



History

Middle Temple Hall is one of the country's finest examples of an Elizabethan Hall. It was built between 1562 and about 1573, although it was probably in use from about 1570, the date which appears in the Elizabethan stained glass windows. Elizabeth I is reputed to have dined here on several occasions, though no written account survives. Certainly the Inn was Crown property when the Hall was built by the Middle Temple, and the Hall itself is referred to as "the quene's highnes howse" in a letter by Edmund Plowden to Sir John Thynne, ancestor of the Marquess of Bath, which survives in the Archive at Longleat. In it Plowden asks to borrow Mr Lewis, Thynne's head carpenter at Longleat, to carry out what he describes as the Queen's work.

There is a longstanding oral tradition that the High Table, at which the Masters of the Bench have sat for centuries, was a gift of the Queen and was cut from an oak from Windsor forest and floated down the Thames to Middle Temple. It is 29 feet long and made from three planks of a single oak tree, and has never been moved from the building since its construction.

Despite some damage in the Second World War, the Hall is virtually unchanged from Tudor times. The finely carved oak screen at the east end of the Hall which was built in 1574 shortly after the completion of the Hall. It was shattered during the Blitz, but the pieces were gathered up into sacks and the screen was painstakingly restored after the War. The screen's two double-leaved, spiked doors were installed in 1671 in an attempt by the Masters of the Bench to prevent high-spirited and rebellious students from occupying the Hall for illegal revelling over Christmas.

The minstrels' gallery above the screen has been used by famous musicians, such the Elizabethan/Jacobean lutanist, John Dowland, and others for performances on special occasions - and still is so used today. Candlemas on 2nd February, marking the end of the period of Christmas revelry, was generally marked by feasting and plays or masques. The most celebrated of these occasions was the Candlemas performance of 1602 - the first performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. A recent publication describes the many links Shakespeare had with the young poets and lawyers of the Middle Temple. It also describes the tradition of Christmas revels - still celebrated in the Inn today.

From the beginning the Hall was used, as it is today, for legal education as well as for dining and entertainment. From 1597 coats of arms of Readers, who delivered their law lectures to Middle Temple students over dinner, line the Hall. Their present day successors are still entitled to panels of their coats of arms, but, as space in the Hall has long since run out, these now line the adjacent corridors.

Much of the heraldic glass in the windows of the Hall is the original glass from the time of its construction. Fortunately it was removed on the outbreak of World War II and put into storage until after the war. The plain glass with which it was replaced was blown out on several occasions during



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the war. Among the oldest glass are several panes with Tudor royal insignia and heraldic devices of Elizabeth I. Other heraldic windows include members associated with early ventures in America - Sir Walter Raleigh, who was admitted to the Middle Temple in 1574, and Sir John Popham, founder of the Virginia Company in 1606.

In the Inn's Archive is a document recording Sir Francis Drake's visit to Middle Temple Hall in August 1586. The Inn's strong connection with navigation and exploration in Elizabethan times is further demonstrated by the membership of Sir Marin Frobisher, Sir John Hawkins, Bartholomew Gosnold, founder of the Jamestown Settlement in 1607, and many others.

From medieval times lectures in the Hall had been given from a table known as "le Cupboard". The present upboard is believed to have been made from the hatch cover of Drake's *Golden Hind*. It is on this table that members of the Inn sign the register when they are Called to the Bar.