

The history of the Masonic Order of Pilgrim Preceptors

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This summary of the history of the Masonic Order of Pilgrim Preceptors is based on information conveyed to the late Andrew Barry Stephenson by John Edward Nowell Walker, former Grand Masters of the Order, and in recollections of Stephenson himself; a history that has been completed by information of recent research in the archives of the United Grand Lodge of England and elsewhere.

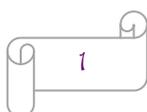
One of the most interesting Masonic rituals, if not the most outstanding, is surely that of the Masonic Order of the Pilgrim Preceptors. Not only is it the connecting point with Royal Arch but at the same time it is the continuation and natural completion, not to mention the bottom line, of Capitular Masonry. The Order was constituted in current terms only in 1984, but its roots and especially its ritual go much deeper in time.

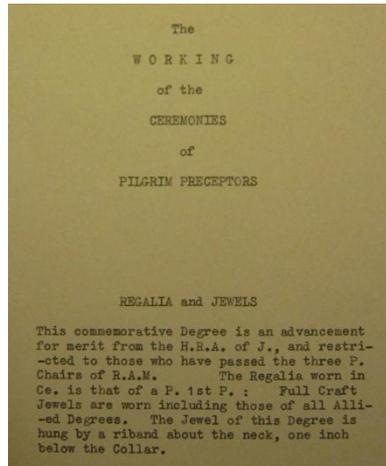


Albert Le Fre

During the first quarter of the 20th century three actors and masons, one of which was the very distinguished English mason Albert Le Fre (1870-1969), traced in a library of a Masonic Hall or lodge somewhere in Northwestern England, most possibly in the greater Liverpool area, an unknown ritual of Irish origin drafted after the year 1862. Sometime later, the actors found themselves idle and forced to remain in their hotel in Manchester for a long and typically wet weekend because the play in which they had been performing suddenly 'folded'. Then, perhaps to while away the time, they conceived the idea of using some of the information they had found as the basis of two ceremonies belonging to a Masonic degree called *The Pilgrim Preceptors*. By the end of the weekend, they had produced a manuscript version of the ritual which was later enhanced and typed. However, this was a private enterprise and they made no attempt to invite others to join them or to see the ceremony performed.

From the references in a copy of the revised typewritten edition of this manuscript, kept in the library of the UGLE, we may assume that the creators of the ritual had posed right from the beginning the prerequisites for obtaining the degree. The Candidate should be a Past First Principal of a Royal Arch Chapter and because of that, as was then the custom, he was unavoidably a Past Master of a Craft Lodge and, in addition, to have received all the Allied Masonic Degrees of the time. This last necessity is no longer required since the constitution of the Grand Conclave of the Order.





The first typewritten edition of the Ritual

The original manuscript ritual remained in the possession of Albert Le Fre and after his death in 1969 was passed to his son Eric Norman Le Fre (1903-1979), an actor and a high ranking and active mason in many Masonic orders of that time, together with a revised typewritten edition of the ritual. In 1978, one year before the death of Eric, both documents were passed to John Edward Nowell Walker (1901-1991), who received the degrees by oath at the hands of Eric and verbally all rights to the Order for a sum of a half penny!



Eric Le Fre



John Walker

When Eric passed away in 1979, Walker at a non-defined temporal circumstance obligated by oath and communicated the degree to another five masons, after a meeting of the August Order of Light held in South London, namely Capt Donald Michael Penrose (1891-1990), Andrew Barry Stephenson (1923-2021), George Austin Duke (1908-1988), Arthur William Jary (1923-1989), and Howard Alan Stokes (1914-2015). At another equally unknown opportunity at the beginning of the 1980s and certainly before 1984, Walker appointed Howard Alan Stokes as *primus* Grand Master of the Pilgrim Preceptors. The Order since its beginning had its seat in Blackheath, a district of South-East London, and more particularly in the house owned by Andrew Stephenson, until 2006 when Andrew decided to move to New Zealand where he died in February 2021.

By 1998 membership had expanded to just under 50 including a number of members from Kent and on the 13th June, 1998, at Gillingham, the St. Augustine Preceptory was the first 'Unit' of the Order to be Consecrated. As the years passed several changes to the Order were made. The title of units changed from Preceptory to Conclave, a full set of Regulations adopted and most importantly the original unit which had hitherto governed the Order became the Sovereign Grand Conclave, which immediately Consecrated the St. Andrew Conclave as a time immemorial Conclave to carry on the work of admission of new members from the London area and elsewhere in the UK and abroad.

A further milestone in the history of the Order was achieved when, under the Warrant of St Andrew Conclave TI, members of the Grand Conclave consecrated a new peripatetic Conclave in the USA, in February 2010 as well as the first Conclave on the Continent of Europe in Athens, Greece, in April 2019. The Order has continued to expand and there are now 36 Conclaves; 30 in England and Wales, 5 in the U.S.A. and 1 in Greece. There is no doubt that the Order was in maximum proliferation in the years 2011-2020 and that is totally to the credit of the charismatic leadership of Stephen Michael Ayres (1943-2020).



Stephen Ayres

The Grand Masters of the Order were: Howard Alan Stokes (bef.1984-1987), John Edward Nowell Walker (1987-1990), Andrew Barry Stephenson (1993-2006), Benson Franklyn Catt (2006-2011), and Stephen Michael Ayres (2011-2020).

The Installation of the new Grand Master, Most Illustrious Brother Jonathan Charles Roberts, marks the start of a new long, peaceful and untroubled course of the Order's history. Such course as required for us all to serve with fervency and zeal the deep and wonderful meanings of the Masonic Order of Pilgrim Preceptors and one that will add more lustre to this great and very important English Masonic tradition.