

Who are we and what did we do?

The idea for this talk first arose when our Provincial Prior kindly invested me with Provincial Rank in the Knights of Malta order. He invested me with the rank of Baillie and said 'if you find out what the office of Baillie did please let me know'.

So I did.

But it also made me think about how we have our ceremonies and although knowing the basics of what the Knights Templar did, many of us — especially me — don't understand what each of us, in each office actually did.

So the purpose of this talk is to educate each of those of us who don't actually know why we meet in a 'Preceptory', and how some of our respective offices came about.

Some offices are easy to understand — Banner Bearer (although more of that to come if we have time), Heralds, Treasurer, Registrar etc, their duties are fairly obvious. But what about the Marshal? What about the Constables? What did they actually do and why do we have them now in our Preceptories?

So let's start at the beginning — why do we meet in a 'Preceptory'?

There will be few of us who are not familiar with why Freemasons meet in a Lodge, in the Holy Royal Arch we meet in a 'Convocation'. Early Knights Templar gatherings were in an encampment, which like the Royal Arch also derived from a religious setting. So it should not be a surprise that when we come to the name for the meeting place in which we conduct Knights Templar proceedings it also has a similar connection.

Of course we could be forgiven for thinking that in view of our Orders name, that of the Knights Templar and its proven link with Jerusalem, we would be content to call our meeting place a Temple. We don't. We might also have expected it to be called a 'Chevalerie' as a gathering of mounted knights, but that is not the case either. We call it a Preceptory.

One clue to why the name was chosen comes at the very end of our present ceremony in England when our brother Knights are called upon to 'listen to our precepts'. The place in which we gather for work and where the principles and tenets that ought to shape our behaviour as men of honour are to be promulgated and accepted. We call these directives our 'precepts' and it is essential, if this Christian aspect of Freemasonry is to make its peculiar contribution, that we should always be reminded of what these precepts are. They are guidelines for conduct and morals that need to be laid hold of.

The word 'precept' comes from the Latin 'capere' that means 'to take hold of' or 'to hold on to'. The word 'precept' therefore means something worthwhile to grasp, in practice as well as in our minds, so that it affects the kind of persons we are.

The other reason for calling our gatherings Preceptories is that they were called such when the Order was first founded. The noble Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux assisted in first organising this great order and he was requested to provide these knights with thoughts and principles that would inspire and guide them in their main activity as the protectors of pilgrims in and around the temple mount of Jerusalem.

When a candidate applied to join the Order, he was tested as regards his sincerity and devotion to those who were to rule over him; he was then entrusted with the possession of the same basic truths and teachings. This instruction took place in a Preceptory, and the person in charge was called a preceptor. It was his teachings that were to ensure the quality and single-mindedness of the knights' future behaviour.

Perhaps that has something to say about what our Preceptors ought to aim at; not just being familiar with the right words to speak or the right ceremonial actions to be performed, but enabling others to understand the import of what they learn.

So.. .we know where Preceptory comes from. We also know where Preceptor comes from. But what about the Preceptors' main men, the Marshal and Constables?

The Templar Knights had, from the very foundation of their Order, to be very concerned about their mounts. Horses were an important requirement in their

inventory, and without them, and in good condition, their very existence as a group of warrior knights would be in jeopardy.

Indeed, the logo that is most associated with the best known historical site of the Templars in Britain today — the Inner Temple area lying between Fleet Street and the Thames Embankment — is that of Pegasus, the legendary winged horse of antiquity. This symbol arose when the lawyers who eventually came to inhabit the inner Temple apparently misunderstood the original symbol showing two knights on one horse. This early form of the image was to convey a message that the knights accepted poverty.

However, it was certainly not suggesting that they were so short of mounts that steeds had to be shared. It also suggests that if a knight was unseated in battle, and his horse bolted, another knight would carry him out of the fight to where he could remount — after all, we are still 'brother knights'. It is two men and not the wings of a horse that we are to imagine when we see the Pegasus image on the Inner Temple railings.

In order to care for their steeds, the Templars made use of officers who were skilled in caring for horses. It is these skills that are represented by the titles we give to two of the most prestigious officers in our preceptories.

The original word from which we derive 'horse' is the Norse/Icelandic word 'Hross'. This in turn came from the same source as the Latin word 'currere' that means 'to run'. The horse was a 'running beast', hence its name.

Another word came from the Gothic language (an extinct people from the Baltic region), 'mearh', which became 'mare' for the female of the species. Around 1000 AD, the Frankish people referred to a person who cared for horses as a 'skealth', which originated from the Latin 'sclavus', a slave. When both words were combined, 'mearh-skealth' was formed and so 'Marshal'.

Therefore, he was someone who cared for the precious mounts of the knights — an essential officer of the Order. Today, there are of course some Marshals who may find their human steeds more difficult to manage than the horses of days gone by. I wouldn't dare say there are also some Marshals who could get a little too much on their high horse.

If the Marshal was the man who was responsible for the welfare of the animals, even their formation in battle, there was an officer whose job was to care for the horses when they were resting. The word 'stable' means 'a place in which to stand still'; its adjective use is to be 'calm, balanced, reliable'.

When the knights' horses were brought back to their camp or castle, they required comfort and someone who would relax them. This was the job of the companion or 'comes' and was referred to as the 'comes-stable'; in time he became known as the 'Constable' Therefore, it should be no surprise that this was the name of the public officer who kept animals in order before doing the same with human 'animals' who broke the peace — hence the word constable.

This explains why in the Preceptory, the Marshal is always on the move, observing and making sure events happen as they should, whilst the Constables stay seated in their places, watching over the whole company. They are the ones who check the persons who enter, assisting the Preceptor in keeping order and halting those who might try to invade our privacy and disturb the peace.

Now you may understand why those who are eligible for the office of Preceptor had to previously hold the role of Constable; however, not everyone had to be a Marshal.

In these more peaceful times, it is clearly more desirable to have a ruler who has learned how to maintain order, ensure that the workhorses of the Preceptory are looked after and that harmony prevails rather than conflict. There was obviously great wisdom in the minds of those who devised and named the Preceptory's servants.

So what else....

Our banners and the banner bearers perhaps?

If there is one moment that will surprise, if not startle, a new member of this Order, it is when he first hears the corporate use of the phrase 'A Beauseant!' as a salute. It is rousing isn't it?

Yet how many of us who use it with vigour and panache really understand its background? Of course, we may well be aware that this was a cry that was associated with the Templars, but what of its actual significance?

The earliest record of the word 'Bausant' was an old French term used to describe a piebald horse. When we appreciate how the Templars cared for their steeds, the use of such a term would hardly be surprising. Specifically it referred to a horse that was marked with black and white patches.

However, there are some who believe that 'beuseant' means 'well-formed' or 'pleasing' — a possible modern French interpretation. I am assured that in the days of the first Templars, it did not refer to such a connotation or 'well-seated' in reference to the knights' effectiveness as good horsemen.

Further research suggests that as far as the Templars were concerned, the word simply referred to 'a special banner'. The cry 'a Beuseant' was a call to the Knights Templar in the midst of battle. This was to their standard, consisting of half black and half white (a red cross on a white background by the 13th century), which was to be their spur and rallying point in conflict.

The regulations of the Order required that in times of danger, the Beucennifer (standard bearer) was protected by ten knights, thus honouring its presence when summoned.

The distinctive design of black and white represented the same ideas and symbolism of the carpet that adorns most Lodge rooms: good and evil, light and dark. It may even have more esoteric meanings. What mattered most was that it offered a distinct rallying point and demanded the knights' utter dedication as warriors to fight to the death if need be rather than retreat or surrender.

When the Knights Templar of old shouted 'a Beuseant' they were in effect saying 'We commit ourselves to the uttermost to serve the cause we have undertaken. We will always honour the Order of which this flag or banner is the emblem and we will defend each other to the last drop of our blood'. It was indeed quite a commitment.

A final historical fact.. .the nobleman who conceived the idea of forming a band of noble fighters to protect pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land was Hugues de Payen. We may not know much of his first companions but one of them bore the title of Seigneur de Beauce. It would seem to be highly appropriate that when de Beauce was in the heat of battle and called to his fellow knights for aid or assistance, he would also apply a similar sounding cry: 'a Beuceant'.