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Canon's Ashby House and the Masonic connection

Introduction

In August 2010 I was asked by the Province of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire to look into reports of symbols and paintings dating back to 1580-90 which had been discovered at Canon's Ashby House near Daventry in Northamptonshire, which up to 1981 was the Ancestral home of the Dryden Family when it was passed over to the National Trust. Earlier research had suggested these symbols and Paintings may have Masonic Connections.

History of Canon's Ashby House

The Dryden Family had owned property on this site since the marriage of John Dryden to Elizabeth Cope in 1551 when John Dryden inherited the estate as a gift from his father in law, a local landowner and Lawyer. By 1573 records show the estate Dryden inherited including the remains of the old Monastery and Wylkyn's farm, this as it was described, probably comprised the central section of the east range of the present Canon's Ashby house. John added several rooms to the building Beginning with the Tower and what is now the Great Dining Room which are 1550-60's in character and continued with the Great Hall and Kitchen by the 1580-90's to complete the typical H plan Elizabethan Manor House. The Winter Parlour was completed in the 1580's during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the 1st.

Masonic Link

Between 1580 and 1590 his son Sir Erasmus Dryden, who had brought himself a Baronetcy, built the final north range to enclose the pebble court. He decorated the Winter Parlour with crests of his friends and neighbours. It is these that give us a Masonic link.

The Winter Parlour panelling is decorated with crests on several levels. It is curious that some of the lower crests which I believe to have Masonic connection have been defaced but very few of the upper ones. The official guide to Canons Ashby House states "It doubts these (Crests) have any Masonic connection, as Freemasonry was not properly organised in England until 1717." This perpetuates the 'Corporate Mantra' given out by the United Grand Lodge of England. We know that there were speculative Lodges in existence prior to this date as Elias Ashmole was initiated into such a Lodge in 1661 while a Robert Moray is listed as joining a Speculative Lodge in 1641. It is suspected these were not the first speculative Masons only those whose names are recorded. The paper below, written by WBro The Reverend Neville .B. Cryer PGC. States his belief that Speculative Freemasonry existed before this period.

I requested assistance with this research from the Library and Museum at Great Queen's St and received the response that: "They doubted there could be any connection as Freemasonry as we know it and understand the term today did not come into existence until about the beginning of the 18th century – this Grand Lodge being established in 1717."

This is curious because as I say above a resemblance of modern Freemasonry (judging from a corpus of medieval manuscripts) was already in place over 100years beforehand, even if its pedigree was lost

So that it is then? Put away my books as the United Grand Lodge of England has spoken. Elias Ashmole and Robert Moray will be impressed. I accept that it is difficult to confirm a great deal as fact given the paucity of information available to us but is that a reason to stop trying? There is a rich history out there waiting to be discovered and to simply cut off interest by running out the corporate mantra to me is indefensible.

I have received a letter from David Adams who was at one time employed at the house, he wrote: *"I was until recently House Steward there (Canon's Ashby) and did extensive research into the House & Family.*

With regard to the Masonic connection, I kept running into brick walls on all fronts. While there seems to be a consensus that there are Masonic overtones, getting the Masons to admit it seems difficult.

The best bet seemed to be Scottish Masonry, while they were positive in their reply to my queries, unfortunately a lot of their early records were destroyed in a house fire in the 1600s!

The Grand Lodge in London claims to begin in the 1700's and has no earlier records - I think a Mason may well get further."

This outlines the problems with researching Masonry from this period, if an expert in the field cannot make progress, then I am going to find it difficult. I wonder why as he states "Getting Masons to admit it seems difficult"? Surely if there is a possibility of discovering more about our history we should be embracing the chance to explore this, or is there some investment in maintaining the Mantra that we did not exist until the 18th century?

In an undated short paper entitled: **The Winter Parlour Revisited**ⁱ I discovered at Canon's Ashby written by David Adams and Clem Hatzel the authors write:

In October 2002 we wrote a speculative piece about the winter Parlour. Since this time more information has been received which supports our earlier assertion that this room had a more significant purpose than a family dining room. Among 'hear say' evidence collected a visitor informed us that Cullross House on the Firth of Forth has an identical room including the Boars head lozenge without neck. (David Adams subsequently confirmed this). A museum conservator from the Victoria and Albert stated the 'Buffet' was a representation of the temple at Jerusalem.

*During the last week of May, N.B. **The year this was written is not known.** two experts have brought their knowledge and experience to the Winter Parlour. The first is Dr Peter Hill an eminent Historian specializing in the families history of Northamptonshire. The second is the Rev N B. Cryer, Past Grand Chaplain of the United Grand Lodge of England. The Rev Cryer sent us a copy of his paper: **The Development of English Freemasonry from 1350 TO 1730**ⁱⁱ. In which he states: In the early 14th Century operative masons were organized in site lodges (Temporary lean-to structures used for meetings, rest periods and storage) These were ruled by a fellow elected from their own lodge membership, master masons were excluded from the lodge. The lodge was responsible for work conditions, wage rates, qualifications and regarding of members. By 1350 the population had been decimated by the Black Death, there was a shortage of masons and wage rates rocketed. The final outcome was that to practice a trade or profession you had to be a member of a guild holding a Royal Charter. This move to regional guilds meant Master Masons could mix with the other grade of members. The masons trade took some severe knocks in the early 1500's King Henry VII demolished castles, his son Henry the VIII closed the monasteries and associated buildings, a preference for building in brick and wood developed. For various reasons the masons allowed members of other trades to join their guild provided they were freemen. According to the masons this was because the non-operative members wanted to retain the old religious ceremonies and rites suppressed by the King. My own cynical interpretation is "It's good for what little business there is" By the time of the Great Fire of London in 1666, the*

guild lodges were so packed with non-operative members, a new trade guild had to be formed to represent the working masons.

WBro the Reverend Cryer's research amends previous perceptions of the start of Freemasonry, either as at the time of the formation of the Royal Society after the restoration of the Monarchy or 1709 when the first Masonic pamphlet was published.

We believe the Winter Parlour was decorated in the early 1580's whilst John Dryden was still alive. It would be quite reasonable for John who was carefully demolishing a priory and using materials to build his house to be a non-operative mason, provide site lodge facilities and finally bring the lodge meeting room into the house. The Rev Cryer is certain that lodge meetings have been held in the Winter Parlour.

*Let us now turn to Dr Hill's contribution, which in some ways is even more positive. The shield shaped paintings are obviously family crests, between a third and a half having been identified. Presumably in the context of a lodge this is a membership list? **N.B. I believe the lower crests are more likely to be this list, the upper ones easily identifiable as local families. Maybe a form of concealment***

More interestingly Dr Hill speculates that the lozenge shaped patterns could be a distorted representation of the Octagon, the basis for sacred geometry, especially in the Templar round churches, modeled on the dome of the Rock which stood near their headquarters in Jerusalem.

Dr Hill's conclusion is that the symbolism in the room is mainly Masonic with Scottish connections, not Templar although there is some shared symbolism.

*One last interesting fact-the servants did not like the parlour when it was handed over to them they painted the entire paneling with cream distemper. Did they simply not like it or being aware of the rites that had been performed in there, were they afraid of it and over-painting the symbols gave them a sense of security? **N.B. I agree with the later theory.***

So is there a Proven History?

Empirical evidence supporting the history of Freemasonry prior to the 18th Century is hard to find. Theories vary wildly from the plausible to the sensational. Most masons believe that Freemasonry is derived from the early medieval stonemasons guilds and enquire no further. However, a well rounded study in Freemasonry should look more deeply at all possible roots, even if only to be able to dismiss most of them.

There is no commonly accepted Ancient History of Freemasonry – as I have said even the United Grand Lodge of England does not publish a house view prior to its own initial conception in 1717(See above)

One theory is that we originated out of the Medieval Operative Masonic Guilds

We have evidence that Operative Masonic guilds (or gilds) existed in Scotland as early as 1057 and possibly in England from 1220 when we know the Masons Livery Company was in existence. Those guilds, associations or Compagnonnage as they were known in France and mainland Europe, were conscripted to produce sufficient masons of all qualities to satisfy the aspirations of Kings and the Church in their respective building programmes.

In days where travel and communication for all but King and Church was highly restricted, the guilds are believed to have developed their own methods of introduction and secret modes of recognition when working on various programmes around the country. These were essential in order to distinguish a skilled master from the aspiring apprentice. This was important because they were no written credentials in those days because only top Master Masons could read, let alone write letters of introduction on expensive parchment. However, some historians (Chief among them John J Robinson) argue it is difficult to prove English stone masons guilds (unlike Scottish guilds) existed at all given the relative lack of evidence available to corroborate them. A view not shared by WBro the Reverend Cryer.

Box Club Charity Theory

A more recent theory suggests modern Freemasonry developed from charitable beginnings. In the 1600s many trades operated what have become known as box clubs where their members would set aside earnings for the group or individual members to fall back on if they suffered hard times. Those without such assistance usually starved through lack of other reliable welfare support. Evidence indicates these box clubs began to admit members outside their trade and had many of the characteristics of early Masonic lodges. Perhaps Freemasonry arose from an early and successful box club framework, which was later taken over by the leading intellectual lights that emerged in the seventeenth century? This I believe is a link to the Masons Guilds who would have had the knowledge and resources to organise such a scheme.

The Winter Parlour at Canon's Ashby

We know that in the early days many Lodges moved around from Public house to Public house and that their proceedings were not well documented. Others were organised and funded by the local Squire, Solicitor or Magistrate and often held by them in their own houses, being one of the few places big enough or warm enough to hold such meetings and where food and drink would be available and it would be private. I believe this to be the case at Canon's Ashby.

The Winter Parlour seems ideally suited for this purpose; there is a cupboard alongside the fireplace, which reputedly contained a secret staircase or access to the room above. Although on examination I find this difficult to believe given its small size and the construction of the beams inside and would have been I believe used for storing items that the owner would not want lying around on display. It may have been the case this held not that which has been handed down, a secret staircase but some secret compartment to hide away objects the owner did not want discovered.

The Winter Parlour panelling is decorated with crests on several levels. The crests on the upper levels are a mixture of those of local families and the Dryden family. Those on the lower are less easily identifiable and do not seem to conform to the usual settings for Heraldry and are possibly those with connections to members of the Lodge, or indeed hidden/disguised Masonic symbols.

The fireplace in this room is authentic to the period and is unadorned. The fireplace in the Tower has two compasses of a more practical design chiselled into the stonework. The Buffet is decorated with two setsquares above two columns on the upper part with the lower part having been decorated with two Compasses, which have a scroll running between the open points. Unfortunately the inscription on the scrolls has been erased. When the Winter Parlour was given over to the servants as a dining room in the 18th century, they systematically painted over the paintings and carvings. This I believe was because of the room's Masonic connection and the Crafts perceived connection to the worship of the Devil and other unholy acts. They may have also removed the script on the scrolls if they had any Masonic connection.

In the 16th Century there was turmoil in England, in 1530 King Henry the VIII had broken away from Rome and Catholicism and began a persecution of Catholic's, declaring himself the Head of the 'Church of England' and demanding all of his Ministers swear allegiance to him as Head of the Church those who refused were executed including Sir Thomas Moore.

Following his death in 1547 his son Edward the 1st who was 9 yrs old took to the throne.

The government was entrusted to his uncle the Duke of Somerset (who fell from power in 1549), and then to the Earl of Warwick, later created Duke of Northumberland. Edward was a staunch Protestant, and during his reign the Reformation progressed, he died in 1553.

Henry's daughter Mary known as Bloody Mary for the carnage that took place during her reign to restore Catholicism; ascended the throne and ruled until 1558.

Henry's Daughter Elizabeth who then took the throne was Protestant in her views and in her early years tried to find a middle ground with the Catholics but went to war with the Catholic Spanish after she had her sister Mary (Queen of Scots) Executed after Mary had led a revolt out of Scotland to take back the Throne and restore Catholicism.

Many families continued to have strong if not zealous beliefs, one way or the other and this could explain the first use of the Winter Parlour, which has a decorated recessed buffet that may have been used as an altar, although below, although later I offer another explanation for its use.

The Dryden's were Puritans, the zealots of their day. Sir Erasmus Dryden was imprisoned on two occasions for his actions in support of his beliefs. Given the constant change in the Royal support for the two faiths it may have been that the family practiced their true religion in private, hence the building of the buffet in this style.

Masonry was in its infancy still being established as a speculative order, mostly in Scotland and given the strict adherence to religious beliefs at this time. In this period of our history being declared a witch was almost automatically a death sentence. In **1563** Scottish courts declare witchcraft a secular crime. In **1580** The English witch-hunts begin in earnest, over 1,000 are put to death. It is perfectly reasonable then to believe that a member of the local gentry, a leading light in the community, would not want his connection to such an organisation known outside of the Lodge.

The arrangement of the crests in the room is of particular significance; those on the top rows are the arms of local families alongside those of the Dryden family with characteristics consistent with others of the period and identifiable to those recorded in other places in the County. Those on the lower rows although not looking very different are significant to the Masonic Scholar, as they show representations of tools and symbols used in our order today and are not easily identified from heraldic records. In fact research taken from paperwork

given to me by the National Trust list many of the crests in this row as 'Unidentifiable' or 'Unknown' could these be a 'membership list, or Lodge symbols'?



Two of the walls in the Winter Parlour showing the crests and the cupboard alongside the fireplace Picture courtesy of the National Trust

The Lion, which surmounts the red column, is the Holy Royal Arch symbol for Strength and Power, while the five arrows depict Balance and Harmony. The Boars Head on a cushion, no neck, symbolises courage, authority and antagonism. It can also represent Hospitality. It is interesting that the Boars Head with no neck is normally found in Scottish Heraldry with Scottish Speculative Masonry being established earlier than that in England this could be a significant link. There is also a set of scales often used in Craft ritual.



Another wall depicting Masonic symbols picture courtesy of the National Trust

In the picture on the left we see an inverted crescent above a dagger, underneath clouds, which is depicted in the Temple of Solomon. The scallop and staff, symbols of pilgrimage to Santiago De Compostela, likely to be Templar because the scallop alone was used by Templar pilgrims. The first and second pictures show the damage to the lower crests, this damage is consistent in this row but significantly few of the top rows are damaged.



The Buffet with the Setsquares compasses and scrolls Picture courtesy of the National Trust

The writing on the scroll on both sides of the buffet has been erased, yet the compasses are in excellent condition for their age. The setsquares are clearly seen in the left hand picture. They surmount two columns again a possible Masonic connection? The V&A Conservator identified



The entrance to King Solomon's Temple its similarity to the design of the buffet is remarkable

This buffet is a representation of the Temple at Jerusalem. I do not believe the white carvings around the buffet have any Masonic significance, as they are not described in the official handbook as being part of the original decoration.

There is no evidence of either John or Erasmus Dryden the builders of the Winter Parlour having any connection with Masonry either Operative or Speculative but as I have said this may not be significant as there were very little written in those days. The fact that many people could not read or write at this period in history and the cost and time it took to write on parchment with quill pens meant that only important letters were routinely written, books were expensive and the preserve of the rich, Government or the Church. Also the religious turmoil at the time and the fear of belonging to any organisation that could suggest non-

adherence to the religion of the day would be kept concealed, hence the use of the crests to identify the members of a lodge without drawing attention to them. The compasses may have some cryptic script written on the scroll to disguise their real purpose.

This is all speculation and to discover the facts we need to identify and de-cipher the meaning of the lower row of the crests. This proved difficult, as they did not seem to match any crests depicted in local or national archives. The top rows are documented as belonging to local families such as in the picture below from the Winter Parlour



Typical painted wall in the Winter Parlour Picture courtesy of the National Trust

Which from the top left going down: shows the crests of 1. Farmer of Leicester, 2. Unknown. 3. Unknown. (Damaged) Second row going down: 4. The Dryden Family. 5. Unknown. 6. Warrington of Camberly. Third row going down: 7. Spencer of Everdon. 8. Fermor. 9. Sir Henry Wallop. 10 Unknown (Masonic?) Fourth row going down: 11. Dryden. 12. Gatsby of Aston St Ledger. 13. Hardy of Adstone. 14 Unknown (Masonic?) this picture is another example of the damage to the lower row of crests where the others are in the main in good condition

My next port of call was the excellent research facility in the public Library in Abington St Northampton. I had used this before when researching the history of parades in the Province, they were not only very helpful but a treasure trove of material that was not to be found anywhere else. I could only hope they are as useful in this search.

Unfortunately extensive research could only throw up the family history and parish records of

the time. The Dryden connection with Canon's Ashby is well documented and the family tree recorded. There is nothing to help identify the lozenges in the lower rows of the Winter Parlour. The only positive thing to come out of the research is that they could not be identified as crests or coats of arms of local families and remain I believe symbolic representations of some sort rather than heraldic crests. The form and structure are inconsistent with crests or coats of arms of the time. There is no quartering. The symbols are not on one side or the other (Dexter or Sinister) as in normal crests. So nothing to suggest they are individual crests or have been handed down.

Research for specific items in heraldry show that the scales depicted represent Justice but I could not find them as a stand- alone symbol in any English heraldry reference work we used. The quill pen in hand with the scroll underneath, symbolizes learned employment and the liberal arts (A phrase used in our Fraternity) but again could not be identified as a coat of arms in any work I researched. The same applies to all of the stand- alone symbols.

The British Library was of some help in this search but again I could not find any reference to family or more precisely personal coats of arms as crests or arms were issued to individuals and not families, armorial bearings are hereditary. They can be borne and used by all the descendants in the legitimate male line of the person to whom they were originally granted or confirmed. To establish a right to arms by inheritance it is necessary to prove a descent from an ancestor who is already recorded as entitled to arms in the registers of the College of Arms.

Something that began to emerge from research in this library was a strong Scottish connection. The Red Column with the Lion above is a Scottish symbol for the Altar, a Masonic connection hidden away perhaps? The Dagger with the point down is also called a dirk in heraldry and again is predominantly found in Scottish coats of arms. As I have said this image was found in the Temple at Jerusalem I believe this to have a Masonic connection. The Scales "Within balance of the last" i.e. supported by a floating point is again found in Scottish Heraldry and represents Justice, another Masonic symbol? The Sheave of Arrows is again difficult to track down in a bundle of five; normally they are seen as a sheave of three, the inscription around them is Concordia Persto; which when translated reads "Concord (Harmony) to Persist" A good inscription for a Lodge meeting. The Quill pen in hand does not appear as a stand alone crest in any reference book I came across so I would surmise it represents the Liberal Arts. The translation of the scroll is difficult given its condition but seems to say ' Knowledge dominants the truth'. Given the evidence that there is a similar room in Cullross, the Scottish connection

seems to be more than coincidence.

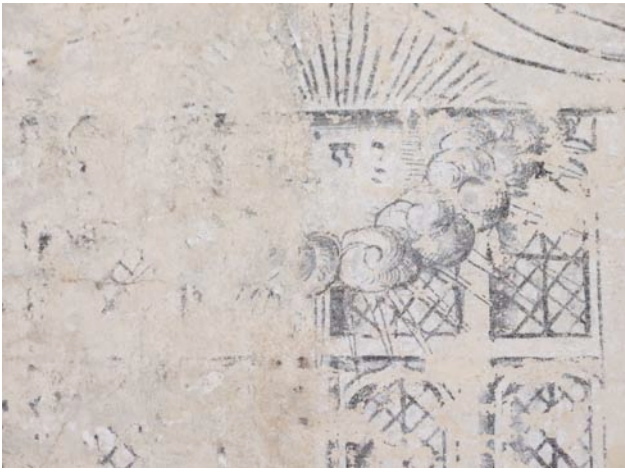
The Spenser Room

Another interesting room in Masonic terms is the Spenser room. This is named after the Poet Edmund Spenser (1552-99) Author of the *'Faerie Queen'* who was a first cousin by marriage to Sir Erasmus. This room contains many murals depicting Christian themed scenes. These were discovered when the 18th century paneling was removed. One warns of the danger of worshipping false Gods. One the story of Jeroboam, who is seen making a sacrifice at the altar of Bethel and he is denounced by "A man who came out of Judah." This story has often been used by Anti-freemasonry elements as an analogy for the worship of Freemasonry being seen as non-Christian.

What is interesting in Masonic terms are the references to possible Masonic symbols. In the two pictures shown below, the inn in the picture on the right shows a sign of a Dragon, the first Northamptonshire Lodge formed in the 1750's was called the George and Dragon Lodge as it met in the George and Dragon public house. The one on the left shows the possible remains of an all seeing eye with a Hebrew sign for life (A symbol used in both Rose Croix and the Knight Templar Orders) Going through the centre with a wreath of clouds used in the Masonic symbol beneath.



Original Masonic symbol of the all seeing eye



The two murals showing possible Masonic Connections, the similarity of the image in the left hand picture to the original is unmistakable Picture courtesy of the National Trust

Conclusion

My research uncovered a good representation of possible Masonic connections in a room we believe was used at one time or another as a Temple, with other symbolism throughout the house. The search is inconclusive but leans heavily toward a Masonic connection. With little else to go on I fear this will remain a mystery. If any one reading this has any thing to shed light on the work, that others and I have carried out I would be glad to carry on the search. The Scottish connection would also support early Masonic connections, as we know Speculative Masonry began in this region before it spread to England. The oldest known Lodge is a Scottish Lodge: **Mary's Chapel No 1 (13)**

I hope this paper has been of some interest to the reader and will inspire you to look more into our fascinating and varied past.

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Bibliography

ⁱ The Winter Parlour Revisited D. Adams and C. Hatzel. Date unknown.

ⁱⁱ The Development of English Freemasonry from 1350 to 1730. WBro the Reverend N. B. Cryer, PGC. Date unknown. Given as a Lecture to "Experienced Craftsmen"