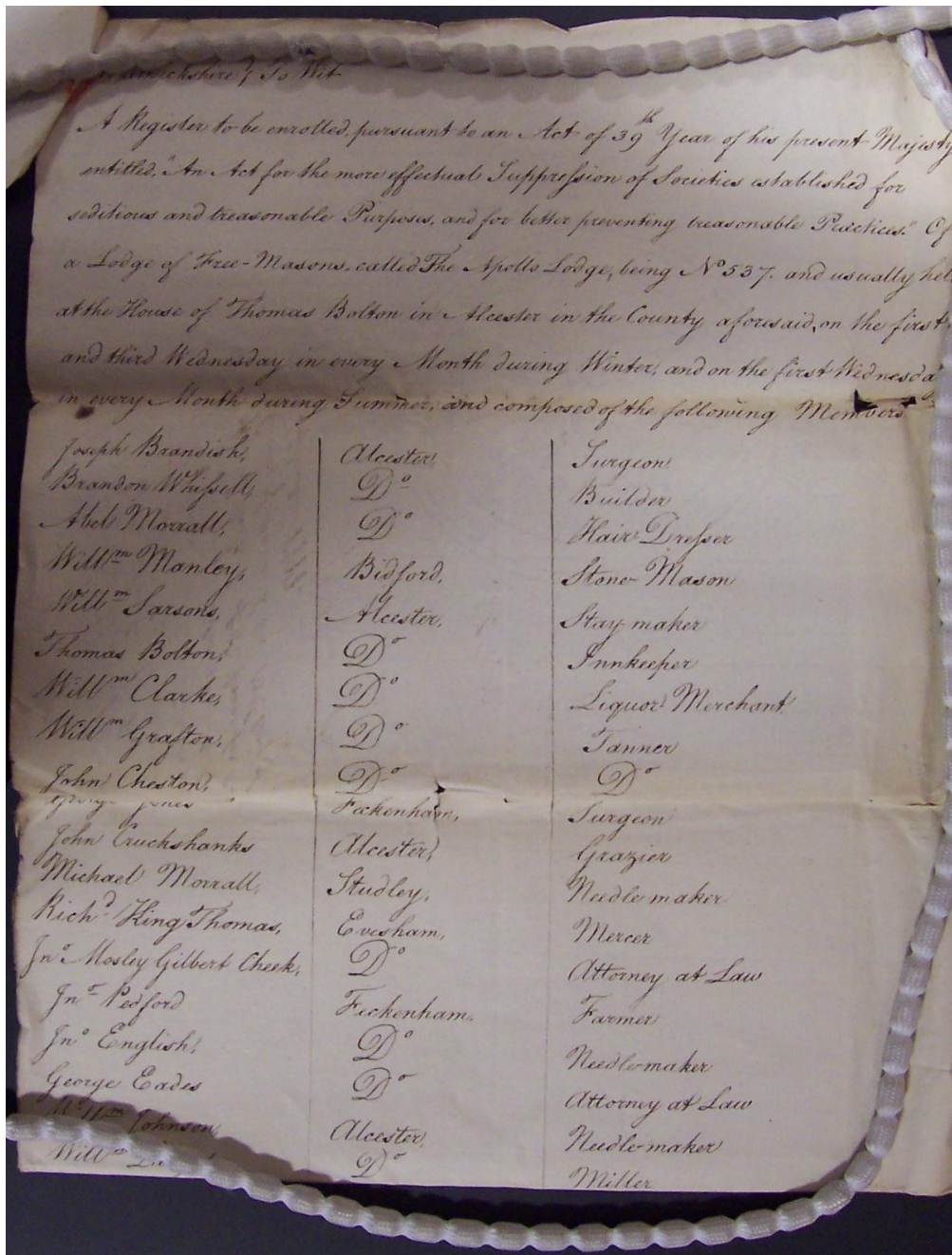


Returns of Members of Freemasons' Lodges, 1799 – [QS87/1](#)



Unlawful Societies Act of 1799

“An act for the more effectual suppression of societies established for seditious and treasonable purposes; and for the better preventing treasonable and seditious practices”

Britain in the 1790's saw a number of radical and revolutionary groups emerge in the wake of the French Revolution. Characterised by their secrecy and secret oaths, this caused widespread distrust of societies. In particular, those that required members to take an oath not authorised by law.

In 1799, the Unlawful Societies Act set out a number of provisions, including a ban on any meetings of societies that undertook secret oaths, such as the Freemasons.

Freemasons and the Unlawful Societies Act

In May 1799, a group of masonic representatives attended a meeting with the Prime Minister, William Pitt to discuss the problems the Act would cause them and explained that they supported the law and lawfully constituted authority.

The Prime Minister expressed his worry that the Society would be used as a cover by others for seditious purposes, but was willing to support a clause to prevent the Act from affecting them.

As a result, Freemasons were excluded from the Act, but lodges were obliged to return a list of members to the local Clerk of the Peace every year, which are recorded in the Quarter Sessions.¹

This practice continued until 1967.

Freemasonry in Warwickshire

Freemasonry can be traced to twelfth century England. The Provincial Grand Lodge of Warwickshire describes it as such:

“As well as being one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies, Freemasonry is an enjoyable association of like - minded men who work towards a common goal of being happy themselves and communicating happiness to others. This is achieved by work in the Lodge, largely based on a series of ritual ceremonies, with much in common with the old passion plays, which follow ancient forms and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides. These seek to instil morality in all men: by teaching and practising high standards of conduct in society. These aims are furthered at the dinners held after lodge meetings and at other social occasions.”²

Warwickshire currently has around 4,500 members and 190 lodges. The Apollo Lodge, as mentioned in this month's document, still exists to this day.

Certificate and register of the names of the members of a Free-Masons Lodge (No. 537), called the Apollo Lodge and held at the Angel Inn, Alcester.

Delivered 10th September 1799.

These returns of members are an interesting insight into a Society usually associated with secrecy. The members are listed by name, location and occupation. The third column suggests the variety of occupations and social standings of masons in Alcester. Some of the occupations listed are:

Surgeon, Needle maker, Hair dresser, Lieutenant 22nd Reg. of Dragoons, Joiner, Farmer, Attorney at Law

Freemasonry is known for accepting members from all walks of life to meet as equals.³ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men-only societies were more associated with a more rigid demographic, such as in Gentlemen's Clubs, these meetings of a non-political and non-religious nature can tell us something about alternative groups for men at the time.

In addition, the Returns of Members are a useful tool for family historians who know or suspect their Warwickshire ancestor of being a Freemason.

References

1. Prescott, Andrew, '*The Unlawful Societies Act of 1799*', A lecture presented at the second international conference of the Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 4-5 November 2000.
2. <http://www.warwickshireppl.org.uk>
3. <http://www.ugle.org.uk/>