

BEN DUNK – REMINISCENCES

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Believe it or not.

Chichester Cathedral's Vicars' Hall, Crypt and 'The Eve of St. Agnes' by John Keats.

In 1950, when I was in the employ of: T. F. Lummus Electrical in South Street, Chichester, in the then, County of Sussex, now West Sussex; I was instructed by one of my bosses, Frank Lummus, to go and fix the faulty lights high up on the ceiling of the Vicars' Hall at the Eastern end of the Chichester Cathedral precincts, off South Street. The Vicars' Hall was built over the Cathedral Crypt and was being used as a Freemason's Lodge. I believe Mr. Frank may have thought me a potential new masonic recruit. Our work together at the secret wartime factory, (See my Memoirs) had brought us close together, as much as his bachelor remoteness would allow.

The Crypt was built in the 12th. Century and the Vicars' Hall above, in the 14th. Century. The latter was constructed, as a 'Mansion' to house the Vicars' (Priests) Choral (choir), associated with the Cathedral, where they resided and catered for themselves.

The Crypt was and is, a dungeon like complex of one large room and many other spaces. Originally used for storage, like keeping church valuables and was called a Guildhalle (Gold Hall). Also, most likely, for storing deceased persons; whilst waiting for relatives to pay for the privilege of burying their loved one in the consecrated cemetery grounds of the Cathedral. The 13th. to 16th. Century 'Whitefriars' Christian sect, practiced the same procedure in East Street, Chichester. I was present in the 1970s, when my archeologist friend, Margaret Rule AIA, excavated off East Street, Chichester, on the East side of the Corn Exchange. There were about six layers of skeletons in a proposed building plot. There were over 380 of them. The sect survived at least partially, by revenue from the consecrated ground burial practice.

The collected human remains were transported in a single Elm wood box-coffin, in a street procession to Westhampnet Church cemetery, re-buried and blessed by the Bishop of Chichester, in a graveside ceremony.

The bones were medically analyzed for diseases and, among others found, at that time, the earliest record of Syphilis was confirmed. My oath of secrecy about this fact is surely lapsed by now. Similar results since have been discovered in other places and publicized.

When we went for lunch nearby at The Market Inn in Eastgate Square; the landlords, knowing of our association with the skeletons, would stand up a chicken leg bone in our mashed potato.

Another original use of The Crypt was as a Guildhall (Gold Hall); where church valuables were kept in strong rooms. Note: The late Francis Steer, the Chichester Historian, called it: The Undercroft, in a booklet on the building. I have endeavored to refrain from referring to his professional report, because my intention is to be only; a reporter of very personal experiences and observations.

I was instructed by my boss to seek out the Masonic Caretaker of the Vicar's Hall, Mr. Ebenezer (Actually that was his first name, I never knew his family name.) We spoke about the renewing of electric bulbs but he did not seem to know about these. We then got into a conversation about Freemasonry. (I still believe my boss sent me there to speak about and interest me in this subject. I mention in my Memoirs that my father was a reclusive Freemason, so too, were the brothers Lummus. Furthermore, this was their Lodge).

Apart from a very large carved throne like chair in the room, the only thing that was clearly Masonic, was a painted shield hanging from the ceiling with a carpenter's square and divider and a large letter 'G' painted on it. To the best of my memory he said; the square and divider represented the Masons interest in building and the letter 'G' stood for God, Goodness and Gracious. He mentioned legendary prince like figures in Masonry: Jubalo, Jubala and Jubalum. He said this was the Mason's Temple and when I asked about this Temple; Mr. Ebenezer informed me that someone they called a Tiler, drew the outline of this on the floor, with chalk, in the form of Solomons' Temple and after their meetings it was washed off the floor. This Masonic Hall was, interestingly, on Cathedral Church property and Masons are credited with the building of Gothic cathedrals all over Britain and Europe.

Then, the garrulous Mr. Ebenezer, told me another story about the Vicars' Hall. This one has in it a lot of hypothesis. It is a remarkable tale about the known visit to Chichester by John Keats the early 19th. Century English Poet. Author of, among many other great works : 'The Eve of St. Agnes.' He told me that Keats had stayed at the Vicars' Hall in January 1819 (St. Agnes Eve) and commenced writing there, his epic poem, 'The Eve of St. Agnes.' The very first line of the poem is: "St. Agnes Eve – Ah, bitter chill it was!" At that time of the year it probably was very cold. He suggested that some of the first four stanzas of the poem and the last two lines of the last stanza relate to and describe his stay, his experiences and the conditions he found at the Chichester Cathedral and the Vicars' Hall. Keats, by a number of expert biographers, record that he was an ardent hiker; having gone on a walking tour of Northern England, a year or two before. He is also recorded as continuing his southern England route, after Chichester, via Bedhampton and Salisbury. He died a year later in Rome; at the young age of 38: he had been diagnosed with Tuberculosis and his doctor had recommended he go there, for the dry air.

Mr. Ebenezer went on to say, that Keats arrived at the Chichester Cathedral and requested Sanctuary and sustenance, the Church was not allowed to refuse, for deserving persons. Keats was given food and drink, then permitted to stay in the Vicars' Hall, with the Vicars. He pointed out the actual Vicars' niche, he believed Keats occupied to sleep for the night; a very cramped space in the wall, with a window. The doors to the niche were missing but there were the remains of iron door hinges in the wall. This was on the North wall at the Eastern end of the large refectory hall. This, he said, was where Keats commenced his famous poem.

Keats, in all probability, would have attended a Cathedral service before going to the Vicars' Hall and 'reading between the lines' of the relevant stanzas of the poem, one can see that it not only opens, by telling what the weather was like; he backs it up as follows: "The owl for all his feathers, was a cold." Note: in the course of my electrical work on the Cathedral and The Campanile (Bell Tower); I observed Barn Owl nests and pellets with the bones of small birds and mice: both in the bell's loft and at the top of the square tower of the Cathedral Spire. Keats probably saw the owls or heard them, at least.

I imagine Keats would have walked across the Southdown Way; over the South Downs and he would have seen hares and sheep: they were prolific there, at that time. "The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass" "And silent was the flock in woolly fold". I saw them, perhaps less so, in my youthful excursions on the Southdowns.

Then he meets the Beadsman (probably one of the Cathedral Vicars) in the Cathedral and shakes his hand in greeting. "Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told" "His Rosary, and while his frosted breath" "Like pious incense from a censer old" "Seem'd taking flight for Heaven, without a death" "Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer's he saith." (What amazing descriptive words!) A picture of the holy Virgin; this Church of England still had its remnants of Catholic origins.

"His prayer he saith, this patient holy man"; "Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees" A lamp was needed; it was dark. "And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan," Barefoot on the cold stone Cathedral floor; an act of penance? "Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees." It was probably the Vesper's service time and later we hear: "North he turneth....." They were probably in the Chapel that was housed in the North Transept of the Cathedral? The Beadsman, for Keats, became the Cathedral host and friend for the night. Keats notices the giant rectangular box tombs in the Cathedral with sculptures of full size Knights and their ladies on top and black iron fences surrounding them. "The sculptur'd dead on each side, seem to freeze", "Emprison'd in black purgatorial rails" "Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries" "He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails" "To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails". The Beadsman has seen these statues many times and he is probably too cold, to think. We learn; by Keats's poetic lines so far: it is a freezing cold night.

The Beadsman then takes Keats to the Vicars' Hall. "Northward he turneth through a little door" Was this the little door leading out of the Cathedral from the North Transept? "And scarce three steps" Were these steps going into the Vicars' Hall? Having settled Keats into his niche, the Beadsman sat by the fireplace. In my time, the fireplace was not there but Mr. Ebenezer assured me that long ago, a large one existed. The Beadsman was to keep a long night penance for St. Agnes, on her Eve. "His was a harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve" "Another way he went, and soon among", "The rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve," "And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve".

In the last two lines of the last stanza, the 42nd, the Beadsman eventually falls to sleep. "The Beadsman, after a thousand Aves told," "For aye unsought for, slept among his ashes cold."

Returning to Stanza 4; I do not know where the Church decorations are: referred to by Keats in the following lines: "The carved Angels, ever eager eyed." "Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests." "With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts."

Footnote: Only my very personal observations have been applied to interpretation of a few stanzas and lines of the Poem, the major number of Stanzas are left for study by superior classical Scholars.

Chichester Limerick.

There was a young lady of Chichester,
Whose form made the Vicars in their niche's leer,
One morning at Matins,
The heave of her satins,
Made the Bishop of Chichester's britches stir.

Anon.