

HELL FIRE AND FREEMASONRY - HANDOUT

Hellfire clubs have been around over 300 years. Dens of iniquity and riotous, orgiastic revelry. There is little documentary evidence about the proceedings. (The first rule of Hellfire Club is apparently "You do not talk about Hellfire Club.").

There was a distinctly love - hate relationship between Freemasonry and the plethora of hell fire clubs which blossomed in the British Isles in the eighteenth century. Hell fire clubs were a pseudo-satanic, extrapolation of clubs frequented by members of the aristocracy engaged in violent and sometimes murderous pranks against unfortunate victims, with impunity, because of social standings and position.

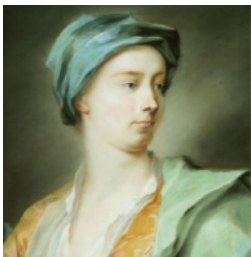
PICTURE 2 – A RAKES PROGRESS AT THE ROSE TAVERN



Drinking and whoring were standard activities for these clubs. The hell fire clubs took the debauchery one step further by adding black masses and other satanic rites.

According to Geoffrey Ashe's *The Hell-Fire Clubs: A History of Anti-Morality*, members came to meetings dressed as characters from the Bible and dined on such delicacies as "Holy Ghost Pie," "Breast of Venus," and "Devil's Loin," while drinking "Hellfire punch."

PICTURE 3 – PHILIP, DUKE OF WHARTON (FOUNDER)



Wharton's club was disbanded in 1721 when his political enemies convinced King George I to prohibit such "impieties." He subsequently joined the Freemasons. Nevertheless, despite his known association with the Hell Fire Club, Wharton was able to secure election as Grand Master of the English Grand Lodge from 1722 to 1723.

His period as Grand Master was undistinguished. His support for Freemasonry continued and his most important contribution was perhaps establishing a lodge in Madrid. In that same year Wharton, who was evidently spending much of his time on the continent, became the first Grand Master of Freemasonry in France.

Wharton probably founded and at the very least became a member of a rival fraternity known as the Society of Gormogons. The primary purpose of Wharton's club was the performance of satirical religious ceremonies, possibly inspired by the works of Voltaire and the then-popular fad among the upper classes of blasphemy.

Unlike later hellfire clubs, Wharton's club accepted women as full members. The club held its meetings on Sundays at various locations around London. Wharton's love hate relationship with Freemasonry seems to have done him little harm in establishment circles as, in 1741, he became a Knight of the Garter. The Duke's party-hearty lifestyle caught up with him eventually. He died a penniless alcoholic aged 32.

PICTURE 4 – THE BEGGARS BENISON (FOUNDED 1732)



The title of this Scottish gentlemen's club was "The Most Ancient and Most Puissant Order of the Beggar's Benison and Merryland." Benison means "blessing" and "Merryland" is a euphemism for a woman's body. The club's name comes from a story about King James V, who received a blessing from a beggar woman, which they adapted into the club's motto: "*May prick nor purse ne'er fail you.*"

Founded by wealthy landowners and merchants in 1732 in Anstruther, the club endured until 1836, having by then added branches in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Membership may have been as high as 500.

Club meetings involved drinking, banqueting, sharing pornography, ogling naked female models, reading erotic verses, listening to lectures about sexual practices, and group activities.

The Seventeenth century in which the hell fire clubs were formed, was the same as that which saw the creation and development of Grand Lodge, the umbrella body which would oversee a dramatic growth in the number of Masonic lodges.

PICTURE 5 – THE MONKS OF MEDMENHAM (founded c.1750)



A sociable fellow who loved a good joke, Sir Francis Dashwood was also a notorious prankster. At the Royal Court in St Petersburg, he dressed up as the King of Sweden, Russia's sworn enemy. While in Rome, he and his friends sometimes masqueraded as members of Roman Catholic clergy. Inspired by his travels abroad, Dashwood conceived a mock monastic order, where the members would indulge in distinctly un-monk-like behaviour. He created the club to support his favourite pastimes: making fun of religion, drinking, and having sex.

About 1755, Dashwood and his friends rented Medmenham Abbey, an abandoned monastery located alongside the River Thames, just a few miles from Dashwood's estate in West Wycombe. This would become their official clubhouse. Dashwood previously founded two other clubs, the Society of Dilettanti and the Divan Club. These were primarily drinking and dining clubs. The Dilettanti focused their conversation around art, and the Divans shared stories about their travels.

If you're a fan of Regency novels, you know that a "rake" (aka "rakehell" meaning "hellraiser") is an antiquated term for a man who spends his time drinking, gambling, and womanizing. This lifestyle required a fair amount of free time, rakes typically were members of the upper class and their "light-o'-loves" (mistresses and prostitutes) were able to indulge in scandalous behaviour safe from the prying eyes of more respectable aristocrats.

PICTURE 6 – SIR FRANCIS DASHWOOD IN A PARODY OF St. FRANCIS OF ASSISI.



Politician and quintessential rake Sir Francis Dashwood (1708–1781) founded and presided over what was perhaps history's most notorious hellfire club, The Order of the Friars of St. Francis of Wycombe. "No vows of celibacy were required either by the ladies or the 'Monks', 'the former considering themselves as the lawful wives of the brethren during their stay within the monastic walls; every Monk being religiously scrupulous not to infringe upon the nuptial alliance of any other brother.'" Another feature of Dashwood's club was a series of manmade caves on the abbey property where club members held some of their activities. The caves are still owned by the Dashwood family, who give tours there and rent them out for parties and special events.

PICTURE 7 – THE GEORGE AND VULTURE INN, LONDON.



This club initially met in the Greyhound Tavern in London and later at the George and Vulture. Another Freemason and a close friend of the Duke of Wharton, the Earl of Rosse was instrumental behind establishing the Dublin Hell Fire Club.

Rosse subsequently became the Grand Master of Ireland's Freemasons. By 1722 both the government and Grand Lodge had condemned the Hell Fire Club and similar societies for their

disruptive activities and effectively driven the former underground. The George and Vulture is now a restaurant. There has been an inn on the site, which is off Lombard Street in the historic City of London district, since 1142. It was said to be a meeting place of the notorious Hell-Fire Club and is now a revered City restaurant.

Dashwood's wife was described as "a poor forlorn Presbyterian prude," one of the reasons he spent so much time out partying with his friends. The group consisted of Dashwood and eleven of his friends who called themselves the "Monks of Medmenham." In addition to the Earl of Sandwich, members included Dashwood's half-brother Sir John Dashwood-King; Richard Grenville, Earl Temple; Sir Thomas Stapleton; Paul Whitehead; Sir George Lyttelton, and John Wilkes*, according to correspondence between Wilkes and Dashwood.

It is mentioned at least twenty times in The Pickwick Papers by Charles Dickens, who frequently drank there himself. The George and Vulture has been the headquarters of the City Pickwick Club since its foundation.

Threatened with demolition, Cedric Charles Dickens, the author's great-grandson, campaigned to save it. Since 1950 it has been the home of his Dickens Pickwick Club and, in the same year, it became the venue for the Christmas Day Dickens family gathering, in the Dickens Room.

PICTURE 8 – ENTRANCE TO THE HELL-FIRE CAVES IN MEDMENHAM.



Entrance to the Hellfire Caves tourist attraction in Medmenham.

The Monks of Medmenham soon increased their membership beyond the original twelve. The list of other presumed members of this hellfire club is a long one. Many of the people whose

names are associated with it may have only been guests and not full members.

It's even possible that rumours of their involvement are false and were just spread by their enemies to discredit them. Dashwood and his friends did not perform their rituals in earnest; they just considered them part of the joke. The monks mocked Christian ceremonies or aped pagan rituals as a means of titillating their guests.

In letters, members speak gleefully of the "wickedness" of their "love feasts." Everyone wore costumes, ate rich food, drank to excess, and got friendly with their companions. Although they did tell people that the Devil was the head of their club, they considered him more of a mascot than anything else.

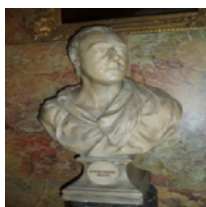
PICTURE 9 – THE MEMBERS LIST (Also included) ROBERT VANSITTART 1728 – 1789.



Robert Vansittart was born in Great Ormond Street, London, the second son of Arthur Van Sittart of Shottesbrooke Park in Berkshire. Educated at Reading and Winchester. He matriculated at Trinity College, Oxford, on 8th April 1745, was elected a fellow of All Souls' College. In 1753, he was called to the bar by the society of the Inner Temple and appointed regius professor of civil law in the university.

Vansittart was friends with the painters, George Knapp and Hogarth, as well as the poets, Paul Whitehead and William Cowper. A man of licentious and debauched habits and, like his brother, Henry, was a member of the 'Franciscans of Medmenham'.

PICTURE 10 - PAUL WHITEHEAD (POET AND STEWARD)



A less privileged member of the Order. Whitehead was a writer and a satirist. In 1742 in collaboration with one Henry Carey, virtually unknown today but in fact the man who wrote the lyrics to the national anthem).

Whitehead set up a parade of beggars, prostitutes and others, all wearing Masonic regalia to walk the proposed route of a Masonic procession immediately prior to the Masons themselves.

Despite many Freemasons among their number already, Dashwood and the Franciscans heartily approved of Whitehead's sense of humour and invited him to join the Order. Whitehead soon became the Order's secretary.

PICTURE 11 – SIR HENRY VANSITTART, GOVERNOR OF Bengal and MP for READING.



Vansittart was born in Bloomsbury, the third son of Arthur van Sittart (1691–1760). His father and grandfather, Peter van Sittart (1651–1705), were wealthy merchants and directors of the Russia Company.

Peter, a merchant adventurer, who had migrated from Danzig to London about 1670, was also a director of the East India Company. The family name is taken from the town of Stittard in Limburg, the Netherlands. They settled at Shottesbrooke in Berkshire.

PICTURE 12 – CHARLES CHURCHILL (RECTOR, SATIRIST AND POET)



In 1761, he became a close ally and friend with the champion of liberty of the press John Wilkes, whom he regularly assisted with The North Briton weekly newspaper. His collaboration with Wilkes thereafter earned him an honourable place in the history of parliamentary democracy and civil liberties.

His Epistle to William Hogarth (1763) was in answer to the caricature of Wilkes made during the trial. Hogarth's vanity and envy were attacked in an invective which Garrick quoted as shocking and barbarous. Hogarth retaliated with an engraving based on The Painter and his Pug, which caricatures Churchill as a bear in torn clerical bands hugging a pot of porter and a club made of lies and North Britons, while Hogarth's pug Trump urinates on Churchill's Epistle. In October 1764 he went to Boulogne to join Wilkes. There he was attacked by a fever of which he died on 4 November.

PICTURE 13 – ROBERT LLOYD (POET AND SATIRIST) 1733 – 1764.



He was author of the popular poem The Actor (1760) and the comic opera The Capricious Lovers (1764), first performed at Drury Lane a few weeks before his death. He was also co-editor of St James's Magazine (1762-3), and member of the infamous Nonsense Club of Old Westminster men with Bonnell Thornton, George Colman, William Cowper and others. Lloyd was often in debt, and died in Fleet Prison on 15 December 1764, shortly after the death of his lifelong friend Charles Churchill, to whose sister, Patty, he was engaged.

Churchill's sister died shortly after. The Dictionary of National Biography says that Lloyd joined Charles Churchill in a "reckless career of dissipation", and Vulliamy. "Lloyd died when he was thirty-one, ruined by his friendship with Churchill".

PICTURE 14 – JOHN MONTAGU (4TH EARL OF SANDWICH, FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY) 1718 – 1792.



He was educated at Eton and at Trinity College, Cambridge, and spent time travelling, initially going on the Grand Tour around Continental Europe before visiting Greece, Turkey, and Egypt which were then part of the Ottoman Empire. He founded a number of Orientalist societies. On his return to England in 1739, he took his seat in the House of Lords as a follower of the Duke of Bedford, one of the wealthiest and most powerful politicians of the era.

In 1744, the Duke of Bedford was invited to join the government, now headed by Henry Pelham, taking the post of First Lord of the Admiralty. Sandwich joined him as one of the commissioners of the Admiralty, in effect serving as deputy under Bedford.

In 1746 he was a plenipotentiary to the Congress of Breda, and he continued to take part in peace negotiations until the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was concluded in 1748. He was also made ambassador to the Dutch Republic during the talks. Using the resources of the British secret service, Sandwich was able to outmanoeuvre his French counterpart by intercepting the latter's secret correspondence.

Like his friends John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford and George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax, Sandwich was keen on cricket. The earliest surviving record of his involvement comes from 1741 when, as the patron and captain of the Huntingdonshire county team, Sandwich and Halifax formed the Northamptonshire & Huntingdonshire team which twice defeated Bedfordshire, first at Woburn Park and then at Cow Meadow, Northampton.

PICTURE 15 – GEORGE BUBB DODINGTON, BARON MELCOMBE 1691 - 1762



Bubb was first returned as MP for Winchelsea in 1715. Bridgewater in 1722, 1727 and 1734, through to his Baronetcy in 1761. He changed his surname to Dodington by Act of Parliament in 1717.

His uncle died in 1720 and left him his estate. He was Lord Lieutenant of Somerset from 1721 to 1744.

Walpole made him Lord of the Treasury in 1724. Enormously rich, he became a friend of Frederick, Prince of Wales, who took advantage of their acquaintance to obtain loans that helped clear his debts, and, on being thrown out of St James's Palace by his father, King George II, moved into a London house belonging to Dodington

He was Treasurer of the Navy and became Privy Councillor on 3 January 1745 and was treasurer of the chamber to the Prince of Wales from 1749 to 1751. He was Treasurer of the Navy again to November 1756. Created Baron Melcombe in 1761. His house at Hammersmith, known as 'La Trappe' (an ironic reference to a Trappist monastery) was the focus of a lively political and cultural salon of supporters of Frederick, Prince of Wales whose palace at Kew was located across the river.

Dodington is said to have been involved in a spy-ring, collecting valuable information about Jacobite activities. In 1761, following the accession of Frederick's son to the throne as George III, he was created Baron Melcombe.

PICTURE 16 – SIR THOMAS STAPLETON MP OF GREYS (1727-1781).



The Stapleton's, of Irish extraction, emigrated to the West Indies and also settled in Oxfordshire in the early 18th century. Sir Thomas Stapleton's father was M.P. for Oxfordshire 1727-1740, and Sir Thomas was returned for Oxford without a contest in 1759 and 1761.

Under his will, Sir Thomas pledged property in Britain and Nevis to support portions for the younger sons of his daughters.

PICTURE 17 – GEORGE SELWYN MP. – THE GENTLEMAN SADIST. (1719 – 1791)



George Selwyn, son of a Gloucestershire gentleman farmer, was sent to Eton and Oxford as befitted his rank in society. At this early stage Selwyn seems to have had the edge on the darker-side of human nature.

George's Oxford career was cut short one drunken evening in July 1745. Having somehow blagged a local silversmith into handing over a sacred chalice that was being repaired for a church, George set out to parody the Christian Holy Communion. In 1745, that was enough to have you drummed out of Oxford however drunk you claimed to be. Even pandering to the anti-Catholic feelings of the day – did not save Selwyn's university career.

In the eighteenth century it was important for a man to be 'clubbable'. To be able to socialise amongst his peers with poise, elegance and wit. He became a well-known figure at clubs such as Brookes' and White's (White's was so notorious for gambling that Hogarth satirised it as a club where if a man collapsed outside, his body would be dragged into the club so bets could be laid on whether he was dead or not). He didn't just restrict his membership to the more usual gaming and drinking clubs. Selwyn was one of the fully paid up members of Sir Francis Dashwood's Monks of Medmenham – otherwise known as the Hellfire Club.

PICTURE 18 – JOHN WILKES MP. (1725 – 1797)



Born in the Clerkenwell London, John Wilkes was educated initially at an academy in Hertford; this was followed by private tutoring and finally a stint at the University of Leiden in the Dutch Republic. Wilkes was also beginning to develop a patriotism for his country. During the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, he rushed home to London to join a Loyal Association and readied to defend the capital.

In 1747, he married Mary Meade and came into possession of an estate and income in Buckinghamshire. Wilkes and Mary, however, separated in 1756. Wilkes never married again, but he gained a reputation as a rake. Wilkes was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1749 and appointed High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 1754.

A member of the Knights of St Francis of Wycombe, or the Medmenham Monks, and was the instigator of a prank that may have hastened its dissolution when he brought a baboon dressed in a cape and horns into the rituals performed at the club, causing considerable mayhem among the inebriated initiates. In March 1770, Wilkes was appointed a sheriff in London, defender and who authorized the literal reproduction of the interventions of the Parliament. In 1774 he became Lord Mayor of London; he was simultaneously Master of the Joiners' Company. In 1779 he was elected to the position of Chamberlain of the City of London, a post of great responsibility which he was to hold until his death in 1797.

He was a member of the Oddfellows and today. Wilkes died at his home at 30 Grosvenor Square, Westminster, London on 26 December 1797. His body was buried in a vault in Grosvenor Chapel, South Audley Street, London on 4 January 1798.

PICTURE NO. 19 – SIR WILLIAM STANHOPE MP (1702 – 1772)



Stanhope was distinguished by his wit, humour, and literary talents. He spent large sums in the improvement and decoration of the house and grounds and was one of that noted club of wits and bon vivants who assembled at Medmenham, under the frivolous, and in some respects, disreputable character of Monks of La Trappe.

PICTURE 20 – THOMAS POTTER MP. (1718 – 1759)



Thomas Potter sat in the House of Commons between 1747 and 1759. Born in 1718, the second son of John Potter, Archbishop of Canterbury. He matriculated, aged 13, at Christ Church, Oxford in 1731, graduating B.A. in 1735, and was admitted to the Middle Temple.

From his second marriage he acquired Segenhoe Manor at Ridgmont, near Woburn, Bedfordshire. He was believed to be the author of *Essay on Woman*, a crude parody of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*. The authorship of this was later attributed to John Wilkes, when it was read out in the House of Lords, during his expulsion from parliament in 1764.

In 1747 Potter was elected as MP for St Germans in Cornwall. Then in 1754, as MP for Aylesbury, a seat controlled by the powerful Grenville family with whom he was associated from then on. He was returned as

MP for Okehampton in 1757. Potter was in ill health for a long time, suffering in particular from gout. In 1759 he died at his residence in Segenhoe at the age of forty one and was buried in nearby Segenhoe churchyard.

PICTURE 21 – WILLIAM HOGARTH, PAINTER AND SATIRIST (1697 – 1764)



William Hogarth FRSA was an English painter, printmaker, pictorial satirist, social critic, and editorial cartoonist.

His work ranges from realistic portraiture to comic strip-like series of pictures called "modern moral subjects", and he is perhaps best known for his series A Harlot's Progress, A Rake's Progress and Marriage A-la-Mode. Influenced by French and Italian painting and engraving, Hogarth's works became widely popular and mass-produced via prints in his lifetime, and he was by far the most significant English artist of his generation.

PICTURE 22 – SIR JOHN DASHWOOD-KING MP. (1716-1793)



Sir John Dashwood-King, was an English country gentleman. Born John Dashwood, he adopted the additional surname of King by the terms of his uncle Dr. John King's will.

His principal interests lay in his lands in Wales and Lincolnshire which he had inherited from his maternal uncles. From 1753 until 1761, he served as Member of Parliament. In 1761, he married Sarah Moore by whom he had eight children. He served as High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire in 1777. On the death of his half-brother he inherited the baronetcy and

West Wycombe Park.

Other members included:

Francis Duffield, owner of Medmenham Abbey.

John Tucker, MP for Weymouth.

Sir John Aubrey, MP

Arthur Vansittart, of Shottesbrooke Park, MP

Dr Benjamin Bates of Aylesbury.

Edward Lovibond.

Dr John Morton, MP.

John Orris, MP & Don at Magdalen College, Oxford.

Dr Thomas Thompson, Physician to the Prince of Wales

John Hall Stevenson.

Mr Clarke of Henley.

Richard Hopkins, MP.

Sir John Russell.

PICTURE 23 – THE GUEST LIST.



American revolutionary and founding father, Benjamin Franklin, attended meetings while a guest at Dashwood's home.

PICTURE 24 – THE CHEVALIER D'EON



Another Freemason and Franciscan was the intriguing Chevalier D'Eon. D'Eon was androgynous (genderless) and provoked no end of curiosity in both France and Britain at the time.

D'Eon exploited his reputation and as a result was able to move in high society. Such was the curiosity about his (or her) true nature and the debate surrounding it, many began betting on D'Eon's true sex and huge sums were soon riding on the result.

Fearing that he would be kidnapped by those wishing to settle the debate (and possibly win their wagers) D'Eon sought protection and received it from no less a person than a Masonic Grand Master, Lord Ferrers, who held that post from 1762 to 1764.

D'Eon was actually a member of a French lodge L'Immortalite de l'Ordre. His membership of the Order of St. Francis appears to have been marginal but as someone who bucked sexual convention simply by being himself he was always a welcome guest at the meetings.

PICTURE 25 – BLACKADDER III – TV SERIES

Prince Regent: Last night, I was having a bit of a snack at the Naughty Hellfire Club, and some fellow said I had the wit and sophistication of a donkey.

Blackadder: Oh, an absurd suggestion, sir.



Prince Regent: You're right. It is absurd.

Blackadder: Unless, of course, it was a particularly stupid donkey.

Hellfire clubs in modern times

Still in existence is the Phoenix Society (now known as the Phoenix Common Room), which was founded by Sir Francis Dashwood's nephew Joseph Alderson at Brasenose College, Oxford University, in 1781. It is the oldest dining club at Oxford. If any of Dashwood's nastier habits are embraced by club members today, they aren't saying.

Secret hellfire clubs supposedly exist at Trinity College and Maynooth University in Ireland. These clubs are said to carry out similar actions as the 18th-century hellfire clubs, including mock ceremonies and drinking alcohol. We can only hope the practices of the Beggar's Benison are a thing of the past.

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