



## NUGGET

### Bro. William Preston

**Summary:** The life and times of William Preston, founder of the Prestonian Lectures.



**William Preston**

*from the 1812 edition of Illustrations of Masonry*

Once we hear reference to the annual appointment by The United Grand Lodge of England of the *Prestonian Lecturer*, we are immediately reminded of William Preston. Who was this remarkable man and what is the story surrounding his extraordinary contributions to Freemasonry?

He was born in Edinburgh on 7th August 1742, and his education begun at the tender age of six, when he entered High School paid for by his father. After the death of his father, Preston withdrew from College and took employment as Secretary to Thomas Ruddiman, a celebrated linguist. Due to his employer's failing eyesight, Preston did much research work in classical and linguistic studies. Following the death of Ruddiman, Preston moved to London to work for William Strahan, the King's printer; where he remained for many years. His critical skills, attracted literary men of the period to call upon him for assistance and advice, evidenced by the many autographed presentation copies of famous works found amongst his possessions.

Typical of the records of the time, the date of Preston's Initiation into Freemasonry is not known, having occurred in London in 1762 or 1763, in a Lodge meeting in the White Hart Tavern in the Strand, when Preston was around twenty. The minutes of the Athol (Ancient) Grand Lodge show that a Lodge No. 111 was constituted on April 20th 1763, and Preston's name appears as the twelfth amongst twenty-two on the roll of membership. The following year the Lodge was re-constituted, taking the name of the Caledonian Lodge No. 325.<sup>1</sup> It was attended by many very prominent Masons and the quality of the Ceremonies and Addresses made a deep and profound impression on Preston and galvanised him to enter into a programme of research and correspond extensively with Freemasons at home and abroad. This research found expression in the form of his first book entitled *Illustrations of Masonry* published in 1772. It was nothing less than a total revision of the old lectures and craft rituals of the time. It reconsidered the implications of the ancient charges, and placed them in such format as to receive the approval of leading members of the Craft and the sanction of the Grand Lodge. They have, to all extent and purposes, remained unchanged since that date.



Preston's reputation grew in proportion to his zeal and ability. He was invited to attend the Lodge of Antiquity No. 1, one of the Lodges involved in the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1717. Their Lodge records reveal that on that occasion he was elected as a member of the Lodge and Installed as Master at the same meeting, and the Lodge thrived greatly under his leadership. He became actively involved with Grand Lodge serving upon its New Masonic Hall Committee, and in 1773 he was appointed as Deputy Grand Secretary. Encouraged by the favourable reception of his published works, he employed, at his own expense, lecturers to travel the length and breadth of the Kingdom and deliver lectures before many Lodges. New editions of his book were demanded, and eventually over twenty re-prints were produced in England alone.

When he died on 1st April 1818, he bequeathed to The United Grand Lodge of England the sum of £300, the interest from which was to support some well-informed Mason appointed by the Grand Master, to deliver annually a Lecture upon one of the three Degrees of Craft Masonry. Lectures were delivered from 1820 until 1862, then was revived in 1924, and continue to the present day. Perhaps a quotation from an unknown source sums up William Preston's contribution to freemasonry:

*'He who contributes to the Mason's search for light that will enable the Craftsman to more intelligently and efficiently serve his God, his Country and his neighbour, is rendering the highest and most enduring quality of service'.*

## Endnotes

1. This Lodge is still in existence as Lodge No. 134 on the register of the United Grand Lodge of England.
2. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - [A Prologue, https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084](https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084)



## Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.

Themed with the meeting or activity.

Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.

Read at home and shared as a topic for a future discussion.

Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

\*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

For further papers and other learning materials visit *Solomon* at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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