

A Day Around the Inns of Court and Sir John Soane's museum

15 April 2016



Fig. 1 One of William Frith's bronze cherubs; this one on the telephone

Armed with the very comprehensive notes Jeremy Bate had sent prior to this event, members met at Two Temple Place for the first visit of the day. Built by the American real estate magnate William Waldorf Astor in the 1890s as his Estate Office in England, Astor had chosen John Loughborough Pearson as his architect. Pearson, already known for building Truro Cathedral in a French Gothic style, had, like Astor, studied in Italy. Here he had become fascinated by the 13th-century inlay work of the Cosmati family, having seen their floors made from recycled ancient Roman marble in the churches of Rome, and by the mosaic work of Ravenna and Venice, both of which he was to introduce in his later commissions.

Reputedly Astor gave Pearson an unlimited budget and a free hand in the design of Temple Place; Astor's obsession with secrecy means no papers survive to illustrate their discussions. Pearson regularly used certain craftsmen in his work and here they were able to really show their skills.

The Cosmati-inspired marble floors were by Robert Davidson of the Decorative Art Studio on Marylebone Road; the stained glass ceiling over the central staircase and the extraordinary Tiffany-influenced picture windows in the Great Room by Clayton and Bell; the stone carvings on the exterior and the wood carvings in the Great Room were by Nathaniel Hitch. Thomas Nicholls, who had worked with William Burges at Castell Coch and Cardiff Castle, carved the literary figures on the great staircase and the Shakespeare frieze above the staircase; and William Frith was responsible for the satinwood library and the bronze lamps, supported by cherubs playing with new technology, which flank the entrance stairs. The interior of Two Temple Place appears to have been entirely panelled in wood – oak in the general offices downstairs, the great staircase and private upper rooms in mahogany and satinwood, ebony from Brazil and pencil cedar from New England (Fig. 1).

The Bulldog Trust, a charity established in 1983 to provide support and advice to charities facing immediate financial difficulties, now owns Two Temple Place. Each year the property is open to the public for an annual winter exhibition, which is intended to showcase museum collections from outside London and to support emerging curatorial talent. We were fortunate to visit just before the end of this year's exhibition 'Beyond Beauty, Transforming the Body in Ancient Egypt'. A short film of the installation of the exhibition is available on the website two templeplace.org. Click Exhibitions and then 2016; it shows glimpses of the amazing interiors as well as the fascinating exhibition.

We then walked to neighbouring Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court, where we visited the Hall, considered one of the finest surviving Elizabethan buildings in London. Shorter but as broad as the Great Hall at Hampton Court, and with a double hammerbeam roof, the Hall was begun in 1562 during the treasurership of Edmund Plowden, one of the most highly regarded lawyers of the day. John Lewis, who had been John Thynne's carpenter at Longleat, carried out the work. One of the treasures of Middle Temple Hall is the carved screen of 1574, now with doors of 1671. The screen was heroically restored following extensive damage during the Blitz when a neighbouring building received a direct hit.

Many of the items of furniture have stories and associations. The High Table is of three 29-foot planks of a single oak, reputedly from Windsor Forest, a gift of Elizabeth I to the Middle Temple, floated down the Thames and installed before the building was finished. If so, the table would have been in the hall in 1602 when Queen Elizabeth attended the first performance of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. The current supports do not appear to be 16th century. Another item of furniture, which is part of

Fig. 2 An Alto Adige chest,
previously at Serjeants Inn, now at
Middle Temple Hall



Fig. 3 A bench-end by Price the
Joiner, 1623, Lincoln's Inn Chapel



the ceremonies of the Hall, is the 'cupboard', a table on which the book members sign when they are called to the Bar is laid. The present 'cupboard', which replaced an earlier one, is a table with cabriole legs, according to tradition made from the hatch cover of Francis Drake's ship the *Golden Hind* but possibly part of the work at the Hall by John Fieldhouse in the 1730s. Some of the furniture we saw in the Hall and adjacent rooms are gifts to the Middle Temple, such as the Italian chest illustrated here (Fig. 2).

We understand there is currently a proposal to research the furniture and archives of the Hall; when this has been completed it would be most interesting to again visit Middle Temple Hall. Our thanks for a most interesting visit are due to our guide Diane Eccles. This was followed by a much-enjoyed lunch in Hall.

We then proceeded up Chancery Lane and through the Tudor gateway to Lincoln's Inn, where the medieval

courtyard plan is still maintained, with barrister's chambers and lodgings sharing common entrances. Here we visited the Chapel, rebuilt 1619–23 in a traditional style in order to blend with the earlier buildings. Inigo Jones had submitted a model in 1618 but apparently there is no evidence of any further involvement by Jones. The chapel sits on an open crypt, which was used for burials until the middle of the 19th century. The building of the new chapel had been overseen by a member of Lincoln's Inn, Otho Nicholson, who had already been involved with the refitting of the library at Christ Church, Oxford and, between 1615–17 had promoted building the Carfax Conduit, part of a new scheme to bring fresh water into Oxford. He brought the Oxford mason John Clarke to Lincoln's Inn to build the new chapel. The foundation stone was laid in 1620 by the then Preacher of the Inn, John Donne. In 1623 the pews were supplied by 'Price the Joyner'. Laurie Lindey has

recorded several Prices working as joiners in 17th-century London prior to the joiner Richard Price who was supplying quantities of tables, seat and bed frames, and cane chairs to Charles II from the 1670s (Fig. 3). Laurie's records of 17th-century London furniture makers are to be included in the digital version of the *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, which the Furniture History Society is currently preparing to put online. Before the chapel was consecrated, seats were allocated in strict order of precedence. The recorded admonition not to lean or place hats on the communion table suggests the table was in the body of the chapel in the 1620s rather than standing as an altar against the east wall.

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