

STAPLE INN

On September 28th, 1956, Professor Grimes, our President, delivered his postponed presidential address, giving in his account of the Walbrook Mithraeum and of the series of operations which revealed its ruins to modern eyes one of those brilliant expositions that have gone to make up his great reputation.

For this occasion permission had been given to the Society to use the restored hall of Staple Inn. Nowadays romantic descriptions of old places have gone out of fashion and old-world appeal is frowned on. Facts are the thing, and rightly so. But it is still allowable to quote *Edwin Drood* sparingly. Staple Inn "is one of those nooks, the turning into which out of the clashing street imparts to the relieved pedestrian the sensation of having put cotton in his ears, and velvet soles on his boots." This sentence, not one of Dickens' best, conveys again to the reader the lasting quiet of the place, shattered in 1944 and restored so perfectly.

In 1354 certain towns were given the sole right to sell wool and were called Staples. In 1375 the Merchants of the Staple moved from Westminster "to a place called Staple Inn in Holborn," but remained there only three years. So William Kent. The next step is veiled in mystery. What is the connection between the Staple and the law? The Actuaries' Year Book takes the view that disputes arising at a Staple House were settled by an open-air court attended by law students. Close by was Gray's Inn which, it is suggested, held Staple Inn on lease, acquiring the freehold in 1529.

"Staple Inn," continues the Year Book, "was governed by a Principal elected every third year, a pensioner (presumably the Treasurer)"—P.J.T. 1747—"and a council of eleven senior members known as 'Ancients,' who possessed freehold chambers in the Inn . . . There was also a tutor or reader appointed by the Benchers of Gray's Inn. It is believed that for a time the governing body supervised the legal education of the junior members."

But time brought changes. No longer was it necessary to be a lawyer to be a member of the society. On 23rd March, 1759, Samuel Johnson, having moved from Gough Square, wrote to Lucy Porter. "I have this day moved my things, and you are now to direct to me at Staple Inn, London . . . I am going to publish a little story-book, which I will send you, when it is out." This book was *Rasselas*.

In the 19th century a Royal Commission found that no facilities for the teaching of law any longer existed at the inn. In 1884 Staple Inn was sold, the State acquiring the southern portion for the building of the Patent Office, the Prudential Assurance Company the remainder in 1886. With great public spirit the Prudential undertook the restoration, which it entrusted to Alfred Waterhouse.

MIDDLESEX MANOR HOUSES

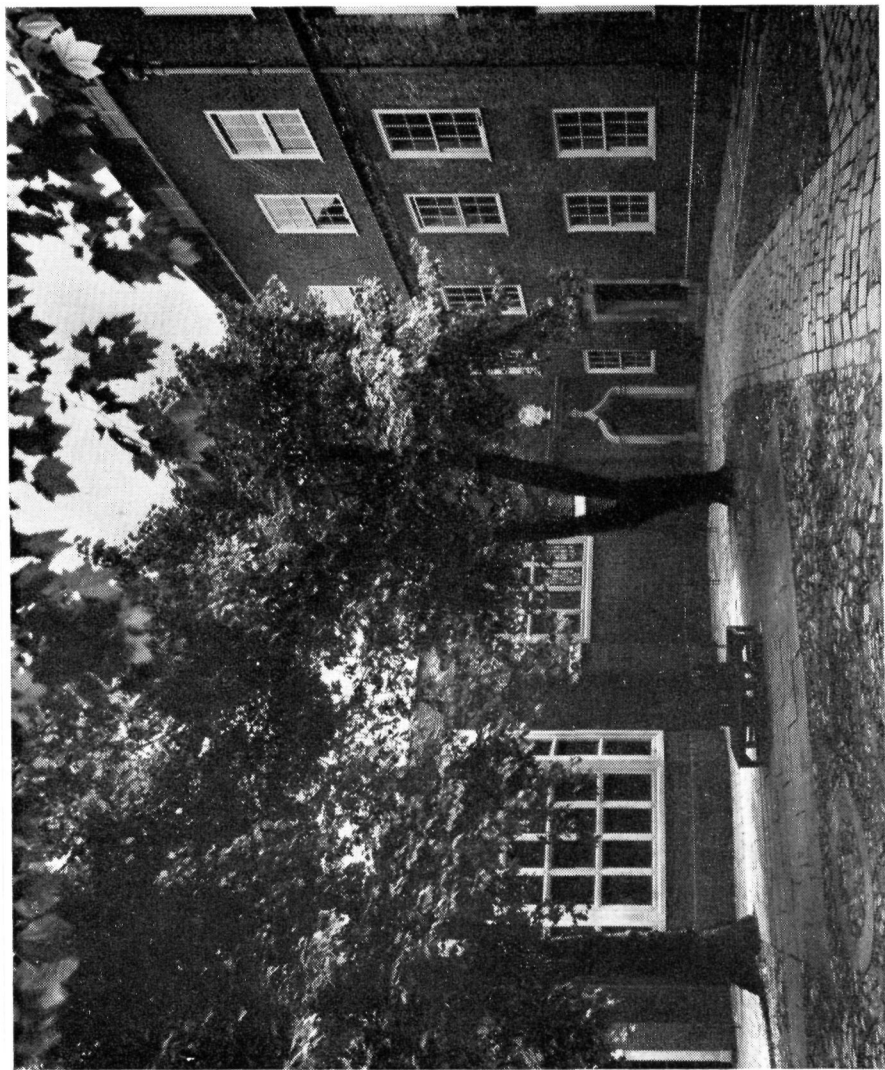


BROMLEY HALL, BRUNSWICK ROAD, POPLAR



Photograph by L. G. BRAY

RUISLIP MANOR HOUSE
Lent by Ruislip Library



STAPLE INN RESTORED
By kind permission of the Institute of Actuaries

In 1887 the Institute of Actuaries, which had been formed in 1848, obtained from the Prudential a tenancy of the hall and adjoining rooms, an occupation which continued until the temporary loss of the hall in 1944.

Inside the Holborn entrance, where once hung a notice instructing the porter to prevent "rude children from playing," is the following inscription: "Original building erected 1545-1589 by Vincent Enghame and Another. The rear elevation was cased in brick 1826. The front after various alterations was restored in its original design in 1826. The entire building was reconstructed in 1937, the old front being retained."

A tablet on the north wall of the restored hall runs: "STAPLE INN HALL, built in the 16th century, stood on this site until destroyed by a flying bomb on the 24th August, 1944. THE HALL was rebuilt in its original form in 1955, incorporating timber and other materials from the old building."

Some of the detail of the reconstruction is given in the Year Book. "The Hall has been rebuilt on its original site and as nearly as possible to its former design; the stained glass windows are again in their old positions. One of the roof trusses has been reconstructed from the original oak, and the carved pendants and features on the new trusses are almost entirely the originals. The design for the new oak panelling has been based on a panelled room (*circa* 1603) exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum, whilst the carving of the oak screen formerly at the rear of the Hall has been reproduced on the panelling of the new rear wall and on the three doors which lead to the Council Chamber."

The restored inn and hall were opened on 31st May, 1955, by Sir Hartley Shawcross, Treasurer of Gray's Inn, who during the ceremony recalled the fire of 1780. This stopped the clock above the hall with its hour hand at eight and its minute hand pointing to six and gave rise to a rhyme about the legal fee of the time.

The ancients' ancient clock has stopped,
 Stopped by the hand of fate.
 The hands have stood—of course they would—
 Fast at six and eight.

It is all very well to talk about sparing quotations from *Edwin Drood*. That novel preserves the changeless spirit of the place, for in Staple Inn lived the unchanging Mr. Grewgious. "Three hundred days in the year, at least, he crossed over to the hotel in Furnival's Inn for his dinner, and after dinner crossed back again."

The Society expresses its gratitude to the Institute of Actuaries for so kindly granting use of the Hall in September, 1956, and for permission to use the photograph facing this notice.

F.W.M.D.