



Commemorative Order of St. Thomas of Acon

A History of the Order

That we have a revival of this very English Order of Chivalry is due to the untiring efforts of our first Grand Master, Sir John of Dorking (the late John Walker who was Secretary General of the S.R.I.A. for many years). John spent more than twenty years searching the archives of the Guildhall Library for information about the Order of St. Thomas of Acon, intending initially to write its history. Happily, he discovered the report of the Installation of the Master in 1510, an account so unusual and so typically English, that he felt compelled to revive the Order, albeit Masonically, rather than attempt to compete with the many histories of these Islands - some, alas, more lurid than accurate- which vie for public attention.

In former times, few could read or write so that memories were better developed than ours. Pythagoras forbade all writing, considering it "the destroyer of all memory"; fortunately most people were more tolerant. It was not necessary to record what was to be spoken, nor to give more than headings of the order of events; such clues as have survived require imaginative interpretation. Good stories, on the other hand, (such as those of Becket, father and son), were written down for use as homilies by priests. The Third Crusade began in 1189 A.D., and on the 8th. June 1191 King Richard I (Richard Coeur de Lion) arrived with his forces, before the seaport of Acre, and captured the city in 5 weeks. Amongst the English force was one, William, the Chaplain to the Dean of St. Pauls, who when he saw the corpses of the Christians about the walls of Acre, had compassion on them. With the aid of a few helpers he buried a large number of the dead, and tended the wounded. Seeing that his actions were being appreciated, William formed an Order for the express purpose of burying Christian Knights who fell in battle in the Holy Land. To this first purpose he added a second, the raising of monies to redeem ransomed captives captured by the Saracens. The Order being formed at Acre its name was incorporated in the title (the Anglicized version of Acre being Acon). The Order was so successful that William was able to build a church and churchyard, which he dedicated to St. Thomas, a Becket, thus the Order became entitled the Commemorative Order of St. Thomas of Acon. Through disease and death of the other knights fighting in the Holy Land, this Order of English monks was pressed into service as replacements, and became an Order of military monks, (it was also at this time circa 1279 that the Prior lost his pre-eminent position, this being accorded to the Master), fighting alongside the Knights of the Temple, the Knights of the Hospital of St. John the Almsgiver, the Knights of the Hospital of Lazarus and the Teutonic Knights of the Hospital of St. Mary. King Richard I rewarded their valor by according them the status of an Order of Chivalry.

Of all the five noble Orders of knights in the Holy Land at this time, only this Order had a purely English foundation - a fact of which we should be justly proud. In England the

Order acquired the property of the Becket family in Cheapside where they built a Chapel and a headquarters. Following the battle of Acre, the Order of St. Thomas of Acon merged temporarily with the Order of the Temple. When the knights were subsequently driven out of Cyprus, the Chapel of the Order of St. Thomas was the only church on the island permitted to ring its bells. Remains of this church can still be visited. Old records are sparse, the last admission into the Order being recorded on the 2nd. February 1367, but that the order continued is not in doubt as the records of the Installation of a Master in 1510 mentioned above demonstrate and it was listed as one of the Orders dissolved by Henry VIII. At the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538, he offered the Chapel of the Order for sale, and, in memory of St. Thomas (Thomas `a Becket being canonized barely two years after his death during the Lentern period in 1173) , and in view of the association of his father, Gilbert, with their trade, the Worshipful Company of Mercers purchased it. The Chapel in Cheapside was destroyed in the Great Fire of London and the present Mercers Hall and Chapel were built on the site. This is a matter of historical record; lengthy articles have been published in the "Historical Review", which is available in most public libraries and in several books. All that remains today to remind us of that building is the recumbent statue of Christ, which lies at the entrance of the new Mercers' Chapel. Additionally, the Church of St. Thomas, in the City of London, was built in honor of St. Thomas `a Becket, and the Mayor, on the day of his Installation, always attended Mass in that church, before proceeding to St. Paul's.

Order of St. Thomas of Acon
Article for the Masonic Globe
by J.H. Bray

The Order was formed to give a Christian burial to those Knight Templars who had fallen in battle. It was formed to tend the wounded. The original Prior also had a third remit: to ransom captives kept by Saladin. The Order had its being between 1189 and 1538. Then, as part of the process of the Dissolution of the Monastries, King Henry VIII sold the Order and its properties to the Mercer's Company, who had been using some of the order's premises since the mid 1400s. The records of the Order had always been deposited in the library at Guildhall, London. They survived the Great Fire of London and in 1950 were rediscovered by John E.N. Walker. He was in fact in course of researching certain historical aspects of the four original Lodges but came across so many references to the order of St. Thomas of Acon that he decided to forgo his original intentions, and followed up on these details. For the next 20 years he spent each lunch time looking them out in the Library of the Guildhall, London. His assiduity to the task included teaching himself medieval French and Latin. By 1970 he had extracted all the details of the order from the records - including a complete ceremony of the Installation of the Master. At the completion of such a project one then has to ask the simple question "well, what do we do now with the information?", and it was because of the unique nature of the Order that it was decided to revive it as a Masonic Order. The unique nature being the fact that of all the Orders of Knighthood that were fighting in the Holy Land during the Crusades - and most particularly during the third Crusade - this was the only Order to have an English Foundation - the original monks have come from the City of

London. Certain very well known masons then assisted in the preparation of the present day ceremonial, which delights so many. The basic story relates firstly to Gilbert Becket and then to Thomas Becket, his son, later Archbishop of Canterbury who two years after his murder in 1170, in Canterbury Cathedral, was made a Saint. The influence of Becket was formidable with people revering his name and calling upon him to cure all manner of their ills. This influence extended in an every day sense over the next 150 years and his story is still of the greatest interest today. As a story line therefore this fitted perfectly with the time frame of the third Crusade.

The first meeting of the revived Order, now a Commemorative Order of St. Thomas of Canterbury of Acon, (abbreviated to the Order of St. Thomas). The opening few lines of the minutes perhaps give a flavor to the background. "The Chair was taken by J.E.N. Walker who explained the purpose of the Meeting especially in regard to the founding of the Fraternity of Masons in Ironmonger Lane in the City of London in the Church of St. Thomas somewhere between 1170 and 1338, most probably 1240. He suggested that since the only Knightly Order of an English foundation which took part in the Crusades was that of St. Thomas, it was his idea that a Masonic version of that Order be formed. The difficulty of placing an exact date for the commencement of the Order, which some authorities place as early as 1190, it is perhaps shown by two articles, both of which may be accessed by the Internet by simply putting in the question panel - Order of St. Thomas of Acon. This will show up two headings, "The City Livery Companies and their Heraldry" by L.G. Pierson, and "The Order of St. Thomas of Acre" by Dr. Alan Forey, Emeritus Professor at the University of Durham. Dr. Forey appears to deal with the second phase of the Order's evolution. The generally received wisdom on the matter would suggest that whilst the monks left London prior to the Third Crusade and were present at the siege of Acre in their normal capacity, that of the first translation to a Nursing Order, or Order of a Hospitaller nature, occurred by command of King Richard I a short period afterwards. Thereafter a further period ensued before a second translation to being a Military Order, with finally the third translation occurring when King Richard I created them into a Chivalry and ordered certain of his Knights Templars to protect the new Chivalry.

To interject a further historical note, - the time frame for these events is interesting; King Richard I arrived in the Holy Land in June 1191 and concluded the siege of Acre on the 12th. July 1191, and after having fallen out with Duke Leopold of Austria, both the Duke and King Phillippe of France soon returned home. Richard on the other hand killed the prisoners taken at Acre, marched down the coast to Jaffa, winning a victory at Arsuf en route. However his forces were unable to penetrate inland to Jerusalem and in September 1192 he was obliged to conclude a treaty with Saladin. He endeavored to return to Europe in October 1192; en route his ship was wrecked, he was taken prisoner for 15 months, and was eventually released, returning to England in March 1194, but left again in May 1194 never to return. He died at Chalus on the 6th. April 1199 aged 41 years. This historical note tends to suggest that the elevation to being a Chivalry must have taken place either before October 1192 or between 1194 and 1199. It is probable therefore, that Dr. Forey is reporting on an existing situation when mentioning 1220. For 100 years the Templars, the Hospitallers, the Teutonic Knights and the Knights of St. Thomas et al held

Acre, the occurred the battle for Acre, at which the Order's history can be traced, since at the battle on the 12th. May 1291, which resulted in its loss, the Master and nine of the Knights of St. Thomas were killed.

(see Official History of the British Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem by E.J. King(1934) , page 32.

Following such a grave loss to an Order, which was never numerous, perhaps by reason of its function, the Order merged with the Order of the Temple for the period of its journey from Cyprus back to London when it again became independent buying its own properties etc. The order's eventual demise in 1538 has already been described. There is inter alia some interesting information in connection with Peter de Roches, Bishop of Winchester which the reader will find fruitful to pursue. Let it just be said - events could have turned out differently!

So now, turning to the modern era and to the Commemorative Order; events since 1974 moved slowly, there being but one Chapel, Blackheath Chapel T.I. located at Blackheath, London, and the main preoccupation in the early stages was one of evolving and refining the ceremonial and the contribution of many senior masons is acknowledged.. It may be of interest to note that in the present ceremonial the commemorative Order preserves both the Military and the Monastic aspects of the original Order. The first Most Worthy Grand Master, J.E.N. Walker, retired to give way to A.B. Stephenson who in turn retired from office in 1997 - at which time the membership was 38, and it was the present Most Worthy Grand Master Sir Barry of Ilford (B.Clarke), who decided to expand the Order.

This took effect on the 29th. August 1998 when 38 candidates were admitted to the Order and were give the simple invitation to "go, form chapels". Since that date 21 further Chapels have been formed (18 plus T.I. in the U.K., plus two in the U.S.A., and one in Canada) and the membership as at the 31st. December 2001 is just short of 600.. There are a further 16 Chapels in course of formation over the next two to three years with two enquiries of especial interest: an enquiry from Spain (which will depend on "events"), and one from Australia. The average number of founders per Chapel is 20. It is fully intended that the present structure of Grand Master's Council and individual Chapels will give way to Provinces within the next twelve months, and that thereafter steady progress will be made to an Order wholly structured by Provinces.

At the initial stage of development to Provinces the areas contained are more like regions as the Order has yet to see just where Chapels will be raised. We look to the future with great confidence pacing great reliance on th M.W.G.M.'s dictum "that Chapels will be raised where the members wish them to be raised".

The order is member led in its development. This is the surest test of continuing support. The fact that the Order is also an invitational Order and that the Chapels are made up of groups of friends is a source of great strength.

The Order of St Thomas of Acre
by Dr. Alan Forey
University of Durham, emeritus

Although the date of the foundation of St. Thomas of Acre and the identify of its founder have in the past been disputed, there is little doubt that it was created in the Holy Land at the time of the Third Crusade, and the members of the Order came to regard the English king Richard I as their founder. Its dedication reflects the growing cult of Becket at the end of the twelfth century. Up to the 1220s, St Thomas housed a group of regular canons, who according to contemporary sources devoted themselves to the care of the poor, the burial of the dead and the ransoming of captives in the East. Although the foundation received some patronage in the early thirteenth century, especially in England, it did not flourish, and its poor state persuaded Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester, to effect a reform when he was in the Holy Land in the later 1220s. After the canons had been removed, he transformed it into a military order, which adopted the rule and customs of the Teutonic Knights. This was done with the counsel of the patriarch of Jerusalem and magnates in the East, who would no doubt have stressed the military needs of the crusader states. The bishop of Winchester also transferred the house in Acre to a new site in the northern quarter of the city. The order's military activities during the rest of the thirteenth century have left little trace, but it did seek to imitate the larger military orders in the terminology used to describe officials, and in structure. As it acquired more property and privileges, it began to create a provincial organization at least in the British Isles, with the master of its subsidiary London house having charge of the Order's properties throughout England and Ireland and with subordinate preceptors administering more distant properties in these countries. As Alexander IV noted in 1257, however, the foundation still lacked adequate resources. In 1279 it was appealing for aid to Edward I, and a number of sources refer to debts. It was apparently this situation which occasioned proposals in the second half of the thirteenth century for an amalgamation with the Templars. Many details of the Order's history in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries are obscure, but an agreement was finally reached, on the basis of which the Templars sought to take over the Order's house in London. But St Thomas continued to maintain an independent existence in the East; presumably some of its members there opposed union. Opposition was definitely present in England, where members of the London house appealed to Edward I against the Templars' action, and they further protested against an attempt by Edward II to subject them to the convent of Bonhommes at Ashridge, gaining a decision in their favor in the king's council in 1315. In the meantime, those in the East had migrated to Cyprus after the fall of Acre in 1291, and in the early fourteenth century there was schism, with both the master in Cyprus and the master of the London house claiming authority over the whole Order. The situation of those in Cyprus was, however, precarious, and they took steps to transfer the Order's headquarters to London. The master in the East, Henry of Bedford, came to England shortly before 1320 and ousted the head of the London house; he also nominated a deputy to exercise authority in Cyprus. The brothers who had remained in Cyprus soon rejected Henry's authority, but this action seems to have been occasioned by personal animosity; the brothers appear at that stage to have accepted that London should be the Order's headquarters. Yet in the second quarter of the fourteenth century there was again a mast

in Cyprus claiming jurisdiction over the whole Order, and attempts were being made to maintain St Thomas' status as a military order in the East. Its financial situation had, however, declined further in the fourteenth century--the London house was said to be in ruins in 1330--and it was not long before any military pretensions were abandoned and the Order's headquarters were established permanently in London. Nothing is heard of a master in Cyprus after the 1360s. In the later Middle Ages the brethren of St Thomas based in London no longer followed the rule of the Teutonic Knights, but instead adopted that of St Augustine. Some charitable work appears to have been maintained, and a grammar school was established at St Thomas in London, possibly in the mid-fifteenth century. The London house also established links with the Mercers' Company, which was holding its meetings and worshipping there from the later fourteenth century. The Mercers later became the patrons of the house, and when St Thomas of Acre was dissolved in Henry VIII's reign, the Mercers' Company bought the Order's property.

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