

The Liverpool Masonic Rebellion and the Grand Lodge of Wigan

The last in a series of articles

By

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The Wigan Grand Lodge

The Masonic Rebellion in Liverpool had included from the outset a number of Wigan lodges, and after 1825, no minutes exist of the Grand Lodge meeting in Liverpool, though in Gage's resignation letter written in 1842, he stated that he had:

*"not had the pleasure of meeting the Grand Lodge, nor in fact any private Lodge during the last fifteen years."*²⁵

The makeup of the Liverpool and Wigan lodges involved in the rebellion were similar, with the majority being tradesmen and merchants, all sharing the same grievances, but the shift from Liverpool to Wigan was to become a permanent one. Another leading Liverpool rebel, John Eltonhead, returned to the United Grand Lodge on the 7th of March 1827,²⁶ the same year that Gage had stated that he had last attended a lodge. With these two leading rebels gone, only a handful of active Liverpool brethren such as Thomas Page, Thomas Berry, and John Robert Goepel, mixing with an influx of leading Wigan rebels, such as John Atherton, Ralph Ball, and Robert Bolton were left.

Despite the abolition of slavery in 1807, the port of Liverpool continued to grow as merchants and investors found new trade and new business. William Ewart, the Liverpool broker and

a leading member of the Merchants Lodge, became a founder of the Committee to support the proposition of the building of the Liverpool and Manchester railway.²⁷ On the 15th of September, 1830, the Liverpool and Manchester railway was finally opened by Freemason the Duke of Wellington, an event attended by an array of local dignitaries, and it connected the port not only to the cotton producing town of Manchester but to the whole of the industrial north-west of England, bringing the area closer together and cutting down the transport time between Liverpool and Manchester to an hour.

The railway also brought social and business networking closer together and especially aided the cotton, coal, and iron making industries in the area.²⁸ The North-west of England soon became crisscrossed by interlinking railways, and within a few years of the opening of the Liverpool to Manchester railway, the cotton and coal producing town of Wigan became connected, this new easy transport bringing the Masonic rebels closer together. Indeed, it was not long after the introduction of the railways that the Masonic rebels moved their center of operations to Wigan, though a number of Liverpool brethren still attended. The rebellion in Liverpool had struck a blow to Freemasonry in the port, but like Masonry in its neighboring industrial towns, by



The Royal Arch apron of John Mort, Sr., the last Grand Master of the Rebel Grand Lodge, which he wore at all times in the lodge room. Photo by the author.

the mid-nineteenth century, the society had started to expand. The newly constructed Provincial Grand Lodge of West Lancashire, formed in 1826 to make the large province of Lancashire more manageable, soon made its presence known in Liverpool, and prominent local figures such as Robertson Gladstone were appearing in the membership list of St. George's Lodge of Harmony, especially as the lodge could now claim to be the oldest surviving lodge in the area.²⁹

There is a large gap in the minute book from the last known meeting in Liverpool in 1825 until April 13th, 1838, when the Grand Lodge suddenly met in Wigan at the Hole I' th' Wall tavern in the market place. Gage was not in attendance, but original rebels Thomas Page from the "Antient" Liverpool Lodge No. 31, (renumbered to its original

pre-Union number of 20 after the rebellion) and Robert Bolton from the Wigan based Sincerity Lodge No. 492 were present. A new Grand Master, William Farrimond Esq., was elected, officially replacing George Woodcock who, according to the surviving minutes, had never actually attended the Grand Lodge meetings, and the rebel Grand Lodge began a new phase as it took on more of a Wigan identity, gradually severing its ties with Liverpool.

After 1838, the meetings of the Grand Lodge took place regularly every quarter in various Wigan taverns, some of which were run by its own Freemasons such as the Hole I' th' Wall, which was run by Brother Thomas Johnson; the Banker's Arms, which was run by Brother Thomas Bolton; and the Angel Inn in nearby Ashton-in-Makerfield, which was run by

Brother Timothy Turton. Wigan was well placed in the center of Lancashire, and at its height in the early 1840s, the Wigan Grand Lodge had lodges in Wigan, Liverpool, Ashton-in-Makerfield, and Warrington and had been in close contact with an "Antient" lodge in Lynn Regis in Norfolk, which may have had to do with Gage having originated from there and having continuing links with the town.³⁰

By mid 1842, Gage finally resigned from the Wigan Grand Lodge, angry at not being asked to review the renumbering of lodges and the granting of new Warrants, a decision that had taken place in a meeting held on the 15th of August, 1838. The Wigan based Sincerity Lodge became Lodge No. 1, and the Liverpool Lodge No. 20 became Lodge No. 2, a move which may have added to



The collar of John Mort, Sr. Photo by the author.

Gage's anger and revealed how Wigan had become more dominant and more proactive in the administration. This new proactive stance by the new, Wigan based Grand Lodge began to pay off, and it slowly began to spread its influence, having five lodges under its jurisdiction by the early 1840s, though George Woodcock's Barnsley lodge had declined an offer to join the Wigan Grand Lodge, and a lodge in nearby Warrington called the "Lodge of Knowledge" was relatively short lived. Two more lodges were given warrants; one based in nearby Ashton-in-Makerfield named Harmony and Perseverance, the other named the St. Paul's Lodge, which was based in Ashton-under-Lyne. All of these lodges except for the Lodge of Sincerity seemed to have disappeared by the 1860s.

Gage had always been given the title of Deputy Grand Master, courteously being given the task of overlooking some of the activities by correspondence. However, he was deeply upset that the *Magna Charta* had been breached, as it had originally stated that on the creation of the rebel Grand Lodge, all lodge numbers per 1823 had been reverted back to their pre-Union numbers before 1813. On the 10th of June 1842, Gage wrote a lengthy letter of resignation in which he outlined his feelings at not being asked to review the decision of the new warrants. He was a proud man, and as he was the person who had instigated the Liverpool Masonic Rebellion, he appeared to have been hurt by the decision. In the letter, he made references to the *Magna Charta of Masonic Freedom*, reminding the brethren of their origins:

"It was therefore from an ardent desire to hand down to posterity the an-knight templar

cient landmarks, customs, and usage of Masonry that we reestablished the Ancient Grand Lodge; this act however could only be justified by a strict adherence on our parts to the ancient laws, landmarks, and usages of Masonry."³¹

Gage also sternly refused a request to write a pamphlet detailing the causes of the rebellion. Despite Gage's coldness, he was still the spiritual leader of the "Antients," and in the reply to his resignation, Gage was described by the Grand Master as a man whom:

"the tyrants in the Masonic world would have always looked upon with dread."³²

Perhaps Gage's opinion was not sought by the Wigan Grand Lodge in fear of his reaction to the changes. The *Magna Charta of Masonic Freedom*, originally written under the influence of Gage, was rewritten in 1839. This reorganization, decided by a Grand Lodge now dominated by Wigan brethren, began to forge a new identity. The original rebels, Gage in particular, were still held in high regard and seen as the founding fathers of the resurrected "Antient" Grand Lodge, and Robert Bolton's reply to Gage's resignation, though tinted with expectation and hinting at Gage's lack of interest, effectively left the door open for his return. Gage however, never came back and never replied to Bolton's letter. Increasing the isolation of the Wigan Grand Lodge, Thomas Page and John Robert Goepel, two of the last remaining original rebels from Liverpool, returned to the United Grand Lodge on the 1st of December, 1858.³³ Like Gage, John Robert Goepel had dramatically changed his career, going from a jeweler

to a dentist after the Masonic Rebellion, a profession in which he engaged until his death in 1862.³⁴

Gage was by this time older and was still based in Liverpool, and though seemingly showing a lack of interest in Masonry, he still held a sense of importance when it came to his position within the Wigan Grand Lodge. His disinterest may have been as a result of his close colleague John Eden's embezzlement of Masonic funds, the relocation of the Grand Lodge to Wigan, or of Gage having a family and changing his career from a tailor to a land surveyor. Gage went on to publish a map of Liverpool, which was based on his surveys of the port in 1836.³⁵ He was however, to remain a rebel to the end, effectively rebelling against the rebels. Gage was always an obstinate man, passionate, arrogant, and confident in the face of opposition, and his fight for the cause of Antient Freemasonry had been extremely fierce and proactive.

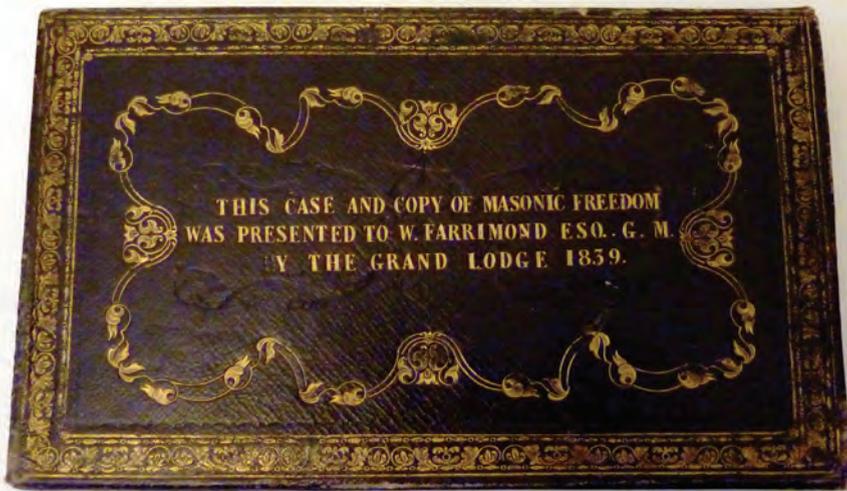
He held the respect of his fellow rebels, and without Gage, there would have been no Wigan Grand Lodge, his leadership influencing its original design. He had aspired to greater things, Gage, a mere tailor having written to the Duke of Sussex complaining about the way certain brethren in Liverpool were being mistreated being an excellent example of an attempt to break down the class and social divisions. Gage died in 1867, aged 79, though as his ex-Masonic rebel had noted, Gage would continue to inspire the Wigan Grand Lodge.³⁶ The success of the rebellion, albeit on a local basis, is revealed in its organization and the proactive stance of the Wigan Grand Lodge, its effect on the United Grand Lodge also proving to be permanent with the rather

large Lancashire province being divided in two shortly after the rebellion, creating the more manageable western and eastern divisions.

The End of the "Antients"

The minute book for the Wigan Grand Lodge ends in 1866, though James Miller who wrote his memories of the Lodge of Sincerity in the 1950s stated that the Grand Lodge of Wigan did survive, supervising the last remaining lodge, the Lodge of Sincerity, its last Grand Master being John Mort who served as Grand Master from 1886 until the lodge returned to the United Grand Lodge in 1913. James Miller was a young man when he was initiated into the Lodge of Sincerity in 1908. He followed his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, in becoming a Freemason under the Wigan Grand Lodge and would become instrumental in the survival of its memory. Miller discusses in his memoirs the festival of St. John, which was celebrated by all lodges before the Union and mentions the practice of the Royal Arch, its apron being worn by the Grand Master, John Mort, at all times. The Knight Templar order was also practiced, and Miller mentions a sickness and burial society within the lodge, which may have been a continuation of the "funeral fund" which was mentioned in the minutes of the Wigan Grand Lodge in 1839.

John Mort seems to have held the Grand Lodge of Wigan together during its final years, and he appears in the Wigan Grand Lodge minutes for the first time in 1866 when Peter Seddon was Grand Master. Mort, like Miller, passed on his memories of the Wigan Grand Lodge, enabling Eustace Beesley



The Magna Charta of Masonic Freedom, 1839. Photo by Fred Lomax.

to write his history in 1920. According to Miller, Mort was initiated in 1864. He served as Master of the Sincerity Lodge on a number of occasions and became the last Grand Master in 1886. Miller paints a cosy picture of an isolated lodge filled with friends and family members. Mort's son, also called John, was a member, and Miller's uncle, Richard Warburton, was initiated on the same day as Miller. Miller recited the merriment of the lodge festive board, where each member of the lodge was allowed one drink from the lodge funds. When the drinks had been consumed, the Worshipful Master would call out "mortar," and a Steward would take the trowel around so that each Brother could give his contribution to the next round of drinks. After these funds had been exhausted, a cry for "more mortar" would ensure further drinks, accompanied by the fine tenor voice of John Mort, Jr., who was also a member of the Wigan knight templar

Parish Church Choir.

These eccentricities reflect the lodge as an apparent time capsule, surviving in isolation, having an independent and inward looking attitude. The drinking and socializing seemed to have created a deep bond between the brethren, keeping the last remaining lodge alive. The Grand Lodge had met at numerous inns and taverns around Wigan, some meetings taking place in the center of Wigan, such as the infamous Dog Inn at Wigan Market Place where the Grand Lodge met on a number of occasions in 1839. Other meetings took place on the periphery of the Wigan area, such as the Angel Inn in Ashton-in-Makerfield. The use of these inns was vital as important meeting places for the Grand Lodge. Many of them, like the Angel Inn and the Rope & Anchor Inn in Scholes, were run by fellow brethren, enabling the Grand Lodge to establish regular meetings, ensuring its continuity and allowing it to

carry on its own unique culture.

As the Wigan Grand Lodge descended into solitary isolation, “regular” Freemasonry under the United Grand Lodge of England flourished in Wigan. The Provincial Grand Lodge of West Lancashire met there in October 1886, and in November of the same year, the Wigan Freemasons under the United Grand Lodge celebrated the centenary of the Lodge of Antiquity No. 178. More visits by prominent figures within the United Grand Lodge followed. In October 1889, the Freemasons accompanied the Mayor to church, and a sermon was given by the Grand Chaplain of England, the Reverend T. Barton Spencer. Perhaps these very public displays by the ever more powerful and confident United Grand Lodge sent a message to the dwindling Wigan Grand Lodge.

Indeed, “regular” Freemasonry in Wigan, like in other industrial towns at the time, attracted the local aristocracy. One such local aristocrat was James Ludovic Lindsay FRS (Fellow of the Royal Society), who resided at Haigh Hall, an elegant neo-classical manor house on the outskirts of Wigan.³⁷ Lindsay was to become the 26th Earl of Crawford and 9th Earl of Balcarres, and he founded the Lindsay Lodge No. 1335 in 1870, Lord Lindsay serving as a Conservative MP (Member of Parliament) for Wigan from 1874-1880. Lindsay became a central figure for Freemasonry in Wigan, becoming involved in the development of local education and charity. His family had been concerned in the opening of the local mining and mechanical school, and Lord Lindsay had been involved in the building of local school houses.³⁸ Lindsay became a celebrated astronomer, and together with his father, they had built

up one of the most impressive libraries in Britain, the “Bibliotheca Lindesiana.” In 1910, Haigh Hall played host to a visiting contingent of Manchester Masons, again confirming the power and status of “regular” Freemasonry against the increasingly secluded Wigan Grand Lodge.

Miller was to witness the end of the Grand Lodge of Wigan, its last surviving lodge being isolated and alone, and as a relic of the “Antients” of the eighteenth century, it was not recognized by other local Masonic lodges. Despite the ruling passed in the early days of the Grand Lodge that it was forbidden to discuss the United Grand Lodge, Miller mentions that “heated arguments” on rejoining had been going on for two or three years leading up to 1913. The matter was brought to a head, as Miller puts it, in 1912, when an unnamed newly raised brother received an invitation to visit a Masonic lodge under the United Grand Lodge of England. On presenting himself to the lodge and showing his certificate, he was refused admission, which led him to write a rather abusive letter, calling the lodge a bogus institution and stating that he was the victim of a fraud. This incident seemed to confirm that the Sincerity Lodge, the last surviving lodge under the Grand Lodge of Wigan, had a bleak future, and if it was to survive, it needed to adapt.

A meeting between both Grand Lodges was sought, and the Sincerity Lodge was visited by Worshipful Brother J. D. Murrey from Provincial Grand Lodge, who was satisfied with what he witnessed of the working of the lodge. Miller recites that developments moved quickly and that the lodge could keep the name “Sincerity” but would have to be renumbered. Ironically, the issue over the renumbering of lodges

after the Union was an issue which had moved Gage to rebel against the United Grand Lodge in the first place. The lodge would lose its original number of 486, it would surrender its old Warrant, and despite being founded in 1786, it would have a new number of 3677. In the official United Grand Lodge records, the Lodge of Sincerity would have the 26th of September, 1913, as the date of its consecration.

All the brethren of the Wigan Grand Lodge then had to be initiated, passed, and raised, in a ceremony which was reminiscent of the pre-Union “re-making” ceremony, when an “Antient” Mason joined a “Modern” lodge. Miller seemed to have mixed feelings of his lodge rejoining the United Grand Lodge, and he ended his memoirs with a haunting image:

“But one can still wonder if the ghosts of those old brethren of an unrecognized Lodge still linger around Sincerity.”³⁹

Miller was speaking with some regret of the surrender of what was effectively the last surviving relic of the “Antients” and was perhaps referring to the ghost of Michael Alexander Gage, still lingering in the lodge room with his Masonic rebels. It had been ninety years since Gage presided over the first meeting at the Shakespeare Tavern in Liverpool, and in the Masonic Rooms at Wigan, Gage’s

dream finally ended, as the last surviving lodge under the Grand Lodge of Wigan rejoined the United Grand Lodge of England, bringing the rebellion to an end.

The rebellion represented feelings of dissatisfaction and discrimination among some Freemasons, especially within the then large Lancashire province. Feeling that their grievances were being unanswered, they broke away from the United Grand Lodge in London and went their own way. The rebellion can also be seen to reflect a revolt by the merchants and tradesmen of Liverpool against the “tyranny” of the Duke of Sussex, Freemasons and tradesmen such as Gage and Broadhurst seeing the leadership of the United Grand Lodge as being firmly in the hands of the London based aristocracy, a leadership that had neglected the issues raised by the brethren of the leading port in the industrial North-west of England. This is evident, not only in the name and the wording of the *Magna Charta of Masonic Freedom*, but also in the aggressive attitude of the leading rebels, some of whom, such as Gage, clearly had personal aspirations. The rebellion was the last stand of the “Antients,” and despite it taking place, the expansion of Freemasonry under the United Grand Lodge of England continued apace during the later half of the nineteenth century.

End Notes

²⁵ An excerpt from Michael Alexander Gage’s resignation letter, 10th of June, 1842, in Beesley, *Wigan Grand Lodge*, p.85.

²⁶ Michael J. Spurr, “The Liverpool Rebellion,” in *AQC*, Vol. 85, (York: Ben Johnson & Co. Ltd, 1972), pp.29-60, on p.42.

²⁷ John Macnab, *History of The Merchants Lodge, No. 241*, Liverpool, 1780-2004, Second Edition, (Liverpool, 2004), p.34.

²⁸ “The Manchester and Liverpool Rail-Road” in the Monthly Supplement of *The*

Penny Magazine of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, March 31 to April 30, 1833, pp.1-3.

²⁹ *List of Members for Lodge No. 35 held at the Adelphi Hotel – Liverpool, December 18th, 1839*. Masonic Hall, Hope Street, Liverpool. Not listed.

³⁰ *1851 Census for Liverpool, Lancashire*. Liverpool Library. Ref: HO153/2183.

³¹ A transcribed excerpt from Michael Alexander Gage's resignation letter, 10th of June, 1842, in Beesley, *Wigan Grand Lodge*, p.84.

³² *Ibid.*, pp.83-88.

³³ Spurr, "The Liverpool Rebellion," *AQC*, Vol. 85, p.42.

³⁴ Goepel's occupation is given as "Dentist" age 50 and his birthplace as London in the *1851 Census for Liverpool, Lancashire*. Liverpool Library, Ref: HO107/2180. However, Goepel was listed as a "Jeweler" aged 40 in the *1841 Census for Liverpool, Lancashire*. Liverpool Library, Ref: HO107/556/28. Deaths registered in June, 1862, John Robert Goepel, Liverpool. Ref: 8b. 113.

³⁵ *1851 Census for Liverpool, Lancashire*. Liverpool Library. Ref: HO153/2183, where Gage's occupation is listed as a "Civil Engineer" and also in the Church Records for St. Peters, Liverpool; Baptism of William Henry, son of Michael Alexander Gage, Land Surveyor, and his wife Sarah, 25th of December, 1833. Liverpool Library. Ref: 283PET2/21. Also see the *1841 Census for Liverpool, Lancashire*. Liverpool Library. Ref: HO107/558/3. Gage's occupation is given here as "Land Surveyor." A map of Liverpool published in 1836 was based on Gage's expert survey of the port, see Liverpool Map, 1836, M. A. Gage, Maritime Archives and Library, Drawer Z/F3.

³⁶ Deaths registered in January, February and March, 1867, Michael Alexander Gage, aged 79, West Derby, Liverpool. Ref: 8b. 331.

³⁷ James Ludovic Lindsay was first initiated into the Isaac Newton University Lodge No. 859 in Cambridge in February 1866. He subsequently joined a number of other lodges including the Prince of Wales Lodge No. 259 in 1868 and the Lodge of Edinburgh No. 1 in 1870. Lord Lindsay, as he was styled from his grandfather's death in 1869 until he succeeded to his later titles on his father's death in 1880, also served as Deputy Provincial Grand Master for West Lancashire.

³⁸ See Cornelius McLeod Percy, *History of the Mining and Technical School, Wigan*, (Wigan, 1900). The agent of the Earl of Crawford had chaired a public meeting in 1857 which duly decided that the Wigan Mining and Mechanical School should be established. Many public buildings in the Wigan area bear the distinctive Crawford and Balcarres mark on the date stone. An example of one such building is the School House on Red Rock Lane near Haigh Village, which was built in 1871.

³⁹ *Reminiscences of an Unrecognised Lodge, namely Old Sincerity Lodge No. 486* by James Miller. Some of Miller's regalia is currently held by the Library of the United Grand Lodge of England. Many thanks to the Reverend Neville Cryer who supplied a copy of the memoirs of James Miller. Not Listed.

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