

The Freemason Who Owned Stonehenge and Gave it Away

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Image by Tom Hendrickson

On September 21, 1915, Master Mason Cecil Chubb, set out to purchase a set of dining room chairs as instructed by his wife. Instead of chairs, on an impulse, he had the winning bid for Stonehenge and the thirty acres surrounding the site.

His purchase of Stonehenge, and his later actions, were a major turning point in the care and preservation of Stonehenge. His actions would help transform Stonehenge from a 5,000-year-old neglected ruin to a national treasure and probably one of the world's most famous prehistoric monuments, that almost one million people visit each year and people travel from around the world to visit.



Sir Cecil & Mary Chubb

Needless to say, at the time, his wife was not thrilled with his purchase, as all she wanted were dining room chairs. But as with most things in life, there is more to the story....

Brother Cecil Herbert Edward Chubb was born on April 14, 1876. He grew up in a working-class family in Shrewton, England a very small English Village just four miles West of Stonehenge.

He attended Christ Church College Oxford and earned a law degree. Brother Cecil became a successful attorney in Salisbury and served on its City Council, and as a Justice of the Peace (Misdemeanor Court Judge). He married in 1902 after meeting his wife Mary at a cricket match.

In 1905 Cecil became the Director of the Fisherton Mental Hospital, a business his wife had inherited. The hospital was having financial difficulties when he first assumed management of the hospital. During his direction and guidance, from 1905 the institution became solvent and eventually grew to become the largest mental hospital in Europe.



Salisbury Hospital Staff

During that time Cecil oversaw construction of new wards, which added more hospital beds. Also, innovative, and modern treatments were introduced at the hospital. During World War I the hospital offered services to treat those soldiers who had experienced the ravages of war, at Cecil's direction. Cecil even used his own home to house patients when the hospital was at capacity. Cecil's purpose was to help his fellow man and veterans, return to their families and transition back to a normal life.

Cecil was a smart businessman and investor. However, he also enjoyed the life of a country farmer, and he raised short horn cattle and many successful racehorses.

Cecil Chubb was made a Mason in Lodge Elias de Durham #586 in Salisbury. The Lodge is still active, and they meet on the second Thursday of every month. The Lodge is named after the English Master Stonemason who oversaw the construction of the Salisbury Cathedral. I can attest that the Salisbury Cathedral is magnificent, and I am thankful I have been able to visit the cathedral.

His Masonic Degrees: Entered Apprentice October 1905, became a Fellowcraft November 1905, and a Master Mason December 1905. He never held an office in the Lodge, nor belonged to any appendant bodies. He thoroughly enjoyed being in the company of his Masonic Brothers and remained a member until his death.

He was also an intelligent and prudent investor, and his careful management of his finances provided the means for him have the means to purchase Stonehenge.

Stonehenge had always been owned privately since October 2, 1538, when King Henry VII confiscated the Amesbury Abby and surrounding lands under his "Dissolution of the Monasteries. The ownership transferred several times until the Antrobus family purchased it in 1824. When the heir of the estate Lt. Edmund Antrobus was killed in combat during the opening months during World War I, it was divided up into lots and put on the auction block.

During the time of private ownership Stonehenge had not always been a showcase of a neolithic monument or a honored sacred place or always treated with reverence and respect as we are all led to believe.

During the 19th century tourists could rent hammers and chisels at local hotels and blacksmith shops to chip away souvenirs, carve their names into the stones as a keep's sake or trophy. In the modern day, staff found stones were graffitied, had chewing gum stuck to them and had been subjected to urine, vomit, and excrement.

Over the centuries of private ownership many of the stones had been propped up using wooden timbers, others had fallen, many became twisted and were in a bad state of disrepair.

In the time leading up to the 1915 auction, many rich Americans and Foreigners were sweeping across Europe buying up castles, monasteries, and antiquities. Today we

would call these items national treasures and they would be protected. At that time they were dismantled, boxed up and shipped back to the states or whatever location was requested.

The 1915 auction was very well publicized in all the local papers. This auction caused quite a buzz among the locals as they feared the same thing might happen to their Stonehenge.

The auction was held on a Tuesday afternoon, on September 21, 1915 (106 years ago). The auction was held at the New Theatre in Salisbury England. The theater was filled with potential purchasers, interested parties, and a lot of spectators and bargain hunters. The Estate Agents Messrs., Knight and Rutley (this company is still in existence today) began the auction in the theatre at 11:00. When Auctioneer Sir Howard Frank announced Lot #15, and gave the description, he began with "Would anyone offer 5000 pounds for Stonehenge". There was no response from the audience. Auctioneer Frank urged "surely someone will offer me 5,000 pounds".

A gentleman's hand went up whose bid was accepted by the auctioneer. Then several others joined in the bidding in the increasing amounts of 100 pounds. On a mere impulse or whim, Brother Cecil raised his hand and bid 6,600 pounds. The Auctioneer raised his hammer and hearing no other offers, the hammer descended with a clear sharp rap. The audience applauded Brother Cecil's new unintended purchase. In today's dollars, Brother Cecil bid about one million dollars.

Immediately following the sale, a newspaper reporter interviewed Brother Cecil, who remarked that when he entered the sale "he had no intention whatsoever of buying Stonehenge". But he also added "while I was in the room, I thought that a Salisbury man ought to buy it, and that is how it's done".

When asked if he had any plans regarding the future of Stonehenge Brother Cecil replied, that the situation was new to him, and he didn't have any time to think of any plans. He went on to say that all should be assured that every means of protecting Stonehenge will be taken.

The second highest bidder at the auction was Isaac Crook, a local farmer who wanted to purchase the land for the purpose of grazing sheep.

Cecil's wife was not thrilled with his purchase. I can imagine she may have reminded him of why she sent him to the auction in the first place. "But Cecil darling where are the dining room chairs"?

Personally, I think as Cecil waiting for the auction of the dining chairs, he was filled with anxiety and doubt about the fate of Stonehenge. He was quoted later as saying, "he was born close to it, and during my boyhood and youth visited it at all hours of the day and night, under every conceivable condition of weather-in driving tempests of hail, rain and snow, fierce thunderstorms, glorious moonlight and beautiful sunshine". I think that his love for Stonehenge caused him to become an impulse buyer that day.

Three years after the auction and influenced by the Ancient Monument Act, Cecil wrote a letter to the Office of the Works (a predecessor of English Heritage). In the letter he offered Stonehenge “as a gift to be held for the nation”.

The First Commissioner of the Works, Sir Alfred, accepted Cecil’s offer with great pleasure. He must have been excited for he informed the Prime Minister and the King of the offer.

On October 26, 1919, Cecil and Mary Chubb passed Stonehenge into the public’s hands for safekeeping, at a special ceremony held at Stonehenge, where the Chubb’s signed a deed of gift to the nation. By giving Stonehenge to the government, it gave the government the responsibility of the conservation of Stonehenge. The conservation task today is performed by English Heritage. However, the Chubb’s set some special conditions, for their gift, that are still in effect today. The conditions were that local residents have free access to the site; and entrance fees for all others were not to exceed one shilling. (With inflation increases have occurred and today the entrance fee is 14.50 pounds or \$ 27.20 American dollars.)

As a token of a grateful nation, Prime Minister David Lloyd George awarded Brother Cecil with Knighthood, and the title of Sir Cecil Chubb First Baronet of Stonehenge. His local nick name was Viscount Stonehenge.

Brother Cecil died of heart disease on September 22, 1934. He was the last private owner of Stonehenge. When Cecil Chubb made his generous gift of Stonehenge to the nation, this marked a critical turning point in the care and restoration of this iconic Neolithic monument. Between 1919, 1964, and 2021 there were a series of major restoration projects, accompanied by archeological excavations, and scientific studies.

Brother Cecil Chubb’s gift helped Stonehenge go from a little-known unprotected ruin to a national treasure that is recognized and visited by millions of people all over the world.

Brother Chubb’s Masonic Values.....

While Brother Chubb’s actions occurred over a hundred years ago and his gift of Stonehenge was a grand gesture for his community and his country, Brother Cecil Chubb demonstrated, through his actions, the Masonic ideals of:

Brotherly Love - devotion to and the caring for each other and our community; and

Relief - caring for and selflessly giving to those in distress; and

Truth – using knowledge, honesty and understanding to build ourselves into men.

These are the same masonic principles that we practice, and that Red Wing Lodge demonstrates today. While Red Wing Lodge may not have some great monument to donate, it is not the monetary value that makes any action valuable, it is the contribution to the betterment of the community and assisting mankind. When a mason participates and contributes in their own way to their community, that is equally important. Red

Wing Lodge has displayed compassion our fellow men, a public minded spirit and has been an active part of the community.

By our participation in Salsalicious, awarding scholarships, serving meals for Loaves and Fishes along with Books for Bikes, these are but a few of the things that Red Wing Lodge has done that demonstrate our masonic ideals. I think we, as a lodge, have a lot to be proud of.

And here is one last thing to think about:

As individual Freemasons we need to stay on the path in our daily advancement of becoming a better man, so we can make our community and our world a better place.