

# WHERE ARE WE? FOUNDLINGS & PARISHES

A talk given by Mark Ockelton in Hall on 15 May 2011

Today is Sunday, and some of us have come from a service in Chapel. Lincoln's Inn Chapel is a building on legs: there is a space underneath, which has a pleasant, rather gothic, cloistral feel to it. If you want to know why the Chapel is raised above the ground, and what structural problems it had as a result, you will have to read the relevant chapter in *A Portrait of Lincoln's Inn*. Today, I want to say something about the space under the Chapel and its use.

There was no particular planned intention for it. It has been a burying-place from the first, and was used for meetings and leisure. A group of about eighty MPs held a meeting there in May 1659 to make the first plans for the restoration of the monarchy. The meeting is supposed to have been 'secret'. It is an odd place to have a secret meeting, as it is open on all sides, and a particularly odd place to have what might have been seen by some as a treasonable one, because the head of state, Lord Protector Richard Cromwell, was a member of this Inn, and so presumably might have passed by at any moment. After the Restoration, in better times, Pepys records that he walked under the Chapel, and it is again today a good place for an amble, especially in the rain, when the vault appears like some giant umbrella.

But the devil finds a use for unused places, even under chapels, and it was not long before the undercroft of the Chapel became a haunt, if not of vice, then of the products of it. In 1731 the Black Books record 'a child dropt under the chapel' and that was certainly not the first, because when looking the other day at the Treasurer's accounts for 1727, I noticed a record of another. The older histories of the Inn say that babies were 'often left under the chapel, and were brought up as foundlings by the Inn, and given the surname of Lincoln'. It seemed to me to be worthwhile to investigate whether this statement, which has

become part of the folklore of the Inn, is true, and if so why.

First, the numbers. As I have already indicated, the published Black Books do not tell the whole story, but even they record quite a nursery of dropped children - not always under the Chapel, but often recorded specifically as there. There were two together and apparently another one, in 1732, one in 1735, apparently two in 1737 and perhaps another. One was dropped under the Chapel in 1740, an unspecified number in 1741, again one or more in 1744. There is then apparently a pause. In 1750 three are recorded, and in 1754 one 'in the square'. Then there were apparently no more until 1774 of which more in a moment.

There is simply no documentary basis for suggesting that they were all brought up by the Inn and called Lincoln. One was called John Lincoln, and was apprenticed to a barber in 1744. He must have been one of those whose arrival is not mentioned, because his age does not fit any of those to whom I have referred. I do not know how he got his name; he was not baptised in the Chapel. The others were simply passed on to other people to look after. There are occasional small payments for nursing and for baby clothes, but the most frequent payment is to the Beadle of the Parish of St Andrew Holborn, for taking the children away. He was given, it appears, five shillings each time,

but in 1741 he was given a retainer of some sort 'for being ready in fetching away dropt children' and the payment was renewed in 1744.

Those two last dates may be significant, as may be the falling off of numbers soon afterwards. That glorious model of private charity, the Foundling Hospital, set up by Thomas Coram, accepted its first babies in 1741, and in the first three years, before its premises in Bloomsbury were ready, operated from houses in Hatton Garden, a few hundred yards from here and in St Andrew's Parish. So perhaps the retainer paid in those years was for the Beadle to deliver children to the care of the Foundling Hospital. I hope so. And it may be that in those years it became clear that the Foundling Hospital was a much better place to leave children even than the undercroft of Lincoln's Inn Chapel. The charity still operates, but they have changed the name. That is perhaps a pity, because foundling is such a positive word. It is so much better to be found than to remain abandoned.

Why were babies dropped in Lincoln's Inn? There must have been many other cosy corners that could be reached without braving the Lincoln's Inn porters, who were no doubt keeping an eye open for strange young women with bulgy dresses. We can only speculate, but the guess is likely, I think, to be a good one.

Foundlings were paupers. They had no income, nor any means of obtaining one, and so they fell to be looked after by the parish. The parish was the principal unit of local government from Elizabeth I to Victoria, and its officers therefore had the responsibilities of local government, one of which was to make arrangements for paupers, including abandoned babies found in the parish. The Elizabethan poor laws set up the system, modified in subsequent years. There was a division into the deserving poor and the undeserving poor, and, by the eighteenth century, parish workhouses, such as we see a little later in 'Oliver Twist' presided over there by the Beadle, Mr Bumble, who was the relevant parish officer. Other things, such as maintenance of highways, fell to the parish, and property in the parish was rated or taxed to pay for them. That is why parish boundaries were so important. Outside the Inn, on the south side of New Square, between the Inn's gateway and the front door of the Seven Stars public house - a way passed by bar students with haste in one direction and little attention in the other - you will see the boundary between the parishes of St Clement Danes and St Dunstan in the West marked with two great stones.

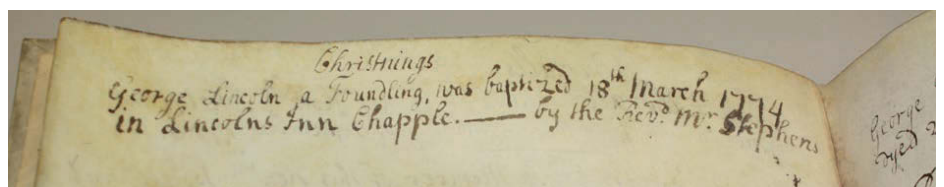
England is divided into parishes, some large, some very small. The parish was an ecclesiastical division, based on the parish church, and became also one with civil importance. But because it began as an ecclesiastical division, ecclesiastical peculiarities could affect the arrangements. Now the site of Lincoln's Inn had been the premises of the London house of the Bishops of Chichester. It had a chapel, and did not need a parish church; and the Bishop of Chichester could not be expected to have a house in a parish in the Diocese of London, under the jurisdiction of the Bishops of London. So his house, and so subsequently the Inn, was not in any parish. In the northern half of the Inn today, the parishes stop, with boundaries coterminous with

the boundaries of the Inn. (It is different for New Square, because the land on which New Square was built was not part of the Bishop of Chichester's house.)



Parish boundary marked with anchor

Surely here we have our reason. The parish system of poor relief was inadequate and often cruel. If a child could be dropped at a place that was not in a parish, it would not be covered by the poor law statutes, and so just might have a better chance. It was worth the smuggling, and the risk of the Inn taking no care at all, to avoid the workhouse. So it is perhaps rather ironic that what the Inn did was to hand over the foundlings to the Beadle of St Andrews Parish. I expect they were then treated just as if they had been dropped there but, as I have suggested, there is a glimmer of hope in that in the years after 1741 they went



to Coram's foundation. And so we come to the curious case of George Lincoln. A boy baby was dropped in Lincoln's Inn on 14 February 1774. On 18 March he was baptised in the Chapel: no previous foundling had been so treated. He was given the name of George Lincoln, and put out to nurse, not for a one-off payment, but for four shillings a week. In 1775 he had clothes bought, and the enormous sum of four pounds seventeen shillings and sixpence was paid for medical treatment for him. He then constantly makes appearances in the accounts of the Inn. He cost eleven pounds in 1776, and similar amounts in subsequent years, for nursing. There was a payment for over a pound for medicine for him when he was 'bit by a mad cat' in 1780. He was sent to boarding school in Staindrop in County Durham, which cost eight pounds in 1782, and his boarding with a clergyman there cost over fifteen pounds a year by 1785. He was apprenticed in the same place as a carpenter, the costs of which were over fifty pounds in 1790, and the Inn still paid board and pocket money, two pounds a year. Unfortunately, we do not know what happened to him after that. How did he qualify to be treated in this unique way?

We need to go back to the parochial status of the Inn. What I said about the Inn not being in any parish may not have been strictly true: there is a document in Middle Temple Library, recording memories going back beyond the construction of the Gatehouse in 1518, and they clearly show that the Inn's premises were regarded as within the parishes of St Andrew, St Dunstan and St Clement Danes. But the point is that by the eighteenth century, it was generally assumed that the Inn was not in any parish. So it had

to pay the Beadle of St Andrews to come and do what in his parish was his job anyway. So, it paid no parish rates.

But in the early 1770s, that position was questioned. St Clement Danes raised a poor rate. It was paid for a couple of years, but then the Inn raised a query about whether it was liable for parish dues at all. The matter needed a parliamentary committee, and one was set up in 1774. Thomas Grint, the steward of Lincoln's Inn, gave his evidence on 8 February 1774. He said that the Inn had always made itself responsible for all the duties that would otherwise fall on the parish in respect of its lands. He recorded a number of historical matters that undoubtedly tended to show that the Inn, and its Chapel, had not been perceived as being part of any ecclesiastical parish. Rather more surprisingly, he said that he knew of no baptisms in the Chapel, and that he never knew of any children being dropped in Lincoln's Inn.

This may have been strictly true. Grint was not appointed to his first post in the Inn until 1764. There had been numerous baptisms, but the last of which we have a record was in 1749; and the last child was dropped in 1754. But it is curious that Grint, who was the predecessor of today's Under Treasurer, should have such small knowledge of the concerns of the Inn only a couple of decades previously. His evidence does, however, appear to show that by early 1774 there was no child in respect of whom the Inn was making payments.

What happened after Grint gave his evidence, I have already mentioned. Less than a week later, a child was dropped in the Inn, the first for over twenty years. The Inn was in the midst of litigation. It had to show that in terms of poor relief, it would do all that the parish would do, and more. There is no record of any discussion, but it must be the case that the Inn decided to use the foundling to demonstrate what it could

do when it tried. Thus, George Lincoln's good fortune was to be dropped where, and exactly when, he was. (One almost suspects a plot by the overseers at one of the neighbouring parishes, who must have been even more surprised by Grint's evidence than we are.) George Lincoln was treated like no other foundling. Only three others seem to have been baptised. One, Mary Lincoln, was also dropped in 1774 and was initially treated like George, but died very young. A child was christened Lucy Lacy (Lacy is the surname of the Earls of Lincoln) in 1799, but lived less than a year. Lewis Lincoln was dropped in September 1791. He came with the particular embarrassment of a letter to a gentleman (not a member of the Inn). He lived long enough to be apprenticed in 1807 – again to a carpenter, and to have his tools bought for him in 1813.

But that is the complete story of the foundlings given the name of Lincoln. George Lincoln's story must have been the foundation of the propaganda that all Lincoln's Inn foundlings were treated as he was, and like most propaganda, it is largely inaccurate. As a public relations exercise, though, it was apparently successful. The Inn's liability to general rates was never precisely sorted out, and there are various agreements with the parishes recorded in subsequent years. But Lincoln's Inn did not pay poor rates, because, apparently, it managed to show that it was not in a parish and so was not liable to pay them; and that there was no need for it to do so, because it treated its paupers so well.

So the answer to the question posed by the title of this talk 'Where are we?' is that, unlike nearly everybody else in the country, we are not in a parish. We are simply in Lincoln's Inn. In the period about which I have been talking, students ate dinners in order to qualify for the bar, as they do now; and merely to dine in the presence of benchers was then and for a long time afterwards

regarded as educational. I am sure it still is, but modern tightening up of regulations has required even our guests to be educated by hearing a talk such as this. It is high time to eat. But as we settle down to what will no doubt be a good lunch in palatial albeit extra-parochial surroundings, let us remember that the repeal of the Elizabethan poor laws did not abolish the problems of unwanted babies. Let us spare a thought and perhaps a prayer, during the grace that is about to be said, for young mothers in the misery of feeling compelled to abandon new born children, and for the uncertain future of the children themselves. And let us give thanks for the charity of Thomas Coram, and for other institutions which continue to provide, for displaced children, some of the benefits that, by sheer good luck, fell into the lap of George Lincoln.

