First of all, the most famous Hellfire Club was the organisation allegedly founded by Sir Francis Dashwood (1708-1781) yet it was never called that name by its members. It was more formerly known as The Friars of St Francis of Wycombe, The Monks of Medmenham, or The Order of Knights of West Wycombe. Dashwood was the son of a wealthy businessman who had married into the aristocracy. He sat in the House of Commons as an MP for over 20 years and variously held the offices of Chancellor of the Exchequer, Postmaster General and Treasurer to King George III.

As a young man, Dashwood went on the Grand Tour of Europe and spent some time in Italy. There he fell in love with the classical architecture and mythology of the country, developed a hatred of Roman Catholicism, met Prince Charles Edward Stuart and became a Jacobite secret agent.

Dashwood also seems to have become involved with the Rosicrucian movement through these Jacobite contacts. While staying in Florence, he was initiated into a Masonic lodge. This event may have taken place as a result of his meeting with Prince Charles, as the pretender to the Scottish throne is known to have had extensive connections with various Masonic and neo-Templar secret societies. In France, the youthful Dashwood also attended a Black Mass as an interested spectator, although what was to become a lifelong interest in the subject appears to have been more as rebellious reaction to Catholicism than any serious attempt to practise or follow Satanism.

In 1739, Dashwood returned briefly to Italy and made contact again with the Masonic societies. He also visited Rome during the election of the new Pope. The previous pontiff had prohibited the practice of Freemasonry in 1738 and excommunicated all Catholics known to belong to Masonic lodges. The English Grand Master of the Florence lodge, Lord Raynard, son of the Chief Justice of England, was forced to close the lodge down and destroy all its papers to avoid being arrested by the Inquisition.

On his return to England, Dashwood founded the Society of the Dilettanti. This was one of many London clubs of the time patronised by the aristocracy and royalty and catering for the hard-drinking and womanising habit of wealthy rakes.

In 1746, Dashwood founded his Order of the Knights of St Francis and they initially met at the 16th century George & Vulture public house in Cornhill in the City of London. This tavern was later to be immortalised in Charles Dickens' 'Pickwick Papers'. The Knights met in a room dominated by 'an everlasting Rosicrucian lamp'. This was a large crystal globe encircled by a gold serpent with its tail in its mouth. The globe was crowned with a pair of silver wings and was suspended in chains in the form of twisted serpents. This lamp is not to be confused with the one in the shape of a giant bat with an erect phallus formerly displayed in the Witchcraft Museum on the Isle of Man and allegedly belonging to the 'Hellfire Club'. The Gnostic design of the 'Rosicrucian Lamp', incorporating a snake and doves also appears on the font Dashwood later presented to West Wycombe church. In 1751, Dashwood leased Medmenham Abbey on the Thames near Marlow, about 6 miles from his ancestral home at

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West Wybombe. It had originally been a 12th century Cistercian monastery, came into secular hands at the Reformation and was converted into a Tudor manor house. In the tradition of the 18th century Gothic revival, Dashwood converted the Abbey at great expense into a suitable headquarters for his Order, installing stained glass windows and carving above the front door the motto "Do as thou will". The gardens boasted a statue of a naked Venus (bending over, so the unwary visitor walked into her buttocks) and a well-endowed statue of Priapus.

At one end of the Abbey's dining room was a figure of Harpocrates, the Egyptian god of silence, with his finger to his lips, and an effigy of Angerona, the Roman goddess of silence. It has been said that these statues were reminders to the Friars that nothing that was said or went on in the Abbey was to be spoken about outside its walls. In Freemasonry these two deities are known as 'the guardians of secrecy'. In 1740, the Earl of Middlesex had a medallion struck depicting Harpocrates when he became the Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge in Florence.

Dashwood's interest in pagan gods and goddesses was reflected in the decorations for his house at West Wycombe, designed by the famous architect, Robert Adam. The west wing of the building was a replica of a classical temple to Bacchus, complete with a statue of the god. On the ceiling was a painting of Dionysus and Ariadne in chariots drawn by leopards and goats and followed by a company of satyrs and nympha. Other representations of the two deities appear in the house and the myth would seem to have a special significance to Dashwood.

To celebrate the opening of the Bacchus 'temple', Dashwood organised a pageant with actors dressed as fauns, satyrs and nympha in animal skins and ivy wreaths. The classical pagan theme was continued in the garden, which, some writers claim, was laid out in the form of a naked woman. It certainly had many statues of classical gods and goddesses and small temples dedicated to Flora, Daphne, the four winds and to music. There was also a large artificial lake on which Dashwood staged mock battles using full-scale models of sailing ships.

Around 1750, Dashwood arranged to have built a network of caves under West Wycombe Hill and these were used by the Friars for their meetings or, as local and London gossip had it, their wild orgies. Yew trees surrounded the entrance to the caves and a low passageway led northwards to join several small caves and catacombs. These caves featured individual 'cells' for the 'monks' to entertain their female guests, and a 'banqueting hall'. An underground stream, known to the monks at the River Styx had to be crossed to give access to the Inner Sanctum, a circular room where so-called 'Black Masses' were said to be performed.

Gerald Gardner claimed the caves represented the Goddess and stated: "the banqueting hall represents the womb where new life originates. After being born in the womb, the worshippers pass through the pubic triangle and into the flowing river. Then born and purified they go on to the joys or resurrection that await them in the temple".
What exactly did the Prior and his Friars get up to in the Abbey and in the caves? The members of the Hellfire Club included some of the most wealthy and influential people in the land. Suspected members included the Earl of Sandwich, Thomas Potter (the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Paymaster General), the radical MP and Lord Mayor of London, John Wilkes, the satirical artist, William Hogarth, the Earl of Bute (who was Prime Minister), the Marquis of Granby, the Prince of Wales and possibly even Benjamin Franklin and Horace Walpole. If popular gossip in the coffeehouses could be believed, the 'monks' ferried 'mollies' and 'dollymops' (prostitutes) down the Thames from London in barges to act as masked 'nuns'. They also celebrated the Black Mass over the naked bodies of aristocratic ladies. The truth is less sensational, but probably more startling. In fact it seems to have been an open secret among the members of the Establishment, which Dashwood and his friends belonged to. When Sir Francis became Chancellor, one of his first actions was to tax cider. This led to the circulation of rhyme, saying: "Dashwood shall pour from a communion cup / libations to the goddess without eyes / and hot or not in cider and excise". This was a pointed reference to the goddess Angerona.

A painting was also done of Dashwood depicting him dressed in a monk's habit and kneeling to worship a statue of Venus. One of the leading members, John Wilkes, gave the game away when he said, "No profane eye has dared to penetrate the English Eleusinian Mysteries of the Chapter Room (the inner sanctum) where the monks assembled on solemn occasions. Secret rites performed and libations to the Bona Dea". The latter was, of course, the title of the Great Mother Goddess in the classical Mysteries.

In his younger days, Sir Francis had joined the Society of Gentlemen of Spalding, whose members included leading Freemasons and the antiquarian and Chief Druid, Dr Rev William Stukeley. Dashwood was a member of the Mount Haemus grove of druids. Mount Haemus claimed descent from a 13th century druidic grove established in Oxford. In turn, this grove claimed connections with the Mysteries of Ceridwen still practised at that time in the Snowdonia region of North Wales. The druidic Council of Eleven withdrew Dashwood's charter to run a grove, following rumours about sex orgies at Medmenham. The Friars of Wycombe wore white druidic-style hooded robes with silver badges inscribed with the motto 'Love & Friendship'.

The so-called 'Hellfire Caves' existed before Dashwood enlarged them. They were, in fact, prehistoric in origin and it is said that in ancient times a 'pagan altar' used to exist on West Wycombe Hill with 'pagan catacombs' below. The Friars were, therefore, using a long-established pagan site for their meetings. An old folk tradition says that when the first church was built at the base of the hill in the middle Ages, unseen hands destroyed the building work every night. Finally, the priest heard an unearthly voice telling him to build the church on top of the hill where it would not be disturbed. Its sitting obviously had some geomantic significance.

Local legend says a secret passageway leads from the caves to St Lawrence's church. It was apparently used by a mysterious Lady Mary or Sister Agnes, an 'abbess' who was supposed to rule over the 'nuns', for romantic trysts with her
boyfriend who was the priest at the church! When asked about Sister Agnes, Dashwood would take his visitors to a hole in the wall of one of the passageways. When they looked through, they saw a 'witch's face', illuminated by candles. In fact this face was a mask.

In 1751, Dashwood paid for the church to be restored - an odd act for a so-called Satanist. However, one later visitor described his renovations as "a Egyptian hall" and said that the restored church "gives one not the last idea of a place sacred to religious worship".

In fact, Dashwood modelled the reconstruction after the solar temple at Palmyra, with Corinthian pillars and walls decorated with friezes of flowers, fruit, doves, olive branches and leaves. On the ceiling was a depiction of the Last Supper, the Christian version of the agape of the classical Mysteries, and a golden ball, seven feet in diameter, was surmounted on the church spire. This obvious solar symbol was a copy of the golden ball on the Custom House in Venice, which has a weather vane in the shape of the goddess Fortuna. The golden globe held seats inside for three people. It is believed this ball was meant to link the sun god who was born at the winter solstice with Christ as 'the Light of the World'.

When one of the leading members of the Order, Paul Whitehead, dies in 1774, he left instructions in his will that his heart should be buried separately.

It was to be placed in an urn and buried in the mausoleum erected on a hill over the caves for Dashwood and a few selected Order members. The urn was carried three times around the edifice, accompanied by soldier's of Dashwood's private army, the Bucks Militia, before it was placed in a niche. Dashwood's major biographer, Eric Towers, has suggested this strange request and ceremony was, in fact, the enactment of a pagan Dionysian dismemberment ritual.

To summarise, it would appear that the popular folk legend of the so-called Hellfire Club with its satanic goings-on and Black Masses is the product of imaginative fantasy. It is possible that some members of the Order of St Francis indulged in pseudo-Satanic rites as a prelude to their sexual antics. Many of the monks attracted to the Order were merely "happy disciples of Bacchus and Venus who got together occasionally to celebrate women and wine". Others had a more serious purpose and, as one 19th century writer put it, "Sir Francis himself officiated as high priest engaged in pouring a libation from a communion cup to the mysterious object of their homage". From the available evidence, it is safe to surmise that this "mysterious object of their homage" was, in fact, the Goddess and that Sir Francis Dashwood and his merry monks were not Satanists but followers of the pagan Mysteries.