



Graffiti scratched into the window stonework of the south-west tower dungeon where Knights Templar were imprisoned between 1308-1311

## Templars at Newark

### Adrian Crampton on Carvings in the Dungeons of Newark Castle

At the west gate to Newark-on-Trent stands the 12th Century remains of a castle built on an earlier Saxon settlement by Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln. As his primary residence it was a testament to his wealth and power. This stately edifice had remained intact until the mid-seventeenth century when, following the end of the civil war and after managing to survive three sieges, Parliament ordered it made indefensible and much was dismantled.

Due to its central location in the country as well as its splendour, Newark castle has welcomed many prestigious visitors throughout history amongst who, most notably, was King John, who rested there the night before his death, having eaten poisoned fish during his journey the previous day.

The castle was a prominent building in the area and also served as a judicial hub. To this end, four dungeons were sunk beneath its flagstones. Of the two beneath the north-west tower, one is of a beehive shape, the other a square design and are known locally as oubliettes, a name derived from the French word 'to forget'.

From a bolted trap door high in the dungeon prisoners were lowered by rope, or thrown, into the cell below, probably injured in the process, naked and forgotten, relying on the charity of friends to bring them food. Considering injury, hunger, disease and extreme unsanitary conditions life expectancy was little more than 5 weeks.

And it was here that following the Papal Bull of 1307 which ordered the arrest of all Knights Templar under accusations of various heresies and the seizure of their properties on behalf of the Church that the local Knights Templar were incarcerated for up to three years awaiting trial at Lincoln for heresy. Some of those held at Lincoln were kept in the Chapter House of the Cathedral, which ironically is used today for Masonic Templar ceremonies.

### The Knights Templar

The Knights of the Order of the Temple, a monastic Order of warrior monks, had been established in Jerusalem around 1119, their core purpose being to offer protection to pilgrims travelling in the Holy Land. The Order increased its wealth over time in part due to their members having taken an oath of poverty and often donating their property on admission, and

also through successful banking systems. Their membership and influence increased throughout Christendom and after their expulsion from the Holy Land, along with all other crusaders, following the fall of Acre in 1291, this formidable and independent army became a cause for concern especially to the King of France, who had taken substantial loans to fund his ongoing territorial campaigns against England and envied their financial resources.

On 13 October 1307 all the Templars in France were arrested and imprisoned and their property seized. Philip was supported reluctantly by the newly elected pope, Clement V, who had been Philip's candidate for that office. The Templars were tortured to extract confessions and over sixty died as a result. Despite the harsh imprisonment, resistance to these charges continued. By March 1310 a total of 597 Templars had come to the Order's defence but this resistance was broken when in May that year, on the orders of the Archbishop of Sens, fifty-four Templars were summarily taken from their cells and burned to death outside Paris.

The Order of the Temple was abolished by Papal Decree on March 22, 1312. The last Grand Master and the Preceptor of Normandy were burned to death in Paris, 11 March 1314.

## The English Arrests

In England, the Papal Bull was initially disregarded by Edward II who refused to countenance the accusations, but after pressure from the Pope and also his father-in-law, the king of France, coupled with evidence of confessions extracted from European Templars under torture, writs were issued to arrest all members of the Order in Great Britain and to make inventories of their goods.

The English Templars were taken primarily to the central castle of the county and when full, to outlying strongholds, awaiting trials to be heard in London, Lincoln and York.

However, in contrast to the conditions of contemporary residents in the dungeons, their imprisonment was far from strict.

William de la More, Grand Preceptor of England, based at nearby Temple Breuer and two of his Brother Knights, were given 'beds, robes and silver vessels, and allowed to go outside the city at will without a guard'. Moreover, while the King held the Templar lands, each Knight was given a daily subsistence of six pence to be paid from its income, with de la More receiving an additional two shillings due to his rank.

It is worthy of note from the carvings at Newark that the Templars were allowed tools with which to carve, and candles to light their cells. When word of this leniency reached the Pope instructions were sent to Edward to guard the prisoners more securely and to include the use of torture to extract a confession.

Initially refusing as under the English judiciary system the use of torture was banned Edward eventually issued permission for the same to be employed provided that 'this should not involve mutilation, perpetual disablement of any member, or effusion of blood'.

In June 1311, Knight Stephen de Stapelbrugge of London was taken to the Tower to be interrogated under torture and confessed all that was required of him.

Following this capitulation other Templars in the Southern region were offered clemency on confession and were happily received back into the Church.

In Lincoln and York the courts dealt more leniently with the Templars and torture was not employed and, 'being repeatedly exhorted that they should leave the order, answering that they would rather die', were absolved of their sins on confession and sent to do penance in various monasteries or to join the Order of St John to whom, in time, the Templar lands were given; none of the British Knights were put to death.

## A visit to the dungeons

It was on a cold wet November morning that Newark Castle Ranger and archaeologist, Rene Mouraille, kindly conducted a tour around the castle: three of its four dungeons carry carvings which are considered to be Templar. The smallest is in the south-west tower lit by one narrow window which carries various carvings including an eagle, crosses and a rotunda, generally similar to those found in Chinon Castle, France, where Templars were also imprisoned. The second is a bottle shaped dungeon in the north-west tower. About its circumference are small carved cubic recesses, each containing an embossed red cross on its innermost face. These were used to support candles; traces of soot are still evident 800 years on. The third dungeon, also in the northwest tower, measures fourteen by eleven feet and is just over twelve feet deep. It is thought that this housed a prominent Templar since it contains a carved relief of a calvary cross, a heart and a roundel in its eastern wall. When the castle became disused after the civil war this dungeon became a meat store and was at some point brick lined. Interestingly, the only bricks since removed are exactly over the Templar relief, suggesting that someone knew of its existence.

Rene Mouraille conducts tours by appointment which can be arranged through the Gilstrap Centre, Newark, on 01636 655 765. For more information please visit [www.newark-sherwooddc.gov.uk](http://www.newark-sherwooddc.gov.uk)

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All photographs by Michael Baigent.