

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

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**The Mysterious Life of Elias Ashmole**

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Brethren Why has Elias Ashmole received so much attention from those within Freemasonry when his supposed patronage of the Craft was at best Minimal from all recorded accounts. I believe the fascination with him was not just that he attended the first Speculative working Lodge in England and recorded this event but also because of his diverse interests, Ashmole was Born on May 23, 1617, in the town of Lichfield, Staffordshire, ( As close to the Centre of England as you can get) Elias's Father Simon, was a humble saddler of Yeoman stock with no recorded Education, he served in several military campaigns including the Earl of Essex's ill fated expedition to Ireland and Holland. Simon's Father Thomas was the Bailiff & Mayor of Lichfield, he had held the position of Bailiff no less than seven times. His mothers name was Ann Bowyer of Noble Ancestry, she was known to be very strict regarding Elias's Education and spiritual development, she was well read in Divinity, History and Poetry, she continuously lectured him on the importance of good manners and Study and always corrected his faults. His name upstaged the family tradition of naming the first son after the father. The name Elias was given to him by his Godfather Thomas Otley (The sacrist of Lichfield Cathedral , St Mary The Virgin) The Name Elias is known in scripture as Elijah which generally means " the expected" or the " Coming one" (this may be why Ashmole used the engraving of the messenger "Mercury" in his Coat of Arms later in life ?) so some feel that Thomas Otley, may have been influenced by Kepler, the famed Astronomer who in 1604, observed a series of new stars in the constellation of Seppentarius and Cygnus, Kepler \*\*\* interpreted this as a sign from the Great Architect of the Universe, of the onset of Great Political and Religious Change, some predicted the onset of a coming Golden Age, you have to understand that in this period of History Astronomy and Astrology were inextricably linked

He was said by those who new him to be very concerned about the path to the gate of Transcendence or Knowledge. He was known to have the virtues, of concentration, tolerance, discretion, good humor and mindfulness, he was alleged to have been very honest and had a directness that served him well for his whole life. From the depths of his own conscience came an over powering desire to understand life itself through the gnostics and the essence of mystical Alchemy; which is the taking up of dark matter and transforming it to light, his motto was; Ex uno Omnia; from the one all.

Elias attended Lichfield Grammar school where he was made to study Latin, Greek, poetry

and Arithmetic, he was also a chorister at the Cathedral, It is said that the actual City of Lichfield and its history may have had more of an influence on Ashmole than any of the books or documents he read later in life and studied because of this we should take a brief look at its origins.

Lichfield, home at the time to some 3000 people had been a spiritual centre since Celtic and Saxon times, Ashmole even designed a coat of Arms for the city in 1666 which contained some corpses for good measure. Where we get this scenario from is from the actual name of the City, Lich is a modern word for an old English word which roughly means "Stream or Bog" . The word lic also means corpse in old English so we get the name "Field of the Dead" or Lichfield.

\*\*\*George Fox the inspired founder of the quaker movement apparently had a vision of the City flowing with Blood, oddly enough it is thought that Lichfield itself was a very holy place so much so that in Celtic times great warriors and Kings were brought here to be buried and even the sick could be cured in its bogs, the other theory behind its spiritual past is that a total of 999 (the emergency telephone number in England) Christians who had escaped North after the execution of the Romano - British, Saint Alban, Martyred themselves in its bogs. The reason I am bringing this in to our story is so you have some appreciation of how Ashmoles mind may have been influenced by his surroundings and its history during his formative years and remember Lichfield's Geographical location, in the Centre of England, only last month we had a paper on the significance of the point in the centre of the Circle and what this symbol may have meant in spiritual terms especially to mankind in the middle ages.

The last item that may have influenced Ashmoles curiosity in all things Hermetic and the cosmos was the fact that in 669 a Saxon- Celt named Chad , arrived in Lichfield, he eventually became a Saint and he was the patron Saint of madmen \*\*\* , he came from the pulse centers of Christianity at the time in Europe of Lindisfarne in the North, all that was in Lichfield at that time was a marshland dampening a shallow valley and a large untamed forest. So what drew him here ? The single consistent element that keeps appearing is it was a place associated with Death and to an individual such as Chad above and below which are the central themes of most religions must have appealed to his sense of symbolism and his searching for the answer to life.

Ashmole shared much of Chads Orient Derived spiritual - magical vision of the Cosmos. They both believed that God sends his seers for the Guidance of mankind and a mastery of the body was the path to keep the spiritual eyes clear and in focus so that God's will could be read. For Elias the hand of destiny would lead him on the path to London, and his future successes.

Ann Ashmoles brother in Law James Pagit, Baron of the Exchequer of London, liked to send his son Thomas to Lichfield and it was on one such trip that he befriended Elias, so when young Thomas on his return to London, told his father about this talented boy from Staffordshire, his father kept an eye on him eventually inviting the Sixteen year old to stay with the family at their London Home, this would put him in touch with the latest culture and gain him access to court. He lived with the family for two years before moving out to lodgings, as he was now pursuing a life in the study of law.

Ashmole became a solicitor in 1638, and in this same year he married Eleanor Mainwaring of small wood in cheshire who died from the complications of pregnancy on the 06 December, 1641, his life was to be embroiled in litigation at one time or another for the next 25 years, in 1657 he gained admission to the prestigious Middle temple.

After the sudden death of Eleanor, a shadow fell over Ashmole's life and as sometimes happens in peoples lives a personal tragedy can be the spark that sets an individual on the road to self discovery. The following year a civil war broke out between Parliament and supporters of King Charles 1. The underlying cause was religion, so on August 22 , 1642 the king raised his standard at Nottingham.

Ashmole being a man of conscience a deep thinker and fiercely loyal to the Crown, began to write poems in allegorical terms undermining the parliamentary cause, he read extensively and acted as a legal councilor for the Crown. That same year the round heads vandalized Astbury Church, smashing its medieval stained glass, damaging the stone and woodwork and carrying the Organ and pre reformation furniture to a close by field and setting fire to it. Beneath the church were Eleanor Ashmoles cold remains resting in peace. This event must have had a cathartic affect on Ashmole's already fragile sentiments.

1643 proved to be a major turning point in Ashmoles life, in May of that year he travelled to Oxford on legal Business concerned with collecting the Kings excise from the Town of Lichfield. Charles 1, had been driven out of London so he established his court in Oxford. Elias Decided

he would join Brasenose College. Ashmole's uncle by marriage, Sir Henry Mainwaring sponsored him. Ashmole took great care to erase his status there by recording parts of his diary in Cipher, probably to conceal its contents from the Parliamentarians. His studies were mostly in natural philosophy (rhetoric & logic) Mathematics (arithmetic & Geometry), Astronomy and Astrology. Bro. Ashmole now seems to be completing his education in the Seven Liberal Arts that we as Freemasons are drawn to in the Second Degree, is it any wonder Ashmole was attracted to Freemasonry.

In 1664, Ashmole, was appointed as the Commissioner of Excise, he was now employed as a solicitor in the King's Parliament while continuing his studies at Brasenose. In 1665 Elias met a senior Officer in the King's Garrison of Oxford, Capt. George Wharton, also a keen astrologer. and within a month Ashmole was Appointed to a Commission in Ordnance for the protection of the City. Wharten imbued him with a strong love of Astrology and Alchemy which next to his Antiquarianism became the leading feature of his intellectual Character. Soon after this he took on another position as the Commissioner of excise at Worcester, the Captain of horse and Ordnance.

But in September 1646 , Cromwell finally defeated King Charles forces in a battle for the City of Worcester and this was where Charles's forces surrendered.

So here we have a fallen Knight, Fresh out of a job, unable by the laws of Parliament to practice Law, banned from the Courts of London because of his Royalist ties and Judging by the excerpts in his Diaries in poor physical health, he was almost destitute and had to be supported by his adopted family the Manwarings, who by all accounts were themselves supporters of Cromwell's Parliamentary Army. When suddenly on October 16, 1646 less than a Month after the fall of Worcester he was being initiated a Freemason in Warrington Lancashire with his cousin Col. Henry Manwaring ! However what should interest Masons is the attendance of two other Bros. Richard Sankey, the father of the freemason who transcribed the Sloan Manuscript, this document is one of the English copies of the "An-tient Charges" which had developed from the Shaw Statutes. It recaps the Duties and Privileges of a Freemason and gives an outline of what Freemasonry is about \*\*\*. Richard Sankey's son Edward \*\*\* dated his signed copy of the Antiet charges (16) October , 1646 the very day Ashmole was initiated ! The conclusion has been reached in many circles that Ashmole took his Obligation not on the Volume of the Sacred Law but on the "Sloan Manuscript no 3438" This Manuscript was

probably expressly composed for Ashmoles benefit and his initiation. The second interesting character at Warrington was Hugh Brewer, he had been a Captain in the Royalist Army of James Stanley, The early of Derby. So here we have Henry Manwaring a serving Colonel in Cromwell's Army being initiated alongside his cousin a failed officer in the Royalist cause and being welcomed by a recent Captain of the Kings Army ? Strange bedfellows ? The rest of the attendees mentioned in Ashmoles diary except one were all Landowners whose politics was not known.

One day later on October 17th Elias, becomes revitalized like a man possessed, he borrows a sum of money from his cousin, now his Masonic Bro. and buys a horse, then on the 25th of October he leaves for London ! Despite his being banned from the City after his defeat at Worcester. By November he was living the high life in London, attending “ The mathematical feast at the White Hart” mixing freely with Astrologers, Alchemists and mathematicians. How was he suddenly accepted by such strong supporters of the parliamentary side such as renowned Astrologer William Lilly, just what had enhanced his fortunes and made him acceptable to a man like this ? There are even notations in the papers of the public office confirming the unlawful nature of his move to London. However he was left free to pursue his many interests. Unfortunately we will never know why he joined the craft was it motivated by self improvement or a desire to become accepted by society again. There is no doubt that after he became a Freemason his life suddenly changed for the better.



Returning for a moment to Ashmoles Initiation this is the first written proof that Speculative Freemasonry was being widely practiced in England and Scotland (Robert Moray initiated into Freemasonry in Scotland was an admitted not an Accepted Mason in 1641 ) before 1640 as most of those present at his initiation were already Freemasons. None of those present from what we can discern were operative Masons, this is a very

important fact ! with the exception of Richard Ellom who in his will styled himself a Freemason in the stone masons Trade. The lodge however will have consisted of several additional members not present who may well have been operative Masons at that time.

The other important fact that was published in 1717 to coincide with the formation of the Grand Lodge Of England was the sentence "Then at the lodge" not "Of the lodge" as written by Ashmole. This might indicate or imply that those present were not even members of this lodge which has huge significance. The next entry in his Diaries relating to Freemasonry does not take place until 1682 a full 36 years hence? Ashmole, was a joiner and the answer may lie in the fact that Speculative Freemasonry at this time was an organization of consequence and because of this event if he attended meetings between these dates he may not have felt that there was a need to record such events ?

In 1647 Ashmole, remarried to a Mary Forster a widow of three husbands, her second son Humphrey Stafford, broke in to Ashmoles home threatened him with death and proceeded a suit against the marriage, Elias, won the case and in 1649 enjoyed the fruits of his wife's estate who by now wanted nothing more to do with him ! Therefore, he was free to push ahead with his studies in Astrology chemistry and now Botany,

By 1650 Ashmoles studies began to pay off and here we see him editing an Alchemical work by John Dee, together with an anonymous work on the same subject under the anagram of James Hasolle. This was followed by his most famous collection of Ancient metrical treatises on Alchemy the book was called " Theatruin Chemicum Britannicum" and was published in 1652 followed by the way to Bliss in 1658.

This paper was not intended to investigate or detail all of Ashmoles Hermetic and esoteric studies however, because we are not sure what influence they may have had on his Masonic interests I have decided to do a quick glossary of his other Non Masonic pursuits, time permitting ?

Elias, often consulted oracles and became a spiritual son of William Backhouse, a venerable Rosicrucian who in 1653 bequeathed him the secret of "The true matter of the Philosopher's Stone" . For the record he stated that he never went past the stage of speculative enquiry.

He became good friends with John Tradescant, keeper of the botanic Garden at Chelsea and was willed all of Tradescants collections which in truth formed for the most part the Ashmolean Museum for which Elias gets the credit. All of his and Tradescants collectables

were moved to Oxford where a special building was erected for this purpose in 1682. Ashmole's main life work is his "Institution, Laws, and ceremonies of the order of the Garter" (1672). His strong support of the Monarch was to be rewarded by King Charles 2 with an appointment to Widsor Herald, he became Commissioner, controller and Accountant - General of excise and held at the same time a commission for the controller of Surinam.

Ashmole was a founding member of the Royal Society and assisted in the design of its coat of Arms.



I will close with a brief explanation of Ashmole's only other recorded mention of Freemasonry, the notation is dated March 10th 1682 and it states

*About 5 p.m. I received a summons to appear at a lodge to be held the next day at Masons Hall London. The entry in his diary the next day goes on to say;*

*"11th accordingly I went and about noone were admitted into the fellowship of Freemasons, by Sir William Wilson several other names are mentioned, I was the senior Fellow among them (it being 35 years since I was admitted) There were present besides myself the fellows named Mr Thos and Mr Wise of the Masons Company. We all dined at the half moon tavern in Cheapside, at the Noble dinner prepared at the charge of newly Accepted Masons.*

So what ceremony did Ashmole actually attend? He was the senior fellow among them thus a speculative gathering in an operative environment of the Masons Company Of London. Of the Ten who dined at the Half Moon, eight were operative Masons employed by Christopher Wren ,



who was a member of Old St Paul's Lodge, serving as Master in 1729 . Since 1691 that Lodge had held their meetings at the Goose and Grid Iron Tavern, in St Pauls Church Yard. This was according to Andersons Constitutions of Freemasonry (1738) the first Grand Lodge that was formed, on Bro. Wrens death several newspapers called him a "Worthy Mason". Ashmole had received a summons to appear implying that he was known to be a Mason. It is quiet possible that operative and Speculative Masons freely mixed at Lodge meetings until a later period when Grand Lodge was formed and the rules changed.

There is evidence that Ashmole, had begun work on a History of Freemasonry, but he was never to finish it, Bro. Ashmole went to the Grand lodge above on either the 18th or 19th of May 1692, less than a week before his 75th Birthday



Some of Ashmoles closest friends and influences were:

- 1) Izaak Walton, Author of the " The complete Angler " which reads like a Freemasons Vacation guide, it is still in print and there is a stained glass window located in Winchester Cathedral of his likeness and underneath is written "Study to be quiet.
- 2) John Dee.
- 3) Sir Robert Moray, close Friend and fellow founding memeber of The Royal Society.
- 4) Sir Issac Newton (Which coincidentally was my house name , color Blue ! when I attended Holland Park School in London)

5) Francis Bacon; "The new Atlantis"

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