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# THE WORLD OF THE ANTIENTS AND MODERNS: LONDON IN THE 1700S

***by Guy Palliser***

As a New Zealander of English and Welsh descent, my cultural heritage is basically European rather than of the Pacific. I thus found that the Prestonian Lecture to the United Grand Lodge of England for 1976, by WBro A C F Jackson, PGSwdB, entitled 'Preston's England', added greatly to my then rather thin knowledge of the period.

Jackson dealt in detail with the life of a Mason over a typical day, and brought forth also an examination of eighteenth century history as background to Masonry, besides such details of the citizens' lives as dress, food, housing, the London environment, sports and pastimes; and the lodge and its furnishings, Masonic clothing, and lodges' ceremonies. But Jackson was mostly interested in the later half of the eighteenth century, for Preston was born in 1742, and initiated in 1763. It was 1772 before he produced a 'Grand Gala' in which he demonstrated his revised ceremonies.

So Jackson, a Past Master of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge No 2076 EC [now resigned, as he is in his 80s, resident in Jersey, but sufficiently infirm as not to travel to London any more on a regular basis], had as the object of his lecture 'to show what the Masons of Preston's period were like; and how they lived in and out of the lodge'.

He notes that 'we have been too inclined to treat masonry as if it existed in a vacuum **. . .**', which observation I find relevant right now for New Zealand, as we strive to go forward to find the causes for steady losses in our Craft. But Jackson's paper, of over 7500 words, is longer than I can contemplate, so my treatment must be brief, so that I only deal with a few aspects of the subject.

This study has been to look at parts of the social life of London in particular, and of England to a lesser degree, in the later part of the seventeenth and the early part of the eighteenth centuries, in the light of the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717.

The foundation of the Grand Lodge did not start in a vacuum, and we know that the creating Four Old Lodges that met in different taverns in London were established well before that 1717 date. The half century before that time was for England a tumultuous time in terms of, for example, the Revolution of 1688–89. The constitutional significance was that the nation had rejected the theory of sovereignty based on hereditary divine right, and started a new era of limited monarchy and parliamentary government. The Revolution also meant the transfer of the monarchy into the Protestant line, and away from Catholic power.

It also marked the change from the Stuarts to the Hanoverians—the Georges I to III, and so on—who ruled for two-and-a-half centuries. In 1707, the Act of Union saw Scotland, finally, being united with England economically as well as constitutionally. This had a slow but steady effect on the lives of the English, and it marked a great achievement of British statesmanship. There were also the Peninsula Wars: Britain captured Gibraltar in 1704, Barcelona in 1705, and occupied Madrid, but lost Spain, in 1707.

Those fortunes of war led initially to the Treaties of Utrecht in 1712, and to Britain's negotiating a commercial treaty with France, which went far towards establishing freedom of trade between the two countries. This series of treaties represented a major advance for maritime trade, for the growth of the

colonial empire, and the development of British naval control of the Mediterranean. Altogether, then, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were times for new currents in the domestic and foreign affairs of Britain.

**Population**
The divisions of English society were long standing, and became more marked as the population contrived to grow, especially in London. E N Williams says that the 1696 population of 5.5 million was a 'puny but pugnacious people **. . .** spread over the face of the country in a much more even way than it has ever been since **. . .** much more like that shown in the Doomesday Book'. Urbanisation was starting to accelerate: London's 350,000 to 400,000 in 1650, rising to 575,000 to 600,000 in 1700. Bristol was the busiest port, and like Norwich, the second-largest town, had a population of about 30,000. The greatest density of population was 'on a belt on either side of a line joining London and Bristol'.

**Housing**
England had as its 'most important single development' in the eighteenth century this growth in population. With the constant inflow to London, more and more housing and other accommodation was required. Overcrowding was general, with poverty a major cause, but there was 'the necessity for workers to live near their place of work, owing to the absence of any means of cheap transport, and the unpleasantness and danger of walking through streets, much more the outskirts, of London after nightfall'.

The crowded manner of living in London was also due in part to social custom and tradition, as well as to economic causes. The shopkeeper or the well-to-do artisan who was a housekeeper was superior to the fluctuating mass of lodgers. They lived as weekly tenants in furnished rooms. But there were increasing thousands who when they rose in the morning did not know how they would be supported during the day nor where they would lodge that night.

Dorothy George goes on to say that the typical housekeeper, meanwhile, lived in one or two rooms in his house, and let the rest. Servants and apprentices slept in the kitchen, the shop or the garret as a matter of course. The pupils in expensive boarding schools slept two to a bed. All classes lived so much at coffee houses, alehouses or clubs, that house-room was a secondary consideration.
A man might live in a garret at eighteen pence a week [but] few people would enquire where he lodged, and if they did, it was easy to say, 'Sir, I am to be found at such a place'. The necessary 'good address' was provided by the coffee-house or tavern.

However, 'numerous families of labourers lodge with their wives and children in common alehouses in the metropolis and probably in most of the large cities and towns in different parts of the kingdom', according to Colquhoun, an observer of the period.

**London Life**
London life centred round the tavern, the alehouse, and the club, says Dorothy George. It had long been the custom for almost all men who had the means to spend their evenings at some public house or tavern. Most public houses had a parlour for the better class of customer, the others drinking and gambling in other rooms. Most of these premises were converted houses, for the landlord stood behind the bar always placed close to the door, so that he could take orders and despatch the pot-boy or the maid to the room the customers had entered. For example, The Mouth tavern in Bishopsgate had eight drinking-rooms, each of which was provided with screens so that they could be divided up into partitions for the benefit of customers who required privacy for the pursuit of love, intrigue, important conversation or private business.

The good tavern-keeper's profits were considerable but he worked hard for them: his tavern was open every day, and he was on duty most of the time, as barman, kitchen manager, waiter on occasion, but also as business agent, procurer, broker, banker, and message-boy. The visitor could expect him to

provide him with wine, beer, food, fire and comfort, change his money, give him advice on the pleasures of the town, take messages for him, and then hire him a coach. Please remember that there were no telephones to assist him.

Restaurant meals catered for different strata of incomes, both those 'much frequented by the gentry' and those at the bottom of the income scale. At more than one inn in Black Horse Alley it was possible to eat a good dinner for threepence, though as the century progressed the best taverns could charge up to two guineas a head. The usual routine was for a breakfast of cheese and bits of toast softened in a mug of ale, with dinner between noon and 1.30 pm. A light supper formed the reminder of the day's meals.

**Coffee Houses**
As London grew larger, says Ford, it became essential for men to have meeting places which were more formal than the tavern, and less intimate than a private house; the arrival in the mid–seventeenth century of the new beverages, coffee pre-eminently, chocolate, tea and punch, created an entirely new form of social environment, the coffee house. As is well known, these became the meeting places for men of a particular class, commercial group or intellectual bent, each clustering at one favoured house; they were the genesis of the London club. In the 1680s Robert Hooke can be seen visiting Garraway's coffee house near the Exchange to discuss the sheets of the map of London then in production; later in the day meeting Wren at another coffee house to discuss some aspect of the rebuilding programme for the City, and visiting a third to find another group of friends or colleagues towards the evening. The first coffee house had been opened in Oxford in 1650; by 1663 there were 82 in the City, and were at their zenith during Queen Anne's reign (1702–1714). The proprietors supplied newspapers and displayed advertisements; political and court gossip was exchanged, and coteries formed.

Coffee houses quite quickly became identified with particular professions and political parties. No doubt the men of the Four Old Lodges used coffee houses in their vicinity frequently, for so many clubs started in these convivial gathering places.

**Gambling**
It has been well researched and clearly noted that from the reign of Anne till the beginning of the nineteenth century, gambling was a national disease among the leisured classes of both sexes. This is of note in New Zealand in late 1998. Games of skill and games of chance, horseracing, lotteries, and commercial speculations—all made an irresistible appeal. While the men spent most of the day, and sometimes of the night also, round the card-tables at the fashionable clubs of Almack's, White's, and Boodles, the ladies occupied themselves in similar fashion in their own drawing rooms.

Thousands of pounds would be won or lost at a single sitting—Charles James Fox, the great Parliamentarian, occasionally played for 24 hours, losing £500 an hour! (Before he was 25 he had squandered £140,000, mostly at cards.) Men would take wagers on anything—that X would not be made a vice-admiral by such and such a date, that Y would be found wearing a certain suit on a particular occasion, that Z would, although seriously ill, be still surviving on the first of next month, and so on.

**Clubs**
Joseph Addison in 1711 observed that 'man is a sociable animal and we take all occasions and pretences of forming ourselves into those little nocturnal assemblies which are commonly known as clubs'.

Clubs grew up in the taverns, quite apart from the few major and upper- and middle-class clubs, such as those private aristocratic clubs like Almack's, White's and so on. There were lottery clubs; cutter clubs for lads who had a boat on the river; literary clubs; gardening clubs; trade clubs of many kinds; burial clubs; Tall Clubs; Ugly Clubs; spouting clubs, to give members experience in public speaking; chair clubs, for chairmanship practice; cock and hen clubs; and the innumerable card clubs.

WBro Jackson gives the club genesis of Masonic meetings in this way:

With the increased prosperity of the upper and middle classes came the opportunity to enjoy leisure and social life. Communities in the various levels of society were small enough for everyone to know everyone else. One of the results was that, in the English taverns and coffee-houses, there arose little dining clubs formed by people of similar interest. Into this framework, the masonic lodge fitted extremely well.

One might note that the rise in club numbers spelt the decline in coffee houses, for clubs created identity and partisanship much more than the coffee houses. It was possibly or probably the growth of clubs that promoted the growth of Masonic lodges, especially in London.

**Getting About**
There was one bridge over the river Thames until 1737, so water transport was an essential element of London's life. In 1676 there were said to be some 2000 watermen plying for hire, with the taxis, that is, the single and double sculls, and the buses, which were the wherries, seating up to 10 to 14 people, with regular routes. Water travel was extending throughout the kingdom: navigable rivers were about 960 miles in 1700, and rose to 1110 by 1726.

The sedan chair and hackney coach were in use from the 1630s, and private coaches grew popular for the well off—Samuel Pepys, for example, obtaining his in 1696.

The great City of London and the growing City of Westminster on its west, needed large quantities of food supplies on a daily basis. Instead of the rules that the Tudors set, having producers sell in smaller quantities directly to the end-user at market, the wholesalers grew up, taking supplies in bulk. There was the traffic for drovers, butchers, grain-dealers, millers, brewers, maltsters, and coal merchants. These developments meant that road needs grew at a fast rate, as well as water transport for bulk commodities. The new turnpike roads grew, too, with 109 Acts between 1720 and 1750, then 389 from 1751 to 1772.

**The Streets**
The quality of the streets of London was still mainly medieval in the early part of the century—that is to say, primitive, and even disgusting. Up till 1762 there was no municipal obligation to maintain streets; at that date the *Westminster Paving Act* was passed. The practice till then was that it was the personal obligation of each householder to pave and keep in repair the street in front of his own door! In consequence, the streets were paved in round pebbles, which under the improvements of municipal responsibility gave way to flat Purbeck stone. The other points about the streets under the old system of care was that the filth—including sewage—was infrequently cleared, and pot holes and the like not usually promptly attended to.

The new Acts, for they were numerous, provided for the scavenging of the streets and removal of household rubbish. The streets were largely a stinking mess. The Acts required the removal of encroachments on the streets, which were projecting balconies (only a few feet apart), signs right across narrow streets, the dangerous unfenced open cellars, and unprotected coal chutes. So many of the streets were very gloomy from the overhangs, and never received the sun directly.

The Paving Commissioners required the Commissioners of Sewers to undertake the construction and deepening of sewers and drains. These activities made an immense change in appearance and sanitation, so you must just imagine how very bad and even shocking, were the streets before these Paving Acts. Even in 1736 the road between the court suburb of Kensington and Piccadilly was so 'infamously bad' that Lord Harvey complained of living 'in the same solitude as if cast on a rock in the middle of the ocean'. That road was not the only one that was 'an impassable gulf of mud'.

**Street Lighting**

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the lighting of London depended on an Act of William and Mary (1689–1702), which provided for street lighting only from Michaelmas to Lady Day—that is, from 29 September to 25 March, a period of six months—and then only from darkness to midnight. Those people who did not contribute to certain public lights were to hang out lights of their own. The law was unenforceable, so that London streets generally were dark and dangerous.

It was in 1745 that the Westminster Sessions tried to enforce the law, they said, 'to the preventing of murders, burglaries, street robberies, fires, misdemeanours and debauchery'. That statement, by that council, gives you an immediate appreciation of the dangers of walking in London after dark.
The City of London, as distinct from Westminster, made regulations in 1716. Householders were to hang out lights in the six winter months from 6 to 11 pm on 'dark nights', that is, on 18 nights a month. The result was that the City was described as 'perhaps worse than that of any other great city', till 1736, when an Act gave powers to rate people in order to finance the hanging out of lamps throughout the year.

In the next decade or two, London street lighting was greatly admired by visitors from Britain as well as from abroad. In 1780 it was said that there were 'in Oxford Road alone **. . .** more lamps than in all the city of Paris'.

**Cultural life**
The late seventeenth century saw the emergence of scientific enquiry in Britain, particularly marked by the founding of the Royal Society in 1662. In 1686–87 it published Newton's *Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis*. Newton's achievement was celebrated as the triumph of the modern mind over ancient medieval ignorance. He had revealed the nature of reality: Voltaire called him the greatest man who ever lived. Newton had fulfilled Descarte's vision of nature as a perfectly ordered machine governed by mathematical laws and comprehensible by human science. The foundation of a new world view was thus established by the Newtonian–Cartesian cosmology.

This period, the eighteenth century, saw the development of what we now call the Enlightenment. The thinkers and writers moved to the view of the ascendancy of reason and the power of the individual, in contrast to the power and unquestioning acceptance of tradition. This process steadily progressed through the work of the scientists, philosophers and writers of the time, with Britain represented by such as Newton, Locke, Pope, Berkeley, Hume, Gibbon, and Adam Smith.

The Enlightenment saw the work of artists of all kinds, but it was the later part of the century developed such as Hogarth, Gainsborough, Reynolds, Romney, and Zoffany; the engravers Vertue and Woollett; the busts of Roubillac; and the furniture and decorations of the Adam brothers. Trevelyan remarks that their works were not outbreaks of genius in protest against its surroundings, but the natural outcome of the ethos of the age, when art was a part of the ordinary life and trade.

He finds that the same could be said of the literary world of the later part of the century, of Gray, Goldsmith, Cowper, Johnson, Boswell and Burke. Apart from William Blake, a great rebel, these eighteenth-century practitioners of the arts had a quiet, settled unity of aim, and thought it was a classical age.

One of the most important aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art was its architecture: witness the magnificent genius of Sir Christopher Wren. His work in creating the present St Paul's Cathedral, the design being started in 1675 and even before the site of the old St Paul's was cleared in 1687, went on continuously as the construction went on. The great work was completed in 1710, and thus Wren was able to watch over it for the remaining 13 years of his life.

From these brief notes on the philosophy, and on those who created the art, of the period, we may get more balance in our view of the life we have seen in London, the principal seat of mental and artistic activities in Britain. We should remember, too, that on the other side of the coin of art creation was

that of consumption—there was always a ready market, which increased as incomes increased, and ensured the art creators of their careers.

**Education**

In New Zealand in this second half of the twentieth century, the fact of the mass reading public is taken for granted, generally speaking. Since 1877 we have had compulsory education, and most of the recipients of the system can read sufficiently well as not to be handicapped by their ability as readers. But this was not the case among working men and women in eighteenth-century England, even though there was a great advance from the end of the century.

Francis Plate in 1835 summarised the lack of education for those not of the middle or upper classes, who had grammar and 'public' and private schools, and private in-house tutoring. Dorothy George comments thus: 'Conceive what a state London must have been in, when there was no provision for school teaching besides the charity schools, which taught the children next to nothing likely to be useful to them.'

Victor Neuburg points out that there was no real theory of popular education at this time in the century, simply a desultory debate over whether children of the poor could be taught to read or not. This was rooted in the social theory that saw society as a divinely ordered mechanism in which everyone knew his place, with concern on both sides to maintain the established order.

Bernard de Mandeville's 'Essay on Charity and Charity Schools', in the 1723 2nd edn of his book, gave his view as:

(a) the poor do not need education;
(b) if they have learning they become too proud to work;
(c) education makes servants claim higher wages while at the same time they do not want to do servile work;
(d) though it might be reasonable to teach reading, the teaching of writing cannot possibly be justified.

This was the prevailing view until long after de Mandeville's time. The theory was sociological and economic: no nation can be great without vast numbers of ignorant people to do the drudgery. As you see, this is the 'slaves are essential' thesis, and unfortunately it represented the consensus view of authoritative English society during our period. The scholars had the great examples of the ancient Greek culture, based on a slave population to do the menial work, which a large proportion of the upper classes could read about in the original.

As one now retired from a career in education, I could provide you with numerous examples of accounts and documents to illustrate the wretchedness of pupils and teachers at the working class level (as well as for higher socio-economic levels). But in this short paper I refrain from getting on to a hobbyhorse and do not expand on the general picture just given. If you were sufficiently interested you could follow up this matter, several references in the Bibliography being helpful, for most contain further reading lists that could take you forward and deeper.

**Punishments and penalties**

Britain's eighteenth century carried forward a legacy of severe punishments and penalties. Here is an interesting example from the period of Edward II (1307–1327).

The award of the court [the Earl of Carlisle was told], is that for your treason you be drawn, and hanged, and beheaded; that your heart, and bowels and entrails, whence came your traitorous thoughts, be torn out and burnt to ashes and that the ashes be scattered to the winds; that your body be cut into four quarters, and that one of them be hanged upon the tower of Carlisle, another upon the tower of Newcastle, a third upon the Bridge of York and the fourth at Shrewsbury; and that your head be set upon London Bridge, for an example to others that they may never presume to be guilty of such treasons as yours against their liege Lord.

There was, of course, another form of punishment: natural death in prison, through starvation and disease. Here is what critics said in 1714 and 1716. In 1714 it was said 'the Marshalsea alone generally contains seven or eight hundred prisoners **. . .** two or three commonly perishing in one day in the miserable and wasting condition'. In 1716 a critic wrote: ' 'tis reckoned there are about 60,000 miserable debtors perishing in the prisons of England and Wales'. George notes that one naturally assumes that this is a wild exaggeration but, allowing for dependents of prisoners, it was probably not very far from the truth.

Punishment may have suited the mood of brutalised cockneys, but it scarcely fitted the crime—there were few murders, but many executions; most offences were against property. Burglary, arson, and highway robbery caused authority to panic, and new capital offences were created. With capital crimes of about 50 when George I was enthroned in 1714, Parliament had raised the number to about 200 by George III's death in 1820. Picking a pocket to the value of 12 pence earned hanging, as did consorting with gipsies. Setting fire to a heap of hay, or a town, brought the same fate.
Crime deterrents did not work, for even for small crimes there was the pillory, the whipping at the cat's tail, and the suspending of the criminal's body in chains from a gibbet, yet the committing of crimes continued unabated.

Even later in the century, the dangers of the road and street had not greatly diminished, for Horace Walpole (1717–1797) observed that 'One is forced to travel, even at noon, as if one was going to battle'. The real cause of the increase of crime, according to foreigners, was the coexistence of wealth and poverty on each other's doorsteps. We may note that control, though not solution, was not effected till the Act of 1856, requiring every county to have a police constabulary.

**Sexuality**

Dr Roy Porter, in his chapter in Bouce's work on sexuality in eighteenth-century Britain, says:

> In their quest of modes of life which were rational, liberal, polite and happy, men of the Enlightenment habitually contrasted themselves to the common people (whom they regarded as leading lives dominated by custom and superstition, little better than criminals), and the courtly aristocracy (whose lives were artificial, dissipated and useless). At the dawn of the Enlightenment those two strata were leading very distinct sexual lives, both of which were unacceptable to Enlightenment opinion.

On the other hand, the sexual lives of the mass of the population were dramatically circumscribed. First, they were limited by suspicious and guilt-ridden attitudes towards the body **. . .** Second, they were circumscribed by a family, domestic and village economy, in which prudence sternly dictated the regulation of family size, and to the production of offspring only under favorable circumstances.

**. . .** Third, popular eroticism was probably inhibited by the limiting conditions under which sexual activity took place - dirt, disease, modesty, physical inhibitions, and lack of privacy, created conditions in which for many people sex was neither the incarnation of love nor an *ars erotica*, but rather infrequent, functional, perfunctory, and repetitive.

At the other end of society there was the Restoration court. Sexual libertinism was rife in royal circles.

It is noted that first, sex was a prominent part of the written and printed culture. Secondly, sexuality was very visible in the public arena. In London, prostitution swarmed on the streets, and at the peak there were probably over 10,000 prostitutes at all levels, from professional to the amateur. Thirdly, there was a good deal of casual, easy going, promiscuousness, which few thought to question.

Sexuality amongst high society led to frequent, and famous, cases of adultery, with accepted *ménages á trois* and shifting sexual liaisons. Bastardy was common, and most frequently accepted. Wives were often prepared to put up with their husbands' affairs. But there were groups in Georgian England who were horrified that rampant sexuality was undermining the moral fibre and godliness of the nation. As

the century went on, new leaders joined in, including the great evangelist John Wesley, who talked of 'the deluge of depravity which has been pouring upon us'. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment attitudes towards sexuality were gradually changing, and were very different by the last of the Georges.

**Overview**

That really great and authoritative expert on London life in our period, M. Dorothy George, gives us a fine overview of the situation. Keep in mind that she had access to hosts of original documents for painstaking examinations of this period. Here is what she says.

In London in the eighteenth century we see a society which still clung to the old safeguards and prejudices, to the restriction of workers to their place of settlement, to rigid demarcations between class and class, to the exclusiveness of trades and corporations, to a fierce hatred of foreigners. But in spite of—sometimes even because of—these restrictions there was a ceaseless movement to and fro between the metropolis, Great Britain, Ireland, and the Continent, as well as upwards and downwards in the social scale .

Leslie Stephen has pointed out that the eighteenth century is conspicuous for the number of men who rose from the humblest positions to distinction in science, art, and literature. And in the anonymous-strata of labourers, artisans, clerks, shopkeepers and men of business, many rose from the bottom of the ladder to established positions. The corollary to the thousands of decayed housekeepers who filled the workhouses and debtors' prisons were thousands of people of lowly beginnings who took their places, and as the middle classes were increasing, there was more room for movement upwards than downwards.

At the same time the status of the poor sort was improving. The average working man was becoming better educated, more self-respecting, and more respected. He is no longer supposed to belong to 'the vile and brutish part of mankind'.

**Conclusion**

This paper has surveyed a number of aspects of early eighteenth-century life in England but especially of London. It has omitted more than it has included, for these brief samplings are but an infinitesimal commentary from a large mass of material available to the researcher. The Bibliography gives a small account of these resources, and now that I have read all of them except the few large reference works, I must mark the effort as most worthwhile.

The commentary here about life in London, both before and when the original Grand Lodge was constituted in 1717, with a few later contrasts mentioned, forms little of the full carpet of social life upon which our forebears enacted their founding endeavour.

As Jackson says in his Prestonian Lecture:

> A lodge had all the advantages of a club without the excessive gambling and drinking; and masonic brethren, with a Tyler, could ensure a privacy for themselves which the ordinary club could not guarantee for its members. The first half of the century provided the biggest changes in the whole history of masonry. Operative masonry had virtually disappeared. The second half of the century should have been a period of masonic consolidation and, in many respects, it was.

I tentatively suggest for your reflection that the nascence and growth of speculative Freemasonry in the early eighteenth century, especially its 'break out' time, was a consequence of the society and its pressing need for the grand visions of at least some of its Masonic founders. At the very least, their view that Freemasonry ought to be better organised and regulated was the most appropriate action that the far-sighted among those brethren could possibly take. 'The hour begets the man', it has long been said. Perhaps you may consider that society begets its institutions.

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