden	clergyman
Moses Magnus (Warrant, 18 Feb. 1797)	Warden	watchmaker
George Otterwell (1803 Return)	Junior Warden	shoemaker
B Stanley (1817 Return)	Master	brewer
J Rutherford (1817 Return)	Senior Warden	gentleman

Freemasonry also helped filled the gaps between moments of national celebration (of royal birthdays and military and naval victories) and everyday life. One aspect of the developing ‘public sphere’ was a growth, for the first time since the Reformation, in civic ceremony and public processions. In a town such as Grays, which lacked the pomp and glamour of corporate civic governance, a close association between the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship and the local establishment would have assisted the development of local respectability. This ‘corporate civic Christianity’, as one historian has called it, would have been most obvious at the dedication of the Lodge which, along with the service in Grays Parish Church, would almost certainly have been accompanied by a procession.<sup>30</sup>

Eighteenth-century freemasons frequently proclaimed their identity though public ceremony. For example in May 1797 at Chelmsford, Essex freemasons – including the officers and brethren of the Grays lodge – gathered for the installation of George Downing as their Provincial Grand Master. Essex magistrates authorised the use of the Shire Hall for the ceremony and the procession accompanying it included ‘the whole line, consisting of four regiments’, based at Warley barracks. Grays soap maker George Bishop, the Master of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship, ceremoniously carried ‘the first great Light’.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship Erased**



The Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship was formally erased in 1828 – ‘erased’ being the masonic term used for the permanent closure of a lodge.<sup>32</sup> The membership had fallen to single figures and it would be almost half a century before masonic activity resumed

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<sup>30</sup> Money, ‘Freemasonry and the fabric of loyalism’, p. 260.

<sup>31</sup> *Scientific Magazine, and Freemason's Repository*, vol. 8, no. 6 (June, 1797), pp. 407-8.

<sup>32</sup> United Grand Lodge of England, library catalogue entry for the Annual Returns of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship.

in Thurrock with the foundation of the Saint John's Lodge in 1870. However, the underlying reasons for the Prestonian Lodge's decline appear to have been a combination of demographic, political and cultural factors.

The Prestonians may well have been defunct some time before 1828, for the last surviving membership return in the archives of the United Grand Lodge was made in 1817, and to judge from a list of erased lodges across the county, the latter undertook an audit of lodges in 1828 and erased those no longer functioning.<sup>33</sup> Four months before its formal consecration the membership of the Lodge had stood at nineteen. Early in 1799 it peaked at 24. By February 1804 it was 13 and in 1817 just nine, none of whom had belonged to the Lodge before June 1814. Death accounted for some losses, notably Thomas Green (1808) and the surgeon and apothecary John Dell Children, a Junior Warden, who died in 1804.<sup>34</sup> Some members' businesses had ended disastrously: David Assiter, Romford innkeeper Thomas Gray, and Aveley 'victualler, dealer and chapman' Robert Wright, were declared bankrupt in 1814, 1808 and 1813, respectively.<sup>35</sup> Mordechai was prosecuted for perjury in 1807.<sup>36</sup>

If, as this article has suggested, becoming a freemason was often a means of affirming credentials as a loyal subject of the United Kingdom, then we might speculate that the end of the French Wars led to diminished interest in the Lodge. Its membership in 1817 also suggests it had undergone a profound change in character. All Kent and London connections had been extinguished and members were drawn only from Grays, Little Thurrock, Purfleet

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<sup>33</sup> A list kindly provided by Essex masonic historian Terry Lockhart shows that six lodges were erased in 1828. In no other decade between 1760 and 1860 were more than three lodges erased.

<sup>34</sup> Children: The National Archives, will dated 1804 (PROB 11/1414/237). For Green see Bingley, 'Barstaple and Chafford Yeomanry Part 2', p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> London Gazette, 2 April 1814, 2 February 1808 and 16 March 1813.

<sup>36</sup> Chitty, Practical Treatise on the Criminal Law, p. 358.



and Aveley.<sup>37</sup> This is puzzling. A partial explanation might be found in the decline of Grays' weekly market, at least as far as grain was concerned, from around 1818.<sup>38</sup> By 1824 the Market or Court House had been closed, and the building instead used as a Congregational church.<sup>39</sup> As far as Grays was concerned, the urban renaissance seems to have stalled.

A further explanatory factor may be that the early members of the Lodge had been especially interested in the theoretical aspects of freemasonry but that their interests were increasingly being met elsewhere. Evidence that the Prestonian was a particularly 'serious' lodge is tangential but quite persuasive. First, as we have seen, it adopted for its title the name of William Preston, an eminent authority on freemasonry who was particularly anxious that it should develop as a system of ethical and moral improvement. Second, a particular interest in masonic practice can be inferred from an event on 18 December 1798. The brethren of the Lodge presented to their Senior Warden (John Coverdale, a brewer from Ingatestone), 'as a Testimony of their Fraternal Regard', a copy of one of the foundation texts of modern freemasonry: James Anderson's *Constitutions of the Antient Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (first published in 1734), bound in calf and richly decorated with gilt masonic motifs.<sup>40</sup> What had Coverdale done to warrant this gift in the short compass of the Lodge's life to that date?

Thirdly and most pertinently, a second masonic organisation in Grays, the Hermes Chapter of the Royal Arch, had been instituted in October 1798. The Royal Arch was the highest tier of advanced masonic practice, exclusively recruiting from established

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<sup>37</sup> See the appendix entries for Thomas Cribb, Thomas Foreman, William Godfrey, Jonathan Hayder, Joseph Jones, Jonathan King, J.S. Rutherford, Benjamin Stanley, Robert Wright.

<sup>38</sup> The market 'declined after the institution of that at Romford, about thirty years ago', White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory*, p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> *Victoria County History*, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> This book was sold by Bloomsbury Book Auctions in February 2013. See catalogue entry at <http://www.bloomsburyauctions.com/cms/pages/lot/36018/166> (accessed 20 July 2017).

freemasons, typically those most-dedicated to exploring the most-esoteric aspects of masonic lore. The Royal Arch constituted an élite within freemasonry: the Provincial Grand Master of Essex, George Downing, was Founder of this Grays Chapter and its First Principal. Christopher Cuppage, secretary both of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea and of the Royal Cumberland Masonic School, was another founder member. David Assiter and another Prestonian from Gravesend, perfumer John Dye, also appear to have been early members of Hermes. Almost certainly it too met at the King's Arms.<sup>41</sup> That a town so small as Grays, with a masonic population to match, could sustain a Royal Arch chapter at this early date is remarkable. An integral link between the Hermes Chapter and the Prestonian Lodge would help explain the wide geographical area from which the latter recruited, for the Royal Arch was a highly specialised activity; few opportunities to become involved in it existed in the 1790s.

However, the Hermes Chapter relocated to Gravesend in 1815.<sup>42</sup> Assuming that a significant overlap between the Prestonians and the Hermes Chapter had been maintained, the latter's removal to Kent can only have accelerated the downward spiral of the Lodge. In essence, of course, freemasonry is a secretive activity and we are unlikely ever to know the full story of this process. However, the existence of a masonic lodge in Grays at the turn of the eighteenth century offers a number of insights into the character of the town at a formative time in its history as well as a turbulent period in the nation's fortunes.

**Picture Credits:** Thanks to the Library and Museum of Freemasonry for permission to reproduce image of the cancelled warrant on page 43, and to Odette Stevens for sourcing the image of the King's Arms.

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<sup>41</sup> *Free-Mason's Calendar for the Year 1795* (London, 1795), p. 21; *Universal Magazine*, new series vol. 1 (January-June, 1804), p. 542. A short history of Hermes Chapter No. 77, Province of West Kent ([Sidcup], 1990), p. 4, gives the location as the King's Head, Grays, but there was no public house of that name. I am grateful to Michael Burton, Scribe of Hermes Chapter, for kindly providing a copy of this history.

<sup>42</sup> Hermes Chapter No. 77, p. 5. The Chapter still exists and now meets in Sidcup.

## Appendix to Thurrock's Earliest Freemasons: Members of the Prestonian Lodge of Perfect Friendship

This reproduces the list published in *Panorama* in 1980 with a handful of corrections and some additional details taken from other sources and the Lodge's constitution warrant. Italicised names are discussed in the text above.

\* indicates a subscriber to Jethro Inwood, *Sermons...*, April 1799

Name	Occupation	Residence	Admitted
<i>Moses Adams</i>	not given	not given	Founder (18.02.1797)
<i>David Assiter*</i>	Stonemason	Gravesend	Founder (18.02.1797)
William Barron	Innkeeper	East Horndon	27.06.1797
John Beckwith*	Innkeeper	Romford	20.07.1798
Christopher Bedingfield	Attorney	Gravesend	1.08.1797
Thomas Bentley	Gentleman	Chatham	8.05.1801
<i>George Cosnet Bishop*</i>	Soap maker	Grays	Founder (18.02.1797)
<i>Elped Blaker</i>	Tailor	Long Acre London	9.11.1802
<i>John Blaker*</i>	Coal Merchant	Grays	2.01.1798
William Blankley*	Hat maker	Gravesend	13.03.1797
Joseph Borley	Excise Officer	Writtle	8.07.1800
Robert Bosfield	Gentleman	Purfleet	8.03.1803
George Bridge	Surgeon	Orsett	9.05.1797
James Chant	Customs Ho.	Leigh	24.03.1802
Joseph Chapman	Master of a boat	Grays	30.05.1799
<i>John Dell Children</i> <sup>*43</sup>	Surgeon	Grays	13.03.1797
John Cooper	Cooper	Purfleet	16.02.1802
<i>John Coverdale*</i>	Brewer	Ingatestone	13.03.1797
John Cribb <sup>*44</sup>	Innkeeper	Grays	18.12.1796

<sup>43</sup> Surgeon and apothecary, contracted by Grays Overseers to attend the poor of the parish and carry out smallpox inoculations, see J.R. Hayston, 'Grays Thurrock Vestry Book, 1724-1807', *Panorama* 14 (1971), 21.

<i>Thomas Cribb</i> <sup>45</sup>	Carpenter	Grays	9.07.1816
James Davies	Farmer	Southfleet [nr Dartford]	18.06.1799
George Day	Victualler	Shoreham (nr Sevenoaks)	18.05.1802
Aled Deakin*	Shipwright	Northfleet	12.06.1798
Alexander Duncan	Surgeon	Gravesend	22.10.1798
<i>Robert Dye</i>	Perfumer	Gravesend	13.03.1797
Thomas Eagles	Hatmaker	Romford	6.05.1800
William Edwards	Gentleman	Purfleet	12.10.1802
Richard William Eve <sup>46</sup>	Miller	High Easter	27.06.1797
William Ford	Grocer	Romford	3.10.1803
Thomas Foreman	King's Arms Victualler	Grays	7.06.14
Thomas Fuller	Carpenter	Grays	Founder (18.02.1797)
John Geere[?]	Painter	Gravesend	26.06.1798
<i>James Gilbie</i>	Gentleman	West Thurrock	11.06.1799
William Godfrey*	Coal merchant	Stifford	Founder (18.02.1797)
William Godfrey	Carpenter	Grays	n.k. (on 1817 list)
<i>Thomas Gray</i>	Innkeeper	Romford	18.12.1798
<i>John Green</i>	Farmer	West Tilbury	7.12.1799
<i>Thomas Green</i> *	Gentleman	Little Thurrock	27.2.1798
Revd Richard Haslop <sup>*47</sup>	not given	Stifford	20.11.1798

<sup>44</sup> In 1823 a cornporter and publican of the Sailor's Return (now The Wharf, Grays), see R. Bingley, 'Notes towards an industrial history of Grays, 1770-1850', *Panorama* 46 (2008), 26.

<sup>45</sup> 'Carpenter, late victualler', according to the 1817 return.

<sup>46</sup> Presumably a relation of John Eve, butcher, grazier and cattle dealer of Grays. See T. Errington and J. Webb, 'The Errington murder', *Panorama* 43 (2005), 34

<sup>47</sup> Not listed in the Clergy of the Church of England (1540-1835) Database, so perhaps a dissenting minister.

Jonathan Hayder	Gentleman	Purfleet	n.k. (on 1817 list)
William Hearn	Farmer	Shoreham (nr Sevenoaks)	20.04.1802
Thomas Herbert*	Excise Officer	Grays	20.11.1798
Henry Holland*	Innkeeper	Northfleet	30.01.1798
John Wenham Hollman	Malster	Romford	20.11.1798
Thomas Johnson	Gentleman	Grays	28.08.1798
Stephen Johnson	Gentleman	Grays	24.09.98
Joseph Jones	Gentleman	Purfleet	n.k. (on 1817 list)
James King	Mariner	Grays	7.12.1802
Jonathan King	Soap maker	Little Thurrock	n.k. (on 1817 list)
William Linyell	Whitesmith	West Thurrock	4.04.1797
David Little*	Linen draper	London	13.03.1797
<i>Revd Lockart Leith</i>	Rector	South Ockendon	Founder (18.02.1797)
John Lockett*	Grocer	Northfleet	12.06.1798
Thomas Macklin	Innkeeper	Romford	6.06.1797
<i>Moses Magnus</i>	Watchmaker	Orsett House	Founder (18.02.1797)
John Masters*	Perfumer	Romford	30.07.1798
William Masters	Brewer	Ingatestone	27.06.1797
John Meadle	Miller	Stock	6.06.1797
William Miles*	Fellmonger	Hornchurch	18.04.1797
Benjamin Miller (aged 42)	Barge Master	Grays	31.03.1801
Benjamin Miller (aged 50)	Barge Master	Grays	13.08.1799
<i>Saul Mordechai</i>	not given	London	Founder (18.02.1797)
Benjamin Morris	Mariner	Purfleet	16.11.1802
John Otley	Grocer	Ingatestone	1.08.1797
<i>George Otterwell</i>	Shoemaker	Ingatestone	16.04.1799

<i>Phillip Phillips</i>	Watchmaker	Orsett House	Founder (18.02.1797)
James Porter	Brewer	Ingatestone	25.07.1797
<i>J.S. Rutherford</i>	Gentleman	Grays	7.06.1814
John Sackett*	Innkeeper	Romford	18.04.1797
Samuel Sanders	Wine Merchant	St Mary's Hill London	5.07.1803
Benjamin Sayers	Cordwainer	Aveley	8.04.1800
Jonathan Seabrook	Mariner	Boston, Lincs	12.07.1797
Thomas Sedgwick	Barge Master	Grays	14.01.1800
William Shelburne	Barge Master	Purfleet	22.09.1801
Thomas Sillitoe	Baker	Northfleet	22.13.1801
Henry Smart	Innkeeper	Ingatestone	13.08.1799
John Smith	Surgeon	Grays	12.11.1799
<i>Benjamin Stanley</i>	Miller	Little Thurrock	7.01.1817
John Thomas	Carpenter	Aveley	9.05.1803
<i>Thomas Trotter</i>	Comedian	Grays	5.05.1799
Thomas Turner	Belong <sup>s</sup> Ordinance	Gravesend	4.11.1800
Charles Venniss	Shipwright	Northfleet	5.05.1799
Thomas Waghorn	Tailor	Romford	8.07.1800
William Weaver	Clerk of Works, Ordinance	Gravesend	10.06.1800
James Woods*	Innkeeper	Grays	Founder (18.2.1797)
Robert Wright	Grocer	Purfleet	26.12.1803
<i>Robert Wright</i>	Victualler	Aveley	ditto
William Wright	Gardener	Grays	4.04.1797

