

A HISTORY OF THE PROVINCE OF WEST LANCASHIRE

The Province of West Lancashire is not only the largest of the Provinces ranged under the banner of the United Grand Lodge of England: it also has claims to be the birthplace of English Freemasonry. The initiation of Elias Ashmole in Warrington in Lancashire on 16th October 1646 is the earliest recorded initiation into English Freemasonry. All trace of that early Lancashire lodge, if indeed such a lodge existed, if it was not merely an ad hoc meeting of conveniently situated Freemasons, has disappeared. The oldest of the existing lodges is Lodge of Loyalty No.86 in Prescot, dating from 1753 and still meeting on the Wednesday before full moon, although the brethren of course can no longer rely on their horses to see them safely home in the moonlight.

The Province, founded as Lancashire Western Division in 1826, becoming the Province of West Lancashire in 1960, covers that part of the ancient county of Lancashire west of the Great North Road (A6) but including Preston and Lancaster. It extends from the Lake District to the Mersey and from Liverpool into the suburbs of Manchester. Its lodges now meet in five counties; Lancashire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire. But in all 524 lodges the loyal toast is still to "The Queen, Duke of Lancaster".

Any description of the Province inevitably begins in Liverpool. Here is the headquarters of the Province and the greatest concentration of lodges 155 of them. The Province, being so large, is divided into 25 Groups, each with its Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary, ranging in size from the Preston Group with 35 lodges to Leigh with just 7. Liverpool has no fewer than seven Groups, with between 18 and 34 lodges in each.

In the popular mind Liverpool is associated with the Beatles, Aintree Racecourse and its two principal football teams. This is understandable. The Beatles were the most formative influence on popular music in recent times; Aintree Racecourse is the home of the world's greatest steeplechase: no other club can match Everton F.C.'s 115 years at the highest levels in the game or Liverpool F.C.'s glittering array of trophies.

Liverpool's equally famous waterfront is a more appropriate symbol however. Ever since King John gave Liverpool its first Charter, its prosperity has been linked to the sea. Here much has changed. Great transatlantic liners are no longer tied up alongside the landing stage. No merchant ships are at anchor in midstream waiting to enter the south docks. The decline of the British merchant fleet means that there are no serving mariners in Mariners Lodge No.249 and fewer seamen to recall when the traditional toast "to absent and seafaring brethren" is honoured in Liverpool lodges. But the north docks and the Royal Seaforth Container Base, mainly in Bootle and Crosby, handle as much cargo as ever and the closure of the south docks has created new opportunities. The Maritime Museum and the mighty warehouses of Jesse Hartley around Albert Dock are major tourist attractions, and the Tate Gallery has added to the city's artistic store, complementing the Walker Art Gallery in the city centre: together they house some of the most important collections outside London.

Elsewhere in the city architectural treasures abound. The eighteenth Century Town Hall and the Bluecoat Chambers remind visitors of the time when "cotton, sugar and slaves were the money spinners." St George's Hall, the finest neo-Classical building in Europe, where the first meeting of Grand Lodge outside London took place in 1901, dominates Lime Street.

The Masonic Hall stands on another famous street, Hope Street. The spectacular lantern crown of the Metropolitan Cathedral gazes down on one end of the street and the monumental Anglican Cathedral "the final blaze of Gothic" looks across the chasm of St James Gardens at the other. With only slight poetic licence it has been said, that "two great cathedrals are linked by a street of Hope." On Hope Street the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society has its home in the Art Deco Philharmonic Hall, where the talents of the young Simon Rattle and Andrew Davies were nurtured. Opposite the Masonic Hall, Liverpool playwrights like Alan Bleasdale and Willy Russell learned their craft in the Everyman Theatre. In this atmosphere of religion, drama and fine music the Province has its office and in the region of ninety lodges meet. Thirty-three more lodges meet at Woolton Hall, an 18th. Century mansion renovated by Robert Adam late in the century: twenty-one lodges meet at the Masonic Hall in Garston and the rest mainly in hotels.

Among these is Liverpool's oldest lodge, St.George's Lodge of Harmony No.32. The history of "32", not least the mystery of its number, is a microcosm of the complex history of English Freemasonry. The enterprising Liverpool gentlemen of Lodge No.45 bought the warrant of the defunct Lodge 25, a common and profitable practice among the "Ancients". When the "Ancients" and "Moderns" united, Antient and Amicable Lodge No.25 was one of three with that number. This confusion led to the assumption that St.George's Lodge of Harmony, as it had now become, was two years older than it actually was. Hence St.George's Lodge of Harmony, founded in October 1755, has a lower number than the Lodge of Loyalty, founded in December 1753.

Although the Provincial Office is in Liverpool, the Provincial Grand Lodge has for the last twenty-five years met

consistently in the Winter Gardens in Blackpool and in Preston, first in the Public Hall and then, since 1973, in the Preston Guildhall.

The 18th.Century passion for sea bathing first brought visitors to Blackpool: the 19th.Century railways led to its development. The railway arrived in Blackpool in 1846, and during the second half of the century the Central and North Piers, the Winter Gardens and the Tower were all built. Blackpool can now be regarded as the definitive British seaside resort. South of Blackpool is Lytham St.Annes, formed in 1922 by the merger of the ancient Anglo-Saxon settlement of Lytham with St.Annes on Sea.

Both in bold Blackpool with its "Golden Mile", alarming Big Dippers and spectacular illuminations and sedate Lytham St.Annes with the Royal Lytham golf course, Freemasonry came early and has continued strongly. Blackpool had a lodge, Clifton Lodge No.703, in 1857 before it had a pier and Lytham's oldest lodge, Lodge of Triumph No.1061, followed eight years later. Now Blackpool, Lytham St.Annes and the other towns of the Fylde, Cleveleys, Poulton le Fylde, Garstang, Pilling and Fleetwood have 60 lodges. In contrast to Blackpool, Preston the county town of Lancashire is an ancient town, the oldest Royal Borough in Lancashire with a Charter issued by Henry II. Henry valued Preston for its strategic position, guarding the most important crossing of the Ribble. Its position gave it a local importance too as a market for local produce and even to-day its lively market is one of Preston's most notable features. Richard Arkwright invented his Water Frame in Preston and in Victorian times cotton was vital to its economy. Its main industrial importance to-day is as a centre of the aircraft industry. The feature of Preston which makes it unique is the Preston Guild.

In the Middle Ages every town of consequence had a Merchant Guild. The Charter giving Preston the right to a Guild Merchant (fair) was granted by Henry II in 1179 and over 800 years later it still exists. In the reign of Edward III the king ordered that the Guild should be celebrated every twenty years: the king's order is still enthusiastically obeyed. One of the tangible results of the Preston Guild is the superb modern Guildhall, where, in addition to international Snooker Championships and the World Indoor Bowls Championships, the Provincial Grand Lodge of West Lancashire every year holds its October meeting, and where you are sitting this very evening!

In mediaeval times and for centuries later the most westerly parts of Lancashire in the Fylde and south of the Ribble were rendered wild and inaccessible by extensive marshes and mosses. These were gradually drained, although remnants remain around Simonswood and Rainford between Southport and St.Helens and part of the great expanse of Martin Mere has been restored as a wild-life sanctuary. The drainage of the rest produced rich farming country with villages and small towns like Burscough, Rufford and Tarleton which had been developed by Tudor times. Leyland, just south of Preston, has been a centre of the motor industry. Appropriately its modern Masonic Hall has that precious asset in this motoring age, an ample car park. For the most part, though, the area is still, as in Tudor times, an area of farmland bounded by Southport, Preston and Parbold Hill, from which the whole plain can be seen in panoramic splendour.

Southport is the most southerly of old Lancashire's seaside resorts. It is now a partner of Bootle and Crosby in the Sefton Metropolitan District of Merseyside. Crosby and Bootle abut so closely to Liverpool that only a staunch local patriot could distinguish the boundaries. The largest of the Port of Liverpool's docks, the Royal Seaforth Container Base and the Liverpool Freeport are all in Sefton. In addition, Sefton is an important administrative centre. Bootle is the birthplace of Girobank and the home of that most important of government departments, the Charity Claims Department of the Inland Revenue. In addition to its docks and the Freeport, Crosby has a wealth of stately Victorian and Edwardian houses. Merchant Taylors School, Crosby, which boasts Robert Runcie as one of its "old boys", was founded by John Harrison, who later founded a second Merchant Taylors School in Northwood. Old Crosbeian Lodge No.4992 meets in the school. Another nineteen lodges meet in Bootle Masonic Hall.

Southport faces the Irish Sea rather than the Mersey and to some extent is separated from the rest of Sefton by the sand dunes of Formby, Ainsdale and Birkdale. Southport, even more than Blackpool, is a Victorian product. In 1800 it consisted of an inn and a few cottages. By the end of the century it had become the pleasant residential and holiday town it still is to-day, seeing itself as "one of the best examples of Britain's traditional seaside resorts with a beauty and elegance quite unmatched."

The traditional side of Southport extends to a funfair, a Marine Lake and the Floral Hall, its attraction for visitors is increased by its golf courses especially the championship courses at Hillside and Royal Birkdale. Its beauty is enhanced by the Southport Flower Show, one of the princesses, along with Shrewsbury Flower Show, to Chelsea's queen. Its elegance is centred on Lord Street, over a mile long with shops along one side, and classical buildings, gardens and fountains along the other and described as "one of Europe's most elegant shopping boulevards". Just off Lord Street is the neat two-storey Masonic Hall, where 25 of Southport's 28 lodges meet. At the heart of the farming country south of Preston and to the east of Southport are the market

towns of Chorley and Ormskirk, both important centres of Masonic activity. Ormskirk was one of a scattering of Viking settlements in South-West Lancashire, such as Aigburth and Toxteth in the south, Crosby and Formby along the coast and Kirkby, Burscough, Scarisbrick and Skelmersdale close by. Its market dates from 1286, when the monks of Burscough Priory gained permission from Edward I to hold a weekly market. Now Ormskirk is crowded with shoppers on its Thursday and Saturday market days. Its most engaging feature is the parish church, one of only three with both a steeple and a tower. In Ormskirk's case the steeple is older than the tower, which was built to house the bells of Burscough Priory when it was dissolved in 1548. Rufford Old Hall nearby is linked by local tradition, which has strong circumstantial evidence to support it, with Shakespeare who, it is claimed, was the "William Shakeshaft" recommended to the care of Sir Thomas Hesketh of Rufford in 1581.

Chorley's markets date from 1498. The covered market, it claims, is "the best of its kind in the region." The more intriguing market is the open air "Flat Iron" market which derives its name from the practice of displaying wares in the open not on stalls but on sheets laid on the floor and held in place by flat irons. It is now held every Tuesday with about 100 stalls. A coach trip to Chorley Market is one of the attractions offered to visitors to Blackpool and Southport. Astley Hall on the outskirts of Chorley is reputed to be where Cromwell spent the night of 16th August 1648 during the running battle of Preston Moor which finally brought the Civil War to an end. "Cromwell's boots" are now displayed to visitors: why Cromwell then went to battle without his boots no-one seems to know. Henry Tate was born in Chorley, although his sugar empire was based at Liverpool. William Hesketh Lever, the philanthropic Freemason Lord Leverhulme, went in the opposite direction, building the Sunlight Soap empire on the banks of the Mersey, first at Warrington and then at Port Sunlight in Cheshire, and presenting the people of Chorley with Lever Park, complete with a replica of the ruins of Liverpool Castle.

In Ormskirk and nearby Lathom and Croston and in Chorley and neighbouring Horwich and Westhoughton thirty six lodges meet: the four which meet in Horwich, in Ridgmont House, a beautifully adapted country house, appear to have strayed, like the moorland sheep, to the forbidden side of the A6. Lancashire as such a rural haven does not perhaps accord with popular perception. The Lancashire of the mighty men of Wigan and of Leigh, of St.Helens, Warrington and Widnes, the Lancashire of mines, heavy industry and Rugby League fits that perception better. St.Helens, one of those industrial and Rugby League giants, a mere hamlet near a chapel dedicated to St.Helena when Ormskirk already had its market, and Preston, Liverpool, Lancaster and Wigan were Royal Boroughs, owed its rise to coal and glass-making. Making glass for windows and bottles was well established by the end of the 18th Century and the men of St. Helens had mastered the art of making plate glass. The Liverpool-Prescot turnpike road was extended to St.Helens in 1746 and in 1762 the Sankey Navigation, Britain's first canal, opened the way to the Mersey. By the time that the oldest of St.Helens lodges, St.Helens Lodge of Loyalty No.897 was founded in 1861, there were fifteen glassworks in the town as well as eleven chemical works and over thirty collieries. In this century the chemical works and even the collieries have disappeared, and the prime occupation is glass-making. Pilkingtons, the main employer, is now a multi-national company, but one which, unusually, has retained its headquarters in a provincial town.

The decline of the coal industry is illustrated by Wigan Pier. That promontory on the Leeds-Liverpool Canal immortalised by George Orwell, has become a "fun place" where "the way we were" in Victorian Lancashire can be experienced. Wigan Pier is cashing in on nostalgia. Unlike St.Helens, Wigan has a long history. The Romans had a fort there to protect the road from Chester to Hadrian's Wall. Later it was a mediaeval market town. It celebrated its 750th Anniversary as a Royal Borough in 1996. Its main place in English history though, like that of St.Helens, is through its part in the first Industrial Revolution. Industry had come to Wigan long before then. Coal was first mined in Wigan in the middle of the 15th Century but it was the incessant demand for coal in the 19th Century, particularly for the cotton mills, which saw its expansion. By the end of the century there were over 1,000 pit shafts within five miles. Now Wigan has begun new industries. With its large canning factory Heinz now means Wigan.

Wigan occupies an interesting corner in Masonic history. Some Lancashire lodges were unhappy at changes produced by the union of the "Ancients" and "Moderns" in 1818. Ultimately, in 1823, eleven lodges formed the "Grand Lodge of Wigan", with the lodge of Sincerity No.432 as the premier lodge. By 1838 seven of the rebellious lodges had returned to the fold. The Lodge of Sincerity, eventually left isolated, remained as the Grand Lodge of Wigan for sixty years. Then, sponsored by Lindsay Lodge No.1335, the Lodge of Sincerity was reconsecrated in 1913 as Lodge No.3677. Members of Arrowhead Lodge No.8500, the youngest of Wigan's lodges, give a dramatic presentation of those turbulent events.

The Masonic Hall in Wallgate is, perhaps significantly, on the site of the encampment in Wigan of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, that other unsuccessful rebel. Wigan is no longer in Lancashire. With its neighbour Leigh it is in Greater Manchester. The lodges of the south eastern part of the Province are even more within the orbit of Manchester. Eccles, Swinton and Urmston bear the same relationship to Manchester as Bootle and Crosby do to Liverpool, while Chorlton-cum-Hardy is within Manchester itself a pleasant suburb where that great hero of at least some Mancunians, Sir Matt Busby, lived. Nineteen lodges meet in the South

Manchester Masonic Hall in Chorlton-cum-Hardy. A further twelve meet in Urmston in Greater Manchester and Heaton Moor in Stockport completing the South-Eastern Group of Lodges. Fourteen meet in Eccles, famous for its cakes, held to have religious significance, but popular for their rich currant filling. Six lodges meet in its "District" at Swinton.

There is considerable contrast between the city and conurbation of Manchester, the twin capital, with Liverpool, of the modern North-West, and the ancient capital of Lancashire, Lancaster.

It was Roger of Poitou, granted the land north of the Mersey by William I, who chose the hill at Lancaster for his principal fortress. When his lands acquired a sheriff the shire became Lancashire. King John made Lancaster a Royal Borough like Liverpool, intending that both should safeguard communications with Ireland. Eventually Lancaster passed to Edward III's giant fourth son John of Gaunt who became Palatine Duke of Lancaster. His son in due course became king as Henry IV, and thus the first "King, Duke of Lancaster". Subsequent monarchs have been careful to retain the powerful Palatinate in their own hands, and the modern Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster no longer holds sway from Lancaster Castle, but from the Cabinet Room at Westminster.

Modern Lancaster, still dominated by the massive castle (now a prison) and the Priory Church on their steep hill, combines its function as a small but busy shopping centre with a role as a centre of learning through the "new" University founded during the upsurge of higher education in the 1960s. The oldest of its lodges, Lodge of Fortitude No.281, dates from 1789, the year of the French Revolution. Most of its lodges reflect Lancaster's own past grandeur with names like Duke of Lancaster No.1353, John O'Gaunt No.3815 and Plantaganet No.9357.

North from Lancaster is the beautiful fell country with Carnforth where two lodges meet, as its centre, and further north still, at the border with the old county of Westmoreland, is Silverdale with its one lodge, looking out, like Lancaster, over Morecambe Bay. Lancaster's immediate neighbours are Morecambe and Heysham, which have six lodges. They too look out over the Bay. Morecambe is another of Lancashire's flourishing seaside resorts, with illuminations of its own. Heysham is a gateway to the Isle of Man. Morecambe Bay is a gateway too - to Furness and Cartmell, the only one that does not intrude on another county. The way over the sands was, until the coming of the railways, the quickest route, though it had, and still has, its dangers. The times of the regular coaches from Ulverston to Lancaster in the 18th.Century were fixed by the tides. To-day's "sponsored walks" across Morecambe Bay have to take account of the tides too. But in Wordsworth's words to take the way across the sands was "a decided proof of taste". It was, and still is, the most aesthetically pleasing of routes. But in this part of Lancashire most things are aesthetically pleasing.

The way across the sands was also the way to Scotland, skirting the mountains on the westward side, along the coast then across Solway Firth. Earlier it had also been a route for marauding Scots which Lancaster was designed to stop. Roger of Poitou had been given Furness and Cartmell as a valuable outpost. Barrow-in-Furness is the only industrialised town beyond the sands, and the largest. It developed after the arrival of the railway, when in the second half of the 19th Century it leapt from being a village of about 300 inhabitants to a port and industrial town of nearly 70,000. It acquired a Masonic lodge early. Hartington Lodge No.1021 was warranted in 1864, a year after the Northern Group's oldest lodge, the Lodge of Furness No.995, began in Ulverston. Barrow as a port to rival Liverpool, as its developers had hoped, failed. The town survived as one of Britain's chief ship-builders, particularly for the Royal Navy. Apart from Barrow and light industries around Ulverston, Furness and Cartmell are almost entirely given over to pastoral farming, forestry and the tourist trade. Barrow has five lodges. North of Barrow is Dalton-in-Furness, the original capital of Furness, and the birthplace of George Romney, the rival to Sir Joshua Reynolds as the painter of 18th Century high society. Dalton has two lodges. Between Barrow and Dalton are the ruins of Furness Abbey, in Wordsworth's words, "a mouldering pile with fractured arch, belfry and images, and living trees; A holy scene." Furness Abbey controlled the life of Furness for over three hundred years, even having to take responsibility for defence against Scottish raids. Piel Castle, which gives its name to Piel Castle Lodge No.6099 in Barrow, was built by the monks of Furness.

North again from Dalton is Ulverston, a busy tourist centre, given a Georgian aspect by the shops and other buildings around the market and main streets. At the end of the 18th Century, before the development of Barrow it was the most important town in Furness.

It is still a busy place especially on Thursdays, market days. It has four lodges, including both the oldest and the newest in the Northern Group, Lodge of Furness and Lonsdale Lodge of Installed Masters No.9422. There are lodges in three places on the Cartmell Peninsula; Grange over Sands, Newby Bridge and Hawkshead, with one lodge each. The nature of Grange over Sands is indicated by the number of Past Masters in the town's lodge (Arthur John Brogden Lodge No.1715) whose mother lodges are in other Provinces; ten out of twenty-six or more than a third. Grange over Sands is a quiet, peaceful resort looking over Morecambe Bay to Silverdale to the south east and distant Lancaster Castle to the south, and shielded from the north wind by the Lakeland hills,

a place seen as ideal for quiet holidays and, increasingly, for retirement.

Newby Bridge, the home of Newby Bridge Lodge No.4598 is a far busier place, at the southern end of Lake Windermere, a place for active holidays. Hawkshead Lodge No.4354 is the most northerly lodge in the Province. Hawkshead, near the head of Esthwaite Lake and not too far away from Coniston Water and Coniston Old Man, West Lancashire's high spot, has been described as a village where "the white houses huddle together and face inwards as if to protect each other from the weather and other outside dangers."

The most serious outside danger which Hawkshead now faces are from tourist traffic which threatens to choke its narrow streets in the summer. The dangers from marauding Scots have receded. And since there is no longer a need for Roger of Poitou's valuable outpost, the tidy minds of Boundary Commissioners have removed Lancashire-over-the-Sands into Cumbria.

Geographical considerations seem, surprisingly, to have been ignored by the Boundary Commissioners in the south of the Province.

The Mersey has not proved to be a natural barrier to a Cestrian invasion. Widnes and Warrington have both succumbed. For Warrington it was perhaps no surprise. Its bridge had led to an expansion of the town over the river and canal into Cheshire. For Widnes the catalyst was the new bridge linking it to Runcorn in 1961.

Like Barrow, Widnes is a younger son of the Industrial Revolution. In 1840 it was insignificant, but by 1871 it had grown sufficiently to have a Masonic lodge, Lodge of Equity No.1384. By 1900 it was a town of more than 30,000 inhabitants, important for its chemicals. Widnes is not a lovely town except for the warmth of its people and the welcoming nature of its Masonic community. It has twelve lodges, all of which meet in its four-square Masonic hall in Kingsway.

Warrington is a fitting place to end this review of the Province of West Lancashire. It was, after all, the place where perhaps it all began, with the initiation of Elias Ashmole. Like Wigan, Warrington was a fortified staging post on the Roman road from Chester to Hadrian's Wall. Like Preston it is an important river crossing. But unlike them it never acquired the status of a Royal Borough. The importance of Warrington as a crossing of the Mersey is illustrated by the fact that the present bridge is at least the sixth. Laying the foundation stone of the bridge of 1837 was an event of Masonic significance. It was to have been laid by the Provincial Grand Master, Colonel le Gendre Starkie, attended not only by the town band and various dignitaries, but by the Freemasons in full regalia, presumably members of the Lodge of Lights No.148, the only lodge in the town at that time. In the event the stone was laid by the Deputy Provincial Grand Master, since the Provincial Grand Master missed the train from Liverpool. To-day Warrington is at the junction of the M6 and the M62, while the age-old crossing over the Mersey links it with the M56.

This confluence of Motorways has led to a rapid rise of new industries like the nuclear industry, and marketing, storage and distribution facilities. Old industries like brewing are still important: perhaps not quite as much as they were in 1869, when the head of Greenall's Brewery gave his name to Gilbert Greenall Lodge No.1250, or in 1877, when Sir Andrew Barclay Walker, the Head of Walker's Brewery, founded the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool.

The movement of goods to Liverpool, including Walker's beer, had been considerably eased by the work of the Thomas Pattens, father and son, who made the Mersey navigable well beyond Warrington before the end of the 19th Century. Their home, Bank Hall, is now the handsome Georgian Town Hall facing Winmarleigh Street, named after their descendant, the first and only Lord Winmarleigh.

In front of the Town Hall are magnificent cast-iron gates originally intended for Sandringham. Unfortunately when they were sent for Queen Victoria's inspection they were accompanied by a cast-iron statue of Oliver Cromwell. The Queen was not amused. They therefore became available for purchase, together with the offending statue. They were bought by a Warrington industrialist, Frederick Monks. The gates were erected in front of the Town Hall and the statue was placed where no Royal Personage was likely to see it. The statue now stands before the renovated Warrington Academy, established in 1757, when eminent men like Joseph Priestley and John Howard brought to the Academy scholarship and enlightened teaching.

The newest lodge in Warrington is Academy Lodge No.9382. The oldest the Lodge of Lights received its warrant while the Warrington Academy still existed. Both lodges meet in the Masonic Hall in Winmarleigh Street with twenty one other lodges, including Ashmole Lodge No.5128.

From Ashmole to Ashmole such is the continuing bond of Freemasonry, not just in Warrington, but throughout the Province of West Lancashire, and the bond of friendship is extended to all from the county of "The Queen, Duke of Lancaster".