

The Temple Church

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Original doorway



William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke

The Temple Church is among the oldest and most beautiful churches in London. It was built by the Knights Templar, an order of crusading monks founded in 1118 to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land. The Templars became one of the most powerful orders in Christendom. The Temple was their headquarters in England: here were the Church, two Halls, cloisters and domestic buildings, leading in the 12th century straight down to the River Thames.

The Round Church was consecrated in 1185. It was modelled on the circular Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the most sacred place of the Holy Land and so of the whole world. To be in the Round was to be reminded of Christ's burial, of our baptism into his death – and so of our resurrection to his new life.

The effigies in the Round include (on the south side) the figure of William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke (d.1219). William Marshal was chief advisor to King John and regent in the minority of Henry III. The witnesses to Magna Carta at Runnymede in June 1215 included the Earl's son William, whose effigy lies beside his father's, and Brother Aymeric, Master of the Order of Knights Templar in England. Magna Carta itself was sealed at the end of a long process of negotiation and dispute. A deputation from the barons had met King John at the Temple itself, 6th January 1215, to demand the confirmation of laws and liberties granted by his father.

The Chancel was built in 1240. Henry III had planned to be buried here; this may account for the chancel's design as a 'Hall Church' with a wide central aisle (in which the funerary monument would have been built) and side aisles of the same height.

The Templars were suppressed, 1307-1311. By the 15th century, the lawyers of Inner and Middle Temple were well established in the Temple.

During the 16th century, when the religious and political life of England was caught up in the turbulence between Catholicism and Protestantism during the Reformation, the Temple Church was the scene of the 'battle of the pulpits', between the Master of the Temple, Richard Hooker and the Reader of the Temple, Walter Travers. The debate between these two led Hooker to write his masterpiece, the foundational text of Anglican theology, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*.

In 1608 the lawyers' occupancy of the Temple was secured by the grant of Letters Patent from King James I. The two Inns of Court were granted the land on condition that they keep up the church and its services. The Late Queen visited Church in 2008 when new Letters Patent were granted. The Inns continue to maintain the church and its choir.

In the 1670s Sir Christopher Wren was commissioned to refurbish the Church in classical style. With the exception of the magnificent reredos or altarpiece, the Wrenian woodwork was sold in the course of the 'Gothic' refurbishments of the Church in the 1840s.

In 1941 the Church suffered extensive wartime damage. It was 17 years before the Church was fully repaired, the cracked columns having been replaced with new stone from the beds of dark Purbeck marble quarried in the Middle Ages. The Church has a particularly fine choir which supports regular worship according to the Book of Common Prayer. The Church also hosts concerts, lectures and discussions on matters of current socio-legal interest as well as being a haven of tranquillity and calm in the midst of the busy City.



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Additional notes

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