

The Centre for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism
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A Canonbury Tale: Canonbury Tower and Freemasonry

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The 16th-century Canonbury Tower is one of London's most distinctive landmarks. It is now the home of the [Canonbury Masonic Research Centre](#). In its long history, Canonbury Tower has had some interesting previous connections with freemasonry. The most notable event was probably in 1797, when Canonbury House was the venue for the annual feast of the Premier Grand Lodge, which was reported in *The Scientific Magazine and Freemasons' Repository* 9 (July 1797), pp. 39-40, as follows:

'Masonic Intelligence

London, Wednesday, July 5, 1797

This day the Society of Free and Accepted Masons, under the Constitution of England, (His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales being Grand Master) held their Annual Feast, at Canonbury-House, under the direction of the Lodge of Country Stewards. The Lodge was opened in the anti-chamber, whence the procession in all due masonic form, with splendid regalia, passed into the large room, where a most numerous and respectable assembly of Brethren was collected. The chair was taken by Alderman Newnham, supported on the right by the Worshipful Brother Counsellor Downing, Provincial Grand-Master of the County of Essex: and on the left, by Brother E. Dowling, Senior Master of the Lodge of the Three Grand Principles. Brother Wingfield, Master of the Lodge of Country Stewards, and Brother John Dowling, Past Master of the same Lodge, officiated as Wardens.

The exertions of the Stewards were not confined to the present gratification of their numerous friends then assembled, they opened an additional source of pleasure, by the production of several subscriptions to the Female Charity School, under the protection of Her Royal Highness the Dutchess of Cumberland. On this occasion, the venerable Master of the Knights Templars, Captain Hannam, was respectably conspicuous in bringing the collection of ten guineas from his Chapter. The meeting was honoured with the presence of many Grand Stewards; and the whole was conducted with all the order, harmony, and friendship, which the principles of the Royal Craft enforce, and by which it is the pride and the wish of every good mason to regulate his life and actions.'

Canonbury Tavern, the inn opposite Canonbury Tower, had been built by 1730, and its noted tea-gardens were one of the many attractions which at that time made Islington a popular destination for summer excursions by Londoners (*VCH Middx*, 8, p. 19). By the 1850s, the development of Islington and Canonbury as suburbs of London was proceeding apace, and, as the population of the area grew, so there was a demand for the establishment of local masonic lodges. On 25 September 1855, a lodge was warranted to meet at the Canonbury Tavern, Canonbury Lodge No. 955 (from 1863, No. 657). Its first joining member was Henry Gustavus Buss, who in 1878 was appointed Assistant Grand Secretary. The first initiate was Henry Salt, a heraldic engraver. The consecration of the new lodge, on 22 February 1856, was reported in *The Freemasons' Magazine* (March 1856), pp. 199-200:

'CANONBURY LODGE (No. 955). On the 22nd of February, we had the pleasure of visiting the above-named Lodge, held at Bro. Todd's, Canonbury Tavern, upon the occasion of its

consecration - a ceremony so rare as to bring together a number of our most distinguished Brethren: among them we may note Bros. John Hervey, P.G.S.D.; Bisgood, D.Prov.G.M. for Kent; Gooch, D.Prov.G.M. for Wilts; John Mott Thearle, Prov.G.S.B. for Herts; Bohn, Filer, Wolley, Sullivan, Harrison, Friend, Paas, Todd, Buss, Creed, Broome, Richardson, Adlard, Jones, Cooper, Burton, Arliss, Binckes, Cox, Hart, Pullwarr, Massey, Hogg, Graves, Spencer, Underwood, Savage, Watson, and as many other Brethren. Bro. Todd's room is very elegantly furnished for Lodge purposes, of the most ample size, and capable of further extension. In honour of the solemn purpose for which the Brethren had been called together, the whole of the apartment had been reconstructed and beautified, and its walls adorned with busts of ancient and modern worthies, famous in poetry or song; its jets of gas, popping forth at regular intervals from out the clustering leaves from which they spring; its mirrors reflecting and re-reflecting everything, and giving a *tout ensemble* well worthy a visit to behold.

If other invitation were necessary, we have it directly opposite, in the old tower of Canonbury, with its quaint brickwork and funny little windows in the queerest places, from whence many of our past worthies looked forth upon the rural prospect spread before them; where the green grass grew for miles round the old tower without a break to the eye until you came to the heights of Hampstead and the tree-adorned slopes of Highgate. Thirty years since, we were accustomed for evening solace to wander down to the old Canonbury tea-gardens that stood on the site of the present, or taking a ramble through the fields by the New River, watch the endeavours of Young England to catch minnows with bent pins; or dwelling upon the philosophy that taught, as the old angler did, thus: "When I would beget content and increase confidence in the power and wisdom and providence of Almighty God, I will walk the meadows by some gliding stream, and there contemplate the lilies that take no care..."

The old tower is completely built in, miles and miles of bricks and mortar surrounding it.

Speculative builders - tiny Sir Thomas Maryon Wilsons in their way - have bricked and are bricking over all they can of grass or country, edging up even to Bro. Todd's tea-gardens. May his shadow nor his small preserve of country never be less.

The business of the Lodge commencing, it was opened in the Three Degrees, Bros. Gooch acting as W.M.; Wm. Watson, S.W.; Binckes, J.W.; Longstaff, Tyler. The petition for the new Lodge having been read and the warrant produced, Bro. Laughlin made a most effective oration; after which the corn, oil, and wine, being placed in three elaborately-chased silver cups, from the *atelier* of Bro. John Mott Thearle, the ceremony of consecration took place, the Brethren saluting the M.W.Prov.G.M. Gooch. The W.M. Bro. Filer was then presented and installed in due form, and appointed as his officers, Bros. Hill, S.W.; Bohn, J.W. and Sec.; Wilson, S.D., Friend, J.D.; Buss, I.G. On the closing of the Lodge the Brethren adjourned to the banquet provided by Bro. Todd, who, as is his custom, left nothing to desire. The viands and wines were excellent, and the good-humour and general satisfaction of the Brethren at all the arrangements proved how well they had been cared for. ..

The W.M. proposed what he very appropriately designated as the chief toast of the evening, viz.

"The Health of the Founder of the Lodge, their Worthy Secretary and esteemed Friend, Bro. Bohn". The necessity for a Lodge at Canonbury had been acknowledged for years; but as was usual in such matters, that which was the business of every one had not been attended to by any one, until Bro. Bohn, with a determination that did him the highest honour, took the matter in

hand and carried it out most successfully. The thanks of the entire Masonic district thereabout were due to Bro. Bohn, as the father and founder of the first Canonbury Lodge.

Bro. Bohn, in reply, expressed his great satisfaction at the honour done him on this occasion; for this he had laboured - this had been the goal to which his ambition was directed - to establish a Lodge to the satisfaction of the Brethren. Conscious of having carried his labours to a successful conclusion, and proud of the title the W.M. had been pleased to confer upon him, viz.

Founder of the Lodge, he begged to drink all their very good healths. Bros. Cooper, Levi, Thearle, and Bohn, contributed to the harmony of the evening; and time flew so quickly and merrily, that when we looked at our patent lever we doubted either our own eyes, or its hands, and seriously questioned its ability to tell us the time of day; but day it certainly was; and on the principle of being grateful for everything, we felt very thankful at the opportunity afforded us of getting home very early.'

Thomas Bohn was a Past Master of the Royal York Lodge, No. 7, and the Old Concord Lodge, No. 172. His work for the Canonbury Lodge continued up until 1865, when he unexpectedly died, as a result of internal bleeding after swallowing a fish bone. Bohn was the main moving force in the establishment of a Royal Arch chapter attached to the Canonbury Lodge.

The history of Canonbury lodge by W.A. Ball, published in 1956, describes how the lodge eventually left Canonbury. In November 1865, Todd sold his interest in the Canonbury Tavern to one Mr Goodwin. According to a petition sent by the lodge to the Grand Master, 'the said Mr Goodwin who is not a member of the Craft, has positively declined accommodation to the members of the said Lodge, and has refused them permission to hold their meetings in his establishment'. The warrant stated that meetings of the lodge had to be held in the parish of St Mary Islington. The lodge had investigated the possibility of holding meetings at the 'Highbury Barn' and the Lamb Hotel, near the Metropolitan Cattle Market, but both were considered unsuitable. The lodge was given permission to meet outside Islington, and from 1866 met at Freemasons' Hall, then at Haxells Hotel in the Strand, then once again briefly at Freemasons' Hall, then at a variety of hotels and restaurants in the West End until 1942, when it returned to Freemasons' Hall, where it still meets.

The most notable figure associated with freemasonry in Canonbury was Matthew Cooke (d. 1883), the masonic scholar who first published the early fifteenth-century manuscript of the Old Charges, British Library, Additional MS. 23198, known in his honour as the Cooke Manuscript. Cooke was a musician, the son of Matthew Cooke the elder (?1761-1829), who was organist of St George's Bloomsbury and, briefly, the Curzon Chapel, Mayfair. Like his father, Matthew Cooke the younger was as a boy a chorister in the Chapel Royal and became an organist, acting as Honorary Music Master to the Royal Masonic School for Girls.

He was initiated as a mason in the Canonbury Lodge at Canonbury Tavern on 18 June 1857, an occasion recalled at a festive board following a meeting of the lodge in 1861. Edward Cox, as Master, proposing the health of the visitors including Cooke, noted how 'Bro. Cooke had been initiated in that room [in the Canonbury Tavern] and on the W.M.'s proposition...His titles were numerous, and the W.M. must fail if he attempted to recapitulate them; indeed he believed that Bro. Cooke had gone up so many degrees that it wanted but very few more to take him direct to the Grand Lodge above.' In response, Cooke said that 'Like all young children he came occasionally to the mother for a little pap. The song just concluded had a line in it which spoke

of "giving him a good education," that had been done in his case, by the Canonbury Lodge, for in 955 he acquired that craving for Masonry in all degrees to which the W.M. had referred...'

(*The Freemasons' Magazine*, New Series, 5 (Jul.- Dec. 1861), pp. 412-3).

In 1859, Cooke published a song called *The New-Made Mason* (a copy is in the British Library, pressmark H.1771.d). Whether it was based on personal experience of his initiation at

Canonbury, he does not say.

'Give ear to my tale, Brother Masons, I pray
And ask, of yourselves, if it's true, what I say?
For I'll tell you just how it all happen'd to me,
When I took the first step, in the E.A. degree.

Chorus

For I'll tell you just how it all happen'd to me,
When I took the first step, in the E.A. Degree.
The night I was made I went home rather late,
My wife she looked blue, as she sat there in state,
And she asked, "where on earth had I been till that hour?"
With an accent that told me her temper was sour.
I said, "I would tell her some short three months hence",
At which, up she started, in mortal offence;
Off to bed - called the nurse - tuck'd the children up warm,
And prepared, when I came, to get up a smart storm.
I read all my letters, then march'd up to bed,
She got up the steam, - I forget what she said -
But I kept my own counsel, in spite of her tongue,
And dropped off in a snooze while her 'larum it rung.
Of course, I attended my lodge, each lodge-night,
And in its instructions I took great delight;
Still my wife was impatient for time to come round,
As I'd promised to tell her where I might be found.
She said, - "she believ'd there was some one about",
"Some shameful young hussey that oft kept me out,"
"Whilst at home she sat aching, and quaking, for fear",
"Something dreadful had happen'd - the thought made her queer".
Thus we had gone on for some three months, or more,
Returning from work - she met me at the door,
In her hand was a bill, which she thrust in my face,
As she said - "Sir and Brother, here's your apron and case."
"A Mason your Lordship has lately become,"
"And that's been the reason you've come so late home!"
"Here's some man left this apron, you silly old goose!"
"And, betwixt you and me, that said apron's no use!"
"But if you abroad with an apron must roam,"
"I'll find your old breeches, - and wear them at home;"

"And if you are allowed to kiss my sister Sue,"
"Masons don't serve me so, - I'll be shot if they do!"
Next day, rather late, I indulged in a snore,
(The tale of the poker she'd heard of before)
I felt cold, as I slept, and awoke with a twinge,
For she'd turned down the bed-clothes to look for the singe!

MORAL

Now all you young Masons take warning by this;
When first you are made, tell your wives with a kiss,
Tho' we cannot admit them to see what we do,
There's no husband that's found to his wife, half so true.

Notwithstanding the light-hearted nature of this song, Cooke was a cantankerous figure who was one of many turbulent influences in English freemasonry in the 1860s and 1870s. He protested against the award of the rank of Past Grand Master to the Prince of Wales, arguing that precedent showed that the rank of Grand Patron was more appropriate. At a Grand Lodge in June 1871, he made a violent, virtually libellous, attack on the Grand Secretary and his officials for allegedly using the premises at Great Queen Street to promote additional degrees.

This led to a huge controversy within freemasonry, and Cooke, to his great indignation, was disciplined by the Board of General Purposes.

Even the publication of Cooke's edition of the Old Charges created ill-feeling. Cooke was a regular contributor to *The Freemasons' Magazine*. When the editor, Henry George Warren retired in 1865, Cooke's connection with it ceased. However, it was agreed that his edition of the Old Charges would be printed by the new proprietor of *The Freemasons' Magazine*, William Smith, at his printing office, 'The Scientific Press'.

In Cooke's words, "'The Scientific Press' coolly took eighteen months to print this book of one hundred and eighty pages. Subscribers died and others repudiated their orders during such a lapse of time.' Cooke did not receive any indication of the cost of printing until two weeks after the book was delivered. The bill when it arrived proved to be 'so monstrous in amount that we felt it could only be settled by putting witnesses into a box to prove it was more than twice as much as a fair and reasonable printer would claim'. (*The Masonic Press*, 1 (1 January 1866), pp. 6-8). Cooke had already decided to start his own journal, *The Masonic Press*, as a rival to *The Freemasons' Magazine*. Smith's writ for payment of the outstanding amount on the printing of the Old Charges arrived as *The Masonic Press* was about to be launched, a move which Cooke interpreted as an attempt to strangle the new periodical at birth. Indeed, *The Masonic Press* proved very short-lived, ceasing publication after just three months.

Cooke's belligerence was not confined to masonic matters. He fell foul of the formidable Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum, Anthony Panizzi, for his refusal to comply with new regulations requiring readers to return their books to the counter when they had finished with them. Sadly, Cooke's old age was clouded by financial difficulties, and he was a candidate for relief from the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution in 1881, dying in the home two years later.

(*The Freemason*, 13, 1881, p. 217; 15, 1883, p. 315).

Cooke's affection for the Canonbury Lodge, and for Canonbury Tower, was considerable. In 1858, he published a song entitled *Nine-fifty-five*. It was printed, like *The New-Made Mason*, by

J. H. Jewell, a music publisher at 104 Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury. It is 'Fraternally dedicated, by Permission, to Samuel Hill Esq W.M. Canonbury Lodge, 955, by the Author and Composer, Matthew Cooke, Late one of the Children of Her Majesty's Chapels Royal, A Brother of the Above Lodge'. The song mostly consists of laboured word play on the names of the members of the lodge, but begins by linking the Canonbury Lodge firmly with Canonbury Tower.

A copy is in the British Library, pressmark I.600.(3.).

'Near the tow'r of Queen Bess, which in Islington stands,
And where she oft hunted o'er all its broad lanes;
A Lodge of Freemasons doth meet, work, and thrive;
Its number we know to be, "Nine-fifty-five."
Canonbury's the name of the Lodge so well known,
Though young in the craft yet its praises have flown,
For the members are earnest in MASONRY'S art,
And one and all strive to excel in their part.

CHORUS (fortissimo)

This Lodge of Freemasons doth meet, work, and thrive;
Its number we know to be "Nine-fifty-five".
Though to rhyme all the names is a task hard, and long,
If you'll kindly excuse, I'll attempt it in song,
And as they come handy, take long ones, or short,
They're all sure to fit as they're of the right sort.
We've some dignified members, an *Abbott, Duke, King,*
Besides an odd *Chancellor*, under their wing;
A *Gordon*, two *Rogers*, a *Buss*, and *Molloy*,
With *Nicholls*, and *Roberts*, who never are coy.

Chorus.

We're high in our nations, our Master's a *Hill!*
He's both brother and Friend, which we can't match at will;
Both *Ensom's* and *Worman*, are mason's [sic.] of *Worth*,
And there's *Halton* and *Gobey*, to keep up our mirth,
There are some *Folkes* will say that we've names very hard,
In both *Filer* and *Irons*, but they're each a trump card;
Then *Layton* and *Collingwood*, *Wilson* and *Higgins*,
A happier quartett you wont find at the "diggins"!

Chorus.

It's a flourishing set for both *Berry*, and *Beach*,
Won't let *Kirkham*, and *Willis*, get out of their reach
Lest *Ned Driver*, and *Turner*, should start them to *Gilling*
Who to put on the curb chain is never unwilling.
There are more to be sung; some are teasers, I own,
Such as *Cornick*, as well as our past Master *Bohn*
The founder of this little Lodge that's so bright
Where in CHARITY, FRIENDSHIP, and LOVE, we unite.

Chorus.

If I stop now, and don't keep the *Ball* on the roll
I never shall *Winn*, or approach to the goal
Where I hope to arrive, without causing a crowd
And finish this line, by lugging in *Stroud*,
There's *Todd*, with a *Cheeswright* who's come to the House;
When his wefe's [*sic.*] in the straw wer'e [*sic.*] all mum as a mouse,
And he says, - "that as we of good wishes don't stint her,
He'll *Buke* us an out-and-out rarebit next *Winter*."

Chorus.

Thene [*sic.*] of fowls he's two *Cox* but we can't eat 'em *Rawe*,
So a *Cooke* he must have to cook them for our man.
And he hopes that the *Cutts* each one gets, with his malt,
Will be properly season'd with pepper and *Salt*.
As each brother's been mentioned, by name, in my song,
And I scorn any meaning that's felt to be wrong,
Then in brotherly friendship, all here will combine
In a toast to our Lodge with a bumper of wine.

Chorus.

A copy of *Nine-Fifty-Five* was deposited in the British Museum on 16 June 1858, but, despite its genial and affectionate invocation of the young lodge, within a few months Cooke had resigned from Canonbury Lodge. Although Cooke thus moved on in his masonic career, Canonbury Tower had clearly caught his imagination. In 1863, he was the moving force behind an attempt to form an 'Elizabethan Tower Lodge', to meet at the Canonbury Tavern. The file of rejected petitions to the United Grand Lodge of England for the establishment of new lodges, held by the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, includes the following petition, dated 30 May 1863, in Cooke's own elegant hand:

'To the Most Worshipful Grand Master of the United Fraternity of Ancient Free and Accepted
Masons of England:

We, the undersigned, being regular registered Masons of the lodges mentioned against our respective names, having the prosperity of the craft at heart, are anxious to exert our best endeavours to promote and diffuse the genuine principles of the art, and, for the conveniency of our respective dwellings [as well as in order to assist the masonic promotion of several brethren who see but little chance of preferment in the Order for years to come] and other good reasons, we are desirous of forming a new lodge to be called "The Elizabethan Tower Lodge".
In consequence of this desire, we pray for a warrant of constitution, empowering us to meet as a regular lodge, at the Canonbury Tavern, St Mary's Road, Islington, on the second Tuesday of every month, and there to discharge the duties of Masonry, in a constitutional manner, according to the forms of the order and laws of the grand lodge: and we have nominated and do recommend Brother Matthew Cooke to be the first master, Brother Frederick Hodge to be the first senior warden, and Brother Henry Headly Williams, to be the first junior warden of the said lodge. The prayer of petition being granted, we promise strict obedience to the commands of the grand master and the laws and regulations of the grand lodge.

Sam. Hill, Albert House, Canonbury Park. P.M. Canonbury Lodge 955. Egyptian Lodge 29.

William Lucas Hanley, 1 Park Terrace, Highbury Park. Antiquity No. 2, P.S.W and P.M. 5.

Thomas Mollay, 11 Spencer Terrace, Islington. Canonbury 955. P.M. Egyptian No. 29

.Peter Lacis, Agricultural Hall, Islington. 13 and 1008. P.M.

Frederick Hodge, 58 Holbein Hall, E.C. 318 Union.

Henry Headly Williams, 3 Caumont Chambers, City. 72 Peace and Harmony.

Matthew Cooke, 43 Acton Street, Gray's Inn Road, W.C. Sec. Globe (No. 23). Sec. De-Grey

and Ripon (No. 1207); Sec. Royal Albert (No. 1209), &c. &c.

We, the undersigned Officers of "The Globe Lodge", No. 23, do recommend the prayer of the foregoing petition, in accordance with the laws as set forth in the Book of Constitutions.

Ralph Milward Smith. W.M., P.M. 1044 and P.G. Steward.

Robert Gibbons. S.W. (23.)

George Smith. J.W. (23.)

Matthew Cooke. Secretary (23.)'

Unfortunately, however, Cooke's proposal did not command full local support. In particular, the Canonbury Lodge declined to endorse the proposal, doubtless concerned that any new lodge in the area might affect its membership. A letter from Thomas Bohn, the founder of Canonbury lodge, indicating Canonbury's opposition, is attached to the petition. Further complications were caused by the fact that one of the proposers of the lodge, Henry Headley Williams, turned out not to be a master mason. Cooke moved rapidly to try and sort out this problem, and the boxes of miscellaneous correspondence in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry contain the following letter by him to the Grand Secretary, William Gray Clarke, dated 22 June 1863:

'I saw Bro. William Young, Secretary Peace and Harmony lodge no. 72, and supplied him with certificate of Bro. Henry Headley Williams's raising in the Fitzroy lodge, last Thursday evening and Bro. Young promised to fill up the Grand lodge return and to have it at the Office on Friday. If he has done so our petition for the Elizabethan Tower lodge is *en regle* and, without dictating to you, may I venture to ask for a speedy decision from the M.W.G.M. and your kind offices in our favor? and am

Yours truly and fraternally

Matthew Cooke'

However, a speedy answer was not forthcoming, and on 27 June, Cooke wrote again to the Grand Secretary, enquiring anxiously about the progress of the petition:

'I saw Brother W. Young, Secretary of the Peace and Harmony Lodge, no. 72, last night and he informs me that he made the proper return accompanied by two certificates of the raising of Bro. Henry Headley Williams whose not being registered was the informality of the petition for the new lodge proposed to be called 'The Elizabethan Tower lodge', as some of the petitioners are very anxious to know if the petition has been submitted to the M.W.G.M., and to learn his lordship's decision thereon, May I request the favour of a reply so that I can lay the same before them forthwith?'

An endorsement on Cooke's letter notes that the Grand Secretary replied on the same day, reporting that the Grand Master. Lord Zetland, was inclined to think that no further London lodges should be established unless there were very pressing circumstances. This apparently

was the Grand Master's final decision on 'The Elizabethan Tower Lodge', and the petition was declined. Cooke's reaction to this disappointment is not recorded.