

# **FREEMASONS' LODGES AMONG FRENCH PRISONERS OF WAR.**

BY

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## **SYNOPSIS.**

FRENCH PRISONERS IN ENGLAND.  
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FREEMASONS AMONG THE PRISONERS.  
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DETAILS OF LODGES AT ABERGAVENNY, ASHBURTON, ASHBY-DE-LA-ZOUCH,  
PLYMOUTH AND VITTORIA.

THE subject of my paper is " Freemasons' Lodges among French Prisoners of War," and although of somewhat restricted scope and area, it is one of considerable interest.

From the year 1740 to 1815 Great Britain and France were almost constantly at war with one another. The conflict raged in Europe, Asia, Africa and America, the victory in most cases remaining with the British. In consequence of these successes a large number of prisoners fell into the hands of the British commanders, who shipped them over in detachments to England, where they were treated more or less harshly as prisoners of war.

Many of these unfortunate men arrived in England in 1746, 1756, 1759 and 1779. In 1759 no less than 11,000 were imprisoned at Knowle, near Bristol, where they suffered much from want of food and clothing. But by far the greater number came over during the Revolutionary Wars of 1797 to 1814, for it is computed that between 1803 and the signing of the Treaty of Paris, in May, 1814, upwards of 122,000 French soldiers and sailors were sent over to England. According to Sir Archibald Alison, the historian, the French Government never remitted one farthing for the maintenance of this host of prisoners, but left them either "to starve or be a burden on the British Government, which, on the contrary, regularly remitted the whole cost of the support of the English captives in France to the imperial authorities."

Of this vast host of prisoners, about 17,000 were either exchanged for Englishmen of corresponding rank, who were prisoners in France, or were invalided home ; over 10,000 died during their captivity ; several hundreds of the commissioned officers, including Generals and others of high rank, broke their parole and escaped from the country, but the vast majority

remained in captivity until Napoleon's exile to Elba, in 1814, gave temporary peace to Europe. It is stated that between April 11th, 1814, and August 27th of the same year, no less than 67,000 of the French prisoners were sent back to their native land by the English authorities.

The common soldiers and sailors were mostly confined on board hulks at the seaports, or in huge barracks, situate in different parts of the country, in some cases, as at Perth, Plymouth, Dartmoor, Norman Cross and Chatham, especially erected for the purpose. There were frequent organised attempts at escape, much gambling and quarrelling amongst themselves, and the conditions of their captivity were necessarily harsh and unpleasant. No officers were confined in these barracks, except such as had attempted to escape, or for other causes had forfeited their privilege of " parole."

The vast majority of the officers, and those civilians who were entitled to rank as gentlemen, were allowed to reside in certain specified towns " on parole," within strictly assigned limits and on certain conditions. They were sent chiefly to the smaller provincial towns, not more than Zoo being allowed in any one place. I have compiled a list of about 100 towns in England, Wales and Scotland where, at one time or another, French prisoners were permitted to reside. The general conditions of their detention were probably made as little irksome as possible, and a great deal of consideration was shown them in many ways. Most of the prisoners "on parole" lodged in the houses of the townspeople, a weekly sum of 10/6 being paid for each prisoner by the British Government.

As many of the officers belonged to wealthy families, considerable sums of money were sent periodically from France, so that they were enabled, in many cases, to procure everything necessary for their comfort, and even for the enjoyment of life. It is asserted that " the French officers in Ashbourne spent in the town not less than 30,000 Pounds a year " during the continuance of the war.

Whilst a considerable measure of liberty was allowed to officers " on parole," they were not permitted, without special authority, to extend their walks more than one mile in any direction from the centre of the town. At nine o'clock in the evening in summer, and earlier in winter, a bell was rung, and if any officer was absent from his quarters at that hour, or whose whereabouts was not known, he was fined a guinea, which was given to the person who had informed against him.

In many cases the French officers, being men of rank and education, were esteemed by the townspeople for their polite and agreeable manners, and were received in all public assemblies with high consideration and a courteous welcome.

One officer of high rank passed most of his captivity as an honoured guest of the Duke of Devonshire, at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, and on subsequently visiting the Duke after the conclusion of the war, is said to have declared that the happiest period of his life was when he was a prisoner "on parole" in England.

The little town of Ashbourne, in Derbyshire, owing to its central position and its distance from the coast, was selected by the Government as the place of residence for some of their most important prisoners, among whom were Generals Boyer, Pajeau and Rochambeau. Lord Macartney, and others of the local nobility and gentry, entertained them generously at all times, in an earnest endeavour to relieve the monotony and tedium of their lives.

There are many instances on record where these officers were treated more as friends than as prisoners; the fact that many remained in England after peace was declared is well known, and proves that, in some cases at least, their captivity had been neither severe nor unpleasant.

From the year 1732, when the first military lodge was constituted in the 1st Regt. of Foot-now the Royal Scots-by the Grand Lodge of Ireland, Freemasonry has been increasingly popular in the British Army. By the year 1790 over 150 lodges had been constituted in various Regiments by the Grand Lodges of the United Kingdom, and although, at the present time, only two remain on the English roll, the proportion of military masons is still very large.

Freemasonry seems to have been equally popular in the French Army. Although the first military lodge in France was only constituted in 1759, by the year 1787 no less than seventy-six lodges had been warranted by the Grand Orient of France in various regiments of the French Army.

This popularity of the Craft in the armies of the two nations is surely not surprising. The practice of Freemasonry was found to be a pleasant relaxation from the tedious monotony of military life. It served to break down many artificial barriers, afforded many an opportunity for pleasant social intercourse, and was the means of forming and cementing many friendships. To military lodges is also due the wonderful spread of Freemasonry over the world. They opened their lodges wherever for the time being they were stationed, and when they were ordered to other quarters they often left behind them some local members, whom they had admitted, as the nucleus of a stationary lodge. Most of the old Colonial lodges, and many in the New England States of America, owe their establishment to British Army lodges.

Freemasonry being thus exceedingly popular in the French Army, it is not surprising that among the thousands of French officers who were brought to England from time to time as prisoners of war, there were a large number of freemasons, some of very high rank in the Craft. The members of the English lodges generally seem to have done their utmost to alleviate the distress of these French brethren; many old minute books record sums of money voted for their relief, and upon one occasion the Grand Lodge of England voted a substantial amount for the benefit of a French Naval Commander, a prisoner of war, "on parole" at Launceston.

Bro. Burnes, a magistrate and Master of a lodge at Montrose, took the responsibility of removing some French prisoners from the local gaol to his own house, because they were masons. This brother was the father of Sir Alexander Burnes, the famous Asiatic traveller.

Lodge Edinburgh St. Giles, in 1759, evinced a genuine and sympathetic interest in the French prisoners of war confined in Edinburgh Castle. One of its prominent members, Dr. Hy. Cunningham, was, with other brethren, empowered by the Grand Lodge of Scotland to enquire into the condition of such as were freemasons.

That the freemasons among the prisoners were received as visitors at masonic meetings in England, Scotland and Ireland minutes of lodges at Leicester, Winchester, Bandon, Selkirk, Hawick, Melrose, Redruth, and other towns amply testify, and in many cases there is no doubt they became joining members of these local lodges.

Thus in 1746 and 1747 nine French officers were admitted as joining members in the "Antient Boyne" Lodge, No. 84, Bandon.

The following entries appear in the minute book of the "Druids" Lodge, Redruth :- -

" March 18th, 1779.

" The following brethren, being prisoners of war, this evening favoured us with a visit. (Here follow seven names.)

" April 22nd, 1779 (a month later).

" This evening Bro. Garnier, and others, the seven visitors at the previous lodge, being all French brothers, proposed themselves to become members of this lodge, which was unanimously agreed to."

Similar instances of "joining" can be found in the records of many other lodges.

It is abundantly clear that the bond of masonic brotherhood was generously acknowledged in all towns where lodges were already established, and that the lot of the prisoners who were masons was in consequence very considerably ameliorated.

But it often happened that prisoners were sent to small towns where no lodge was established, and as it was a rule with the authorities to distribute the officers of any particular French regiment among different towns, there was never a sufficient number belonging to any French regimental lodge, to enable them to meet for work under their old banner.

For example: among the officers who signed the Certificate of the Prisoners' Lodge at Lanark, and who were probably the founders, were members of the following French lodges, viz. :- -

- A lodge attached to the 4th Regt. of Lt. Infantry.
- A lodge in the Island of Elba.
- A lodge at Mt. Didier (Dept. of the Somme).
- A lodge attached to the 12th Regt. of Lt. Infantry.
- A lodge at Calais.
- A lodge at La Rochelle, and
- A lodge at Versailles.

Thus in order to practice the ceremonies of the Craft, it was necessary that entirely new lodges should be established by the prisoners themselves. Of these we can trace about thirty, but there is very little doubt that many lodges were founded of which no records have yet come to light.

Although entirely new lodges, in some cases, no doubt, they adopted the names of the old lodges with which some of them had formerly been associated, such as "Fidelity", "Perfect Unity", "Justice and Unity", "Friendship", "Benevolence", "United Hearts" and "Sons of Mars and Neptune". This last a very common name for military lodge's.

In other cases, however, the names adopted by the prisoners clearly indicate the altered conditions under which they were meeting. For example, they designated some of their new lodges:- "Desired Reunion", "Reunited Friends", "Reunion", "Friends Reunited in Adversity", "Friends in Captivity", "Misfortune", "The Unfortunate Ones" and "Desired Peace."

Most of these lodges were established and worked without any warrant or authority whatever, and the certificates which have been preserved were clearly intended to be provisional only, inasmuch as the recipients were therein required to attach themselves to some regular lodge under the Grand Orient of France, as soon as circumstances would allow. That this was done, several of the certificates testify by an endorsement thereon. In two instances, however, the lodges are declared, in the certificates they issued, to be under the immediate authority and protection of Lord Moira, the Acting Grand Master. If in these cases Lord Moira did indeed give permission for the formation of the lodge, it may fairly be assumed, it would be only on the understanding that none but French prisoners should be admitted members therein, and as far as is known, no Englishman was ever received into those two lodges. In other cases, however, exceptions were made - thus, Benj. Plummer, P.S.G.W., of the "Antients" Grand Lodge, was a joining member of the prisoners' lodges at Wincanton and Abergavenny. His admission was probably due to assistance rendered by him in the formation and furnishing of those lodges, he being a merchant, dealing in masonic paraphernalia among other goods. Harry Cooper, cabinet maker and joiner, an Englishman, was initiated in the lodge at Wincanton; while Thomas Richards and ten others were admitted members of the lodge at Abergavenny. These two lodges, as far as is known, were exceptions to the rule.

The earliest lodges of French prisoners in England, of which we have any cognizance, were those at Basingstoke in 1756, Petersfield in 1758, and at Leeds in 1759-63, but of these we know nothing beyond the bare fact of their existence.

Following these, there were Lodge "Fidelite," in Berlin, in 1758 ; "Parfaite Union," in Magdeburg, in 1761; and a lodge working at York in 1762 under a warrant granted by the Grand Lodge of All England, whose headquarters were in that city.

But it was during the latter years of the great struggle with Napoleon, and the victories then achieved by the British arms, that most prisoners were taken and sent to England, and consequently more lodges established.

The existence of the following lodges among the prisoners during this period have been traced, viz. :

Des Amis Reunis, Plymouth, 1809.  
Coeurs Unis, Wantage, 1810 or earlier.  
La Bonne Union, Northampton, 1810 or earlier.  
De l'amitie, Leek, 1810.  
La Paix Desiree, Wincanton, 1810.  
Vrais Amis de l'Ordre Ashby-de-la-Zouch, 1810-11  
Des Amis Reunis, Ashburton, 1810-14.  
Reunion Desiree, Leek, 1811.  
Enfants de Mars, Tiverton, 1811 or earlier.  
Enfants de Mars et de Neptune, Odiham, 1811.  
Les Amis en Captivite, Malta, 1812-20.  
La Paix Desiree, Sanquhar, 1812-13.  
Amis Reunis dans l'adversite, Lanark, 1812.  
La Bienfaisance, Melrose, 1813.  
L'infortune, Valleyfield, 1813.  
Des Infortunes, Vittoria, 1813.  
----- Selkirk, 1813-14.  
Enfants de Mars et de Neptune Abergavenny, 1813-14.  
De la justice et de l'Union, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, 1814.  
Reunion, Dartmoor, 1814.

Many of these lodges probably worked eight to ten years, but we have no definite knowledge on the point, as their records are not forthcoming.

It may fairly be assumed, I think, that the majority of the prisoners who established these lodges were taken during the naval engagements in the West Indies and elsewhere from 1794 onwards, and in the Peninsular War of 1807-14.

I desire especially to refer to the following lodges, as I am able to exhibit some certificates, &c., which were issued by them.

## I. ENFANTS DE MARS ET DE NEPTUNE, ABERGAVENNY.

Several relics of this lodge have been preserved, among which are four certificates, three of which I am able to exhibit ; a set of collars, blue, with broad silver lace, which were worn by the officers; together with a number of swords, used in the Rose Croix Chapter, also established by them in Abergavenny-both collars and swords being now in the possession of the "Philanthropic" Lodge, No. 818, of Abergavenny.

Of the certificates preserved, two were issued to Bro. Thomas Richards, who was a joining member of the lodge. It is believed that altogether ten or eleven Englishmen were received as members of this lodge, and it is quite impossible to give any reason for their admission.

The Craft document is of parchment, beautifully executed by hand, with seal complete, and signed by fourteen officers of the lodge, the famous De Grasse Tilly being Master or

"Venerable." It was this brother who established in France, in 1804, the Supreme Council of Sov. Gd. Inspectors General of the 33rd and last degree of the A. and A.S. Rite, of which he became Sov. Gd. Commander. He was a prisoner in England from about 1809 to 1814.

This certificate gives us an idea of the size of these lodges, for Richards was No. 45 on the roll, and, being an Englishman, his certificate was made out in both French and English, which was not the case when prepared for a prisoner.

The second Abergavenny certificate exhibited is the Rose Croix certificate of the same brother, Thomas Richards, who received the degrees in this chapter. He was No. 39 on the roll, and probably the last member received, inasmuch as within forty days the Treaty of Peace was signed at Paris, and the prisoners were at liberty to return to their native land.

The remaining Abergavenny certificate was granted to Gaspard Laudy, on being installed in the Rose Croix degree. The recipient being a prisoner, the document is entirely in French, and is issued under the direct authority of De Grasse Tilly, to whom I have already referred. Gaspard Laudy, on his return to France, affiliated with a French lodge, his certificate being endorsed to that effect. This is a proof that these provisional certificates were recognised by the French masonic authorities.

It is interesting to know that the English members of this Prisoners' Lodge subsequently founded a lodge, No. 658, which, however, was erased in 1828.

## II. DES AMIS REUNIS, ASHBURTON.

Very little is known of the prisoners' lodge established in this Devonshire town except what we gather from a parchment certificate, now exhibited, granted to a Brother Paul Carcenac, a fellow craft, in a lodge designated " Des Amis Reunis." It was probably issued between 1810 and 1814, and as the recipient was therein obligated to affiliate with a lodge under the authority of the

Grand Orient of France immediately on his arrival in that country, it is quite possible he was returning either as an invalid or in exchange for an English prisoner of equal rank. The certificate, although somewhat faded and very indifferent in execution, is complete with signatures and seal.

### III. ASHBY-DE-LA-ZOUCH.

More is known of the prisoners' lives, and their lodges, in this small Leicestershire town than in any other place in which they resided. Prisoners were stationed there from 1804 to 1814, the earliest arrivals belonging to the defeated army of General Rochambeau. They were about 200 in number, and seem at first to have enjoyed a fair measure of liberty, which, however, was curtailed in some cases after unsuccessful attempts at escape.

Duels, some fatal, were of not uncommon occurrence, and the gravestones of many who died can still be seen in the graveyard of the parish church. Details of ten weddings between French officers and residents in Ashby also appear in the church register. Many traditions of their residence in the town still survive, as the large sums of money received by the prisoners from time to time brought much prosperity to the townspeople.

During their ten years' residence in Ashby, the French prisoners established two lodges and a Rose Croix Chapter. One of the lodges was designated " *Loge Francaise des Vrais Amis de l'Ordre*, and there is a tradition that its constitution was celebrated by a ball, to which many of the inhabitants were invited, the hosts presenting white kid gloves to each of the ladies present.

Several interesting relics of this lodge are still preserved. They consist of two certificates-Craft and Rose Croix, a MS. "Report," portion of a French MS. ritual, three lodge pedestals, a canopy, and a tracing cloth.

The "Report" was prepared by a Committee appointed to enquire into the character, conduct and qualifications of a candidate prior to his admission ; a kind of "tongue of good report." The certificates were issued in 1810 and 1871 to Louis Jean, 2nd Lieutenant of the 11th half brigade of Light Infantry, from whose grandson, a workman at one time in my employ, they and other interesting documents were obtained. They are wholly written in French, and contain many signatures, together with the seal and stamp of the lodge.

The history of this Louis Jean is full of interest. The son of a landed proprietor, he was born at Rouen in 1768. In 1793 he joined the army—took part in the campaigns against the Royalists in the Depts. of the Cotes du Nord and La Vendee, also in the Netherlands. He was subsequently attached to the army sent by Napoleon in 1802 to put down an insurrection in the Island of St. Domingo. The expedition was a failure, and the remnant of the defeated army was captured by the British fleet while on its way back to France. Jean and others were sent to Ashby in 1804, where most of them remained for ten years. Jean's health failed, so that, in 1811, he was permitted to return to France as unfit for further military service. Having married an Ashby woman, he returned to reside there at the termination of the war, but was soon back again in France, where he died in 1833.

The second lodge established by the prisoners in Ashby was designated "*De la justice et de L' Union*," and is believed to have been composed principally of those who were taken prisoners at the surrender of the Spanish fortress of Pampeluna in 1813. They are said to have brought much money with them, concealed in the soles of their boots, and in the collars and cuffs of their coats—part of the vast treasure carried away after their disastrous defeat at Vittoria some months previously. The only evidence of the existence of this lodge is contained in an endorsement on the back of a French certificate, issued in 1812, by the members of a French military lodge held in Vittoria. The translation of the endorsement runs thus :- -

" Seen for affiliation in the W. Lodge *Justice and Unity*, the 1st day of the 2nd month of the True Light, 5814, and has worked with all possible zeal up to this day. Orient of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, the 3rd day of the 4th month of the True Light, 5814."

Before their return to France at the peace of 1814, the Ashby prisoners disposed of their lodge furniture, &c., to some English brethren, who contemplated establishing a lodge at Repton, in Derbyshire, the warrant for which, No. 690 (now 353), was granted in 1817. This lodge now meets at Winhill, Burton-on-Trent, and the furniture, which consists of three officers' pedestals, a dome-like canopy for the Master's chair, and a tracing cloth, is much prized by the members on account of its very interesting associations.

#### IV. " DES AMIS REUNIS," PLYMOUTH.

Although there are many references to the prisoners in locally printed newspapers and books, there is no tradition of a lodge having been held among the French prisoners detained there. However, on the back of a certificate issued in the Island of St. Domingo is an endorsement which notifies the fact. This certificate was granted to Francois Lescamela in 1797 by the Lodge " Reunion Desire," established at Port au Prince by the Grand Orient of France in 1783.

It was quite usual at that time to record visits on the back of a brother's certificate. In this instance four visits are recorded ; at the Mole de St. Nicolas in 1798, at Port de Paix in the same year, at New Orleans in 1801, and at Plymouth in 1809. The last one may thus be translated :- -

" Inspected at the Lodge of ` Reunited Friends,' held at the Mill Prison, Plymouth, the 4th day of the 4th month of the year of the True Light, 5809.

BROUSSE, Ven.  
LE MAIRE, Sec."

It is well known that a large number of prisoners were confined in the Millbay Prison, Plymouth, early in the last century. This prison was built especially for the purpose upon land expressly given by the Prince of Wales, afterwards George IV., as owner of the Duchy of Lancaster. It was a very large building, for at times 8,000 to 10,000 were imprisoned there. It was subsequently occupied as military barracks.

Of the other prisoners' lodges to which reference has been made, there is absolutely no information where they were held, but in this instance there is no doubt of the fact, and it is a matter for surprise, that under the strict rules of prison life the authorities allowed a lodge to be held in the prison by the men committed to their charge. Again, it was the rule for all well-behaved officers to be allowed " on parole," so that we are almost forced to the conclusion, either that this prison lodge was held among the private soldiers, or was composed of officers who for attempted escape or other infringement of the conditions of their parole, were being confined in the prison.

#### V. LODGE "DES INFORTUNES," VITTORIA.

I have included this lodge in my list because the town of Vittoria was at this time in possession of the British forces. By its capture in June, 1813, the French cause in Spain received a very severe blow, a large number of prisoners and much valuable war material falling to the victors.

Some of the prisoners, who were masons, established a lodge there in Nov., 1813, under the appropriate title of "Des Infortunes," the Master of which was Lamarque, a famous French General.

The certificate, now exhibited, issued by the lodge is a very curious document, and as a very good example of these provisional certificates I give the following translation :- -

TO THE GLORY OF THE GREAT ARCHITECT OF THE  
UNIVERSE.

TO ALL REGULAR MASONS-UNITY, STRENGTH,  
GREETING.

We, Worshipful Master, Sovereign Princes Rose Croix and Master Masons, whose names are subscribed below, taken prisoners of war by the English Army, having previously acknowledged one another by the Signs, Words and Grips known only to Masons, and whose degrees have been severally proved both by the usual examination, and by mutual working on the Rough Ashlar in different lodges, having a desire to disseminate the True Light, have united to erect a new Temple at Vittoria, for the G.A.O.T.U., under the name of "The Unfortunate Ones." Because by force of circumstances our Diplomas and Masonic Vouchers have fallen into the hands of strangers, we have determined in regular Lodge assembled, and with the approbation of the G.O. of France, whom we have petitioned for a constitution, that a certificate shall be supplied, duly signed by us, and the Ne Varietur of the Master Mason to whom it may be delivered.

We therefore declare upon our word as Masons . . . . that our very dear Bro. Jno. Jos. Palis, aged 52, domiciled in Paris, Superintendent of Military Hospitals, is a Master Mason . . . . that the said Brother is one of the founders of this worshipful lodge, and has earned, by his good qualities and masonic zeal, the honour of being appointed Master of the Ceremonies therein.

The present Certificate is delivered to Bro. Palis to replace the Diplomas and Masonic Vouchers that he has lost, and deserves from all regular Masons throughout the world, recognition, assistance and fraternal welcome as is customary amongst us.

How long this lodge continued to hold its meetings at Vittoria, or of how many members it consisted, are details about which it is now quite impossible to obtain any information. The Peace of May, 1814, however, would certainly dissolve the lodge, and enable the members to return to their respective homes.

Much more might be said upon this subject. I have many details extracted from books and from files of old newspapers, giving incidents in the daily life of these unfortunate men; but enough has been said, I think, to indicate how much of interest there is in the study, even from a masonic point of view.

References to the prisoners occur, not only in many local histories, but at least two works of fiction are founded upon incidents connected therewith. These are *St. Ives*, by Robt. Louis Stevenson, and *Westcotes*, by Sir A. Quiller Couch.

