



## PROVINCE OF WEST LANCASHIRE

The Province of West Lancashire is one of the largest of the Provinces ranged under the banner of the United Grand Lodge of England, it can also claim to be the birthplace of English Freemasonry.



Elias Ashmole.

The initiation of Elias Ashmole in Warrington on 16 October 1646 is the earliest recorded initiation into English Freemasonry. All trace of that early Lancashire lodge, if indeed such a lodge existed and was not merely an ad hoc meeting of conveniently situated Freemasons, has disappeared.

The oldest of the existing lodges in the Province is the Lodge of Loyalty No 86 in Prescot which dates from 1753 and still meets 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 was founded as Lancashire Western Division in 1826, becoming the Province of West Lancashire in 1960. It 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. However, in all lodges within the Province the loyal toast is still to "The Queen, Duke of Lancaster".

The Province, being so large, is divided into 19 groups, each with its chairman, vice chairman, secretary and other officers who all give generously of their time and are of key importance to the overall success of the Province.

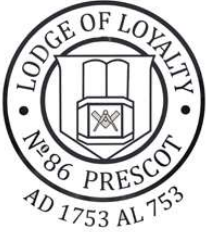
The largest number of lodges being in Liverpool which is divided into two groups: the Liverpool Group and the Gladstone Group.

The Liverpool Group meet in the Masonic hall on Hope Street and one of the lodges in the Gladstone Group meets in the Medical Institute on the corner of Hope Street opposite the spectacular lantern crown of the Metropolitan Cathedral which 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. Liverpool's oldest lodge is 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



Liverpool Masonic Hall.



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 No 86, the oldest lodge in the Province which was founded in December 1753.

The Provincial Office, once based in Liverpool, relocated to the Masonic hall in Leyland in 2015. In 2019 it relocated to 6 Golden Hill Lane, Leyland, with the new office suite offering a more central, modern and easily accessible base for the Provincial administration.

The Provincial Grand Lodge meets at the Winter Gardens in Blackpool and is one of, if not the biggest Masonic meeting in the country.

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 are all homes to many lodges.

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 more than 800 years later it still exists. In the reign of Edward III the king ordered that the Guild should be celebrated every 20 years: the king's order is still enthusiastically obeyed. One of the tangible results of the Preston Guild is the superb modern Guildhall, which has hosted international snooker championships and the World Indoor Bowls Championships, as well as meetings of the Provincial Grand Lodge of West Lancashire.

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 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. Other local lodges meet in Bootle in Litherland Masonic Hall.



Southport Masonic Hall.

The traditional side of Southport extends to a funfair, a Marine Lake and the Floral Hall. Just off Lord Street is the neat two-storey Masonic Hall, where most of Southport's 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.

In Ormskirk and nearby Lathom and Croston and in Chorley and neighbouring Horwich and Westhoughton many lodges meet: in Horwich, they meet in Ridgmont House, a beautifully adapted country house, which appears 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 later two now being in Cheshire after local government re-organisation), 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 15 glassworks in the town as well as 11 chemical works and more than 30 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.

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, a group of 11 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 60 years. Then, sponsored by Lindsay Lodge No 1335, the Lodge of Sincerity was re-consecrated in 1913 as Sincerity Lodge No 3677. Members of Arrowhead Lodge No 8500, the youngest of Wigan's lodges, give a dramatic presentation of those turbulent events.

The original Masonic Hall in Wallgate was, 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.



Urmston Masonic Hall.

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. Lodges meet in the Davenport Hotel in Stockport, The Grange Club in Edgeley and Freemasons Hall in Urmston completing the

South-Eastern Group of Lodges. Other lodges meet in Eccles, famous for its cakes, held to have religious significance, but popular for their rich currant filling, and in its 'district' at Swinton.

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 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. They too look out over the Bay. 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. Today'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.

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. 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. 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 more than 300 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.



Tony Harrison PrGM.

It is still a busy place especially on market days. Its lodges include both the oldest and the newest in the Northern Group, Lodge of Furness No 995 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. 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. Its lodges all meet in its four-square Freemasons 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.



Colonel le Gendre Starkie  
PrGM 1826 - 1865

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. Today 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. Brewing was one of the town's old industries and was very important 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 No 148 received its warrant while the Warrington Academy still existed. Both lodges meet in the Masonic Hall in Winmarleigh Street as do many others 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'.