



PAPER

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. It is almost certain that he would never have 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 an artisan saddler by trade, and a soldier by choice. His mother was a lady 'of good family'. His father secured a career opportunity for his son by entering him as a singing boy in the Cathedral choir of his native city. The boy so benefited by his education, that on going to London, at a time leading up to the English civil war, he succeeded in getting himself admitted as a Solicitor in 1638 at the earliest legal age of 21.

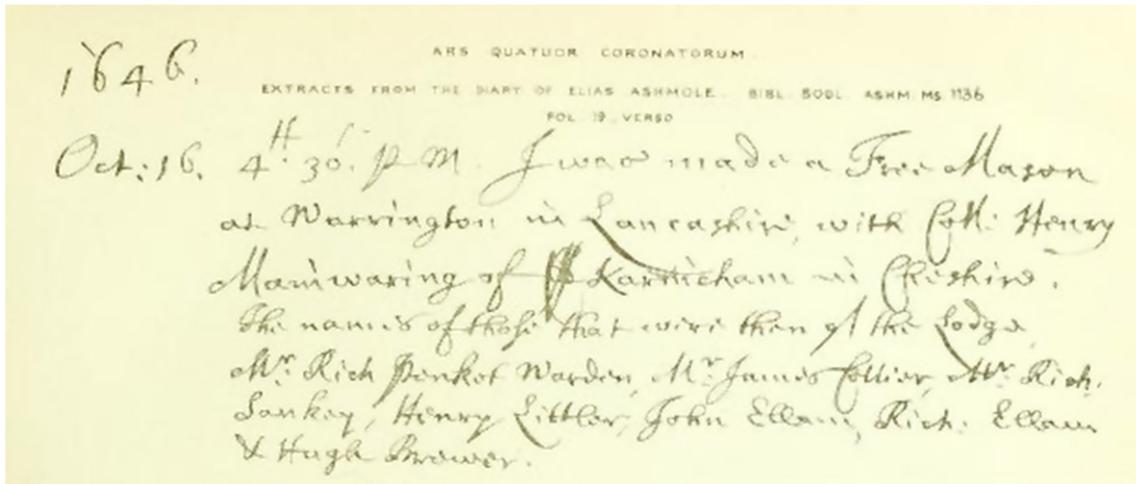
It appears that from an early age he was very ambitious and pursued both wealth and social position. He therefore greatly bettered himself by marrying Eleanor, the daughter of a wealthy Cheshire landowner. When the English Civil war broke out, he abandoned the law for the army, to

follow the King's fortunes. To begin with, he served in the Ordnance at Oxford, shortly afterwards he was sent to Worcester as the King's Commissioner of Excise and Revenue. According to the records he then reappears with the rank of Captain in an Infantry Regiment. Finally, he reverts to his former Ordnance Corps in Oxford, having advanced to the post of Comptroller of Ordnance (The equivalent of Her Majesty's Quartermaster General). It is reported that he was closely associated with Brasenose College, but the extent of his studies is unclear, in fact he did not graduate at that time.

The end of the Civil war came with the defeat of King Charles and the surrender of Worcester to Cromwell in 1646. At the end of hostilities, 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 Diary; making it the earliest record of a non-operative Mason's admission into an English Lodge.¹

Let us therefore take a look at these entries that have been the subject of much debate.² The first record is dated 16th October 1646, this appears easily understood and uncomplicated:

*'Oct: 16 4H 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 then at the Lodge, Mr. Rich Penket Warden, Mr. James Collier, Mr. Rich Sankay, Henry Littler, John Ellam, Rich Ellam, & Hugh Brewer.'*³



The second mention, but not until some 35 years later, appeared on 10th March 1682, reads as follows:

'About 5pm, I received a summons to appear at a lodge to be held the next day at Masons-Hall London'.

This was followed next day on 11th March 1682, with this entry:

'11. Accordingly I went, & about noon was admitted into the fellowship of Free Masons, Sir William Wilson Knight, Capt Rich Borthwick, Mr. Will Woodman, Mr. William Grey, Mr. Samuel Taylour, & Mr William Wise.

I was the senior fellow among them (it being 35 years since I was admitted) there was present besides myself the fellows after named. Mr. Thomas Wise, Master of the Masons Company this present year; Mr. Thomas Shorthose, Mr. Thomas Shadbolt, Waidssford Esq., Mr. Nich Young, Mr. John Shorthose, Mr William Hamon, Mr John Thompson, & Mr. William Stanton.

We all dined at the Half Moon Tavern in Cheapside, at a noble dinner prepared at the charge of the "new" accepted Masons'.⁴

Let us return to some factual evidence about the life and times surrounding this interesting man. When Ashmole later moved to Lambeth in South London, he lodged with the collector and gardener, John Tradescant, who had put together a collection of plants, minerals, coins, and curiosities acquired through expeditions to foreign lands. When Tradescant died, he left his collection to Ashmole, who had already amassed his own collection consisting of manuscripts, coins, astrological and archaeological specimens together with many medical artefacts.

Ashmole had by then become fascinated with alchemy, and published *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 1652, and *The Way to Bliss*, 1658. It has also been suggested that at this time he chose Mercury as his personal sign.

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. During this period he devoted himself to the studying the history of the Order of the Garter, resulting in the publication of *The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* in 1672.

In 1671, he became a Fellow of the Royal Society; some historians claim he was one of the Founders. To celebrate his appointment, he designed the coat of arms of The Royal Society, which design included a hand holding a plumb-rule. To coincide with these achievements, he was also given an Honorary Doctorate in Medicine at Oxford University. In 1677, he gave his collection to Oxford University, on condition that they put up 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.

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 his reasons for seeking membership. 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 was after all 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. In London at that time was probably the greatest concentration of operative masons that had ever occurred, 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 from us.

Endnotes

1. An article in *The Builder* (July, 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.
2. 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.
3. *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]
4. *ibid*
5. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - A Prologue, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>

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 - Followed by 'any questions'
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*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

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