

WAS NELSON A FREEMASON ?

by Bro. F.W. Seal-Coon

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THE LAST TIME the above title appeared in A.Q.C. was in Volume XII for 1899 (pages 109/110) and there have been only two peripheral references since -- in Vol. XLII (pages 88/89) and Volume 88 (page 220). Nor is the outside bibliography much more extensive: a short treatment in The History of Freemasonry in Norfolk by R.W. Bro. Hamon Le Strange, Prov. G.M. of Norfolk, 1896; another in the history of the Lodge of United Friends No. 313, Great Yarmouth, by W. Bro. Robert H. Teasdale, 1930; a brief reference in Hubert S. Banner's These Men were Masons, 1934; and one in Frederick Armitage's Short Masonic History which mentions Nelson as a member of the Gregorians, a quasi-masonic society, in 1797. Examination of several of the biographies of Nelson has thrown up no Masonic references whatever; nor, I am authoritatively informed, has repeated exhaustive examination of the registers of Grand Lodge, more particularly as they relate to the lodges in Nelson's native Norfolk, been any more revealing -- though it is fair to recognise that 18th. century records are by no means as complete as are those of more modern times.

Inquiries at the West India Reference Library in Kingston, Jamaica, have had a similarly negative result,

The question still stands, therefore: did Horatio Nelson, ultimately Admiral Viscount Nelson of the Nile and Duke of Brontë, ever become a Freemason? It must be acknowledged from the start that the evidence for and against is dubious or negative, hence inconclusive. Why, then, should it be reviewed again when previous writers have covered it in at most a few paragraphs. My

answer is: Because Nelson was an archetypal English hero, more adulated and fêted, and certainly better loved, than the great Duke of Marlborough or Nelson's towering contemporary, the Duke of Wellington. Possibly Nelson was as much revered for his frailties as for his tremendous ability and heroism, but the fact remains that by his naval skill, his bravery, his determination, his patriotism, his charm and warmth, his calculated disobediences his vanity and amorousness, he struck the keynote of his time and place. In short, he was the complete 18th. century man, a breed now all but extinct, but which still echoes in English hearts as a romantic ideal. That is why it is important to Freemasonry to know for certain whether Nelson was or was not a member of the Craft, and therefore to examine and re-examine every aspect of that question even if it means finally leaving an enigma to posterity.

Ironically, there are factors in common -- even if their manifestations are unequal and morally opposite -- between entering Freemasonry and entering on a life of crime! They are: background, temperament, company, motive and opportunity, and in Nelson's case all these factors should be taken into account before coming to a conclusion, whether positive, negative or doubtful.

Horatio Nelson was born on 29 September 1758 at Parsonage House, Burnham Thorpe on the Norfolk Coast, to the Rev. Edmund Nelson and his wife Catherine (née Suckling). He was their sixth child and fifth son out of a total of 11 children, three of whom died in infancy. Both parents came of clerical stock and were

well-connected, the wife in particular being related to the powerful Walpole family. The child Horatio seemed somewhat delicate, but fearless and self-reliant as he grew up as a country lad on his father's parsonage farm and among the coastal dunes and creeks. He went early to school in Norwich and then to Paston's School at North Walsham. When he was nine, his beloved mother died, leaving the father with a large brood to rear, so at 12 years old Horatio persuaded his elder brother, William, to write to their maternal uncle, Captain Maurice Suckling, seeking a naval post.

This was arranged, though apparently somewhat reluctantly on the part of Capt. Suckling because of Horatio's seeming frailness and he joined Raisonable at Onathan in March 1771 as captain's servant, later as midshipman. He spent a year learning elementary seamanship and navigation, after which Capt. Suckling procured him a passage in a merchant ship bound for the West Indies for the sake of experience -- apparently a disagreeable one, as he returned with an abiding sympathy for seamen before the mast.

At 14 Nelson was in charge of the tender of the guardship Triumph which his uncle then commanded. Later in the year 1773 Nelson volunteered for a three-month voyage to the Arctic in the sloop Carcass and on his return was appointed to the frigate Seahorse for a tour of the East Indies and India, during which he experienced his first battle. But in May 1775 he became desperately ill and had to be sent back to England.

By now Maurice Suckling was Comptroller of the Navy, headed the Navy Board, and was a man of influence at the Admiralty. On

24 September 1776 Nelson joined Worcester as acting lieutenant. This small ship of the line was on escort duty with Atlantic convoys at the start of the American Revolution, but was paid off on 2 April 1777 and a few days ^{Nelson} later/passed his examination for lieutenant's rank, when he was immediately appointed to the frigate Lowestoffe under Captain William Locker who, like so many of Nelson's future fellow-officers, became a lifelong friend; for even at this early age Nelson's natural charm and openhearted friendliness had shown themselves, later to endear him to nearly all who served with or under him; indeed, to all who came in contact with him except the envious and those whom his stern sense of duty offended. Also manifest were his application, quick mind and grasp of situations, even the diplomatic sense that was later to be of value to his country and to himself.

In July 1777 Lowestoffe sailed for Jamaica and Nelson was given command of her tender to patrol the Jamaican coast and the Mosquito Shore. He lost no opportunity of improving his navigational skills, and when Maurice Suckling died in July 1778 Nelson was held in high enough esteem no longer to need his uncle's influence.

It was in the Spring of this year, when Nelson was at sea in the brig Badger, that an event of masonic significance occurred, for it was then that Sir Peter Parker, with Lady Parker, arrived from New York to be Governor of Jamaica. Sir Peter was a prominent Mason and was quickly appointed Provincial Grand Master of Jamaica.

Lady Parker's daughter, who was commanding the ship "Badger" at the time of her arrival, was the daughter of Sir Peter Parker, who was commanding the ship "Badger" at the time of her arrival. She was the daughter of Sir Peter Parker, who was commanding the ship "Badger" at the time of her arrival.

1779 Sir Peter promoted him to post captain on merit. He took over the frigate Hinchinbrooke as soon as it returned from a patrol during which its captain had been killed, and in the following January he took part in an expedition against the Spaniards at San Juan, Nicaragua. In this Nelson particularly distinguished himself, but fell ill again and though recalled to command the frigate Janus he had to be carried ashore and remained there until, on 30 August, he applied for convalescent leave and soon after returned to England, still frail and shaky. In 1780.

Nelson spent most of the months of slow recovery in Jamaica with the Parkers under Lady Parker's care, and although as a young officer barely of age and of no particular renown he was no masonic 'catch', living as he was in the Admiral's quarters he could hardly ^{failed} have/to become cognisant of Sir Peter's masonic standing or to be aware of his masonic comings and goings. That, prior to this, Nelson's naval duties and nautical studies after he became 21 left him no time for Freemasonry even if he knew of its existence and might have had the inclination to seek initiation, I am convinced; while when it was under his nose, so to speak, at the Parkers' he was in no condition to take it up. Nevertheless, it was at this point in his life that the light of Freemasonry first shone around him.

I have gone at some length into Nelson's background and the beginnings of his career in order to set the scene, as it were, for the examination of the evidence for and against his ever having become a Mason, and it is now appropriate to set out what positive support there is for this proposition. Let us first quote the Appendix to Bro. Hamer Le Strange's history of Masonry

in Norfolk, which describes in detail the evidence known to him at the time and gives an opinion on it:

"A writer in the Freemasons' Quarterly Review for 1839, p. 440, states that Lord Nelson and his servant Tom Allen were Masons, but gives no reference or authority for the assertion. Bro. Henry Sadler, Sub-Librarian of Grand Lodge, informs me that he has never been able to find either of their names in any of the registers, and that he has made special search of all the lists of Norfolk Lodges, and also in those most popular amongst Naval Officers, without discovering any trace of him.

"Among the furniture now in possession of the Lodge of Friendship No.100, at Yarmouth, is a stone bearing an inscription relating to Nelson: it is an oblong polished block of white marble, about the size of a large brick; on the top is a small aperture for the insertion of a Lewis, so that it evidently was intended for use as a 'perfect ashlar'. On each of the long sides is an incised inscription: that on one side commemorates the foundation of the Lodge of United Friends, and runs as follows:

Lodge of United Friends, No.564.
Constituted on Friday, 11th August,
A.L. 5797, A.D. 1797

GROOVE

JAMES DAVY, Sen^r Warden.
WILL^m MADISON, Jun^r Warden.
JOHN GREEN, Jun^r, Secretary.

"The names of the Wardens.....are those contained in the warrant of the Lodge, but for some reason, which I cannot

conjecture, the name of the W.M. (James Fromow), has been deliberately erased, by cutting a deep groove in the marble where the name must have stood; the groove is polished throughout so as to look as little unsightly as possible.

"On the opposite side of the stone is cut the following:

In Memory of Bro^r V^t NELSON
of the Nile, & of Burnham Thorpe, in
Norfolk, who lost his life in the arms
of Victory, in an engagement with
ye Combin'd Fleets of France & Spain,
of Cape Trafalgar, Oct. 21, 1805.
Proposed by Bro^r John Cullove.

"Most unfortunately the minute books of the Lodge belonging to this period have all disappeared; they might have supplied corroboration of the inference from the above description, that Nelson was initiated in or became a member of the Lodge of United Friends. It is at all events extremely unlikely that, in a place where Nelson was so well known as he was at Yarmouth, the members of the Lodge would have dared to place on the stone, commemorative of their own constitution, an inscription claiming him as a brother, which, if untrue, would have exposed them to ridicule and contradiction from many who knew the facts.

"A sketch of the Admiral's life is given in the Freemasons' Magazine for 1798, in which there is no mention of his being a Mason, but he may have been made subsequently. On the 6th November, 1800, he landed at Yarmouth, accompanied by Sir William and Lady Hamilton, and proceeded to the 'Wrestlers' Inn'; on the 2nd March, 1801, he came into Yarmouth Roads with seven sail of

the line, and landed there; and it is not without some bearing on the question at issue, that on this very occasion, Nelson became a member of the kindred society of the 'Gregorians' (a now forgotten rival of Freemasonry), for Palmer (in his Perlustrations of Yarmouth) quotes a letter addressed by him from Yarmouth Roads, to Mr. Pillans, 'Grandmaster of the Ancient Order of Gregorians', which flourished at Norwich, thanking him for his election into that Society. After the battle of Copenhagen, Nelson returned to Yarmouth, and landed there from the Kite, and remained in the town a short time; he was also there when he returned to England, after the battle of the Nile, so that there were ample opportunities for him to have been initiated at Yarmouth.

"Bro. Robert Elliott Thorns, of Norwich, has in his possession a round black papier mache snuff-box, with gilt Freemasons' emblems on the lid, which was given to his relative, John Harcourt, by Lord Nelson, when they dined together at Yarmouth. Its history is authenticated by a letter written by John Harcourt's daughter, who was present on the occasion; she could not recollect the date, but says: 'My father took me with him to Yarmouth and we met Horace Nelson and had dinner together.....I don't know the name of the Inn, but I sat at the window and looked at the ships on the river whilst Horace ^{father} and/chatted, and he gave the box after dinner to my father.....we always called him Horace, he was not Lord then, I think he was Captain.'

"It is true that there is not much in this evidence, but it proves at all events that Nelson had a masonic snuff-box in his possession. The only other evidence bearing on the point is the

'Nelsonic Crimson Oakes Medal', of which two specimens exist in the collection at Grand Lodge, and another in that of the Worcestershire Masonic Library, in the catalogue of which it is described as follows:

'23. Silver medal.

'This piece, although bearing many masonic emblems, is doubtful as to its belonging to the Craft, and it is rather singular that no evidence is forthcoming on the point, or as to the meaning of "Nelsonic Crimson Oakes". Bro. Hughan believes it was struck for a "Benefit Society" of that name, and dubs it as wholly unmasonic.

'Obverse. Bust of Nelson in uniform to left, on his breast the Star of the Order of the Bath, and a broad ribbon, on the arm B.P. Legend, "Galant Nelson, died Oct. 21, off Cape Trafalgar".

'Reverse. The compasses extended, between the points a radiant sun, on the right a fowl anchor on three steps, above which to the left a cluster of seven stars; on the left a cross on a platform of three steps, above which to the right a crescent moon; at the top, the radiant All-seeing Eye; at the bottom, Noah's Ark on the water, over which a rainbow. Legend. "Nelsonic Crimson Oakes" At the bottom, "Commenced JanY 19, 1808." '

"There is not enough in the above facts to enable us to affirm positively that Nelson was a Freemason, but the presumption points strongly towards that conclusion."

Three observations suggest themselves: Unless the Master whose name was erased from the ashlar was involved in some disagreement, now lost to memory, that led to the erasure, there is

the possibility that he did not accept Nelson as a Mason and showed his disapproval of the proposal by Bro. Cutlove (who I have an idea was a stone-cutter) by having his own name erased from the stone. In the second place, the inscription was made after Nelson's death and I consider it unlikely that any Yarmouth Mason would have quarrelled with it, even if he did not think Nelson was a member of the Craft; indeed, he would be more likely to think that Nelson was such, having been made elsewhere. Finally, the last time Nelson was at Yarmouth as a captain seems to have been in December 1781, a time at which there is no suggestion that he was a Mason (though we shall examine the possibility later on).

The next piece of evidence comes from A.G.C. Volume XII in which, at pages 109/110, W. Bro. Alfred Procter, I.P.M. of the York Lodge No.236, mentions a banner preserved in the Lodge. It was of black silk with gold lettering, measured three feet by two feet eight inches, and had been renovated and framed in black oak with a gold flat. It read:

"England expects every Man to do his Duty.

IN MEMORY OF

H O R A T I O V I S C O U N T N E L S O N

Who fell in the Moment of

V I C T O R Y

o f f

C A P E T R A F A L G A R

Oct^r 21, 1805"

Below this inscription were pictured the Sun, the Square and Compasses on the V.S.L., and the Moon, followed by:

"We rejoice with our Country

But mourn for our Brother"

Bro. Procter then gives the following extract from the minutes for 16 December 1805 of the Union Lodge No.331, York (later the York Lodge No.236):

"Br W. Master proposed that a public Procession should take place on the Interment of our Departed Bro. and Hero Lord Nelson. Secl by Br P.M. Thirded by the S. Warden."

"The W.M. then expressed his wish that a Uniformity of Dress should be observed on the occasion And that the Revd. J. Parker be requested to preach a sermon on the occasion at the Parish Church of St. Helen's."

Bro. Procter goes on to observe that the Rev. J. Parker was Provincial Grand Chaplain and that there were records of his having preached sermons on other masonic occasions. The banner, he thinks, was probably made for, and carried in, the above procession.

The author of A Masonic Pilgrimage through London (A.Q.C. XLII for 1929, pages 88/89) mentions Le Strange's history, the York Lodge's banner and the Crimson Oakes medal; also that the "Nelson of the Nile Lodge No.264 meets at Batley and was founded in 1801. while Nelson was still living."

Bro. Teasdel's 1930 history of the Norfolk lodge, No.313, the original holder of the "Nelson Stone", goes at some length into Nelson's alleged membership of the Craft. He opines that the inscription on one side of the stone was cut soon after the Lodge was founded and that on the other side some eight years later "to record the death of Nelson". He remarks that although no authority could be cited for Nelson having been a Freemason,

"yet here he is called 'Brother', a daring statement in Yarmouth, with its three lodges, if he were not....."

The same view might be taken of this last statement as was said of the similar statement by Bro. Le Strange above. As far as Bro. Teasdel is concerned, his arguments pro and con are balanced, perhaps not unnaturally, towards the possibility of Nelson having been initiated in a Yarmouth lodge, but notes that he was there only twice between November 1800 and July 1801 on visits of at most a few days, during the first of which he was tremendously busy and during the last unwell. Nevertheless, it was during the ten-day visit in March that he wrote his thanks for election to the convivial Order of Gregorians. All the same, it seems unlikely that he could have gone through the stages of entering Freemasonry at this time. Incidentally, Bro. Teasdel mentions a Bro. Gilmour of No. 313 who was a strong partisan of Nelson being a Mason, and held high office in the Cork Masons, who held an annual meeting on Trafalgar Day and, for what it is worth, believed to a man that Nelson was a Mason.

Otherwise, Teasdel's summing up of the pros and cons is reasonably balanced, but since ^{is} it/lengthy and no more conclusive than anyone else's, there seems to be no point in quoting more extensively from this lodge history.

Banner's These Men were Masons merely mentions in a footnote the aforementioned banner and block of marble, and in the text points out that he has not listed Nelson as a Mason because his membership is "too controversial" -- a fate apportioned also to Wren and Napoleon!

Next, on page 220 of A.Q.C., Vol. 88, W. Bro. A.R. Hewitt

mentions two non-masonic friendly benefit societies, the "Lodge of the Most Noble Order of Nelsonic Oaks" founded on 21 August 1810 and one of many of the period which imitated Freemasonry and borrowed from it, and the "Lord Nelson's Benefit Society" which operated somewhat later in Portsmouth and probably had a naval connection. The former issued the Nelsonic Crimson Oaks medals in commemoration of Lord Nelson's death that are referred to above. Obviously, neither of these societies had any more to do with Nelson being a Freemason than the myriad public houses, streets, etc. bearing his name!

Finally, Nelson was a most prolific letter-writer in the high-flown and emotional style of his day, though his epistles were infused -- except, perhaps, those to Lady Hamilton! --- with penetration and good sense. There are large collections in the Maritime Museum, Greenwich; the Nelson Museum, Monmouth; Harvard University Library; and lesser ones in many smaller institutions and private hands, but the librarians of the first three and of some other institutions have not come across any masonic reference, nor do there appear to be any in the numerous Nelson biographies. Admittedly, it is Nelson the seaman, here, lover and victor who is the star of all Nelsonic lore, but had there been a masonic connection somewhere it must surely have come to light ere now.

Having reviewed the documentary 'evidence', let us now revert to the questions of background, temperament, company, motive and opportunity aforementioned. Nelson's background has been sketched and undoubtedly it signals him as potential masonic

material. His temperament, however, is another matter. Masonry unquestionably casts a very wide net and men of vastly differing dispositions have made good Masons; yet somehow one has the feeling that Nelson's particular amalgam would not have pre-disposed him to seek entry. Once in, his natural enthusiasm might have borne fruit, but even if he ever became a Mason, he would scarcely have become a 'settled' one: his intense naval career and stormy love life forbad it.

As regards company, there is nothing to suggest that after his early and comparatively brief contact with Sir Peter Parker (of whom he thought little as a sailor and saw little later on) he knowingly frequented the company of Masons. His other colleagues, and close friends afloat and ashore, are not known as Masons, and whilst he eventually became well acquainted with the Royal Family, some of whom were among the most prominent members in the history of the Craft, he was closest to Prince William Henry, Duke of Clarence, and later King William IV, who though a Past Grand Master, was not active in Masonry. His father, King George III, who occupied the Throne during Nelson's adulthood, was not a Mason and, except quite briefly in 1797, was less than friendly towards Nelson. The Prince of Wales (afterwards King George IV), though a keen Mason and Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge from 1790 to 1813, certainly saw a good deal of Nelson when the latter was in London from 1800 on. However, Nelson was extremely jealous of the Prince's attentions to Lady Hamilton and is therefore unlikely to have been influenced by him towards joining the Craft. It does not seem that Nelson had much to do with

the other Masonic Royal Dukes of Cumberland, York, Gloucester, Kent and Sussex. All in all, Nelson must have known many Masons, but not as Masons, and if at the height of his fame some might have been inclined to induct him, l'affaire Lady Hamilton would have made it difficult for ~~them~~ given the disapproval of the Royal Family and of Society in general concerning this liaison. It remains only to add that neither John Richardson Herbert, Nelson's benefactor during ~~several~~ difficult years in the West Indies and the uncle of Nelson's wife, nor his loyal friend in Canada and later in England, ^{Davison} Alexander /, is known to have been a Mason.

As for motivation, if Nelson ever was a Mason he must have been motivated to become one; and if he was not a Mason, then if he was motivated it was not effective, and the probability is that he was not motivated at all. Since the evidence is at best inconclusive, the aspect of motivation can only be discussed in general terms. As Bro. Teasdale put it in his lodge history: "Freemasonry.....has always appealed to sailors for the material benefits likely to be obtained from it in a foreign land and in strange ports." ^{for this reason} But in his earlier days, joining/would have been a matter of recognising such benefits and having the opportunity of joining, while later on he had no need of them as all doors opened to his fame. Never backward in furthering his own career and with a Masonic Royal Family at the head of Society, the advantages of masonic membership might have been apparent to him, yet there is no shred of evidence that he ever considered it. In any case, had advancement been his motive he would have sought membership of a London lodge rather than of country ones where

such evidence as there is lies.

We come next to the matter of opportunity. In another case this might have been an insuperable barrier to research, but given Nelson's comparatively short adult life and the amount of it he spent at sea, the task becomes easier. In fact, Nelson's sea-going movements are meticulously documented by his biographers, although -- and here's the rub -- his spells ashore are far less so, in part because his biographers' interest leans heavily toward his life and exploits at sea, and partly because Nelson himself became a more private person when ashore, at any rate when not on duty or in the limelight by reason of his fame or his liaison with Lady Hamilton.

One thing is quite certain: Nelson could not have been made a Mason at sea, as the two early Antients' warrants issued for seagoing lodges were never used for ships in which Nelson served. It remains, then, to see when and where he could or could not have been made on land.

We have already established that Nelson could scarcely have become a Mason before the end of his service on the Jamaica station in 1780, so let us follow his movements from that time on.

On his return to England, Nelson was briefly in London and then proceeded to Bath where he remained, convalescing, until the Spring of 1781. In May he visited his uncle, William Suckling, at the Navy Office; then went home to Norfolk, still recuperating. In August, however, he was appointed to Albemarle. He again visited his uncle, and in December was in his ship at Yarmouth Roads, whence he departed for convoy duty in the Baltic.

On 26 January 1782 he anchored in Portsmouth Downs and in April sailed to take a hand in the American War of Independence, cruising off the American coast until September, when he visited Quebec, attended balls held at the Freemasons' Hall, and fell in love with a Miss Mary Simpson. Indeed, he wanted to resign his commission for her sake, but was dissuaded by a wealthy friend, Alexander Davison, who was later to be of much service to him in England.

Nelson then applied for a transfer to Admiral Hood's squadron, hoping for more action and consequent glory. This was granted and on 20 October he sailed for New York, where he met and considerably impressed Prince William Henry. The following month he was cruising in Caribbean waters. However, the war came to an end and early in 1783 Albemarle returned to England and was paid off on 3 July 1783. On 21 October Nelson was in London and met Alexander Davison again. Then, with a friend, Nelson went to France to learn the language (which he never did), boarding with an English clergyman and his family at St. Omer. There he fell in love with one of the daughters, but his affection was not reciprocated and in January 1784 he returned to London and sought a fresh command.

In March he was appointed to Boreas and sailed for the West Indies, carrying the wife of Sir Richard Hughes, Commander in Chief, the Leeward Islands station, and their daughter. Lady Hughes later testified to Nelson's kindness to the midshipmen under his command, though he seems to have been less enamoured of his fair charges. He proceeded via Barbados to English Harbour, ~~Antigua~~ (where 'Nelson's Dockyard' has been renovated and is a yacht marina), Antigua, where he was at first welcomed and entert-

ained.

However, clouds soon blew up and Nelson quarrelled over a matter of precedence with the local Navy Commissioner, Moubray, though he much admired Mrs. Moubray. The Admiralty gave Nelson the right of it, but greater trouble ensued when, with his stern sense of duty, he set out to enforce the Navigation Act which prohibited trade in the West Indies with foreigners. After the War of Independence Americans ranked as such, but West Indian merchants and traders, used to dealing with North America, had disregarded the law until Nelson began arresting American ships bringing and taking their merchandise when they turned against him. Nelson also fell out with his Commander in Chief (of whom he thought little) and the Governor of the Leeward Islands, who had been tolerant of the American commerce. Local merchants sued Nelson for £40,000 and for months he was unable to go ashore for fear of arrest. His only sanctuary was the island of Nevis, whose judge held him to be justified in his acts; a view which was eventually endorsed by the Admiralty. There he was befriended by, and lodged with, the Hon. John Richardson Herbert, President of the Nevis Council, and there he met Frances Herbert Nisbet, Herbert's niece and a recent widow. Nelson courted her sedately and on 11 March 1787 they were married on the island.

Boreas was recalled and sailed for England in May, reaching Spithead on 4 July 1787. Thence she went to the Nore and was paid off on 30 November in that year. Nelson, now with a wife, entered on a five-year period 'in the wilderness'. They spent Christmas in London, then undertook a country tour, visiting Bath and Portsmouth and returning in June to Norfolk, where they settled

in at the family parsonage at Burnham Thorpe. Nelson was occasionally ill, but the couple spent much time in hunting and coursing, attending fêtes and balls, and visiting relatives, godparents and friends. There were visits to Bath while Nelson's father was there, and Nelson visited London by himself seeking a fresh posting. Despite these activities, it must have been a distressing time for him, quite poor and anxious to get back to sea and advance his career.

But all things come to an end and at the beginning of 1793 war with France became imminent (and was in fact declared on 1 February). Nelson lost no time in going to London and on 26 January Lord Howe appointed him to the command of Agamemnon. Except for two brief visits to Norfolk, Nelson was fully occupied in fitting out, sailing early in June for Gibraltar and thence to Naples, where he was warmly received on 22 September by Sir William Hamilton, the British Ambassador, and his beautiful wife, Emma. They at once introduced him to the weak King Ferdinand IV and his strong-minded consort, Queen Maria Carolina.

Nelson sailed to the relief of Toulon, besieged by French republicans, but it fell before he arrived and Nelson went on to Tunis to overawe the refractory Bey. Nelson remained in the Mediterranean, based on Naples, for the whole of the following year, being involved in several engagements. The next year (1795) he lost the sight of an eye during an engagement at Calvi in Corsica. On 11 June 1796 he transferred to Captain with the rank of commodore. In the autumn Corsica was abandoned and the fleet withdrew from the Mediterranean to be based on Portugal. In December 1796 Nelson joined La Minerve at Gibraltar, but left her

in February 1797 to rejoin Captain, in which he fought the battle of Cape St. Vincent. For this he was promoted to rear-admiral.

In April 1797 he was back in the Mediterranean in Theseus, blockading Cádiz. On 24 July he lost an arm in an ill-advised attack on Santa Cruz, Tenerife, and returned to England on 1 September for the next seven months to recover, spending his time between Bath and London, with visits to his native Norfolk. At this time he was made a freeman of the City of Norwich and invested a knight of the Order of the Bath.

During his nearly four years in or near the Mediterranean, Nelson had of course begun his famous liaison with Emma, Lady Hamilton, to which the ageing Sir William seems to have been a complaisant party. At the same time he had won not a little glory and advanced his career considerably.

Recovered from his wound, he sailed from England in Vanguard on 10 April 1798 and in May rejoined the fleet under Earl St. Vincent in the Tagus. From there he re-entered the Mediterranean via Gibraltar, Toulon and (after a severe storm) Sardinia, in pursuit of Bonaparte who had taken Malta, dispersing the Knights of St. John, and was on his way to conquer Egypt. After losing the French fleet and returning to Sicily, Nelson eventually caught up with it at Aboukir Bay and on 1 August 1798 destroyed it, leaving the French army stranded in Egypt. Nelson was wounded in the engagement, but not so seriously.

He returned to Naples on 22 September, exactly five years after he had first arrived there, and was received rapturously as the hero of the hour, not least by Emma and her friend the Queen. Between cruises he spent much time ashore in their company.

However, the French were soon advancing on Naples by land and the Court, with the Hamiltons, was evacuated by Nelson to Palermo in Sicily part of the Kingdom, where he then based himself. On 5 June 1799 Nelson transferred to Foudroyant as Vice-Admiral of the Red, sailing to Naples and back to Palermo where Ferdinand created him Duke of Brontë.

In June 1800 Nelson sought and obtained leave, and on 13 July began a spectacular overland journey in company with the Hamiltons through Austria and Germany, landing at Yarmouth on 6 November. Nelson was received with great acclaim and made a freeman of that town. From there the party proceeded to London, where Nelson was again received rapturously by the populace and much fêted, though in other quarters he was criticized for his now well known liaison with Lady Hamilton and on one occasion he was snubbed by the King. He also became estranged from his wife and in January 1801 Lady Nelson left him for good.

Nelson was promptly ordered to the Baltic to overawe the Danes, and was aboard San Josef at Torbay prior to sailing when he heard on 1 February the news that his mistress had given birth to their daughter, Horatia, the survivor of twins. From Torbay he sailed round to Yarmouth and on 13 March put to sea in Elephant for Copenhagen. It was there that the famous 'blind eye to the telescope' incident is said to have occurred: at any rate, Nelson bombarded the city and destroyed the Danish fleet, thereby discouraging the ambitions of the Russians, whose country he then briefly visited and was received with circumspect courtesy.

In June Nelson returned home to even more fame and a viscounty (he had hoped for more), and a short leave which he spent mostly

in or near London. On 27 July, with the threat of a French invasion in the air, he went to Sheerness to assume command of the anti-invasion forces between Orford Ness and Beahhy Head. During August he carried out an attack on Boulogne, but it was a failure.

In September 1801 Nelson purchased Merton Place in Surrey, which he called his 'farm', but which some called a mirror for his vanity. At this time his health was only fair, and he spent most of his time in and out of London.

At the end of March 1802 the Peace of Amiens terminated the war with France, and Nelson stayed in England. On 26 April his father died at Bath. On 22 July Nelson, still very much the hero, received the freedom of Oxford (and, incidentally, was snubbed by the Duke of Marlborough!). August saw him, with Emma, making a tour of the West Country, where he was gratified by the adulation he met everywhere. On 6 September he was in London again and in October he took up residence at Merton Park, where the Hamiltons were already installed. At this time his health was good; he attended the House of Lords and spoke frequently and with his customary good sense; and at home he enjoyed the company of his Emma. This period, from 1801 to 1803, may well have been the happiest of his life.

The possibility of war with France loomed again in March 1803 and Nelson may have welcomed the prospect, as he was somewhat pressed for money and in any case always had an ear open for the call of duty. The following month Sir William Hamilton, after a long illness, died with Nelson at his side, and Emma was free. However, war passed from rumour to fact and on 18 May 1803 Nelson

left for Plymouth, leaving two days later in Victory for Gibraltar, which he reached on 3 June to take command in the Mediterranean and blockade the French and Spanish fleets. He remained at sea, visiting Naples and Malta again, until he took leave in August 1804 to see Emma, who had meanwhile given birth to another daughter who died within a few days.

Back at sea again, Nelson continued his blockade until, in January 1805, the French admiral Villeneuve broke out of Toulon, but was driven back by storms. However, he got away again on 3 March and Nelson sailed in pursuit to the West Indies, touching at Trinidad and Antigua, only to learn that in fact the French fleet had turned back and holed up again in Cádiz harbour. Nelson followed, but did not make contact before Villeneuve was in safety, so returned to Gibraltar and then sailed for England, reaching Spithead on 18 August. Two days later he was at Merton Place, but had to spend 14 out of the next 25 days in London, the rest with Emma.

On 15 September he re-embarked in Victory at Portsmouth and sailed South to win greater glory but meet death off Cape Trafalgar on 21 October 1805. He was interred in St. Paul's Cathedral on 9 January 1806 amid unprecedented scenes of mourning for Britain's greatest hero. He was only just 47 at his death.

Having traced the movements of this many-splendoured man in fair detail, let us then see what opportunities they offered for him to enter Freemasonry:

During his second sojourn in the West Indies, Nelson could have become a Mason, as there were at the time several lodges in Antigua and St. Kitts, and one each at Montserrat and Nevis.

However, given the circumstances and in particular his bad standing with the merchantile community which would have formed the backbone of the lodges, and the long time he had to spend at sea, his entry seems most unlikely. Even on Nevis, where he had some support, it was among the official and not the mercantile element, and there is no record of Nelson's friend, Herbert, having been a Mason. It may be worth noting that the Masonic writer, Bro. Lionel Seemungal of Trinidad, reports a legend current in the Leeward Islands that the actions of an unnamed British naval officer about this time led to the serious weakening or demise of several lodges due to an exodus of members to the United States in fear of arrest for their illicit dealings. This 'officer' must have been Nelson.

There were also lodges in Barbados whose members might not have been affected by Nelson's actions, but he was hardly there long enough to have become sufficiently well known to Masons, proposed and initiated. It would thus appear that his West Indian tour must be ruled out.

We next look at Nelson's five long years ashore. Though well-connected, and well thought of at the Admiralty, he was still a quite obscure young naval officer, pretty poor with a wife to keep on £350 a year (including £100 from his uncle). Visits to Bath to see his father, and to London seeking a new appointment, would scarcely have provided opportunities, much less the incentive, to seek initiation. Therefore, in the absence of any indication whatsoever that Nelson may have become a Mason during the period, one must think that it too should be ruled out.

It is unthinkable that Nelson would have become entangled with French Masonry during the few months he was in that country

boarding with an English family; while any stops later on at Gibraltar or Malta must be excluded on the grounds of shortness of stay, the pressures of duty, and of course lack of any evidence.

Nor could Nelson have become a Mason at any time whilst ashore in Naples, Sicily and Sardinia, for these made up the realm of the King Carlos who later became Carlos III of Spain and who harshly suppressed Freemasonry wherever he found it -- a prohibition carried on by his son Ferdinand IV, King of Naples.¹

Nelson's next spell ashore was in 1797 after losing his arm, but being for most of the time ill and in pain, and at all times anxious to return to sea as soon as possible, it hardly seems likely that he would have been interested in joining the Craft, or able to. Incidentally, it may be worth speculating how the Masons of those days would have regarded a candidate lacking an eye and an arm.

Nelson's next spell ashore came with his return to England with the Hamiltons in 1800. His stays in Yarmouth on arrival and before his departure for the Baltic must be discarded as too short to go through the processes of becoming a Mason, and though he was adulated by the populace in the interval, he was not in good odour in the circles in which he might have been inspired to join the Craft.

He was on leave barely a month between returning from the Baltic and taking command of the anti-invasion fleet, but then entered on the longer period -- 1801 to 1803 -- when he bought Merton Place and took his seat in the Lords. Famous, titled, quite well off and with his sins pretty well forgiven, this seems the period most propitious for him to have become a member of a

society to which many of his friends and acquaintances must have belonged, not to speak of the Royal connection. His father living in Bath, then dead, Nelson spent little time, if any, in Norfolk and most at Merton Place or in London where the heart of Masonry was. Yet there is no reliable evidence that ^{Nelson} joined it there -- or anywhere. What little there is is dubious, unlocated and posthumous, a probable attempt by Masons less scrupulous and more emotional than those of today to 'cash in' on Nelson's fame by claiming him as a Mason when he was not; perhaps with the more laudable aim of boosting by association Masonry's standing at a time of schism and diminished prestige.

To sum up: though it is impossible to assert with absolute certainty that Nelson was never a Mason, the odds against are long indeed, and in the absence of some future positive development the reply to the question put by the title of this article has to be negative. More's the pity!

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