



NUGGET

Bro. Elias Ashmole

Summary: Elias Ashmole, solicitor, antiquarian, alchemist, astrologer, Freemason.



Elias Ashmole (1617–1692), by John Riley (copy after)
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Interred in a tomb in the Church of St. Mary in Lambeth, near the Thames, are the remains of Elias Ashmole. The story of his life and his accomplishments are remarkable. Moreover, he probably never realised the importance that posterity would place upon two simple entries in his Diary.

He was born in Lichfield in Staffordshire in 1617. His father was a saddler by trade and a soldier by choice and his mother a lady 'of good family'. His father entered him as a chorister in the Cathedral choir of his native city, which greatly benefited his education. Such that he succeeded in getting himself admitted as a Solicitor in 1638 at the earliest legal age of 21. He then married Eleanor, the daughter of a wealthy Cheshire landowner. At the outbreak of the English Civil war, he left law to follow the King's fortunes in the army. To begin with he served in the 'Ordinance' at Oxford, then became as the King's Commissioner of Excise and Revenue in Worcester, only to later reappear with the rank of Captain in an Infantry Regiment. Finally returning to the Ordinance Corps in Oxford, having advanced to the post of Comptroller of Ordinance (The equivalent of Her Majesty's Quartermaster General).

With the end of the Civil war, the defeat of King Charles, and the surrender of Worcester to Cromwell in 1646. Elias Ashmole returned to his family home at Smallwood in Cheshire. It was at this time that he was made a Freemason at Warrington in Lancashire, and it was duly recorded in his Diary¹ making it the earliest record of a non-operative Mason's admission into an English Lodge.² It is unlikely that he was the first non-operative to be admitted a Freemason in an English Lodge, and it is unlikely that we will ever know why he did it. Theories have been advanced that it was to give him 'safe-passage' around the country, and lodgings wherever there was a Lodge of Freemasons; it being a dangerous time in English history. As he was a conscientious diarist, we must assume that he did not attend any Lodge between his initiation in 1646 and 1682, yet it must have been

known that he had been made a Freemason, otherwise he would not have received the summons in 1682. Nor do we know what caused a Lodge to be convened in 1682. Though it was probably the greatest concentration of operative masons that had ever occurred in London, repairing and rebuilding after the ravages of the Great Fire of 1666. On that evening they made other Masons, and some, if not most of the attendees were non-operatives. We will never know if that was the first non-operative Lodge, but it is fascinating to speculate on what that diary entry might be hiding.

Let us return to the life and times of this interesting man. When Ashmole later moved to Lambeth in South London, he lodged with the collector and gardener, John Tradescant, who had a collection of plants, minerals, coins, and 'curiosities' acquired through expeditions to foreign lands. When Tradescant died, he left his collection to Ashmole, who already had his own collection of manuscripts, coins, astrological and archaeological specimens, and medical artefacts. Ashmole had by then become an antiquarian, and published *The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*,³ which established his reputation. This was also a period when he became fascinated with alchemy.

Following the Restoration, in 1661, he was nominated by Charles II as Windsor Herald, an appointment of great distinction, followed by being appointed Registrar and Treasurer. In 1671, he became a Fellow of the Royal Society and celebrated his appointment, by designing the coat of arms of The Royal Society; which included a hand holding a plumb-rule. He was also given an Honorary Doctorate in Medicine at Oxford University and in 1677 he gave his museum to the University, on condition that they erected a building to hold it. The building was started in 1679 and completed 3 years later, becoming the first public museum in the country.

Elias Ashmole passed to The Grand Lodge Above in May 1692, well into his seventies, having lived a life of bewildering diversity; Chorister, Solicitor, Artilleryman, Commissioner of Taxes, Cavalry Captain, Astrologer, Alchemist, Botanist, Antiquarian, Historian, Herald, Collector of Curiosities and Doctor of Medicine.

References

1. The first record is dated 16th October 1646: '1646 Oct. 4:30 pm I was made a Free Mason at Warrington in Lancashire with Col. Henry Mainwaring of Karincham in Cheshire. The names of those that were of the Lodge, Mr Rich Penket Warden, Mr James Collier, Mr Rich Sankey, Henry Littler, John Ellam, Rich Ellam, High Brewer.' The second mention, made some 35 years later, appeared on 10th March 1682, reads as follows: 'About 5pm I reced a summons to appr at a lodge to be held the next day at Masons Hall London'. This was followed next day with this entry: '11th Accordingly I went & about Noon were admitted into the fellowship of Free Masons, Sir William Wilson Knight, Capt. Rich Borthwick, Mr Will Woodman, Mr Wm Grey, Mr Samuel Taylour & Mr. William Wise. I was the senior Fellow among them (it being 35 years since I was admitted). There were present besides myself the Fellows after named.... We all dined at the Halfe Moon Tavern in Cheapside, at a noble dinner prepared at the charge of the New accepted Masons.' *Ars quatuor coronatorum: Being the transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge, No. 2076, London, Volume XI, (1898), Margate.* <https://archive.org/details/arsquatuorcorona11free/page/6> [Accessed 02/12/19] It is understood that Ashmole's Diary appeared in print in 1717, 1738, 1748 and 1774. On each occasion none of the re-prints is an exact copy of Ashmole's original; adding to the speculation and interpretation concerning the entries.
2. An article in *The Builder* (1921) asserts that in fact Sir Robert Moray was Initiated into a Lodge in Newcastle on 20th May, 1641, some five years before. In fact, Moray was initiated into a Scottish military lodge during the siege of Newcastle. He was a Scottish general and what we would now call an engineer and therefore associated with the operative trade.
3. Ashmole had previously published, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652), and *The Way to Bliss*, (1658).
4. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - A Prologue, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>



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

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