

A RESUME OF THE HISTORY OF
ST. ALPHEGE LODGE, NO.1431
(Year 1913)
AND A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE
LIFE OF ITS PATRON SAINT

PREFACE

The object of this pamphlet was, in the first instance, to give some information about the Saint after whom the Lodge has been named; but whilst in course of preparation it was resolved to enlarge its scope and to include between its covers a brief resume of the history of the Lodge. It is hoped that the information given on these two points will be interesting to all our own brethren and also to those visitors who, from time to time, honour us with their presence.

ST. ALPHEGE, ARCHBISHOP AND MARTYR. April 19th, 1012

Ælfheah, Elphege, or Alphege as he is variously designated, was born in the year 954. He was of noble birth, and at an early age showed signs of possession those high ideals of life and conduct which were to be the outstanding characteristics of his career. His parents gave him a good education and seem to have fostered his religious tendencies, so that perhaps it is not surprising that, when he reached early manhood he decided to become a monk. This decision was not arrived at without long and prayerful consideration. His widowed mother was against the step, but believing that he had received a call even more imperative than that of filial duty, he entered the Monastery of Deerhurst, Gloucestershire.

Here he remained some time, but he was not happy; the conduct of the brethren being much too free and lax for the austere young ascetic who believed in the stern and uncompromising piety of the order of St. Benedict. Neither was he slow to reprove, both by word and example, what he considered their lukewarmness and slackness in their religious duties. Possibly it was a relief to all concerned when he decided to leave Deerhurst and attach himself to a Benedictine Monastery of Bath. Here he built himself a cell and lived a life of such austerity and self-denial that he speedily became the leader of a small band of disciples who held similar views. When the Abbot died, the seal and piety of Alphege had given him so much influence that he was elected to that exalted office, although the anchorite was still a young man.

As the spiritual head of this community he still further added to his reputation for holiness, so that when Ethelwold, the Bishop of Winchester, died in 984, Alphege, by the influence of Dunstan (whose power was then paramount with the king) succeeded to the vacant see. This was a remarkable rise for a man who had just reached his thirtieth year, but he must be regarded as a fitting successor to the stern monastic reformer who had so vigorously combated the claims of the secular clergy of the time.

He held the Bishopric of Winchester for 12 years, and as that city was then capital of England, he naturally saw much of the incapable and unfortunate King Æthelred the Unready. The Monarch sought and obtained the advice of the ecclesiastic on many matters, but was not always willing or strong enough to follow it. He, however, showed the confidence he placed in the dignitary's fidelity and ability by entrusting to the Bishop many matters of State which called for careful diplomacy. Perhaps the most important matter in which the services of Alphege were employed was his mission to Olaf, King of Norway. This was carried through most successfully, for not only did the Prelate secure a promise from the foreign ruler that he would never invade England, but the priest's influence over the king was so great that when Olaf accompanied him on his return to this country, he confessed the Christian religion, and was baptised by the Bishop at Andover in 1004.

But though by such an alliance one source of danger to England was removed there was another which was yearly becoming more acute. The ravages of the Danes grew more persistent and daring, and the King earned his nick-name by his unreadiness to repel them. Raid followed raid, and Æthelred, incapable of organising an efficient resistance, had recourse to repeated bribes by which he hoped to purchase relief from their attacks.

Instead of having the desired effect the payment of these sums (raised by the imposition of a tax called Dane-gold) only increased the trouble, for the Danes, after withdrawing for a time, would return again with a larger following, penetrate further into the country and extort a bigger tribute. Small Danish settlements appeared on the East Coast, and Danish Colonists, more daring than their fellows, attracted by the beauty and fertility of the country, founded homesteads further inland, and intermarried with the inhabitants.

Noting the growing power of the Danes, and dreading further attacks, the King conceived and carried out the criminal and dastardly scheme known in history as the "Massacre of St. Brice," unsurpassed, except by the atrocities of St. Bartholomew's Day and the barbarities of the French Revolution. By this plan thousands of Danes were murdered in 1002 under the cloak of hospitality. Among the victims slain was Gunhilda, sister of Sweyn, King of Denmark, who vowed that he would take a terrible revenge, and forthwith prepared to descend upon the East Coast with all the forces at his command.

It was whilst the country was under the shadow of this national calamity that Alphege succeeded Ælfric to the highest honour which the Christian Church in England had to bestow. In 1005 he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, and paid the customary visit to Rome to receive the pall. His occupancy of that position was marked by the same steady, devoted and somewhat stern application to ecclesiastical and national duties which were so distinctive of the man. Joined to a personal austerity was a large hearted charity which made him ever mindful of the wants of others, and endeared him to all with whom he came in contact. They recognised in him a man who practised what he preached, and whose conduct was in striking contrast to that of many of his contemporaries. The simplicity of his private life and the stringent self-denial he inflicted upon himself are illustrated by the fact, chronicled by the old historians, that when he held up his hand to bestow the blessing, it was so thin as to be almost transparent.

"It was so wan and transparent of hue, You might have seen the moon shine through".

It is recorded that he was present at the Council of Enham at which measures were discussed for National Defence, but nothing resulted strong enough to stop the progress of the Danes who, having effected a landing in great force, pushed their way inland massacring the inhabitants, and laying waste the country in this progress.

In 1011 they had reached Canterbury and invested the ancient city. Many of the chief inhabitants who had the opportunity and the means, fled - but when they urged the Archbishop to follow their example he refused, declaring that his duty lay with his flock and those poor and defenceless people who had crowded into the city to seek for some protection.

Inspired by his words and example the citizens put up a gallant fight. For 20 days they repelled the savage attacks of the invaders, but then they succumbed to treachery. A traitor in their midst set fire to the centre of the city, and, when the alarmed garrison rushed to extinguish the flames, the Danes assailed and carried the forsaken ramparts. Then followed a scene of cruelty and carnage difficult to conceive and impossible to describe. Men, women, and children were ruthlessly destroyed, the little ones being tossed from spear point to spear point in the savagery of the hour.

Upon this scene the Archbishop intruded, hoping by his presence to curb the cruelty of the soldiers, and offering himself in place of the defenceless women and children. His intervention was useless, and he, in his turn, was seized and carried in triumph to the Cathedral, that he might behold its destruction. The edifice was crowded with clergy and refugees, but when it was fired and the molten lead from the blazing roof began to drop upon their heads, they surged out, only to fall helpless victims into the hands of the bloodthirsty invaders. The great throng was decimated, not as the term is usually understood by killing one in ten, but by slaughtering nine and saving the tenth to be sold as a slave.

The more important prisoners, including the Archbishop, were retained in the hope that large ransoms would be forthcoming from their friends to secure their release. That of the Archbishop was fixed at 3,000 pieces of silver, and his associates were willing and anxious to raise this sum from the various Church interests and by the sale of the Church plate throughout the Province; but he refused to allow the funds to be used for such a purpose, saying that these things had been bequeathed to the Church for the honor of religion and the relief of the poor.

This exasperated the Danes, who carried him off to their fleet which was lying in the Thames Estuary, and there he remained for seven months accompanying the expedition on its various cruises. Even as a prisoner he made his personality felt, and when a plague broke out amongst the sailors he ministered to them and had the satisfaction of making several converts amongst the members of the rough Danish crews.

Easter Day fell in 1012 on April 13th, and on the following Saturday a number of Danish officers and men went on shore at Greenwich to celebrate some kind of festival. A large supply of wine had reached them from the South, and the feast was long and the drinking heavy. When in a state of intoxication they sent for their prisoner to provide them with sport. He was greeted with the cry of "Money, Bishop; money. Your ransom, Bishop; your ransom." Breathless, emaciated, worn with fatigue and captivity, the Archbishop faced his yelling captors with dignity, and involuntarily the wassaillers became silent. "Silver and gold," said he, have I none. What is mine I freely offer: the knowledge of the one true God. Him it is my duty to preach, and if you heed not my call to repentance, from His justice you will not escape."

Again the raucous cries broke out, and one fellow, more heartless or more intoxicated than the others, picked up an ox bone and flung it at the Prelate. The floor was strewn with the remnants of the feast, so that missiles in plenty were at hand. The cowardly example was followed, and, drunk though they were, the aim of the Danes was sufficiently good to be effective, and the captive sank down battered, wounded, and in great agony beneath the rain of projectiles. But pity was not extinct in all their hearts, and the company included one who, on the previous day, had accepted Confirmation at the hands of the Archbishop. His compassion was aroused, and debating within himself how he could best serve his spiritual father, with the rough and ready kindness of his day and generation, he lifted his battleaxe and with one blow put the wounded prisoner out of his misery.

Remorse seems to have speedily followed this gruesome deed and the murderers were horror stricken at the result of their drunken revel. On the following day the Bishops of London and Dorchester were permitted to fetch the body and they interred it in St. Paul's Cathedral.

There are several Churches dedicated to him, notably, one at Greenwich, on the site of his martyrdom; one at Canterbury, his own Cathedral City; one at Seasalter close

by; one in London Wall, near his resting place in St. Paul's for ten years, and lastly one at Solihull. It was from this Church that the Lodge derived its name.

There is much in the lives of all these early Saints that is legendary and difficult of verification, but the compiler has, to the best of his ability, carefully sifted the true from the fictitious and only included those facts which seem to rest upon an authentic basis.

In any case he hopes he has written enough to prove that the subject of this short memoir is peculiarly and specially fitted to be the patron Saint of a Masonic Lodge. His strict adherence to the obligations of his Order; his unhesitating obedience to the call of duty; his self-sacrificing charity; his temperance; his fortitude and his heroic death must endear his memory to the brethren of this Lodge. They can be justly proud of the name they bear, and it should be a source of inspiration to them, not only in their Masonic career, but in their private life.

H.R.C.L.

ST. ALPIEGE LODGE, NO.1431

The History of the Lodge may be tabulated very briefly. It comprises very striking features, and may be described as a record of steady Masonic work well and worthily performed. As far as can be ascertained from the Records, the traditions of the Craft have been steadfastly upheld, and the ancient landmarks of the Order strictly adhered to. And that from a truly Masonic standpoint is perfectly satisfactory. It is not for every Lodge to look large in Masonic annals, to receive the highest honours, or to occupy the foremost place in its Province, but every Mason may be justly proud if he can claim that the portion of the great Masonic structure for which his Lodge has been responsible has been, and is, without blemish and without flaw.

The Lodge derives its name from the fact that it was first held at the George Hotel, Solihull, which is adjacent to the Parish Church of St. Alphege.

It was consecrated on Friday, October 10th, 1873. In the unavoidable absence of the Right Worshipful Lord Leigh, P.G.M., Warwickshire, the ceremony was performed by V.Wor.Bro. Colonel John Machee, D.P.G.M. Our present P.G.M., the Rt.Wor.Bro. George Beech, was present in the capacity of P.C. Secretary. The usual order having been followed, and the first Worshipful Master, Wor.Bro. F. Cohen, duly installed, the brethren entertained the Pro Grand Lodge to a banquet, at 4.30 p.m., and, to quote the minutes, the meeting dissolved in harmony at 8.30 p.m., an example of early retirement the present brethren would be loath to imitate.

The Founders were nine in number, and the various offices were distributed as follows:-

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|---------|----------------------------|
| W.M. | Wor.Bro. Frederick Cohen |
| S.W. | Wor.Bro. Henry Sanderson |
| J.W. | Wor.Bro. William Hillman |
| Sec. | Bro. George Green |
| S.D. | Bro. August Walburger |
| J.D. | Bro. James Whittendale |
| D.C. | Bro. James Carlow Hall |
| I.S. | Bro. William Oliver Horton |
| Steward | Bro. Joseph Hillman |

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Of these it is believed that Bro. William Hillman is the sole survivor.

The First Regular Meeting was held on November 5th, 1873, when two Candidates were balloted for and afterwards initiated, and two other Candidates proposed.

Our present Secretary, Wor.Bro. B.J. Allsop, was the first brother actually initiated in the Lodge to attain to the position of its W.M. His rise is a remarkable one, quite meteoric in character, and possibly without an equal in the history of the Province. Initiated on Wednesday, March 1st, 1876, he was raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason on Wednesday, May 3rd, 1876.

On the 4th October, 1876, he received the Office of Junior Deacon, and the following year found him advanced to the Senior Warden's Chair, and he was installed as W.M. on Wednesday, October 2nd, 1878, or two years and seven months after his initiation.

Wor.Bro. Boston was initiated a month previous to Wor.Bro. Allsop (February 1876) and succeeded him as W.M. on 1st October, 1879, so that his progress, too, was very rapid.

The Lodge banner was the gift of Wor.Bro. H. Sanderson in 1877, whilst he was in the Chair.

After meeting at the George Hotel for a period of 30 years, it was found advisable to remove from Solihull, and on September 22nd, 1902, the Lodge took up its quarters in the Masonic Rooms, Severn Street, Birmingham.

There it remained for six years, and another removal was effected in 1908. Its first meeting in its present comfortable rooms was held on May 27th, 1908.

It has been honoured with visits from the P.G. Lodge of Warwickshire on two occasions, viz., October 18th, 1883, when the meeting was held in the Parish Church Rooms, Solihull, and on September 26th, 1900, in the Public Hall, Solihull. The Brethren are looking forward to entertaining the P.G. Lodge once again in 1913.

The highest honour yet given by the P.G. Lodge to any of the Brethren of St. Alphege is that of P.G.S of Wks., awarded in 1897 to Wor. Bro. Currall.

(addendum to this publication attached hereto which reads as follows: the following important announcement did not reach us in time for insertion in its proper place:-

Wor. Bro. T.H. Woollen, P.P.G.D.D. of Wks., who was W.M. of St. Alphege Lodge in 1905, has received the high honour of being appointed Asst. Grand Superintendent of Works, England.

Installation - April 30th, 1913.)

The Lodge has always done its share in supporting the various Masonic Charities, contributing liberally throughout its career

There are now 64 Brethren on the roll, a full list of officers and members being appended, and I cannot better close this short sketch of the Lodge's history than by bearing testimony to the splendid feeling of brotherhood and co-operation now existing between all ranks. Truly, we are a happy family.

"Happy have we met,
Happy may we part,
And happy meet again."

H.R.C.L.

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