

A toast to The Temple
by Ross E. Davies

before a meeting of the Priory Scholars of NYC at The Churchill Tavern on May 5, 2018

Permit me to begin with a couple of quick definitions.

First, where is The Temple? It is where it has been for centuries — on a short stretch of land in the middle of London, between the Strand and Fleet Street to the north and the River Thames to the south. It was in the early 1300s — about 700 years ago — that lawyers began moving into the lovely buildings along the north bank of the Thames that had been the London home of the Knights Templar. If we envision London as growing around the slightly lopsided “M” shaped by the River Thames as it weaves from Westminster in the west to Canary Wharf in the east, then we see The Temple just at the top of the first hump of the “M.”

Second, what is The Temple? It is what it has been for centuries: the center of English legal culture and legal enterprise, and the taproot of English legal influence around the world. In other words, it is, in a way, the home of the common law. And it is home to two of the four English Inns of Court (the Inner Temple and the Middle Temple) and the other two (Gray’s Inn and Lincoln’s Inn) are very close by. If you want to practice law in England, you pretty nearly have to be a member of one of those four Inns of Court.

There are many good reasons to toast The Temple. We only have time for one of them today, so here it is: The Temple is toastable because it is one of the great peaceable connectors of people all around the world, and an especially durable connector between the U.K. and its former colonies in the U.S.A.

Thus, for example, in the 18th century we find American troublemakers peacefully studying law among the English in The Temple — including future signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Most notable, perhaps, were two of the original Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, John Blair and John Rutledge (both in the Middle Temple).

And in the 19th century we find an American troublemaker peacefully proceeding to The Temple to see her husband, one Godfrey Norton (in the Inner Temple), after imprudently tweaking the great Sherlock Holmes.

And in the 20th century, we find one of the Inns of Court (Lincoln’s Inn) bestowing, for the first time, honorary bencher status (that is, membership) on an American. Would anyone care to guess who was the first American to become an honorary bencher? It was a Holmes . . . Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. — another Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

And just for good measure, so that we do not leave out the fourth Inn of Court, back in the 17th century one of Holmes’s English ancestors — Thomas Holmes — was a member of Gray’s Inn.

So, today’s toast to The Temple is a toast to friendly relations between the good people on both sides of the Atlantic, even when some of them are, ominously, lawyers.

Please raise your glasses to The Temple.