

LIONEL GREEN tells the story of the **KNIGHTS TEMPLAR**

This was an international and military order arising out of the Crusades. The Templars amassed great wealth and became international bankers. Henry II gave them sufficient money to pay for 200 knights for a year in the Holy Land in expiation for Becket's murder.

At the beginning of the 14th century king Philippe IV of France found the Templars arrogant and unruly but rich. He decided to join the order as a postulant but was rejected. In 1303 and 1304 two popes mysteriously died (Boniface VIII and Benedict XI). King Philippe was successful in securing the election of his own candidate, the archbishop of Bordeaux, to the papacy and he became Clement V in 1305.

In 1306 the newly elected pope asked the prior of Merton and the archdeacon of old St Paul's, London, to settle a dispute involving the Knights Templar and the monks of Sele priory (near Upper Beeding, Sussex) "who murmured concerning certain possessions, tithes, returns and other things".¹ The pope's commissioners, the prior and archdeacon, duly summoned the prior and monks of Sele to appear before them. It was agreed that Sele would not claim tithes of the parish of Shipley and that if a monk of Sele performed divine service in the chapel of Shipley called Cnappe (Knebb), he would pay obventions (occasional dues) to Shipley church and receive six shillings (30p) from the Templars. "The respective seals of the commissioners and the signature of the parties were set thereto".² One wonders why the pope was involved.

In 1306 in both London and Paris there were murmurs about the Templars' alleged vices and infidelity. King Philippe issued sealed and secret orders to his seneschals throughout France, which were to be opened simultaneously and implemented at dawn on Friday 13 October 1307. All Templars in France were seized and placed under arrest by the king's men, and their goods confiscated. In Paris and other parts of France knights were burned at the stake. In England and Wales in 1308, there were 165 Templars – six knights, 41 chaplains and 118 sergeant-commoners (mostly former knights). Their gross annual revenue was £4,720. In Surrey they owned the manors of Caterham, Merrow (one third), Temple Elfold and Wychyflet in Southwark.³

On 20 December 1307 the sheriffs of England were instructed by Letters Close to arrest all members of the Order "on the Wednesday next after Epiphany in the morning" (8 January 1308), and to take inventories of their possessions.⁴ In September 1308 Walter de Geddinges, sheriff of Surrey, held an inquisition at Guildford before John de Foxly.⁵ Templars were sent to the castles of London, Lincoln, York and Dublin.

Judicial papal enquiries began in London on Monday 20 October 1309. The inquisitors included three Frenchmen plus the pope's French chaplain. The enquiry elicited nothing derogatory, and the Grand Master of the Templars in England refused to admit to any crimes. He was kept in the Tower "confined with double irons",⁶ but did not long survive this treatment. Six Templars were convicted in July 1311, but given light sentences and sent to monasteries as a penance.

In 1311 pope Clement held a church council in Vienne, south of Lyons. On 8 September the prior of Merton wrote to him stating that three canons from Thornton, Cirencester and Waltham would be his proctors at the council.⁷ This met on 1 October and demanded the suppression of the Order of Knights Templar. This was officially dissolved by a bull published 15 August 1312 and their possessions confiscated. The papal bull was never proclaimed in Scotland and many French Templars made their way there and fought for Scotland in 1314, helping to defeat the English at Bannockburn.

One English Templar, Stephen de Stapelbrigg, was delivered to Merton priory to do penance in 1312 whilst the king ordered Henry de Cobham, keeper of the Templars' lands in Surrey, to provide a maintenance allowance of fourpence (2p) per day.⁸ At his examination on 23 June 1311, Stapelbrigg stated that he had been made to spit upon the cross and to deny the Saviour and the Virgin.⁹ Later, he escaped from Merton and was re-arrested at Salisbury. He was sent to London where he was examined in 1319 and finally sent to Christchurch priory, Hampshire (now Dorset) to do penance.

In the 1320s another Templar, Thomas Totty (or Tolly) was sent to end his days at Merton.¹⁰

After Edward II had taken his pick, he transferred their possessions in 1323 to the Knights Hospitaller of St John.

1 A Heales *Records of Merton Priory* OUP 1898 p.197

2 Heales p.198

3 Bermondsey priory held the superior rights. *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 16 (1901) p.561

4 Close Roll Cal. pp.14,49; *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 22 (1909) pp.156/7

5 *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 22 (1909) p.157

6 *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 9 (1857) p.274

7 Heales p.207

8 Heales p.212; *VCH* 2 p.98

9 *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 9 (1857) p.272

10 *VCH* 2 p.98; Bull of pope John XXII