

Charles Shirreff: A Life of Disappointments

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MAJOR CHARLES SHIRREFF IS A NAME AND STYLE FAMILIAR WITH MASONIC HISTORIANS, especially those of Jersey and Shropshire. He is referred to as ‘the real founder’ of Freemasonry in the first Province,¹ and as ‘chief actor in the revival’ of Freemasonry in the second.² Several websites of the Red Cross of Constantine give Shirreff as the man responsible for introducing the order to England. None substantiates the claim.

The primary source of all these claims is to be found in a sizeable bundle of letters written by Shirreff between 1784 and 1792 to William White, Grand Secretary of the ‘Moderns’.³ Shirreff’s letters to White and two other gentlemen are almost entirely related to the constitution of a Craft lodge at Whitchurch, a market town in North

¹ http://members.jerseymason.org.uk/craft_history.html

² A. Graham, *A History of Freemasonry in the Province of Shropshire* (Shrewsbury: Adnitt & Naunton, 1892), 6

³ 22 letters are transcribed in A. Graham, *A History of the Lodge No 1 Whitchurch* (Shrewsbury: W. B. Walker, 1902). The letters may be seen at the Library of UGLE.

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Shropshire, to which Shirreff and his wife Sarah had retired in 1784. The letters also offer up a few tantalising biographical details and indicate that Shirreff, a ‘Mason of thirty two years standing’ was experienced in the ‘higher degrees’, was a Royal Arch Mason, Knight Templar,⁴ and most importantly, in his eyes, a man initiated into The Rite of 25 Degrees, an order he referred to only as the ‘ne plus ultra.’ This paper will examine evidence for the part played by Charles Shirreff in introducing the Rite of 25 Degrees into English Freemasonry.

For students of the development of Freemasonry in the latter years of the eighteenth century Shirreff is notorious for strictly adhering to the Antient way,⁵ while simultaneously constituting lodges on the register of the Premier Grand Lodge, the Moderns.

Reference is made to Shirreff’s letters by Henry Sadler in his 1887 refutation of Gould’s claim that Antient Freemasonry had developed as a result of schism.⁶ In ‘A Moderns Lodge in the Hands of the Antients’ G. S. Knocker refers to Shirreff’s apparently floating allegiances but offers no suggestion as to how they could have arisen.⁷ J. Heron Lepper’s erudite and immensely readable paper in *AQC* 56 argued that ‘Traditioners’ were able to remain loyal to the premier Grand Lodge while refusing to be at variance with ‘Antient’ practice.⁸ In the modern era Ric Berman has examined the ways in which military lodges were constituted in North America in the eighteenth century, and how they took advantage of the Antients’ willingness to offer travelling warrants.⁹

In 1892 Alexander Graham in his *History of Freemasonry in the Province of Shropshire* made extensive use of Shirreff’s letters to White. In his 1902 study, *A History of the Lodge No 1, Whitchurch*, he transcribed twenty-two of Shirreff’s letters, mainly to White, and attempted to put together a biography of the man. Unfortunately for Graham the latter task proved very difficult, for the only details he could gather about his subject were those that Shirreff himself related in his correspondence.

I have been unable to discover to what particular branch of the Shirreff family he belonged. It appears from some of his letters that in the last decade of the 18th Century he had a brother living at Old Arlesford (sic) in Hants., but inquiries addressed to members of the family now living in that County have failed to procure the identification of the gallant Major.¹⁰

⁴ ‘On being R-C, A-D, & made a K-t. T-1. . .’, Letter to White 1st Nov 1788.

⁵ Shirreff spells Antient with a ‘t’ in his letters. I have adopted his practice for the purpose of this paper.

⁶ H. Sadler, *Masonic Facts and Fictions* (London: Diprose & Bateman, 1887), 150–155.

⁷ G. S. Knocker, ‘A Moderns Lodge in the Hands of the Antients’, *AQC* 41 (1929), 125.

⁸ J. H. Lepper, ‘The Traditioners’, *AQC* 56 (1943), 139.

⁹ R. A. Berman, *Schism* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 210–12.

¹⁰ Preface to A. Graham’s *History of Lodge No 1 Whitchurch, Shropshire* (Shrewsbury: W. B. Walker, 1902).

In 1973 A. C. F. Jackson published his paper, 'Freemasonry in Jersey', in which he refers to Shirreff as the 'Father' of Jersey Masonry.¹¹ Jackson was able to pursue his researches into Shirreff's life with more success than Graham, but a great deal remained guess work and surmise. Until now Shirreff's presence in Jersey has been a mystery; his birth and parentage unknown; his military career imperfectly understood.

With the benefit of the internet and of a fortuitous meeting with Shirreff's wife's first cousin, five times removed,¹² I have been able to shine further light on the life and times of this enigmatic character. We now know more about his family, his military career, his marriage, his aspirations and his disappointments. I hope to arrive at a clearer understanding and appreciation of the character of this flawed, formidable figure, who richly deserves some, if not all, of the plaudits earlier researchers awarded.

In Part Two I will discuss why it might have been that Charles Shirreff, who proudly and repeatedly proclaimed to the Grand Secretary of the Moderns, 'I am an Antient Mason and will have no other way' could, at the same time, ask White, unabashedly, if not innocently, to grant a warrant on the register of the premier Grand Lodge.

I will also examine the claims of the Red Cross of Constantine that Shirreff was their first organiser in England.

Grandparents

The story begins in 1650, when Charles's grandfather, Alexander Shirreff, was born at Saltoun in East Lothian. Alexander married Martha Foord.¹³ Alexander and Martha had three sons: George (1677–1740), John (1684–1750), and William (1685–1768).¹⁴

Father

Sometime between 1710 and 1714 William Shirreff arrived at Annapolis Royal in the recently-established North American Province of Nova Scotia. He was not attached to the regular army as far we know, but he may have been a member of one of the independent companies raised by the British army for garrison duties in the colonies. In 1710 the British army under Colonel Francis Nicholson had recaptured the land formerly known as Acadia from the French and re-named it Nova Scotia. William, a clerk, settled at Port Royal, or as it had been re-named in honour of the Queen of England, Annapolis Royal.

As Governor of the Province, Nicholson, having been promoted to the rank of General, spent more time in England and Boston than he did in his colony. The administration was left to his Lieutenant Governor, Thomas Caulfield. Nicholson was unpop-

¹¹ A. C. F. Jackson, 'Freemasonry in Jersey', *AQC* 86 (1973), 182.

¹² Letters of Mrs Yvonne Walton to the author.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

ular – on one occasion described as a ‘malicious madman.’¹⁵ It is clear that there was no love lost between him and the men left behind to govern on his behalf. One of those men was William Shirreff.

In a letter to his brother James dated 28 January 1715 Thomas Caulfield makes a first documentary reference to William Shirreff as he ‘Recommends Mr. Shirreff, his late Clerk, who has his accounts etc.’ He continues:

Genl. Nicholson’s behaviour to me has been extreemly barbarous. It is now near four years since I came to this part of the world, and never as yett recd. one farthing, either as Lt. Govr. or Capt. I have been att prodigious expences for contingencies, etc. (v. May 12–14). Genl. Nicholson refused to pass my accts, tho’ he assured me he belived I had laid out for the service every penny of these charges, and when he arrived att Boston freightned Mr. Francklyn so much wth. the non payment of my bills and accots. that he very abruptly forsooke me, etc. Signed, Tho. Caulfeild.¹⁶

The situation of those who manned the garrisons in Nova Scotia was far from comfortable; life was lonely, dreary and dull. There were continuous complaints returned to the Council of Trades and Plantations at London of the wretched allowances for ‘firing and candle’ and the lack of proper remuneration.

It is clear that William’s financial situation was no less parlous than that of the man whose accounts he had prepared. In a letter written to the Council in London on 17 June 1715 Shirreff ‘prays for employment to relieve [his] miserable circumstances.’¹⁷ His prayer was not immediately granted. It was not until 1718 that William Shirreff was given a commission as Commissary of Musters and Judge Advocate of Annapolis Royal. Unfortunately no salary was forthcoming. Indeed, it appears that William was paid not a penny until 1730, when he received a renewed commission.

The unpopular, hasty and intemperate Francis Nicholson was replaced as Governor in 1715 by General Richard Philipps who, though he didn’t arrive in the Province until 1720, set about improving the situation of the garrison. In 1717 the British presence in the Province was strengthened by combining the independent companies into one regiment originally known as Philipps’s Regiment, later the 40th Regiment of Foot.¹⁸

From 1718 William’s employment became regular, even if his salary was not. His diligence and skill as an administrator is illustrated by the respect he earns from the

¹⁵ G. M. Waller, *Samuel Vetch, Colonial Enterpriser* (NC, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 72.

¹⁶ *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 28, 1714–1715* (Originally published by His Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1928), May 16th 1715.

¹⁷ Petition of William Shirreff to the Council of Trade and Plantations. Petitioner served as Lt. Governor’s Clerk at Annapolis Royal ever since the expedition to Canada (in which he went a volunteer) and received no pay. Endorsed, Recd. Read 17th June, 1715.

¹⁸ In 1881 the 40th Foot was renamed The Prince of Wales’s Volunteers (South Lancashire Regiment).

Lieutenant Governor and the confidence with which he addresses his employers in London. He is not frightened to speak plainly. In one letter he complains about ‘the miserable condition of the garrison for want of pay these three years past.’¹⁹ In another that ‘the clothing sent by General Nicholson to the Garrison at Annapolis Royal was extremely bad, damnified and dear so that the soldiers absolutely refused . . . to be issued them.’²⁰

In a further promotion William was appointed in 1725 Secretary of the Council of Nova Scotia, effectively the governing body of the Province. Was William a Freemason at this point?

There has been considerable speculation among Canadian Masonic researchers about the existence of Freemasonry in Nova Scotia prior to 1738. In spite of the lack of convincing proof, M. M. Johnson writes that ‘The first Masonic activity on Canadian soil, perhaps in North America, took place in Annapolis Royal sometime between 1721 and 1723.’²¹

We know from Caulfield’s letters that Shirreff was at Annapolis Royal earlier than 1716. One man who became his friend and colleague in the governing body of the Province was Dr William Skene, surgeon to the garrison. Skene came from a well-known family of Freemasons with connections to the Aberdeen Lodge No. 1. It is reasonable to assume Dr Skene (1676–1758), who had arrived at Annapolis Royal in 1715 at the age of thirty nine, to have been a member of that early Nova Scotia lodge. It is also reasonable to assume that sometime between 1721 and 1723 William Shirreff was initiated at Annapolis Royal. William Skene, by the way, was related to John Skene, Deputy Governor of New Jersey, a member of Aberdeen Lodge No. 1 and often cited as the first Freemason to settle in the New World.²²

We know that other members of the Council were Freemasons, including Otho Hamilton of the 40th Regiment of Foot, John Adams and Major Erasmus James Philipps, also of the 40th Foot. Erasmus Philipps was the nephew of Governor Richard Philipps. As well as being well-connected he had a reputation for intelligence and diplomacy. He spoke French fluently, a useful accomplishment in Acadia.

On 14 November 1737 William Shirreff attended a meeting of The First Lodge of Boston, Massachusetts, on the occasion of the initiation of Major Erasmus James Philipps. Philipps, Skene, Hamilton, and Shirreff had come to Boston on a mission to settle the boundaries of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Philipps remained in Boston until June 1738, but Shirreff was back in Annapolis by the end of 1737.

Reginald V. Harris in his paper, ‘Freemasonry in Canada before 1750’ writes:

¹⁹ Letter to the Council of Trade and Plantations, 13 May 1715

²⁰ Letter to the Council of Trade and Plantations, 14 May 1715.

²¹ M. M. Johnson, *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America* (New York: G. H. Doran Co., 1924), 51, 81.

²² John Skene, Deputy Governor of New Jersey, born 1649, died 1690.

The records of ‘The First Lodge’ Boston show that on November 14th 1737, Philipps was made a Mason in that Lodge and that accompanying him was Bro William Shirreff who affiliated with the Lodge on this occasion. As Shirreff had been a continuous resident of Annapolis Royal from 1716 until 1737 it is evident that he must have been made a Mason in Annapolis Royal.²³

Erasmus Philipps received rapid promotion in Freemasonry. On 13 March 1738 the *Boston Gazette* reported: ‘We are inform’d That Major Philipps is Appointed Provincial Grand Master over the Free and Accepted Masons in the Province of Nova Scotia, and that a Deputation is getting ready for that purpose.’²⁴

The patent was granted by Henry Price, Provincial Grand Master for New England, acting under a patent from Anthony Browne, 6th Viscount Montagu, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster. On the same occasion Price received a petition to constitute a Lodge at Annapolis Royal with Philipps designated as first Master. According to Reginald V. Harris, the “petition was undoubtedly signed not only by Philipps and Shirreff, but by Col. Otho Hamilton and Dr Wm. Skene”²⁵ Thus was formed the first recorded lodge in what is now the Dominion of Canada.

Nineteen years later on 27th December 1757, St John’s Day, Erasmus James Philipps, was granted a second patent as “Provincial Grand Master of Nova Scotia and the territories thereunto belonging.” This time, his patent had been signed by the Grand Master of the Antients, the Earl of Blessington. It is surely no coincidence that around this time, Philipps’s regiment, the 40th Foot had bought a warrant, No 42 on the register of the Antients to form a lodge in Nova Scotia. Number 42 had belonged to a recently deceased lodge in Coventry, England. Philipps was now recognised as Provincial Grand Master by both London Grand Lodges.

William Shirreff by this time was settled to colonial life. His future in the New World was assured. He even became a land owner, when on 30 August 1736 he, along with thirty five other council members and settlers, was granted a share of 50,000 acres in the Province:

on the south side Chiconecto Basin in 36 shares. One tenth to be part cultivated every 3 years. Good tenable houses to be built in a township to be called Norwich. All timber fit for masts to be reserved for H.M. use. Land to be allowed for permanent support of a Minister and Schoolmaster. A continued space of land 100 yards wide

²³ R. V. Harris, *Freemasonry in Canada before 1750* (The Skirret Library, 2019). See: <https://www.masonicworld.com/education/articles/Freemasonry-In-Canada-before-1750.htm>

²⁴ *Boston Gazette*, 13 March 1738.

²⁵ Harris, *Freemasonry in Canada before 1750*.

on the banks of all creekes and rivers to be left free and common to the public”²⁶ This land was escheated in 1760.²⁷

The Siblings

William married in Annapolis Royal. Sadly there are no records of births, marriages, and deaths in Nova Scotia until after the middle of the eighteenth century. We know that his first child, Martha, was born in 1720.²⁸ In June 1741 she married John, the son of William’s fellow Councillor, Otho Hamilton (1690–1770). John Hamilton (1724–1802) was a Captain in the same regiment as his father, the 40th Regiment of Foot. In 1750 John Hamilton was captured by the French and imprisoned at Quebec for two years. During his incarceration Martha died. In John’s absence the British Agent for the Regiment paid bills on his behalf for black cloth, black sealing wax, and a mourning sword.

William Shirreff’s second child was Elizabeth, no doubt named after her mother. The suggested year of birth for the young Elizabeth is 1724. Elizabeth was first married to Ensign Alexander Hay of the 40th Regiment. Hay was taken prisoner by the Indians during the French War and while held prisoner at Fort Beausejour was killed on June 16th 1755 by friendly fire.²⁹

By 1742 William Shirreff at the age of 57 had retired from the Council of Nova Scotia and the Court of Justice and had removed to Boston. He and the family must have been well connected socially, for in 1763 Elizabeth married John Still Winthrop, scion of a respectable New England family that counted among its members two state governors and no fewer than three Fellows of the Royal Society.

Elizabeth and John’s youngest son was Robert Winthrop, born on 7 December 1764 at New London, Connecticut. John Winthrop died in 1778, three years after the outbreak of the war of American Independence. Expressing loyalty to the Crown, young Robert crossed the line under a flag of truce and was taken under the wing of his uncle William Christopher, William Shirreff’s third child. Robert Winthrop was entered as a midshipman in the Royal Navy. He served on Admiral Rodney’s flagship, *HMS Formidable*, during the battle of the Saintes on 12 April 1782. Commissioned Lieutenant in 1790 he gained his first command in 1794. In 1807, the year in which his uncle Charles Shirreff died, he was put in charge of the Dover district of Sea Fencibles,³⁰ and in 1819 was

²⁶ Appendix to Chapter LVII of B. Murdoch, *History of Nova Scotia*. Vol. I (Halifax, NS: J. Barnes, 1867), 519–520.

²⁷ *Calendar of State Papers Colonial America and West Indies*, Vol. 42. 1735–36, 272–84. Available on British History Online.

²⁸ Perhaps named after William’s mother

²⁹ After its capitulation to the British it became known as Fort Cumberland. Hay was the only British casualty on the day.

³⁰ Short for Defencibles – regiments raised to defend against invasion.

promoted to the rank of Admiral. Robert was named as an Executor in Charles Shirreff's will and Trustee of his residuary estate. Robert died of paralysis at Dover on 10 May 1832.

William Christopher, the third child, was in all likelihood born at Annapolis. Again no record of the birth exists, though we know from his obituary that the year was 1730. William Christopher enjoyed a highly successful military career. He was commissioned as Ensign in the 40th Regiment of Foot in January 1751. By 1755 he had transferred to the 47th. On 23 October 1768, the year his father William died, William Christopher was appointed Deputy Quartermaster General to the forces in North America with the rank of Major (effective 25 July 1768). Eight years later he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and finally as Lieutenant General. William Christopher had three daughters all of whom are mentioned as beneficiaries of Charles Shirreff's will. They were Eliza, Maria, and Margaret. Like his father, William Christopher was granted land in Nova Scotia and New York State, from which he is unlikely to have benefitted. He was aide de camp to General Thomas Gage, the commander of British forces at the beginning of the Revolutionary War. William Christopher later bought General Gage's family estate at Old Alresford, Hampshire, England.

I have written in detail concerning the main family members of Charles Shirreff in order to emphasise the high social standing the family achieved by virtue of their military careers or marriages. The way to wealth for an eighteenth-century officer or civil servant was by practices which would today be abhorrent and unlawful, but were condoned, if not expected, at the time. As Deputy Quartermaster General William Christopher used his position to gain considerable personal wealth.

In July 1736 William Shirreff departed from Annapolis Royal with his wife, Elizabeth, on what might have been his first home leave. Although we know that the leave was officially sanctioned, his reason for making the crossing at this time is unknown. The Minutes of the Council for Nova Scotia record that:

At a meeting of the Council held by Order of His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of the Province At his own House in his Majesty's Garrison of Annapolis Royal on Thursday the 10th July 1736.

Present

His Honour the Lt Governor of the Province

John Adams

Henry Cope Esq

William Skene Esq

Erasmus James Philipps Esq

William Shirreff Secretary

Otho Hamilton

His Honour acquainted the Board that Mr Shirreff having his Majesty's leave to go to Britain & as he has Nominated Otho Hamilton Esq to do his duty as Secretary in his Absence. He therefore desired their Opinion.

The Board having taken the time into consideration they agree that Otho Hamilton was a very Proper person to Act as Secretary in Mr Shirreff's Absence.

Ordered that Mr Shirreff commit an inventory of the Papers, Books &c before his Departure to Otho Hamilton Esq he being willing to Act & Accept of the same & then adjourned until to Morrow at Nine a Clock."³¹

There is a hint that William and Elizabeth might have considered remaining in Britain permanently, for in September 1736 Erasmus Philipps wrote to the Governor of Nova Scotia: 'It is reported here (Annapolis Royal) that Mr Shirreff is not to return to his place.'³²

Charles Shirreff, the subject of this paper, was baptised on 5 October 1737 at St Andrew's Church Holborn. On the same day, and at the same church, the register records the baptism of Charles's cousin George, son of John Shirreff, William's older brother. The address given for the parents of both children is Brownlow Street, Holborn.

If William was present at Charles's baptism he must have made a swift exit, for as we have seen earlier he is recorded as having been present at The First Lodge, Boston on 14 November 1737. The sailing time from England to Nova Scotia in the 1730s was reckoned to be anything from four to six weeks.

There is no doubt that William and Elizabeth did make their way back to Annapolis Royal, and that Charles Shirreff lived at Annapolis Royal until his fifth birthday, before removing with his father and mother to Boston. In 1754 the seventeen year old Charles, along with John Hamilton and Alexander Hay, witnessed his father's will in which his entire estate was bequeathed to:

my dearly beloved wife Elizabeth whom I have, through the knowledge of the motherly care of and the affection she has towards our children, by this my last will and testament, nominated, appointed and willed to be my sole executrix.

Charles Joins the Army

On 2 June 1755 Charles Shirreff became a soldier with a commission as Ensign in the 45th Foot, which had only recently arrived in America to strengthen the English presence in opposition to the French and Acadian settlers and their indigenous allies. The struggle to expel the French had been going on for some time, and would end only with Wolfe's capture of Quebec. In the same regiment was the son of Erasmus James Philips, Erasmus John who became a lieutenant in October 1755.

Charles's undistinguished life as a soldier began just a fortnight before Fort Cumberland (Beausejour) was overrun and held by the British. The 45th Regiment became part of the garrison there.

³¹ Minutes of His Majesty's Council at Annapolis Royal 1736–1749. Public archives of Nova Scotia 1967.

³² Letter from Erasmus James Philipps to the Governor of Nova Scotia, September 3 1736.

In his book *Redcoats, The British Soldier and War in the Americas 1755–1763* Stephen Brumwell describes an event which informs on the character of the young Charles, and which almost put an end to his military career before it had begun. Charles fell out with Ensign William Wetherhead of the 47th Regiment and challenged him to a duel. There had been an argument over a garden that Shirreff shared with Wetherhead who refused to respond to the duel unless Shirreff addressed his challenge in writing. The canny Wetherhead immediately took the note of challenge to his commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Montague Wilmot of the 45th Foot. Shirreff was summoned to a court martial. The note read as follows:

Sir, As I am Certain in many things You have endeavoured to hurt my Character, and have done it this day, by setting forth among the Officers of this Garrison, that I behaved like a dirty Rascal, for which I must insist upon your making me a proper acknowledgement before the Officers of the Garrison, or if not, that you will meet me tomorrow morning, with your Sword, behind the Hutts, I am sir, your humble Servt, Charles Shirreff.³³

At the hearing Shirreff admitted writing the letter, but in view of the slanderous comments he had to endure from Wetherhead he considered he had no option but to defend his honour. In his defence he told the court: ‘I conceived I should be unworthy to bear His Majesty’s Commission, if I did not endeavour to clear up my Reputation.’³⁴

Of course he was found guilty and sentenced to be cashiered, but in a strange *volte face* the court rescinded his sentence and punished Wetherhead. Shirreff, in their opinion, had endured ‘very gross & bad Treatment’ from his adversary and had attempted everything in his power to obtain ‘proper Concessions’ before resorting to a challenge.³⁵ The court went even further, commenting that had Shirreff not challenged Wetherhead he ‘might have fallen into a breach of the 23rd Article of the 15th Section of the Articles of War’ – conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman.³⁶ Again in defence of Shirreff, his commanding officer gave evidence that the young Ensign had invariably behaved in a proper manner. The members of the court unanimously upheld Shirreff’s appeal. London agreed and the sentence was reversed. The unfortunate Wetherhead was charged the following day with having ‘aspersed the character of Ensign Shirreff in a manner unbecoming an Officer and Gentleman’, and was discharged from his commission.³⁷

Three years later, in 1758, the British army in America which included the 45th Regiment of Ensign Charles Shirreff, and the 47th Regiment of his brother, William Chris-

³³ S. Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas 1755–1763* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89–90.

³⁴ Brumwell, *Redcoats*, 90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

topher took part in the second siege of Louisbourg. Control of this sheltered port was vital to any army that considered occupying Quebec and that was exactly Prime Minister William Pitt's ambition. The fort was captured and while Wolfe's army including Charles's brother pressed on to lay siege to Quebec, Shirreff was among those left behind to garrison the fort. It was here, according to letters written almost thirty years later, that the twenty-one-year old Charles Shirreff was initiated into Freemasonry. We do not know in which lodge Shirreff was initiated. The only clue we have, again from his letters, is that it worked in the Antient way.

Regiments that took part at the Battle of Louisbourg were, according to Gould, the

1st, 15th, 17th, 22nd, 28th, 35th, 40th, 45th, 47th, 48th, and 58th Foot Regiments; two battalions of the Royal American (both) Regiment, and Fraser's (78th) Highlanders.

Of these regiments, all but four are known to have had Lodges attached to them at the time of the siege.³⁸

The 45th did not have an attached lodge until 1766. In 1757 the lodges attached to the 1st, 15th, 17th, 22nd, 28th, 35th, 47th, 48th and 58th regiments held warrants from the Irish Constitution. In a letter to William White, written almost thirty years later, Shirreff implies that he was never a member of a lodge in the Irish constitution. There were family connections with the 40th Regiment which had been raised in Annapolis Royal. The Provincial Grand Master, Captain Erasmus James Philips, served in it as did the sons of Charles's friend Otho Hamilton. Soon after 1755 the 40th Regiment bought the warrant of a recently deceased Coventry lodge, No. 42 on the register of the Antients' Grand Lodge. Perhaps this was the lodge into which the young Charles Shirreff was initiated into Freemasonry.

Marriage

On 5 December 1760 Charles Shirreff, promoted to Lieutenant the previous April, was married at Trinity Church, Boston, to Sarah Benest, the daughter of Philippe Benest originally of the island of Jersey.³⁹ Benest was a ship owner who had married Elizabeth Mager, the sister of Joshua Mager, a fellow Jersey man, one who had made a great deal of money as a ship owner and victualler of the Royal Navy in Annapolis and Halifax. Mager was also suspected of being a smuggler. He later became Member of Parliament for Poole. The Benest family owned property in Jersey and in Boston.

³⁸ Gould, *History of Freemasonry Throughout the World*, Vol. 4, 'Freemasonry in the Dominion of Canada and Newfoundland' (New York: Scribners), 34.

³⁹ Mrs Yvonne Walton. Letters to the Author.

Charles leaves the army and travels to Jersey

In 1763 with the end of the French and Indian Wars many British officers returned to Europe on half pay. In the 1764 Army List Lieutenant Charles Shirreff's name appears for the last time. For in this year Sarah's father Philippe died and 'under the terms of his will his daughter Sarah inherited one third of his estate. Jersey law meant that she inherited in her own right.'⁴⁰ On the strength of this inheritance Charles left the army and together with Sarah travelled to Jersey. Charles might have had visions of remaining on the island, perhaps setting up in business. We know for certain that one of his immediate priorities was to form a lodge of Freemasons at St Helier. A. C. F. Jackson in his paper in *AQC* 86 gives the full story of the petition and the formation of Union Lodge No. 1. The Provincial Grand Master for Guernsey, Jersey, Alderney, Sarke, and Arme (Herm), Thomas Dobree, granted a warrant and very soon Shirreff as first Master was conducting ceremonies. One of the first certificates Shirreff signed was that of Philip Benest, the son of Philippe. Thus by 1 April 1765 Charles's brother-in-law became his brother. Union No. 1 continued to work until 1813.

On 28 January 1767 Captain William Shirreff applied, on behalf of his brother, Lieutenant Charles Shirreff and Captain William Handfield for a grant of 5,000 acres of land in the township of Halifax. By this time Charles had left the army and North America.

In the following year, however, Charles Shirreff's father died and Charles and Sarah left Jersey. Between 1768 and 1775 I have been able to discover nothing of the whereabouts of Charles and Sarah. It is likely that they travelled to Boston and remained in North America until the political situation forced Charles once again to become involved with the British Army, this time as a Barrack Master at Fort St Augustine in Eastern Florida.

Back with the Army but in a Backwater

The following five years were not a happy time for the Shirreffs. The War of American Independence had begun and hopes of owning land and settling in New York or even Halifax were receding. Added to that East Florida was starved of supplies and short of military protection. There was a possibility of attack by colonials from Georgia in the East. They were stuck in a dry, unhealthy, dusty, and unsafe place.

In accordance with the Treaty of Paris (1763) the Spanish inhabitants of St Augustine had left the city in 1764, when Florida was ceded to the British who divided the peninsula into two colonies: East and West. James Grant was appointed Governor of East Florida, with John Moultrie serving as Lieutenant Governor. In 1775 Britain had gone to war with the colonists, in 1778 with France and, in the following year, with Spain. The situation at East Florida was perilous as well as uncomfortable.

⁴⁰ Mrs Yvonne Walton. Letters to the Author.

On 25 September 1775 Charles writes to his brother, Major William Christopher Shirreff, who is in Boston with his regiment, the 47th Foot. Charles is concerned that William has recently been wounded and that he had not received news from him. He wishes he was with his friends in the 45th who are also in Boston: ‘As things have since fell out, I should have got a Company; and had I now my choice, I would sooner be in that station, and have a brush every day than remain in oblivion here.’⁴¹

There was concern that the Georgians would attack and burn St Augustine, and now that the Fourteenth regiment had been withdrawn to Boston, the likelihood of this happening had increased. Some relief troops were expected from Pensacola in West Florida but, he complained that they had not arrived. Supplies used to arrive from Charlestown and New York, but owing to the war they had ceased: ‘I sincerely wish these troubles were at an end, for they very materially affect every individual.’⁴² In a letter to General Robertson, written the same day, Charles wrote:

And in this place you hear nothing; it is the most miserable hole I ever was in. A man should be well paid that lives in it. Could I have foreseen what has since happened, before I left the Army, I should at this day have been with my corps at Boston, and have had a Company, as I was so old a Lieutenant, which I should have liked much better than the office I now hold in its present state. But could I get paid as Fort Adjutant, I should then be happy; for at present my income barely serves half the demands absolutely necessary for sustenance. But I am in hopes, with your assistance and that of other friends, I may get my pay augmented, as there are many instances that a Brigade-Major has five shillings, and a Town Adjutant, four shillings per diem.⁴³

Shirreff’s plea for a better salary was answered, for by 1 October of the same year he is listed as Fort Adjutant as well as Barrack Master, with the rank of Brigade-Major. His salary was increased to ten shillings and sixpence a day.

Charles Shirreff is beginning to sound a little bit of an ‘Eeyore’; nothing ever seems to go right for him. Two days after complaining to General Robertson, Brigade General Frederick George Mulcaster wrote to General Grant, Governor of the Province:

The Barrack Master Shirreff I cannot say so much for, for I do not see anyone who likes him, not for being a bad person but for being a fool, talking nonsense, a blundering forwardness, and although I believe wishing to be civil, very rude by all accounts. He is as unlike his brother in Boston as two can well be.⁴⁴

The Brigade General went on to say:

⁴¹ Charles Shirreff to Major William Shirreff at Boston, 25 September 1775. American Archives Vol. 3.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Charles Shirreff to General Robertson 25 September 1775. Ibid

⁴⁴ *The Remembrancer, Or Impartial Repository of Public Events*, Volume 4 1775 (London: J. Almon (Ed), 1775-[1784]).

I am very well acquainted with him, and I am only pestered by his continually plaguing me to come and drink tea with his wife, who is as stiff and prim as Mrs Catherwood: however he dines with me tomorrow, and also Chamier . . .

To the embarrassment and annoyance of Shirreff this letter was published two years later in *The Remembrancer, or Impartial Repository of Public Events*. His recourse was to write to *The Remembrancer* to seek an apology.

I beg you will publish the underwritten, being an answer to a part of a letter under the signature of Frederick George Mulcaster, and directed to General Grant, which is in one of your former volumes:

St Augustine, 16th June 1777

Sir

From the first of my introduction to you, and the letter you received from Governor Grant in my favour, made me happy, in thinking I had a Gentleman whom I might call a friend in St Augustine; and on parting, you were pleased to tell me, if it lay in your way to serve me, I should not be forgot. In perusing *The Remembrancer* No. 4, I find among other letters contained in it, one under your signature, directed to Governor Grant, which I now send you a copy of that part respecting myself.

Shirreff then offers Mulcaster a hook on which to hang an apology:

As I am sensible the intention of the rebels is to endeavour to set friends at variance by spurious additions and that I think this is some of their production, I cannot possibly surmise that any Gentleman could possibly act in this manner, as I have for twenty five years past lived with reputation, and should never think of coming to East Florida to lose it.⁴⁵

At this distance it not possible to determine whether Mulcaster's letter in *The Remembrancer* was a genuine transcription or whether, as Shirreff suggests, it had been doctored by the rebels. However it might reasonably be inferred that the portrait Mulcaster is alleged to have drawn is genuine. Two pieces of evidence exist for this. First, Shirreff was an officer of such minor importance he was hardly worth the effort of traducing. Secondly the domestic detail contained within the letter and the style of writing match other letters written by Mulcaster from Fort St Augustine.

Whatever the truth, Mulcaster graciously offered an appeasement:

New York, July 15th 1777

Sir,

I was a good deal surprised at the contents of your letter which I received a few days ago. – You must easily have judged from every circumstance of my behaviour to you

⁴⁵ Ibid, Volume 6 1777

before as well as after General Grant's recommendation, that my sentiments towards you must be very different from the letter inserted by some malicious, ill-designing person, not a word of which is in the least like my style of writing; my recommendations of you, and of your attention to your office, to the Commander in Chief since my arrival here, and using my utmost assistance to increase your income, is a strong proof that my opinion of you was very different from that apprized in my former letter; from all these circumstances, I am sure you must be persuaded how much I not only wished, but endeavoured to be your friend, consequently could not have represented you in a different character from that sure you must believe me, as I always have been,
Your sincere friend,
Fred. Geo. Mulcaster⁴⁶

We are not sure when Shirreff arrived at St Augustine, but suspect that it was with the 14th Regiment when it arrived in East Florida from Boston in April 1773. When they arrived they found a lodge already working in the town. In 1768 the Grand Lodge of Scotland warranted a lodge at St Augustine. In a letter dated 15 March of that year the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Scotland had written:

Having read a petition from James Grant, Esq., Governor of the Province of East Florida, Henry Cunningham, late Senior Warden of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and many other brethren residing in the province aforesaid, craving a Charter for holding a Lodge there by the stile [*sic*] and title of Grant's East Florida Lodge, and also entreating the Grand Lodge would appoint the said Governor James Grant Provincial Grand Master over the Lodges in the Southern District of North America, the Grand Lodge granted the desire of that petition, and authorised a Charter to be made out accordingly, and likewise a Commission appointing Governor James Grant, Provincial Grand Master over the Lodges in the Southern District of North America.⁴⁷

It is clear from Shirreff's letters that he became a joining member of this Scottish lodge, and was soon playing an important role in its administration.

The 14th Foot had been granted a travelling warrant from the Grand Lodge of the Antients in 1759. They were given the number 58. The Minutes of the Grand Lodge of the Antients record on 6 March 1776: 'Ordered a renewal of Warrant of No. 58 to 14th Regiment of Foot, whenever they should require it, at present at St Augustine's.'⁴⁸

The lodge number appears in *Ahimon Rezon* in 1804, 1807 and 1813, but it was likely it did not survive long after the return from America in 1785 at the termination of the American war.

⁴⁶ Ibid, Volume 6 1777

⁴⁷From the Archives of Grand Lodge of Florida. A. F. Hebbeler, *Colonial American Freemasonry to 1770* (University of N. Dakota, 1988), 26.

⁴⁸ Gould, *History of Freemasonry Throughout the World*, Volume 5 (New York: Scribners), 222–23.

From his own words to William White:

... the last (lodge) I belonged to was in E: Florida, and in the Gd Lodge there I presided in every Capacity: in 1778 the Duke of Atholl was Gd Mr. & Wm. Dickey, Esq., was D.G.Mr & Transmitted to me: at St Augustine a Warrant for the 14th Regt., and in those Lodges I worked as I ever did, and in 80 when I left the Province there were three Respectable Body's, besides the Grand one.⁴⁹

We might assume then that as well as the Scottish lodge, Shirreff joined Lodge No. 58 and later requested, for whatever reason, a renewal of the warrant for Lodge No. 58. Jackson suggests that Shirreff could have acted as Deputy Provincial Grand Master to Grant while in Florida, and Shirreff's comment that while in East Florida he had 'presided in every Capacity' might well be taken to substantiate that.

Three years after Shirreff's arrival at Fort St Augustine a detachment of the 60th Regiment arrived under the command of Colonel Augustine Prevost. Swiss born, Prevost had fought for the British in North America and the Caribbean for most of his career. He was also a Freemason. What is more, while serving in Albany, New York, as a young officer, he had been introduced to the Rite of Perfection and had been initiated as far as the fourteenth degree. In 1774 the regiment was stationed in Jamaica. While there Prevost was introduced to Henry Francken, who continued his education in the remaining eleven degrees, and eventually rewarded him with a patent as a Deputy Inspector General. It is certain, as circumstances later reveal, that Prevost introduced Shirreff to the Rite of Perfection at Fort St Augustine over a period between 1776 and 1778. That being so, it can have been none other than Prevost who issued a patent to Major Charles Shirreff conferring upon him the rank of Deputy Inspector General.⁵⁰

In January 1779 the 60th with Prevost left Fort St Augustine under orders to defeat the colonists in Georgia. After the successful siege of Savannah in 1780 Prevost, now fifty nine years old, decided that his fighting years were over and requested leave to retire. After a short delay during which his replacement was captured by the French at sea, Prevost retired to England, buying a imposing mansion and estate called Pricklers at East Barnet. He re-named the estate, Greenhill Grove.

Following the Treaty of Paris (January 1783) the Spanish repossessed several of their former territories including East Florida, and British residents were given eighteen months to relocate.

⁴⁹ Letter from Charles Shirreff to William White, Grand Secretary, 27 June 1785, UGLE GBR 1991 HC 6/B/4 – source not clear

⁵⁰ F. W. Seal-Coon, 'The Island of Jamaica and its Regional Masonic Influence' *AQC* 104 (1991), 175.

Shirreff leaves America

Shirreff writes that he left Florida in 1780. He had applied for land in New York in 1766. This was granted to him in 1773. By then, however, the political situation in North America had deteriorated and two years later in 1775 Britain and the colonists were at war. The result of that conflict robbed Shirreff of his New York land and of the hope of retirement in Boston where he had spent his formative years.

The situation for second generation British Americans who had fought for King George was by 1780 uncertain, to say the least. If they had assets, land, or property, these were likely to be escheated. If they had not accumulated personal wealth during their service they would have as an only source of income their half pay pension which could only be paid in Britain.

In reality, for William Christopher Shirreff, who had accumulated much wealth as a Deputy Quartermaster General; for Prevost, who had had similar good fortune, and even for lowly Brigade Majors like Charles Shirreff, there was only one sanctuary – the kingdom which had employed them for much of their careers.

Charles Shirreff travelled to England between 1781 and 1784. Probably earlier rather than later. How he was employed between those dates is unknown. However, we might have a clue in a memorial of 1780, which had been entered by Charles's brother William Christopher by now safely retired to his Alresford estate:

Memorial from William Shirreff for the pay of his late father, appointed Judge Advocate of the forces at Annapolis Royal in 1718, without salary. And on the recommendation of a Board of General Officers a new commission was issued in 1730 with a salary attached, the arrears of which amount to £2,774 sterling. In the body of the memorial it is stated that Shirreff, the memorialist, has served for 25 years. His first commission, so far as can be traced, was given the 25th June 1755 so that the possible date of the memorial is 1780.⁵¹

Do we discover a pattern in Charles's life? He leaves the army in 1764 on the death of his wife's father and travels to Jersey. He leaves Jersey in 1768 on the news of his own father's demise and returns to Boston. He leaves America for a second time in 1780, synchronous with the granting by the British Government of £2,774 in back pay owing to his late father, claimed by William Christopher. Is Charles following the money?

Whether or not Charles was able to share in the award, which today would have a value equivalent to half a million pounds, is unknown. There is no hint of a family falling out; during the next few years he visited and stayed with William Christopher in Hampshire on more than one occasion.

⁵¹ Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth, Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts e book, 600–01.

In 1784 or before the couple arrived in the town of Whitchurch in North Shropshire, Charles still complaining that he was on his uppers, having to survive on half pay at two shillings and six pence a day. He had to forfeit all his salary as a Fort Adjutant and was paid half his Barrack Master's pay. In spite of his alleged poverty they rented a fine double fronted villa, Bark Hill House at the top of Bark Hill close to the centre of town.

Charles settles in Shropshire

Why did Charles and Sarah choose to live in Shropshire? I have found no evidence for any relative living in the county. Whitchurch was a parole town, but there is nothing to suggest that he was employed in any capacity connected with parole.

From what we have learned of the character of Shirreff it is possible that he had formulated a strategy that would serve a dual purpose in promoting Freemasonry and in promoting himself. Shropshire was fertile ground for an ambitious, experienced Freemason. In 1785 Freemasonry in the county had almost ceased to exist. There was neither a working lodge nor a Provincial Grand Master. The last to hold that office, George Durant, had died in 1780 and no successor had been named. At the same time the last active lodge in the Province, The Lodge of Friendship at Bridgnorth, had been removed from the register of the Premier Grand Lodge for refusing payments to the Hall Fund.

Secondly, communication with the capital was, for the standard of the day, rather good, with three coaches leaving Shrewsbury for London every twenty four hours. The journey time was sixteen hours.

Thirdly, patents of Deputy Inspectors General of the Rite of Perfection allowed their holders jurisdiction beyond a radius of seventy-five miles of any other ruler of the order. Apart from Augustine Prevost, who clearly held sway for London and the Home Counties, we know of only one other holder of a Deputy Inspector's patent, Jean Paul Rochat, for Scotland. Were Shirreff and Prevost dividing the country into Inspectorates, one taking the Midlands, the other holding the South?

Any reader of the letters to William White would have no doubt about Shirreff's conviction of his own importance as an experienced Mason, one who enjoys

such Extensive powers in the process of this Work (which) proceeds from His Majesty of Prussia, through one of his Deputy Grand Inspector in North America, over all Lodges wherever held at the distance of 25 Leagues from each other Round the Globe, and I have the Honor to be one of the D:G:I: &ca; &ca.⁵²

It was not long after settling in the town that Shirreff set about establishing a Masonic lodge in Whitchurch, just as he had done in Jersey nineteen years earlier. It was not easy; he could find only two Masons to begin with: one who had been initiated in France, 'a

⁵² Letter from Shirreff to William White 15 November 1785; Museum & Library of UGLE GBR1991 6/B/7

nation too fond of intriguing their making of Masons,⁵³ and another who had been initiated at Cambridge. Unlike the situation in Jersey, there was no local Provincial Grand Master to apply to, and a request for assistance from the neighbouring Province of Cheshire was not to his liking: they simply wanted to take the process over and he was having none of that.

He had to seek further for the authority to grant a warrant. For some time Shirreff had suffered from gout and rheumatism, and had sought relief in medicine acquired from a certain Dr Bath of Oxford Street, London. In April 1785 Shirreff wrote to Bath asking for the name and address of the Secretary of the Grand Lodge.⁵⁴

The story of the constitution of the Whitchurch Lodge No. 1 is adequately told by Alexander Graham. There is no need therefore to describe it in detail here. The warrant was granted but only after several months of waiting during which Shirreff's impatience and frustration is evident from his correspondence with a Bro. Sandland and with Bro. Ellames, the Provincial Grand Treasurer of Cheshire. Eventually the lodge was consecrated on 15 November 1785 with Shirreff as Worshipful Master and the Reverend Francis Egerton, the gentleman who had been initiated in France, as the Senior Warden.

It is clear from Shirreff's letters that, at first, he wished to be considered for the office of Provincial Grand Master for Shropshire. He would have been aware that the Antients' Grand Lodge appointed no Provincial Grand Masters in England and Wales; they saw no need for the office. He had recourse therefore only to the Premier Grand Lodge if he sought a high office: 'I do not Learn of any P:G:M: in this County, if I find on seeing you in the Spring it will not Cost me too much: you can put me in the way how to Obtain it.'⁵⁵

In the event he admitted that his financial and social standings did not lend themselves to the highest office, and he recommended his Senior Warden, the Revd Francis Henry Egerton, Vicar of Whitchurch, as a suitable candidate. Egerton had all the right social qualifications. He was the twenty-nine-year old son of the Bishop of Durham, and would in 1823 inherit the title of 8th Earl of Bridgewater. His sojourns at Whitchurch were short and infrequent, which no doubt suited Shirreff, especially after Egerton had offered him the office of Deputy Provincial Grand Master. Egerton's frequent absences allowed Shirreff to govern the Province in his own inimitable style, that is energetically if not always wisely. He was not cautious in his criticism of those whom he felt were deficient in knowledge or experience of Freemasonry. His letters to William White evidence the kind of rudeness and 'blundering forwardness' that General Mulcaster was alleged to have attributed to him in his letter to General Grant.

⁵³ Letter from Shirreff to William White 30 Nov 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/10

⁵⁴ Letter from Shirreff to Dr Bath 23 April 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/2

⁵⁵ Letter from Shirreff to William White 17 November 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/9

Regarding the integrity of the Revd Francis Henry Egerton, who had been initiated into Freemasonry in Paris, Shirreff wrote,

I do not give up my Authority in that Lodge, being in the Superior Degrees which they have not Attain'd to, I beg you will According to the English Constitution draw this Line: as I have some who have been made in France: and as that Nation are too fond of Intriguing their making of Masons was not Altogether to my way of thinking – as a Bror, this is to yourself only.⁵⁶

Regarding his opinion of the Provincial Grand Master of Cheshire, Sir Robert Salisbury Cotton, Shirreff wrote: 'Sr Robrt., was pleas'd to tell me himself he knew nothing of Masonry, and between you & as Brors. It surprised to hear such a Declaration from a P:G:M: & it hurt me.'⁵⁷

In Shirreff's defence we know that he suffered greatly from gout and from rheumatism which no doubt contributed to his irascibility. Crapulous he could easily become in his letters, and no doubt overbearing in his attitude to those he considered inferior in the Craft. In a letter to Bro. Sandland whom he had charged with locating in London the necessary tools and jewels of a lodge, Shirreff could not hide his irritation at the delay in receiving a timely answer to his request for a warrant:

I did not think a Requisition from a Bror., who has arriv'd to these Honours, Could after the many Lers., he has wrote, to those whose business it was to have Attended to them, should have treated them in that Slight manner as I have experience'd, which hurts me in a twofold manner, in the 1st place as the Order in Genl. Loses ground by the Demur: And 2dly., fearing those Employ'd in the highest Spheres (as I have but too often know) may be Compar'd to a Rusty Nail, not knowing what the Light is, that has been Communicated to them, futher than the knowledge of attending to the Feasts, &ca.⁵⁸

During his ten years as Deputy Provincial Grand Master Shirreff warranted or assisted in founding three other lodges in Shropshire, The Salopian Lodge in 1788, the Egerton Lodge or Whitchurch No. 2, and the Wrekin Lodge at Wellington. Only the Salopian Lodge No. 262 remains in existence today.

On 31 August 1790 Shirreff represented the absent Provincial Grand Master at a procession to St Mary's Church, Shrewsbury, attended by eighty-eight from the Province and beyond. The Church service was followed by a lodge meeting and a dinner. At some point in the proceedings an altercation took place between Shirreff and an unnamed brother. This incident has over the years become embellished with a significance that

⁵⁶ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 30 November 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/10

⁵⁷ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 31 October 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/7

⁵⁸ Letter Charles Shirreff to Bro Sandland 8 October 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/6

it probably never deserved. The reluctance of Shirreff to name his adversary generated much conjecture. He writes to White:

... everything was conducted to give satisfaction, and would have been completely so had it not been for the Officiousness of a Brother, whom I was Obliged to call to order several times; he was a visitor & the most troublesome one I ever had to manage, the Brethren thought that I was too mild with him, but Lenity I think at all times is best. He is by his own Acct. a very great Mason, now Master of three Lodges, and a SW of a fourth Lodge in London, & pretends to have a thorough knowledge of you & my worthy Bro. Hesseltine, & I am since inform'd he disapproves of my Conduct, & means to relate it to you, if so you will know the Man, and that is my reason for not Announceing his Name in this, in hopes he may think better of it; he talks much of his power, and if Justice is not done him, he can have you & I turn'd out of office ...⁵⁹

White was naturally curious to learn the identity of this person who allegedly was a threat to his tenure as Grand Secretary. In response he asked Shirreff to divulge the miscreant's identity. Shirreff replied on 11 January 1791:

The name you wish to know-shall inform you, but it must rest with your self, I take him to be a very Eccentric Man. Look at your Alphabet in the 7th Degree, and observe the follg. – will tell you his name ...⁶⁰

At this point in the letter Shirreff provides William White with a cipher which has puzzled generations of researchers, probably quite as much as it would have puzzled White. Why did Shirreff not simply give the name of the troublesome individual?

Alexander Graham in his 1892 *History of Freemasonry in the Province of Shropshire* may have been the first to suggest the visitor was none other than Thomas Dunckerley: 'I could not interpret the cypher of the 7th or any other degree, but I believe the person referred to was Thomas Dunckerley ...'⁶¹

Geoffrey Knocker was of the same opinion – he was a little more certain and happy to embellish the story:

... there is good reason for concluding (the visitor) to have been Bro. Thomas Dunckerley, at that time Provincial Grand Master of the neighbouring Province of Hereford, took occasion to correct several details in Shirreff's working, which naturally started a dispute, which in time was probably the reason that he was not re-appointed to the Deputyship, and caused his retirement from the Province.⁶²

⁵⁹ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 14th September 1790 GBR1991 HC 6/B/33

⁶⁰ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 11th January 1791 GBR1991 HC 6/B/34

⁶¹ Graham, *History of Freemasonry in Shropshire* (Shrewsbury: Adnitt & Naunton, 1892), 20.

⁶² Knocker, 'A Moderns Lodge in the Hands of the Antients', 125.

Knocker doesn't inform us what that 'good reason' was. Nevertheless, the story gained in traction over the years. As late as 2012 Susan Mitchell Sommers in her biography of Dunckerley repeats the allegation with even greater confidence: '... Shirreff's description of how a person who must have been Dunckerley dealt with common Masons he found insufficiently respectful...'⁶³

On the other hand, A. C. F. Jackson doubted that the man who had so discomfited Shirreff was Dunckerley. Jackson asked Terry Haunch, Librarian at Grand Lodge, to decipher Shirreff's code. The name that Haunch came up with was Grant. However, Jackson goes on to make an incorrect assumption: 'A Bro. Grant, Master of the Salopian Lodge, was present at the meeting and there is no doubt that he was the interrupter.'⁶⁴

Unfortunately, Jackson doesn't seem to have read his Graham very closely. The Masters of the Salopian Lodge in 1790 were William Neale and later Thomas Loxdale. Not only was there never a Master of the lodge called Grant; there was no member of the lodge with that surname for the next hundred years.

Harold Temperton, in his *History of Craft Freemasonry in Shropshire* (1981) agrees that Dunckerley's name does not appear in the Minutes of the Salopian Lodge for the 31 August meeting, but finds that a Bro. Grant is recorded there, Master of Lodge No. 344 in Liverpool.⁶⁵

In spite of a total lack of evidence the temptation to put Dunckerley in one corner and Shirreff in the opposite has been too great for some researchers to resist—the avowed Antient pitted against the zealous Modern is an attractive conceit. Likewise there have been suggestions that Shirreff's fall from favour with his Provincial Grand Master, and even with the members of Salopian Lodge,⁶⁶ have their origin in Shirreff's insisting on working the Antient way. Once again there is no evidence for this. Certainly Shirreff's forty two 'Rules and Regulations for the Good Government of the Whitchurch Lodge' accorded more with Antients practice than Moderns. He did insist on Deacons and on the observance of the festivals of the Saints John. He was happy to waive a joining fee to 'those Calling themselves Modern Masons.' He had been weaned on Antient Masonry and knew 'no other.' However, on more than one occasion in his correspondence with William White he emphasizes his belief that in reality very little differentiated Masons of differing constitutions.

I am the more convinc'd I was Introduced into this Noble Institution according to the most Antient manner, & that you may Understand me more Clearly, when a Candidate is presented to me, my first Instruction to him Springs from the Second Ler., of

⁶³ S. M. Sommers, *Thomas Dunckerley and English Freemasonry* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012)

⁶⁴ Jackson, 'Freemasonry in Jersey', 185.

⁶⁵ H. Temperton, *A History of Craft Freemasonry in Shropshire 1732–1982* (Shrewsbury: Privately Published, 1982), 21.

⁶⁶ Any argument with the Salopian Lodge appears baseless. He was accepted as a joining member in 1794.

the Alphabet, and I never knew but one Lodge since I have been a Bror., that Ever begun with the ninth Ler. I have met Sevl., Brothers that have been Initiated so: but all such I was from the first told were Call'd Modern Masons, and as I have been in the Society upwards of 32 years, have Represented many Bodys, & being fond of it, I never miss'd.,visiting Lodges when in my power, & always found them of my Sentiment and workd in the same Manner – Except the one Already mention'd, where I gain'd admittance and found them Regular in their proceedings & their Method of making, &ca., very little Diff't., from that of mine, so that I lament there should be any Dissensions in the Society . . .⁶⁷

This extract from Shirreff's letter to William White, Grand Secretary of the Premier Grand Lodge, is key to an understanding not only of Shirreff's personality but also to an appreciation of the relationship between the Premier Grand Lodge and the Antients in the latter years of the eighteenth century, when the shades of Dunckerley and Dermott were fading and tentative moves towards unification had begun.⁶⁸

It will appear to anyone who makes a study of the life and times of Charles Shirreff that he had an overblown sense of his importance . He never courted popularity. He considered himself the superior of his Provincial Grand Master in matters Masonic, and it is likely that the two never really liked each other. Egerton, an eccentric but learned man, a Fellow of the Royal Society and a writer of treatises on Natural Theology, might have found it difficult to work in co-operation with the bluff, officious, and overbearing old soldier. The relationship which began in 1785 when Shirreff as primus Master appointed Egerton as his Senior Warden came to an unhappy end, when in 1795 Shirreff was sacked for not giving 'Satisfaction to the Lodges under his Jurisdiction.'⁶⁹

Shirreff acted in a predictable manner, first castigating Egerton in letters to William White: 'You may depend upon it, so long as the Present person Acts, Masonry will dwindle, for he is despised by us all.'⁷⁰

And again, in requesting from Grand Lodge a remedy for his complaint against his Provincial Grand Master:

. . . that any Power should be placed in the hands of any one who cares not a farthing for Masonry, this I know as a fact, & I now shall observe the old Maxim, vizt:- 'Meddle with Dirt & it will stick to your fingers' – as I have now done with him for ever.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Letter from Charles Shirreff to William White, 27 June 1785; GBR 1991 HC/6/B/4

⁶⁸ See Lepper, 'The Traditioners', 186. In March 1766 William Dickey, a stalwart of the Antients, was made a Moderns Mason.

⁶⁹ Letter from Charles Shirreff to the Brethren of No. 1 Lodge Whitchurch, 27 December 1794.

⁷⁰ Letter from Charles Shirreff to William White, January 1795; GBR1991 HC 6/B/46

⁷¹ Ibid.

Thirdly, by writing a letter to all the lodges under Egerton's jurisdiction, in North Wales and Staffordshire as well as Shropshire, requesting support. To his surprise only three lodges responded. The reaction of two was 'satisfactory', but only one, the Whitchurch No. 1, was 'very much so.' There were few, it appears, upset to see him go. No doubt his 'blundering forwardness' had been the reason rather than his adherence to a specific way of working.

Shirreff's final act was to claim that a higher authority was calling him away. His brother was in London and Shirreff was expecting to be called to government employment:

For this year past, I have had every reason to Expect to have had an appointment from Government, wch has kept me in a state of suspense, and still prevents me from follg. Any plan til it is decided . . .⁷²

It is doubtful whether the government did have plans for half-pay Major Shirreff or that his brother would have influence. Shirreff did travel to London on occasions, but he seems to have had little to do with William Christopher, who by now was a Hampshire Squire on a general's pension with a small fortune he had acquired in North America, and had a son, William Henry, who was to become a Rear Admiral of the Blue. William and Charles were indeed at opposite poles as Mulcaster had suggested.

Summing Up: Antient or Modern?

Charles's military career had been unremarkable; his social skills appeared to be limited yet the energy he put into his Freemasonry was prodigious. In his dealings with Grand Lodges he was pragmatic, even expedient. The Union Lodge No1, Jersey had been constituted by warrant from the Premier Grand Lodge simply because it was the easiest way to get a warrant. In all his dealings, time was of the essence. In Jersey there was a local authority to whom he could make his application. The fact that he was applying to an appointee of the premier Grand Lodge was of no importance to him. The result, writes A. C. F. Jackson, ' . . . was a Modern lodge settling down to work Antient procedures.'⁷³

Jackson puts this down to youthful ignorance on Shirreff's part:

It was quite possible at this stage of his Masonic career – he was only about 25 or 26 – Shirreff did not know that he was applying for a Modern Warrant for a lodge which he intended to be Antient.⁷⁴

I don't believe this theory does justice to Shirreff any more than Alexander Graham's suggestion that in making application to William White for the Whitchurch lodge twenty years later, he had no real idea to whom he was addressing his letters. In those letters

⁷² Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 31st December 1795 GBR1991 HC 6/B/49

⁷³ A. C. F. Jackson Freemasonry in Jersey AQC86 1973

⁷⁴ Ibid.

to White, Shirreff demonstrates that he was well aware of the differences that existed between different “Bodys” and at the same time makes clear his allegiance to the Antients. Was he a Traditioner of the type suggested by Lepper in AQC 56? It is possible; Shirreff by his own admission was not only a Royal Arch Mason but also a Knight Templar and a Deputy Grand Inspector in the Rite of Perfection, the “ne plus ultra”. This is unlikely to have been the career of a Modern Mason; much more likely at this time for a Mason brought up in an Antients’ Lodge and one who had experience of several constitutions abroad. In fact Shirreff dismissed the differences in practice between Antient and Modern:

Except in one Lodge in America our Wt., was from the Gd. Lodge in Scotland: all others I was in held by Wt. from the Gd. Lodge in England: the Last I belonged to was in E: Florida, & in the Gd Lodge there I presided in every Capacity: in 78 the Duke of Atholl was Gd. Mr. & William Dickey, Esq., was D. G. Mr., & Transmitted to me: at St Augustine a Warrant for the 14th Regt., & in those Lodges I worked as I ever did, & in 80 when I left that Province there were three Respectable Body’s besides the Grand one, so that upon the whole I think we are one and the same thing, & take Lodges in General I never found any of them but had Diff. Modes of working, &ca.⁷⁵

It is only natural to cherish the working of one’s mother lodge. Shirreff demonstrated loyalty throughout his life, to Masonry and to family. He stuck tenaciously to every decision he made, good or bad. He was inclined to rigidity, was unhappy when his enterprises were challenged or frustrated and voluble in his complaint. Any significant deviation from his established ritual in his own lodge was unwelcome even if tolerated in lodges he visited outside his jurisdiction.

When we arrive at the application for a warrant to constitute a lodge at Whitchurch in the latter part of 1785, we are faced with a question which has challenged a number of Masonic researchers including Sadler, Jackson and Graham. Why did Shirreff write to the Grand Secretary of the Moderns for a Warrant? Was Shirreff a ‘Traditioner’ as described by Lepper – a man who expressed fealty to the Premier Grand Lodge and to the original landmarks of the Craft simultaneously? Was he ignorant of the state of Masonic politics in 1785? Did he believe he was writing to the Grand Secretary of the Antients’ Grand Lodge? Such suggestions have been made and all remain conjecture. Or do they?

So was he a ‘Traditioner’? In reality he was a traditionalist and a pragmatist. He had experienced no material difference in the organisation and ritual of Masons in the three Grand Lodges of which he had been a member

Was he ignorant of the two state system within English Freemasonry that had existed from 1751 and would continue until after his death? Certainly not, his letters to White confirm this. So, to be clear, first and foremost, if he was going to be involved in England

⁷⁵ Letter from Charles Shirreff to William White, Grand Secretary, 27 June 1785. UGLE GBR 1991 HC 6/B/4.

with any Grand Lodge it was to be with the Premier Grand Lodge the one he described in a letter to White, as follows:

Thus far I think it a Duty Incumbent upon me to Deliver you my Sentiments in Answer to yor. Ler; and at the same time to Offer you my thanks for the good Intentions you have therein express'd towards the New Lodge to be Establish'd here, and should any fresh Orders arrive to me from the Superior of all G:L: joining this to your District none will be more ready to Obey Its Injunctions, in a true Masonica Stile than Sir, Your Friend and B.M. C. Shirreff.”⁷⁶

Did he really think that William White was the Grand Secretary of the Antients Grand Lodge? I don't for a minute believe this to have been the case. Simple research would have informed him this wasn't the case. Conversation with Dr Bath and other London correspondents would have undoubtedly cured him of any such error.

The question of why Shirreff applied to the Premier Grand Lodge for the Whitchurch Lodge might be better turned on its head. Why would the Grand Secretary look favourably upon a man who at every opportunity let it be known that he was “an Antient Mason”? There could several reasons why White was so accommodating.

The Historical Context:

1. 1783–1785 witnessed the return to England and Ireland of many thousands of English soldiers mainly from North America at the end of the War of Independence. There were many Masons returning, Scottish, Irish, Antient and Modern. The popularity of the Antients' Grand Lodge had been rising and the premier Grand Lodge needed to ‘capture’ members in order to stay ahead, experienced Masons such as Shirreff would have been doubly welcome.
2. The premier Grand Lodge in 1785 was fighting back after a long period of decline caused by poor management, the erasure of lodges that would not pay the Hall Fund, a generally arrogant approach to Provincial Masons and a belief that its rulers were part of the Whig ascendancy. Fighting back required a tolerant approach.
3. By the middle of the 1780s the influence of Lawrence Dermott was in decline and as R. D. Soames points out in his short biography of the Grand Secretary⁷⁷, later Deputy Grand Master of the Antients, “The world was moving on and not all Antients seem to have been comfortable with denigrating the Moderns.”

⁷⁶ Letter Charles Shirreff to Mr Ellames 14th November 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/8

⁷⁷ Laurence Dermott – Enigma and Trailblazer. A Biography. Page 44. Metropolitan Grand Lodge of London 2019

4. Rulers of the Premier Grand Lodge were joining the ‘higher’ degrees which having first been discouraged by that body, now became attractive. As previously noted, Galloway, Heseltine, Allen, White and Sweetinbourg were members of the Royal Arch. White and Heseltine were interested enough in the Rite of Perfection not only to borrow books on the subject from Shirreff but to be initiated into these degree by this Deputy Grand Inspector General.

What were Shirreff’s motives? A close examination of the letters themselves will give us clues as to psychology of Shirreff himself. He knew what he was doing.

Ambition:

Shirreff was an ambitious man. He not only desired recognition but demanded it. Belief in his own qualities and values sustained him through a life studded with disappointment. His military career had been unexceptional when compared with the careers of his Brother, William Christopher and his nephews Robert Winthrop and William Henry Shirreff. His pension, as a half pay Major, was 2 shillings and sixpence a day. As far as we can determine he was unknown in Shropshire when he arrived but he may have seen fertile country for his Masonic ambition.

Shirreff’s letters to William White, Doctor Bath, and Bro Sandland offer us windows of perception into his personality. Letters invariably begin by advertising his experience as a soldier and his seniority as a Freemason: ‘I beg Leave to Introduce myself to you as an Antient Mason in its highest Degree, have been Master of Sevl. Lodges in America . . .’⁷⁸ He rarely fails to impress upon the addressee his adherence to the Masonry he practiced in North America often follows: ‘I was introduced into this Noble Institution according to the most Antient manner . . .’⁷⁹

Having established his impressive credentials he becomes a supplicant, asking a great favour, always stating that he was doing so in the interest of the Craft, not his own.:

My only motive in being thus particular must & I hope will Convince you, proceeds from a desire. I shall ever retain to promote the Good of the Fraternity, & not to keep my Knowledge in this Sphere Confin’d in my own breast . . .⁸⁰

Occasionally he ends with a coda reinforcing his importance and experience: ‘ . . .as I can by Virtue of my Patent do as I please After the 3 first degrees are obtained: within 75 miles of me’⁸¹

⁷⁸ Letter Charles Shiirreff to William White 1st May 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/3

⁷⁹ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 27th June 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/4

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Although, as we have seen in the case of Erasmus James Philipps, the Antients Grand Lodge did patent Provincial Grand Masters abroad: ‘The idea of Provinces or Provincial Grand Masters was unknown under the Antients Grand Lodge at home.’⁸²

From what we have learned of Shirreff so far, the cachet of being a Provincial Grand Master or even a Deputy Provincial Grand Master would have been sufficient temptation to seek a Warrant from the Moderns.

Social status

Shirreff wanted to constitute what he referred to as a ‘Lodge of Respectability’:

I shall Observe the same Rule in this Lodge as I always did to Admit none but Gentleman, and as this is the first Instance of one Ever known here, in all Probability as I will not admit the 2d Class, they may form a Body, if so I hope their Warrant will express that they are to Look to our Lodge as the Head, &ca., &ca.⁸³

Masonic status:

Shirreff often reminds his correspondent that he ought not to have become involved in the ‘Lower Degrees’:

but as many Respectable persons here are willing to become Members of this Honble. Society & will be a Credit to it, cause me to Relinquish my former Opinion for the good of the Craft: & to become their Master & Form a Body here, and work in the Antient way as I have always done.”⁸⁴

Having after the three first Degrees full Powers Invested in me by Commission to act as I do think proper, for wch. Purpose I am a Deputy Insp. General & Arrived to the Ne Plus Ultra.” your fingers’ - as I have now done with him for ever.”⁸⁵

The final years of Charles Shirreff

No employment in London or with the government turned up. Charles continued to attend the Whitchurch lodge until 1798 in June of which year he was made an Honorary Member. Graham believed that Shirreff moved away, possibly to London but this is not at all clear from later events.

At the St John’s Day meeting of 27th December 1798 the members of Whitchurch Lodge No 1 voted not to support the Hall Fund. This was the beginning of the end. In 1799 we learn from the Register of members sent to the Clerk of the Peace for the County of Salop, there were only thirteen members. Two years later, the lodge reaffirmed its deci-

⁸² John Hamill. Freemasonry Today 4th September 2020

⁸³ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 31st October 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/7

⁸⁴ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 1st May 1785 GBR1991 HC 6/B/3

⁸⁵ Letter Charles Shirreff to Dr Bath 23rd April 1785 GBR HC 6/B/2

sion not to support the Hall Fund. By this time there were only six members residing in Whitchurch and attendance was low. On 25th November 1801 the Lodge was struck from the Register of Grand Lodge and on 25th August 1803 the lodge was opened for the last time. The final entry in the Minute Book was written in December of that year.

Charles's will was written on the 23rd May 1805. Intimations of his own mortality might have been brought about by the death of his brother William Christopher in the previous year. Charles was buried in St Alkmund's Churchyard on the 19th February 1807. The Reverend John Collier, who had been one of the first initiates of the Whitchurch Lodge officiated. His will was proved in May of the following year. The sole beneficiary for her lifetime was Sarah his wife. Residuary beneficiaries were to be

... all and every child and children of my sister Elizabeth Winthrop; Eliza Shirreff, Maria Shirreff and Margaret Shirreff, the daughters of my late Brother William Christopher Shirreff and Richard Augustin Yates and Robert Winthrop Yates, the sons of my niece Margaret Yates as shall be living at the time of my decease.⁸⁶

Sarah left Whitchurch soon after and went to live with her niece, Maria at Chester. Maria had married the Hon. William Grey, Lieutenant Governor of Chester (1802 and 1817) and the son of Earl Grey. She returned to Whitchurch only to be buried next to her husband on October 30th 1815.

The 'ne plus ultra' and the Ancient and Accepted Rite

Shirreff's letters to William White, Dr Bath, Bro Sandland and Bro Ellames suggest that he considered he was superior Masonically, not least because of his induction into the 25th Degree of Masonry.

I don't doubt that it was Lt Colonel Augustine Prevost who had awarded him with his patent as a Deputy Grand Inspector General. Shirreff and Prevost remained in touch after both had taken up residence in England and it seems that there might have been an arrangement whereby Prevost would hold authority in London and the south while Shirreff would hold sway in the Midlands.

Whatever the plan, circumstances frustrated it. First, Shirreff would have to put in a great deal of work to establish Freemasonry in the first three degrees, a task which, perhaps disingenuously, he expressed as being a little beneath his dignity.

I beg Leave to Introduce myself to you as an Antient Mason in Its highest Degree, have been Master of Sevl. Lodges in America & Constituted one in the Island of Jersey of the Registry of Guernsey, & after 32 Years' Service in the Military Line, have made this my Residence, & did not purpose working in the Lower Degrees of Masonry any more...⁸⁷

⁸⁶ The Will of Charles Shirreff. The National Archives PROB 11/1462/34

⁸⁷ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 1st May 1785 GBR1991 HC/ 6/B/3

Secondly, Augustine Prevost fell ill. On 24th April 1786 Shirreff wrote to William White from Greenhill Court, East Barnet apologising in advance if he were to be delayed in his appointment with the Grand Secretary on 3rd May.⁸⁸ It is interesting to note that this letter was not, like previous letters, addressed to Freemasons' Hall but to White's private address at Sion Gardens, Aldermanbury in the City of London.

White and Shirreff breakfasted together on 28th April. It is possible that on the same occasion or at least on this visit he first made acquaintance with other senior members of Grand Lodge or the Grand Stewards' Lodge who were interested in learning more about the higher degrees. These were James Galloway, (Junior Grand Warden in 1781, James Heseltine, (Grand Secretary and Grand Treasurer), John Allen, (Provincial Grand Master for Lancashire and Counsel to the Grand Lodge) and George Sweetinbourg (lawyer of Doctors Commons). On this first occasion, Shirreff lent books on the higher degrees to White.

Prevost died on 4th May and was buried at East Barnet. Shirreff was now in charge. A letter dated 14th June 1786 is addressed for the first time to, 'Dear Brothers'. He thanks White for the return of books he had left with him and is delighted that their content has interested him in pursuing further study.

... it makes me happy to find that what I have Communicated to you is Consonant and that I had the Honor to Inlist two such worthy Brothers into the Superior Degrees of Masonry. As I am one of the Heads it shall ever be my Chief Care to merit your Friendship & when I proceed on with you in the Future, I shall unfold such a Treasure to you that must more and more Convince you of the Sublimity of these Higher Orders and at the same time give me Real pleasure in so doing.⁸⁹

More books are sent under cover of Shirreff's Agent, Samuel Clare of Lisle Street. Further visits are made to Sion Gardens . In June 1788 Shirreff remained in London for a week. On his return to Whitchurch he writes: 'My best Respects to Bros Heseltine, Galloway, Allen &c. I hope you will all Labour hard in the Vineyard & finish off the books Left with you and those you have done with please send me.'⁹⁰

Shirreff visits White and his friends again in the summer of 1789. It is clear that by 1791 he has introduced at least some of the degrees of the Rite of Perfection to White and other members of the Premier Grand Lodge: 'remember me ... to our worthy friends in the Select Body ...'⁹¹

⁸⁸ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White at Sion Gardens, Aldermanbury, 24th April 1786 GBR1991 AR/1146/12. This letter is incorrectly dated to 24th April 1784.

⁸⁹ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 14th June 1786 GBR1991 HC 6/B/15

⁹⁰ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 1st July 1788 GBR1991 HC 6/B/19

⁹¹ Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 27th December 1791 GBR1991 HC 6/B/39

After 1792 Shirreff mentions no further visits to London. His gout and rheumatism were causing him a great deal of pain. In addition, during his return to Whitchurch from London and Hampshire in March 1792 the coach overturned and though he wasn't seriously injured his ribs were bruised. The health of his wife, Sarah was also giving him cause for concern.

Although Shirreff never gives a name to his 'ne plus Ultra', the fact that he tells us that there were twenty five degrees taken together with his description of his patent, from the King of Prussia, makes it clear that we are dealing with The Rite of Perfection, also known as The Rite of the Royal Secret, The Order of the Royal Secret or The Order of the Prince of the Royal Secret.

The origin of the Rite was France. In North America it had been introduced with the constitution of a Loge de Parfaits d'Ecosse, at New Orleans on 12th April 1764. It now became known as the Rite of Perfection, the Scottish Rite or Morin's Rite. The latter after Etienne Morin appointed 'Grand Inspector in all parts of the New World' by the Council of the Grand and Sovereign Lodge of St Jean de Jerusalem.

In 1771, Henry Andrew Francken, a Dutchman living in Jamaica became a naturalised British subject and an interpreter for the British government. He came into contact with Morin in Jamaica who appointed him 'Deputy Inspector General of all the Superior Degrees of Free and Accepted Masons.' Francken was responsible for taking the Rite from the Caribbean to New York and for producing, from 1774 a number of manuscript copies of the ritual of all degrees, translated into English form the French. Francken appointed a number of Deputy Inspectors General, among them, in Jamaica, Augustine Prevost.

Shirreff's letters to William White prove beyond doubt that the Rite of Perfection, or the Scottish Rite was introduced into England at a very high level by Charles Shirreff. The history of the development of the Rite of Perfection into today's Ancient and Accepted Rite, commonly labelled Rose Croix is well known. Even before Shirreff's death the first Supreme Council had gone beyond 25 degrees. Later in the nineteenth century Albert Pike shaped the whole into the thirty three degrees we acknowledge today.

The final note to White on the subject of the Higher Degrees appears in a letter dated 22nd September 1792: 'The Books reached me safe, and you are freely forgiven for their detention, and now you have got the whole of Symbolick Masonry Genuine . . .'⁹² From this statement we can deduce that Shirreff inducted his friends as far as the 14th Degree which is labelled, in Francken's manuscript of the ritual, written in 1762 and presented to Etienne Morin, 'Perfection, the Ultimate of Symbolick Masonry.' I do not believe that he initiated them into any of the degrees higher than the 14th; his health and circumstances did not permit.

⁹² Letter Charles Shirreff to William White 22nd September 1792 GBR1991 HC 6/B/45

The Red Cross of Constantine – a case of Motivated Reasoning?

The web site of The Red Cross of Constantine and the web sites of several of its districts, including Nottinghamshire; Northants & Hunts; Hertfordshire; East Anglia and the Benelux Division state that the Order was established in England by Major Charles Shirreff in 1780.

This claim requires examination. Returning to the bundle of letters written to William White, Dr Bath, Bro Sandland and Bro Ellames, we search in vain for any mention of the Red Cross of Constantine or indeed for any Order containing the words Red Cross in its title.

Francken's manuscript list of the twenty two degrees beyond Master Mason do not include any knightly degrees below the fourteenth and no degree between the fourteenth and the twenty fifth bearing the title, Red Cross. The name Constantine does not appear at all. Charles Shirreff died in 1807. The first meeting of the Grand Conclave of the Red Cross of Constantine took place 31st May 1865.

Freemasons have ever enjoyed debate and disputation when it involves looking into the clouded mirror of their past. More often than not they have been pleased to see the image they desired – that of an institution with a history going back beyond 'time immemorial'. Anderson was guilty of this in his *Constitutions* of 1723. There were many who believed him when he said that 'No doubt Adam taught his sons Geometry . . .'

Nor is gullibility restricted to the distant past. The great Vermeer expert Bredius was fooled into believing that the amateur forgeries of Van Meegeren were the very best works of the Dutch Master demonstrates the truth of Moliere's maxim, 'A learned fool is more foolish than an ignorant one.'⁹³

The heavy emotional baggage that Freemasons carry - in other words, we often believe what we want to believe – is nowhere better illustrated than in the letters, notes and queries sections of the several Masonic magazines published between 1792 and 1890. Debate, argument and counter argument feature a great deal in the mid to late Victorian era. The first mention of the Red Cross that I have been able to find is in *The Freemasons Magazine and Masonic Mirror* of December 6th, 1862 where, under Notes and Queries the question is asked, 'What is the degree called the Red Cross of Constantine, and how can I obtain it?' The response is terse:

It is the same known in America as Knights of the Red Cross. Not a regular degree, acknowledged all over the world, but one of that numerous body which are nobody's children. Several brethren in England say they can give it, but it is questionable. We English are in everything great lovers of regularly organised authority, and we know of no competent jurisdiction from whom you might receive it.'⁹⁴

⁹³ From Forgeries to Covid denial. How we fool ourselves. Tim Harford Financial Times January 28th 2021.

⁹⁴ Freemasons Magazine and Masonic Mirror December 6th 1862 Page 446.

There is no reason to believe that there wasn't a degree in America titled the Red Cross but if there was it had not crossed the Atlantic and it was certainly not given to William White and friends.

The enquirer may have read a copy of Richard Carlile's Manual of Freemasonry which had been plagiarised from William Finch's two guinea ritual, of which Finch had been the author. Gan, Snell and Peabody have demonstrated that the ritual of the Order of the Red Cross of Constantine was entirely fabricated by its progenitor, Robert Wentworth Little a veritable Masonic factory in his own right who had manufactured the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia in 1867; the Ancient Rite of Misraim in 1870 and the Ancient Archaeological Order of Druids in 1874, before expiring at the age of forty from consumption.

The Order of the Red Cross of Constantine proved very successful during Little's lifetime and still today boasts over two thousand members in England and Wales. Of course there is no intrinsic harm in fabricating a Masonic Order but there is in lying about its provenance in order to boost its authority.⁹⁵

Somehow our old friend Major Charles Shirreff got caught up in the lie. Little pronounced the order to have been founded in 1190 by the Comenius family, direct descendants of the Emperor Constantine. He tells us that the Order was established in England in 1788, when,

. . . under Major Charles Shirreff of Whitchurch, Salop, several distinguished brethren of the Mystic Tie, (officers of the Grand Lodge of England) were admitted, viz: Jas Heseltine, Grand Treasurer, William White, Secretary, John Allen, Provincial Grand Master for Lancashire and James Galloway, Past Junior Grand Warden.⁹⁶

On the 9th of November 1880, the eminent historian of Freemasonry, W. J. Hughan repeated Little's fabrication but changed the date of Shirreff's intervention to 1780. We now know that Shirreff's first contact with William White was in 1785.

The London Freemason on the 28th March 1885 repeated the story almost word for word as did Jeremiah How in his 'Freemasons' Manual'.

And so the story continued to be relayed for the next one hundred and twenty five years and continues to be told today. And yet there isn't a shred of evidence to show that Shirreff had any involvement with an order or degree called The Red Cross of Constantine.

⁹⁵ Robert Wentworth Little: A Duplicitous Freemason, Wordsmith and Mystic, Part 1. Gan, Snell and Peabody AQC 130 2017.

⁹⁶ Knights of the Red Cross of Constantine Bro Charles K. Francis, M.I. Grand Sovereign, An Address published in The Freemasons Chronicle, 13th September 1890, quoting from Robert W. Little. Pages 168 on.

...and Finally

What are we to make of Shirreff's contribution to Freemasonry. There is no doubt that locally, in Jersey and in Shropshire his contribution to the establishment of the Institution was great. No doubt lodges would have been established in both Provinces in time and it was no fault of his own that the Lodges he did constitute enjoyed relatively brief lives. Union No 1 Jersey lasted for forty three years, until 1813 when the major part of the garrison returned to the mainland or Ireland. However it is a greater achievement to introduce Freemasonry into an area where it is dormant or where it never existed than to constitute a lodge in an area where the institution is already established. Such was the case at Whitchurch where there was no Masonic authority, no working lodge. Shirreff had to work very hard to re-establish Freemasonry in the County of Shropshire and it is not surprising that in his surviving letters he became somewhat testy at times when Grand Lodge was slow to respond to his requests. It is to his credit that he persisted; established the Lodge No 1 Whitchurch and became its Master on no fewer than six occasions. Having realised or been told that he was not a suitable candidate for Provincial Grand Master, Shirreff suggested to the Premier Grand Lodge the name of Egerton, his Senior Warden. Egerton was more often absent than present it seems and no doubt this arrangement suited Shirreff who could thus govern the Province almost single handed as Deputy even when his jurisdiction grew to include North Wales and Staffordshire. It is not difficult to deduce from the minute book of Whitchurch No 1 that Shirreff's downfall was precipitated by his general demeanour – his obstinacy, his obduracy, his arrogance and his, to use Mulcaster's words, 'blundering forwardness'.

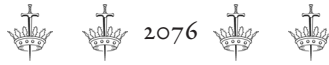
Shirreff's life had been one of disappointed ambition. His military career had been unexceptional; his attempts to become a land owner had been unsuccessful; he had been measured against his brother and found wanting; he had failed to accumulate the means to be a Provincial Grand Master; he was dismissed as a Deputy Provincial Grand Master; he was not a popular man. His family marched on whereas he left no successor. Brother William, the Deputy Quartermaster General had bought a Hampshire estate. Two of Shirreff's nephews became admirals in the British Navy. The husband of his niece, Maria married into the aristocracy. A descendant was Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between 1963 and 1964.

In the foyer of the North Shropshire Masonic Rooms in Whitchurch, Shropshire, leaning against a wall is a massive tombstone carved from local sandstone upon which can be seen symbols associated with Freemasonry. The emblems of mortality are surmounted by the Square, Compasses, level and the Christian cross. There are further symbols including common gavel, setting square and chisel. This tombstone, according to *A History of Freemasonry in Whitchurch* by R. F. C. Hughes and published in celebration of Saint Alkmund Lodge No 2311 to celebrate their centenary in 1988, was rescued from destruc-

tion by a descendant of the first Junior Warden of Shirreff's Whitchurch Lodge No 1 together with three other members of St Alkmund. By association it became known in recent years as 'Shirreff's gravestone'.

The truth is almost as interesting as the fable. As R F C Hughes points out in his history, Whitchurch was a parole town for French naval officers who, in 1812, five years after Shirreff had departed this world, formed a Masonic Lodge, La Triple Union. The lodge was short lived but well populated. In the year of its formation Hughes tells us, there were 24 founders and seven initiates. By 1814 when the Peace of Amiens allowed the officers to return to France there were forty four members. I am certain that this stone at one time marked the grave of a French officer who died far from home.

Today we know so much more about the life and times of Major Charles Shirreff, "real founder" and "chief actor". I am certain that there is even more yet to be discovered.





Roger Pemberton

Roger Pemberton was born in Cheshire and raised and in North Wales. He attended Christ Church, Oxford where he gained an MA in English Literature. After a short spell teaching English in England and the Middle East he ran an import and distribution company in the UK and Europe for thirty two years. In retirement he devotes much of his time to his office as Provincial Grand Master and Grand Superintendent for Shropshire and with what little is left, he spends in pursuit of his interests in Opera, Masonic research, Literature and Motorcycling.