

The English Templars

by

Sir Knight William P. Arney

The Knights Templar in England enjoyed a unique and interesting existence. They were not as involved with the Holy Land as the Templars recruited on the continent but were more intimately involved with the ruling kings.

Immediately after the Council of Troyes (1128), Hugh de Payens, founder of the Order, traveled to Normandy where he met King Henry I of England. Henry held many lands in what we now call France, so it was not at all unusual to find him there. It should be noted that Richard the Lionheart, while king of England, spent only three weeks in the British Isles (where some Welshman killed him with an arrow). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us that Hugh de Payens received gold and silver from King Henry and then traveled to England and Scotland, where he “was received by all good men, and all gave him treasure.” Then Hugh returned to the Holy Land, and no source mentions the English Templars again until 1144, when, from the context of the source, they were firmly established.

When Henry I died in 1135, a civil war was fought for the English crown. King Steven sat on the throne by virtue of his marriage to William the Conqueror’s daughter but was challenged by Henry’s daughter Matilda and her husband, Goeffrey of Anjou. Their son, who would one day be Henry II, was two years old. At this time

primogeniture, or the practice of all rights and properties being inherited by the eldest son, was not firmly established in English royalty. William the Conqueror’s eldest son, Robert Curthose, first passed over for the crown by his younger brother William ‘Rufus’ in 1087, had gone off to the First Crusade in 1096 only to return and find his still younger brother, Henry I, already on the throne.

The English Templars fared quite well in this period, benefiting from the generosity of both sides in the civil war. Their first known land grant came from the personal property of King Steven’s wife, Matilda. She was the granddaughter of Eustace II, Duke of Boulogne. Eustace had saved the life of William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings, is pictured next to him on the Bayeaux Tapestry, and was rewarded with great land grants on the conquered island. It was from these family lands that Mathilde made her grants to the Templars. King Steven added to them.

The Templars’ English headquarters was originally at Holborn, just outside London’s crowded walls. Their most significant holdings at Temple Crossing were given to them by Queen Matilda, wife of King Steven, where their many adjacent holdings made for a strong and profitable early presence. The civil war ended in a treaty. King Steven’s only son had died, leaving him nothing to fight



Effigies in the Templar Round Church in London. Photo by Stephen Dafoe.

for. It was agreed that he would remain king until his death, when the crown would pass to Henry II, the grandson of Henry I. All three kings, Henry I, Steven, and Henry II supported the Templars with cash and land grants. During these early reigns, the Templars were to become a praetorian guard for the English royals. The English Master was always found at the side of the English king. Other Templar officers were left to deal with Templar business outside the reach of master and king. This arrangement continued right up to the fall of the Order in 1307.

A telling example of this came in 1161 during the reign of Henry II. Henry was at war, as usual, with Philip Augustus, king of France. Philip

was much younger than Henry, held much less property (and consequently, wealth), and was very ambitious. He had been making overtures of alliance to Henry's son, Richard, and was otherwise trying to undermine Henry's influence on the continent.

During a truce in the war, Henry and Philip agreed on a settlement of border areas between their holdings, in the Vexin, in eastern Normandy. The future of the Vexin area was to be determined by the marriage of Henry's son, also named Henry, and Philip's daughter, Margaret. Both those royals were but children at the time, so the truce seemed safe for years to come. But Philip's second wife, Constance of Castille, died in childbirth. Philip lost no time in



Henry II

using his eligible status to remarry into a powerful alliance. By marrying Adela of Blois, Philip gained control of both Blois and Champagne. When Hugh, Count of Troyes, left his wife to join the Templars in the Holy Land in 1125, he sold the county to his nephew, Theobald, Count of Blois. This united the lands of Blois and Champagne and made Theobald one of the richest men in Europe. But Theobald produced no male heirs. His daughter, Adela, brought it all to King Philip in the 1161 marriage. This Henry found less than pleasing.

The Vexin had been put in trust and occupied by the Templars, and the English Master, Richard of Hastings, managed the occupation of two crucial castles, Gisors and Neuchatel. At that same time, two cardinals contacted Henry II soliciting his support for the next pope, Alexander III. The

cardinals were unaware that Henry was already committed to supporting Alexander, but he let them believe that his support was dependent on their dispensation of his underage son's marriage. Once the marriage was accomplished, the English Templars promptly turned the castles over to Henry. It should be noted that the English Master, Richard of Hastings, was an appointment of Henry's. It was the custom of English kings to have great influence in the selection of the English Master who was usually from a loyal and prominent English family.

While Richard of Hastings was conspiring with Henry in Normandy, the English Templars were managing the most important land deal in their history. Their old headquarters at Holborn was no longer sufficient for their needs. They were able to sell the old property and acquire that famous piece of property that still bears their name and their church to this day at what is now known as Temple Bar in London. But their Master, being on the continent with his king, was unavailable to sign the necessary documents. So the French Master had to cross the English Channel to stand in his place and preside over the transfer of property. It is interesting that the Vexin castles could have just as easily been held in trust by the French Templars and their Master who certainly would not have accommodated Henry, while the English Master tended to his proper duties in England. It would appear that the French Templars did not enjoy the same loving relationship with the French king as the English did with theirs but rather concerned themselves much more with recruitment and support of the Holy Land. The French preference of Templar

duty over royal politics would become very problematic in 1307.

The information contained in this article can be found in *Records Of The Templars In England In The Twelfth Century, The Inquest Of 1185*. This is volume IX in the series of books published by the British Academy of London, the series entitled, *Records of the Social and Economic History of England and Wales*, first published in 1935.



Right: Temple Bruer in Lincolnshire

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