

Anniversary Address 2012

An Introduction to Middle Temple Hall

by

ROBERT HRADSKY

Almost all of the oldest secular buildings in London are halls: Westminster (1097–99), Guildhall (*c.* 1411–30), Barnard's Inn (*c.* 1439), Lincoln's Inn (1489–92), Merchant Taylors' (14th century), Gray's Inn (1556–58) and the subject of this address, Middle Temple Hall, built 1562–70 and formally opened by Queen Elizabeth I in 1576 (Fig. 1). Why have so many halls survived when their surroundings have been rebuilt? The answer must surely be that halls, like churches, are characterised by continuity of use. They are valued for their original function and eventually become a symbol of the community they serve. The great hall of the Middle Temple is a perfect example, expressing continuity and identity through the heraldic and collegiate imagery that has been applied to the original building, and which is crucial in showing how the building has been used and appreciated.

The Middle Temple is, of course, one of the four 'Inns of Court'. In old English the word 'inn' simply means a house of some sort offering accommodation. So 'Inns of Court' is short for the houses of the men of court, i.e. lawyers. The founding of these four inns is shrouded in uncertainty, but they are generally thought to have been established in the 14th century, when the royal law courts settled at Westminster. Hence, they are all outside the City of London, to the west, so that busy barristers could catch a boat to Westminster Hall, avoiding the worst of the river traffic.¹

The early histories of the four sites vary. The two northernmost Inns of Court – Lincoln's Inn and Gray's Inn – were both established in large, rambling medieval houses, belonging to the bishops of Chichester and the lords Grey of Wilton respectively. The Temple is different because it was a monastery, originally belonging to the Knights Templar, who gave it its name. The Temple as we know it today evolved directly out of the layout of this monastery, which was established in the 12th century.² The distinction between the so-called 'Inner' and 'Middle' Temple dates from this time.

The Templars had two halls, as described in an inventory of 1312, when the Order was dissolved. There was one hall for the prior and brothers, which stood on the east side where the Inner Temple Hall now lies; this has been twice rebuilt since the medieval period, most recently in 1952–55. This consecrated part of the precinct incorporated the Temple Church, begun *c.* 1160. The other hall, for the military knights and lay brethren, stood close to the present site of the Middle Temple Hall, a little to the east.³

Robert Hradsky is a conservation adviser at Alan Baxter & Associates, and is researching the 17th- and 18th-century architecture of the Inns of Court for a PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art.



Fig. 1

Middle Temple Hall, interior looking towards the dais, from the gallery.

Photograph, London Illustrated News, 1949

After 1312 the Knights Hospitallers took possession of the Temple, but did not need the accommodation as they were already established in nearby Clerkenwell. So they were happy to take in the lawyers, who were then seeking accommodation to the west of the City. Almost nothing is known of this formative period for the inns; the earliest records are Lincoln's Inn's *Black Books*, starting in 1422. It can be deduced that for professional and social reasons lawyers found it convenient to club together in order to arrange living and working accommodation. They began a tradition of dining together in the halls they had acquired that continues to this day.

The early records of Lincoln's Inn offer some surprising insights into the collegiate life of the inns:

It was ordained by the Governors of the Inn... that if any one... shall henceforth commit fornication with any woman... he shall pay a fine of 100s to the Society, as often as he shall be so found... And if he shall have her or enjoy her in such a way in the garden, the Coneygarth, or in the lane... he shall pay a fine of 20s.⁴

This ruling of 1489 hints at the quasi-monastic life of the inns, which were populated exclusively by men. Each inn was surrounded by a high wall, with the gates locked at night, as they still are today. After the Reformation the inns became favoured places of education for the sons of gentry, attracting brilliant men such as Edward Coke (1552–1634) who would lay the foundations of modern law. Students were educated through an apprentice system and were attracted by famous lawyers who would lecture within the halls. Within this atmosphere of collegiate pride, the Middle Temple decided to build a new, larger hall and convert the old one into chambers.

The earliest mention of the new hall is in a letter of 1562 sent by the Treasurer of the Middle Temple, Edmund Plowden (1518–85), to Sir John Thynne of Longleat, asking Thynne if the Middle Temple could borrow his carpenter, John Lewis, for the 'building of a new hall'.⁵ This accounts for various similarities between the two hall roofs, particularly in their ornamental details. Thynne, of course, was shortly to build the most advanced Renaissance house in England at Longleat, incorporating ideas for classical enrichment from his earlier house there.⁶ So, there would have been an awareness at the Middle Temple of the latest architectural ideas. Yet, they were, like the other inns, also conservative in their patronage. The great roof is conservative in the sense that its overall form is based on earlier examples (Fig. 1). Its large size, 31m long by 12m wide (about 101ft by 40ft), and hammerbeam form invite comparison with the halls of the 1520s and 1530s at Hampton Court Palace and Christ Church, Oxford.⁷ Yet the Middle Temple has two sets of hammerbeams, a form more commonly found in churches, as at Woolpit (Suffolk) and Willingham (Cambridgeshire), both 15th century. At Middle Temple the double hammerbeam roof was not structurally necessary, but, rather, designed for spectacle, and was prodigiously expensive.⁸

Despite the medieval pedigree of the hammerbeam roof, it is very up-to-date in its details, which are thoroughly Elizabethan (Fig. 2). These may well have been picked out in contrasting colours, but are now soot-black and hard to discern. Little classically inspired pendants hang from the ends of the hammerbeams, which are themselves treated as classical entablatures, each with a bold cornice. This is also true of the collar-beams across the centre of the roof. Furthermore, sitting on top of the hammerbeams and



Fig. 2

Middle Temple Hall, the great roof.

Photograph, © The Honourable Society of Middle Temple, 2012

collar-beams are diminutive Doric columns. In this respect the roof is, of course, typical of English architecture after the Reformation, assimilating only the decorative potential of Italian architecture, filtered through northern European pattern books. Again, for the inn, these details were perhaps simply to show off.

The spectacular oak screen was erected in 1574 (Fig. 3). Like the roof, it is broadly traditional in form, yet up-to-date in its classically inspired detail. There are Doric columns on the lower storey, which support two friezes for added richness. The upper frieze is a correct scholarly Doric frieze, complete with triglyphs and circular metopes (Fig. 4). Elegant winged figures in the lower spandrels contrast with alternating large caryatids and small allegorical figures on the upper storey. The concentration of detail combines to make it one of the showiest screens of its time in England.

The celebrated roof and screen are, in fact, just the beginning of the story. From the outset the hall was embellished by the people who regularly used it, beginning with the heraldic painted windows that commemorate prominent members of the Inn.⁹ Late 16th-century examples survive (*ex situ*) in the east window above the screen, and the sequence continues around the other walls. Heraldry is little studied as an art form, but here the amazing quantity of glass makes it possible to compare shifts in style over the centuries. The swirling, Baroque heraldry of the Restoration period stands out especially, such as that in the south oriel commemorating Francis North, Baron Guilford (1682) (Fig. 5). But what distinguishes the windows from those within, say, a country house is that here no single family predominates, so that the display becomes an expression of the quality of lineage of the whole society.

This theme continues on the panelling, which is decorated with hundreds of coats of arms of members of the Inn who have held the title of Reader (Fig. 6). They are applied as painted plaques bearing shields and,

again, date from the late 16th century onwards. Being a Reader had its pros and cons. It was a prestigious appointment, made twice a year, and carried the responsibility of giving law lectures in the hall. However, the Reader also had to pay for a lavish feast in the hall for the members of the Inn. The feasts could go on for days and included entertainment in the form of plays or musical performances. Through this tradition, the inns became centres of Elizabethan drama. The heraldic panelling, therefore, commemorates events as well as people, and provides one of the few tangible links to what is today the hall's most famous moment – the premiere of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

On 2 February 1602 the young lawyer, John Manningham, wrote in his diary, 'at our feast we had a play called Twelve Night, or What You Will, much like The Comedy of Errors'. He recalls the amusement of seeing a male actor playing a female character who disguises herself as a man.¹⁰ But it is worth going into the play further, because



Fig. 3

Middle Temple Hall, the centre section of the screen (1574); in front is a 19th-century bust of Edmund Plowden.

Photograph, M. Saunders



Fig. 4

Middle Temple Hall, the screen, close-up showing the Doric entablature and the gallery details.

Photograph, M. Saunders

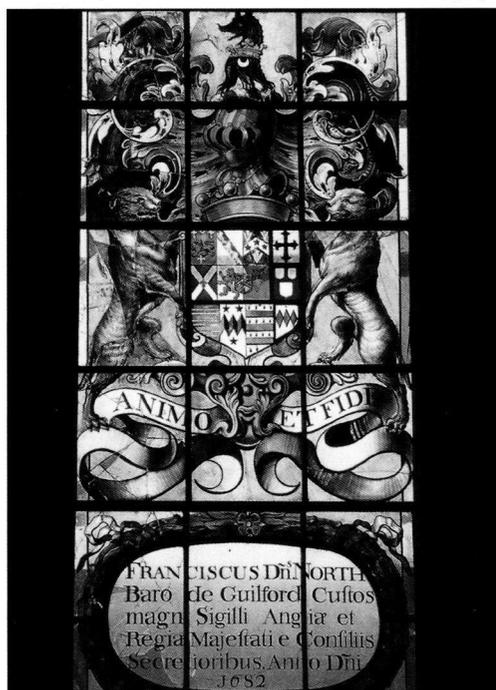


Fig. 5

Middle Temple Hall, stained glass window in the south oriel, detail.

Photograph, author



Fig. 6

Middle Temple Hall, panelling: the coats of arms of members of the Inn who have been Readers, detail.

Photograph, author

there is a persuasive theory that the text actually refers to the Middle Temple Hall.¹¹ In the play, when Malvolio is imprisoned, he complains that it is ‘dark as hell... they have laid me here in hideous darkness’. The clown Feste teases him: ‘Say’st thou that house is dark?... Why, it hath bay windows transparent as barricadoes, and the clearstoreys toward the south and north are as lustrous as ebony’. As Mr Akrigg notes, this description sounds nothing like a theatre but a lot like the Middle Temple Hall. The ‘bay windows’ could refer to the two oriels, while the ‘clearstoreys’ could describe the other windows,



Fig. 7

Middle Temple Hall, looking east towards the screen.

Lithograph, C. J. Richardson, 1844



Fig. 8

Middle Temple Hall, looking towards the dais and the royal portraits.

Photograph, © The Honourable Society of Middle Temple, 2012

which are high up and mainly on the south and north sides. This is, then, perhaps a witty joke where Shakespeare takes us out of the play and into the room in which it is being performed. Whether or not this is convincing, the Middle Temple Hall remains the only surviving building in which a Shakespeare play is known to have been performed.

The screen would have made a perfect stage-set, incorporating two doors through which the actors could enter and depart (Fig. 7).¹² At the other end of the hall on the dais is the high table, reputedly a gift from Elizabeth I, reserved for senior members of the Inn. Nearby is the ‘cupboard’, a smaller table originally associated with Readers delivering law lectures. Other clues as to how the hall was used are more subtle, such as the doors added to the screen in 1671. These have spikes on the top, to exclude late-comers from dinner and to keep students locked in and at table until the Bench has processed out after dinner.

The other additions are predominantly of the 17th and 18th centuries, including much of the panelling and the royal portraits on the west wall. These include a studio copy of Van Dyck’s equestrian portrait of Charles I (Fig. 8). Taking pride of place above this is a shield bearing the collegiate emblem of the Middle Temple, the lamb and flag, which appears on all the Inn’s buildings. The strong sense of collegiate pride attached to the hall was articulated by Roger North in the 1680s, when the building narrowly escaped destruction by fire. If it had not been saved, this would apparently have ‘dissolved’ the society, North remarked.

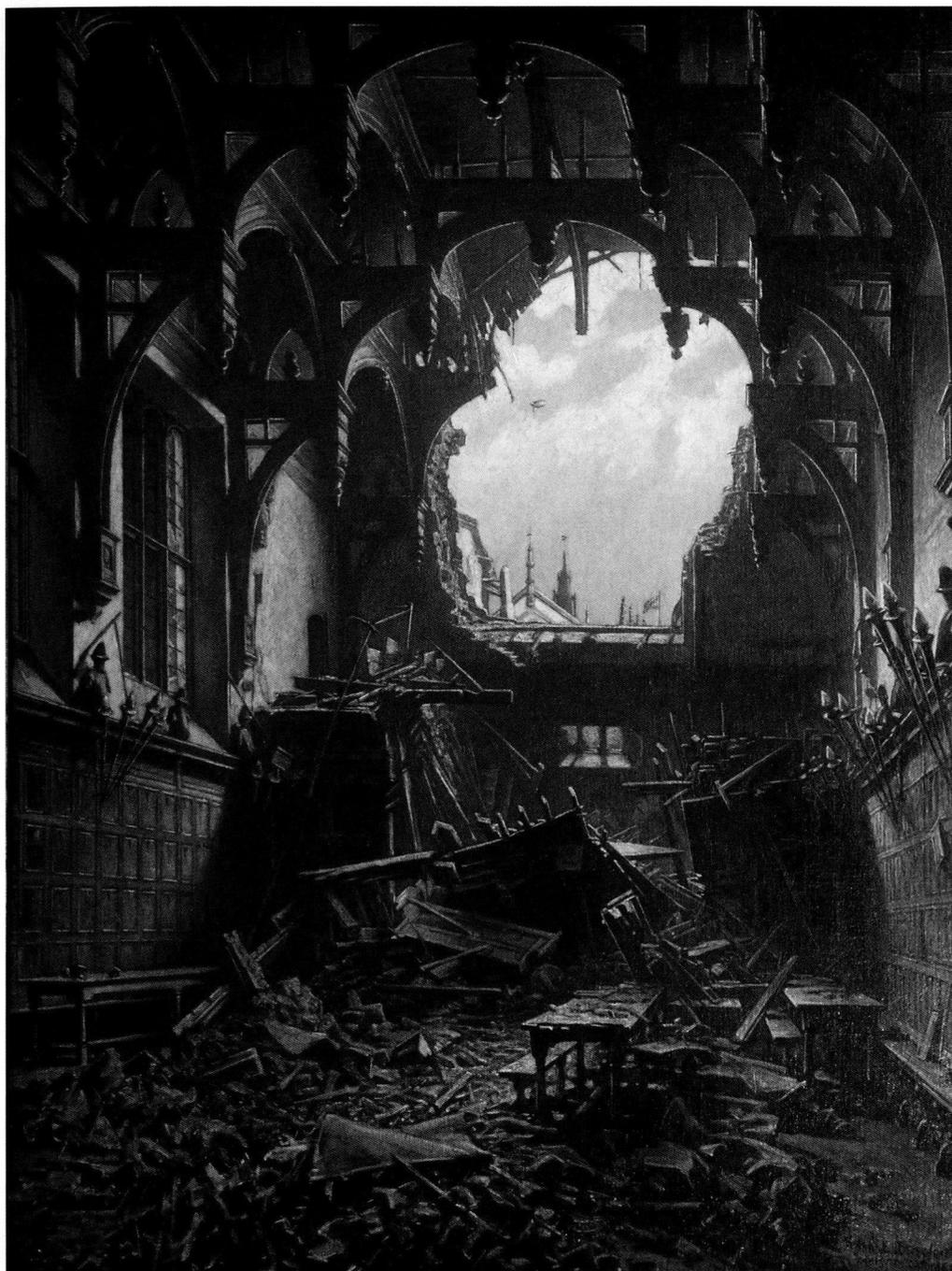


Fig. 9

'Armistice Day, 1940', painting by Frank Beresford, showing the damage to the east end of the hall during the Blitz.

Photograph, © The Honourable Society of Middle Temple, 2012

In later centuries, the hall has changed relatively little, except for the addition of an entrance tower in 1830. Appearances are deceptive, however, because as the painting hanging in the gallery shows, the hall was badly damaged during the Blitz of 1940 (Fig. 9). An exploding landmine sent building debris through the east wall, shattering the great screen into a thousand splinters. This is now hard to believe because the post-War conservators of the screen seamlessly combined new wood with old and then covered both in a thick coat of dark varnish (rather than following the philosophy of 'honest repairs'). Like many other buildings in the Temple, the screen was carefully reconstructed to its original form because of its value as a symbol of continuity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editor wishes to thank the Masters of the Bench of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple for permission to reproduce three photographs from their Archive, and he is grateful for the assistance of Hannah Baker in this matter.

NOTES

- 1 R. Megarry, *Inns ancient and modern: a topographical and historical introduction to the Inns of Court, Inns of Chancery, and Serjeants' Inns* (London 1972).
- 2 W. Page ed., *Victoria County History of London*, vol. 1: *London within the Bars, Westminster and Southwark*, (London 1909), 485-91.
- 3 This hall lay between Pump Court and Elm Court; its foundations were exposed in 1735.
- 4 W. P. Baildon and J. D. Walker eds, *The records of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn: the Black Books*, vol. 1 (London 1897), 89-90.
- 5 See further M. Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture: its Rise and Fall 1540-1640* (New Haven and London, 2009), 32 and 463 (n.86).
- 6 A fire of 1567 largely destroyed the earlier house: the rebuild (1572-80) was the most advanced Renaissance house of its time in England. See most recently Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture*, 162-3, 181-3.
- 7 S. Bradley and N. Pevsner, *London 1: The City of London*, Pevsner Architectural Guides (New Haven and London, 2002), 348.
- 8 As a contribution to the cost, the Middle Temple levied 10 shillings per member, including attorneys.
- 9 The earliest heraldic glass dates from 1540, presumably from the old hall.
- 10 J. Bruce ed., *Diary of John Manningham*, Camden Society (London 1868), 18; the entry was first noticed by John Payne Collier in his *Annals of the Stage* (1831).
- 11 G. P. V. Akrigg, 'Twelfth Night at the Middle Temple', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 9/3 (Summer 1958), 422-4.
- 12 Robert E. Burkhart, 'The Playing Space in the Halls of the Inns of Court', *South Atlantic Review*, 56/4 (Nov. 1991), 1-5.