

# THE ORIGINS OF THE PILGRIM PRECEPTORS

The early part of this account was told to Andrew Stephenson by the late John Edward Nowell Walker, a former Grand Master who died shortly before his 90th birthday in 1990. The remainder is from Andrew's recollections.

The acting profession has always been a precarious one. The Play is all important, and nobody has ever been able to predict what makes a Play a success with the public. Even Shakespeare wrote failures, performed today as 'curiosities'. In this country it is the custom for producers to try out new Plays in selected Provincial Theatres with the authors re-writing parts of the script in the light of audience reaction. Only if the final version appears to appeal do they then perform in London. The actors do their best, but even the inclusion of, say Laurence Olivier, in the cast is no guarantee of success.

In former times, if the cast was lucky, the Manager would pay in advance for their hotel accommodation until the end of the projected visit ( usually the weekend) and give the actors rail tickets for their return to London on a specific day (usually Monday morning). If the tour was a flop there would be no money available to pay wages. Many 'ditties' are recited at actors' reunions setting out the hardships which all may have suffered, even the stars.

During the late 1870s three actors found themselves idle and forced to remain in their hotel in Manchester for a long and typically wet weekend because the play in which they had been performing suddenly 'folded'. All three were members of the Craft and the Royal Arch, and possibly other Masonic Orders. During their visits to the North they had visited a number of Masonic Halls and had access to the libraries these places had in those days; the one at Formby was given particular mention. On this wet weekend in Manchester, perhaps to while away the time, they conceived the idea of using some of the information they had found to develop a Masonic ceremony called The Pilgrim Preceptors. By the end of the weekend they had produced a manuscript version which was later polished and typed. However, this was a private enterprise and they made no attempt to invite others to join them or to see the ceremony performed. One of the actors was named LeFre. He prospered and, in his very old age, discovered his Craft Lodge would be celebrating its centenary on his own 100th birthday. The members elected him to be Master for that special year, but sadly he died just three week before his Installation.

This Worshipful Brother LeFre had a son, Eric LeFre, also an actor and a member of the Craft. Amongst his father's papers Eric inherited the original manuscript and the typescript revision developed by the three thespians in Manchester. Sadly Eric did little with these documents until, after much pestering, an elderly Eric conferred, by Obligation, the Order on John Edward Nowell Walker for a fee of a halfpenny in the 1970s, gave him the script and verbally all rights to the Order. Within a year Eric too had died, whereon John Walker "initiated" by Obligation five Companions after a meeting of the August Order of Light held in South London, namely Captain Michael Penrose, Andrew Stephenson, George Duke, John Jary and Howard Stokes. Jary photocopied the typescript and George Duke attempted to set out the floor cloth using purple ribbon and pins, but without success.

The main problem was the script itself. The actors had abbreviated a large number of words to their first letter followed by dots; unfortunately the number of dots did not always match the missing letters! Whilst they had produced a two page key these six members found that the constant reference to the key made them become frustrated and they abandoned their attempt to rehearse the ceremony. Even using the key they quickly found the many of the abbreviated words were far from secret, but ones in common use and already set out in full in other well established masonic rituals. By this time John Walker, with the assistance of other members, was becoming heavily involved in the reconstruction of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon and eventually he appointed Howard Stokes as Grand Master of the Pilgrim Preceptors. Unfortunately Howard's eyesight was failing and he made no attempt to work the Order.

By 1984 the Temple of the Order of Light which met in South London had grown to 23 members and was well established. One feature of their meetings was the dining, and despite its Yorkshire title of High Tea, it was in fact dinner and was cooked by one of the members. The conversations during these meals was lively and during the September 1984 dinner a newish member, one Brian Slater, brother of John Slater the actor, and himself involved in the entertainment industry as a boffin in special and electrical effects with London weekend Television; Brian had tried to interest John Walker into using special effects, such as dry ice and other theatrical effects in masonic ceremonies. Somehow the conversation moved to the mentioning of the Order of the Pilgrim Preceptors, whereon Brian and another member Benson F. Catt, a City of London accountant, persuaded Howard Stokes into reviving the Order. This he did on 8th December, 1984 when Ben Catt, Brian Slater and Alan Perry were

obligated into the Order. Howard handed over copies of the ritual to them with the request that they devise a practical way of working it. He also appointed Ben Catt as Grand Secretary on the spot with the responsibility of structuring a proper Masonic Order.

Brian and Ben studied the ritual and with Brian's knowledge of scripts and special effects he was able to work out simple 'props' were needed; these he produced. Early during their work on the ritual received from Howard Stokes it was discovered that a page was missing; mention was made in the key but there was no matching page. Through research they found that John Jary who had been given copies of the early script but had died some years earlier and his papers had been destroyed. Brian and Ben then reconstructed the missing page and produced new copies of the ritual with some, though not all, of the abbreviated words restored in full. On 8th March 1986, a full rehearsal of the ritual took place followed by a full meeting of the Order with Howard Stokes presiding and Companion Norman Pitt being admitted; the first time the ceremony, or rather ceremonies for there are two, were worked. At the same meeting five current members of the Order were also admitted to the secrets of the Chair. It was then arranged that the Order would meet twice a year on the morning of two of the four regular meetings of the Order of Light.

Following this first meeting Howard Stokes announced his resignation from the office of Grand Master of the Order, feeling that the progress made had established a firm future for the Order of the Pilgrim Preceptors. Alas Brian Slater died very suddenly at the age of 56 in January, 1987 and Norman Pitt shortly thereafter. At a second meeting, on 5th September, 1987 John Walker became Grand Master and was duly installed in that high office. Andrew Stephenson became Deputy Grand Master. Sadly John Walker died in November 1991 and on 4th September, 1993 Andrew Stephenson was Installed as Grand Master.

Until the 1990s almost all members of the Order had been recruited from those who attended the Order of Light. By 1998 membership had expanded to include a number of members from Kent, and on 13th June, 1998 a new Preceptory, called St. Augustine Preceptory was consecrated. Between the admission of Norman Pitt in March 1986 and August 2000 membership had reached over 50.

As the years have passed changes to the Order have been made. For example the title of units has changed from Preceptory to Conclave, a full set of Regulations adopted and most importantly the original unit which had hitherto governed the Order became a Sovereign Grand Conclave which immediately established a time immemorial Conclave, called the St. Andrew Conclave, to carry on the work of admission of new members from the London area, and sometimes elsewhere in the UK. The Order has continued to expand and on 25th January, 2003 a third unit was established at York called the Athelstan Conclave. This was followed by a fourth on 25th October of the same year, this time at Radlett in Hertfordshire called Prince Edwin Conclave.

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In **2006** Andrew Stephenson announced that he was to emigrate to New Zealand and in his stead he designated Benson F Catt to be Grand Master. In **September, 2006** M. III. Bro. Ben Catt was installed as Grand Master and for the first time a full team of Grand Officers was appointed. Further Conclaves were consecrated in:

- 2007** 5th May, 2007 **Holy Well Conclave** to meet at Mold in Flintshire
- 2008** 9th October **St. Laurence Conclave to meet** at Southend in Essex  
17th November **St. Richard Conclave** at Uckfield in East Sussex
- 2009** 9th September, **St. Petroc Conclave** at Crediton in Devonshire,  
(now meets at South Brent)

**On 14th February, 2010** the Order make took its first step to becoming international when the Mayflower Conclave was consecrated with a peripatetic Warrant to meet within the United States of America.

**Late in February 2011** Ben Catt announced that for health reasons he could no longer continue as Grand Master and had designated Stephen M. Ayres, JP as his successor. **On 19th March 2011** Stephen was installed as Grand Master, to become Most Illustrious Brother Stephen M. Ayres, in a full Installation Ceremony. Ralph Wheeler who for the previous five years had been Grand Secretary was appointed as Deputy Grand Master; only the second DGM within the Order. The new Grand Master announced that in future there would be a regular Annual Meeting of Grand Conclave; this has now been fixed for the last Saturday in June of each year.

Since becoming Grand Master, M. III. Bro. Stephen Ayres has consecrated no less than 23 Conclaves (listed at the end of this History)

**October 2014** saw the Installation of a new Deputy Grand Master, in the person of R. II. Bro. James J. Field at a special meeting of Grand Conclave. R. II. Bro. James was succeeded as Grand Marshal by V. III. Bro. Jonathan C. Roberts.

**At the meeting of Grand Conclave in 2016** the Grand Master re-appointed R. III. Bro. James J. Field as his Deputy and R. III. Leslie Bales as Regional Governor for certain Conclaves meeting in the north of England. He then appointed the first Assistant Grand Master of the Order in the person of R. III. Bro. Roger O'Brien who had hitherto been the Regional Governor for certain Conclaves meeting the south east of England. R. III. Bro. Roger O'Brien will be the key link point for Conclaves not under the superintendence of a Regional Governor. R. III. Bro. Brian Prevett was appointed as Regional Governor for the south east of England.

**The 2017 Annual Meeting of Grand Conclave, on 24<sup>th</sup> June**, was held at Leicester, at considerable saving to the Order, as against meeting in London. The Grand Master, appointed certain new senior Officers:

Deputy Grand Master	R. III. Bro. Roger O'Brien
Assistant Grand Master	R. III. Bro. William Hamilton-Hinds
Grand Secretary	R. III. Bro. Eric Bourne
Grand Chaplain	V. III. Bro. Louis Keats

**In June 2018 the Annual Meeting of Grand Conclave** saw a number of changes in the Grand Officer Team. The most notable being R. III. Bro. Charles Aspinell succeeding R. III. Bro. William Hamilton Hind as the Assistant Grand Master.

**At the meeting of Grand Conclave in June 2019** the Grand Master announced that he would be standing down at the meeting of Grand Conclave in 2020 after 8 happy and successful years. The name of the brother who has been designated as his successor would be announced in March 2020

#### CONCLAVES CONSECRATED SINCE 2011

- 2011** 28th June, **Hadrian Conclave** to meet at Chester-le-Street in Co. Durham  
24th August, **Palatine Conclave** at Leyland in Lancashire  
29th November, **Londinium Conclave** meeting at Mark Masons Hall in London
- 2012** 21st June, **Cantium Conclave**, meeting at Canterbury  
24th November, **Portus Adruni Conclave** to meet at Havant in Hampshire
- 2013** 3rd April, **Mercia Conclave** to meet at Kings Heath, Birmingham  
19th September, **Pride of Surrey Conclave** to meet at Sutton in Surrey
- 2014** 27th June, **Deoraby Conclave** to meet at Long Eaton, Derbyshire.
- 2015** 8<sup>th</sup> August **Conclave of the Angles** to meet at Bury St. Edmunds.
- 2016** 25<sup>th</sup> June **Kernow Conclave No. 18** at Plymouth,  
but to meet at Wadebridge in Cornwall  
28<sup>th</sup> June **Lady Eleanor Conclave No. 19** to meet at Macclesfield  
22<sup>nd</sup> September **Gipplewick Conclave No. 20** at Ipswich.
- 2017** 29<sup>th</sup> August **Rex Britannicus No. 21** at Leicester, but now meets in Surbiton, Surrey.  
13<sup>th</sup> November **Litus Saxonicum No. 22** to meet at Eastbourne
- 2018** 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2018 **Bishop's Lynn Conclave No. 23** to meet at Kings Lynn.  
19<sup>th</sup> September, **Titus Caesar Conclave** to meet at Mark Masons Hall, London. Titus Caesar is a special Conclave with the Grand Master to be the permanent Illustrious Preceptor of the Conclave and a Deputy Illustrious Preceptor being designated each year.

**2019** 2<sup>nd</sup> February 4 new Conclaves were consecrated at Philadelphia; **North Carolina Conclave No 24** to meet at Monroe, **Alfred the Great No. 25** to meet at Sparta, **Triple Triangle No. 26** to meet in Pennsylvania and **Holy Grail No. 27** to meet at Des Moines.

7<sup>th</sup> April, **Athenaeum No. 28** to meet in Athens

30<sup>th</sup> September **Iceni No 29** to meet at Great Yarmouth

18<sup>th</sup> October **Oxonium No. 30** to meet at Oxford

The future of the Order looks safe and secure with new Conclaves to be consecrated at Chelmsford, Widnes, The Wirral and three or four in the United States. The fiftieth Conclave, and more, now looks a real possibility. However, as always, growth must be generated from the interest of the members and potential members not from a plan to expand generated from the centre.

[SMA – V23 September, 2019]