

Gray's Inn and the Outbreak of War

My object is to identify the initial reactions of Gray's Inn, as recorded in the Minutes of Pension, to the outbreak in 1914 of the First World War, the cataclysmic four-year conflict which changed the world forever. The *War Book of Gray's Inn* (1921) includes a brief chronological summary of events in the Inn during the War. The Minutes, beautifully written and easy to read, reveal contemporaneous reactions. Apart from regimental activities in the Inn, which merit some additional narrative, I let the Minutes speak for themselves.

On 28th June 1914, Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. In July 1914, as in July 2013, a grand Ball attended by over 500 people was held in Gray's Inn, all no doubt looking forward, as at the Ball in 2013, to the vacation and the summer season. Within a month, Britain was at war with Germany.

At a Special Pension on 10th September 1914, it was resolved 'to consider what contributions shall be made by the Society to Patriotic and Charitable Funds in connection with the War'. It was also resolved that the House Committee 'deal with the question of the allowances to be made to the wives of reservists employed by the Society', a rare acknowledgement in the relevant Minutes of the existence of the female sex.

On 7th October, Pension adopted the report of the Committee appointed on 10th September, the Committee having proceeded on the basis: 'It is hoped that the emergency may be over or at any rate its severity much reduced, within a year.' (The Commander in Chief of the BEF, though not Lord Kitchener, thought the War would be over by Christmas.) It was resolved that 'expenditure [on entertainment and dining in Hall] should throughout the year be reduced within the narrowest possible limits' and that 'the usual Grand Nights ought not to be celebrated in a year of so much stress and anxiety'. The menu of diners in Hall 'might with advantage be somewhat curtailed' and 'No champagne [is] to be served in Hall ... unless ... upon the special request of some Master of the Bench'.

A saving on grants was achieved. It was resolved: '[The] grant recently authorised by Pension of 200 guineas a year for reading in Chambers ...

should be suspended during the coming year. Apart from the money saving ... it would be most unfair on the public-spirited young men students of the Society, who have gone to the Front, that those prizes should be given to other men who have displayed less public spirit or who at any rate, for some reason or other, are less capable of serving their country.'

It was recorded that 'no fewer than 81 members of the Society are serving with the military and naval forces of the country. It is recommended that their names be screened in Hall and placed on the Chapel door and that they be allowed absent Commons'. That was followed by a decision on 21st October that Pension may 'dispense with the keeping of any terms by any student who shall be or shall have been unable to keep such terms by reason of his being a member of the Forces of the Crown or otherwise engaged in connection with the War'. Later, on 21st April 1915, it was decided that a Hospital Orderly in Serbia should receive the 'same consideration in the matter of terms as those serving with His Majesty's Forces'.

Substantial building work in Gray's Inn Place and on the restoration of the cellars was authorised 'from a desire to aid in the present emergency by providing employment'. The predicted unemployment in the building trade did not occur and the work did not proceed.

Staff reaction is recorded in the Minutes for 21st October: 'The officers and servants of the Society have of their own accord made an arrangement under which they will contribute month by month an agreed proportion of their salaries and wages to one or other of the patriotic funds during the period of the War. It should be understood that the movement was not initiated by the Bench.' The contribution was to vary from 5% to 2½% 'in the case of employees who are paid a comparatively small weekly wage'.

It was resolved that Advocates of the Belgian Bar resident in this country owing to the War be admitted to luncheon in Hall and to the Library and Common Room. That arrangement persisted for over two years.

Wynford Barrow applied for the return of a portion of the deposit he had paid to the Inn: 'he has obtained a Commission with a Cavalry Regiment and hopes to proceed to France very shortly. He intends to spend the money in question on the purchase of equipment.' A refund of £30 was granted. Regimental records confirm that Barrow served in the field with the Deccan Horse, the Indian Army Regiment which

famously conducted a cavalry charge at High Wood on the Somme on 14th July 1916. He survived the War.

On 17th November 1914, it was resolved that 'the usual Call Night allowance of wine other than champagne be served in Hall tonight' and on 25th November that '£50 be donated to the Mayor of Holborn's fund to provide Christmas relief to necessitous persons in the Borough who might otherwise fail to receive their usual Christmas relief on account of the War'.

The need for precautions 'to deal with fires which might arise in the Inn as a result of any raid by air on London during the War' was recognised and it was agreed to pay for bringing an additional high pressure branch water main into the Inn. It was recorded that 14 resident tenants had expressed their willingness in the event of fire to place themselves at the disposal of the Head Porter and, on 25th November, thanks were expressed 'to those gentlemen who have consented to act as Special Constables and as an Emergency Fire Brigade'. (Bombs later fell in the Inn on 8th September and 20th October 1915, though without the devastating effect of those in a later war.)

On 16th December, expenditure of £25 from the funds of the Common Room Committee was approved for 'providing a present for each Member of the Society now serving with His Majesty's Forces'. Contributions were made to Patriotic Funds in the early months of the War. These included contributions to the YMCA (Territorial Corps Department) towards the cost of erecting shelters for the Troops in the Territorial Camps (150 guineas), the Officers Training Corps 'composed very largely of members of the four Inns and that Corps is at the present time adding largely to the Corps of Officers', the Officers' Family Fund (500 guineas), the Professional Classes War Relief Fund (100 guineas), Special Nursing Homes for Officers (100 guineas), The Soldiers and Sailors Help Society (100 guineas) and Newspapers for the Fleet Fund (10 guineas).

Disciplinary issues were not put aside. It having previously been ruled that bank clerks were persons engaged in trade, Charles Hellyer Hodge was, on 11th November 1914, deemed eligible for Call in the special circumstance that he had been admitted before the ruling and subject to an undertaking 'not to practise while he remains a bank clerk'. Employment of Frances Batt as a shell turner was held not to impose any obstacle to his Call to the Bar. In early 1915, a student was severely reprimanded for 'presenting himself for Call without wearing evening

dress'. He was called before a subsequent Pension and, having shown 'deep contrition', was Called but with some loss of precedence.

In early 1915, the War was still expected to be short. On 17th February, reference was made to 'Awards amounting to £420 awarded to five members of the Society': 'four of these gentlemen have since enlisted or received Commissions and accordingly their awards have not been paid. If they return to the profession these sums will no doubt become due at some time during this year or next.'

The military presence

Following a speech by Mr Lloyd George on 16th September 1914, Master Ivor Bowen KC played a prominent part in raising the 1st London Welsh (15th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers) for training in the Inn. There was a precedent: the St Andrew's and St George's Volunteer Corps and the Loyal North Briton Volunteers were granted permission to use the Gardens as a drill-ground in 1803 (Pension Minutes, 23rd November 1803). The early wartime minutes are thin on the subject but, on 25th November 1914, it was reported that, on 29th November, the Officer Commanding and the other officers of the Battalion 'will attend Morning Service in the Chapel'. It was resolved that 'Officers be invited to Luncheon with the Masters of the Bench in Hall after Service'.

On 16th December, before Pension, the Officers of the Battalion 'presented to the Society a piece of plate in the form of a silver dragon'. An address was presented by the Officers and organising committee. They 'wished to place upon record their sincere appreciation of the valuable assistance of the Treasurer [Master Atkin] and Masters of the Bench by placing spacious headquarters at the Committee's disposal for the raising of the Unit and by cheerfully granting the use of the historic Gardens and the ancient Squares of the Inn for the drilling and exercise of the Battalion ... one of the most cherished recollections of the Regiment will ever be that its inception was so closely associated with this Ancient and Honourable Society'.

The Battalion proceeded to North Wales in early 1915 and, later in the year, to France where it fought on the Somme and in Flanders. It was praised by Field-Marshal Haig for its successful engagement with a German Guards Division on 31st July 1917. Casualties were heavy and included the poet Ellis Evans (Hedd Wyn). Pension Minutes for October 1917 record that the Commanding Officer was presenting to the Benchers

of Gray's Inn a trench mortar captured by the Battalion at Pilcheur. The Under-Treasurer had acknowledged receipt of the letter from the Battalion and it was ordered that 'any further acknowledgement be deferred until the trench mortar arrives'. (Enquiries have so far failed to trace the weapon. I suspect it never arrived.)

A second Battalion (18th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers) followed, proceeding to North Wales in 1916, and thereafter a Reserve, or Depot, Battalion was maintained at the Inn supplying drafts to the other Battalions and commanded by temporary Lt Col Bowen. The Battalions' war memorial is on the Chapel wall in Gray's Inn Square, now fronted by the Andy Birchall memorial bench.

The silver dragon remains in the silver vault, though the photograph which for years accompanied it is at present missing. A different photograph can be seen in the *War Book*. Master Bowen was at the same time Recorder successively of Merthyr Tydfil and Swansea and became County Court Judge for Mid Wales in 1918. He was Treasurer of the Inn in 1923.

The London Welsh were not alone in the Inn. It was resolved, on 7th October 1914, that 'so far as may be possible, the Society's premises may be placed at the disposal of the authorities for the purposes of National Defence'. Pension granted a request for about 160 men formed from the Solicitors' Law Stationery Society, as part of the Central Volunteer Training Corps, to drill in Gray's Inn Square on three days a week between 7.30 and 8.30 pm. As early as 17th February 1915, a 'great deal of grass' had been killed by the above military activities and the cost of replanting was put at £55.



The silver dragon photographed on a recent outing.

Following encouragement from Pension, a meeting was convened by the Mayor of Holborn on 21st January 1915 to establish a Volunteer Training Corps, Holborn Battalion. The meeting was addressed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and he and the Mayor were invited to dine at the Bench table after the meeting. The Battalion, in which members of the

Inn were prominent, first drilled at the Inn on 2nd February 1915. Many members passed through its ranks to the Regular Army. Its service is recorded on a tablet in the wall of No 1 Gray's Inn Square.

Comment

The response of Pension appears to me to have been responsible, conscientious and patriotic, as one would expect. The response of members and staff to the call to serve was prompt and generous though not unexpected given the standards of the day. The extent of the hospitality shown to the military was idiosyncratic but not unexpected to those who have known the Inn for a long time. However, there appears to have been little awareness of the magnitude of events and their impact on all aspects of national life and institutions. What strikes me is the good fortune of my generation, and subsequent generations, in not having to confront anything approaching the catastrophe and upheaval of that age. But it was the changes that followed the catastrophe that opened the way to a career at the Bar for many of us, male as well as female.

Master Malcolm Pill