

The Knights Templar in Marlow

If you were asked to invent a seriously obscure religious/military group of people, and think along Monty Python and the Holy Grail lines, you would be very hard pressed to come up with anything more obscure than the real Knights Templar. Yet it was this seriously way-out group of Knights who probably did more than any other group of people to make Marlow what it is today! Why? It's a long story.

After the First Crusade captured Jerusalem in 1099 many Christians started to make pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Although Jerusalem itself was fairly safely held, the route from the coast inland was not. In 1119 a French knight, Hugues de Payens, proposed setting up a monastic/military order to protect the pilgrims on their way inland. This was agreed by King Baldwin II of Jerusalem and Warmund, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and the King granted the new order a headquarters in the royal palace on the Temple Mount. As all the new guards were already knights, they then became known as the Knights Templar. Actually, they were not originally known by this more recent name, but were called the Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon. Officially endorsed by the Vatican around 1129, they remained prominent in the Christian church for two centuries in the Middle Ages, and were one of the richest and most powerful military orders of the time. They also developed the first formal form of banking in the West.

The Templars' decline started at the beginning of the 14th century. Their downfall was triggered by King Philip IV of

France, who was deeply in debt to the Templars having borrowed a lot of money from them for fighting his war against the British. Rumours had been spreading for a while about underhand activities of the Order, and this had created an atmosphere of distrust in France. Philip decided to leverage this distrust in a bid to free himself of the burden of debt. In 1307, he had many of the Order's members in France arrested, tortured into giving false confessions, and then burned them at the stake. Under pressure from King Philip, Pope Clement V disbanded the Templars in 1312.

Knights Templar had to already be a knight in order to join the Order, so typically they were wealthy individuals. However upon joining they had to sign over all their wealth and possessions to the Order and take vows of poverty, chastity and total obedience. Generally speaking membership was for life. Knights were forbidden from any form of contact with women, even their own family, and they had to eat in silence, and consume meat no more than three times a week. They wore the familiar white surcoat with the red cross at all times, and were forbidden to eat or drink unless they were wearing it. Seventy two rules governed how they lived, these known today as the Latin Rule. The red cross on the garment was intended to reflect martyrdom, dying in battle being seen as a great honour guaranteeing a passage to Heaven. Surrender was forbidden.

So what has this obscure organisation to do with Marlow? At the time of the Domesday Book in 1085 the Manor of Bisham was held by a man by the name of Bondi, but by 1086 it had passed to Henry de Ferrers. It passed in time to his grandson

Robert de Ferrers, Earl of Derby, who gave the Manor to the Knights Templar. In 1260 the Manor House was built as a community house for two of the Knights, who retained it until 1307 when the Templars were beginning to be ousted in France. Presumably anticipating a similar fate in England the Knights left Bisham and King Edward II took over the manorial rights, and of course in 1312 the Templars were disbanded by order of Pope Clement V. Proximity to the river must have played a major part in the choice of Bisham, as the river was a major communication route with London, and the Templars had significant interests in the capital, owning lots of land, the ownership of which is clear today in names like Temple Bar and the Inner Temple, one of the four Inns of Court in London, which was built on Templars' land.

At the time the Templars occupied Bisham there was no bridge at Marlow, so the town was completely cut off from the Bisham side of the River. This was a big deal as the main route westward from London followed roughly the course of the current A4; in fact the A4 is one of the oldest established main routes in the country, pre-dating the other main trunk roads which are largely Roman in origin. Only very short sections of the A4 can be attributed to Roman road builders.

In the mid to late 13th century Marlow was surrounded by monastic foundations, the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitallers having houses at Bisham and Widmer respectively, on opposite sides of the River. These two Orders worked closely together, so it was natural they would have found a river crossing at Marlow very useful. Although the facts are a little sketchy, it is believed that the Templars funded the construction of the very first bridge at Marlow,

which immediately opened the small town up to traffic from the main road to the west. In time Marlow would itself become an important stage on a major road, the Hatfield Reading turnpike, itself linking up with both the current A4 route and the main route to Fishguard which would in time become the A40.

So the Knights Templar played a major role in turning what had been a small isolated hamlet on the north bank of the river into a thriving town with major road links. It is interesting to reflect on the extent to which Bisham still preserves a very different identity from Marlow, with many Bisham people strongly emphasising the fact that they are not part of Marlow! Maybe this is a throwback to the early times of the Templars when no bridge existed. But regardless of this, Marlow owes a lot to the Knights Templar of Bisham.

With their military mission and extensive financial resources, the Knights Templar funded a large number of building projects around Europe and the Holy Land. Many of these structures are still standing. Many sites also maintain the name "Temple" because of centuries-old association with the Templars. For example, some of the Templars' lands in London were later rented to lawyers, which led to the names of the Temple Bar gateway and the Temple Underground station. Two of the four Inns of Court which may call members to act as barristers are the Inner Temple and Middle Temple.

