

## The Last Commander



It was 27<sup>th</sup> October 1539 and at the English Auberge of the Knights Hospitaller in Malta, Sir Giles Russell, Turcopolier of the English Langue of the Order, was writing an urgent letter to his brother, Lord Russell.

He refers to his stuff at his Dingley Preceptory, stating that it was good and ought to be recovered, and added that he was writing to the parson of Dingley and to his chaplain, Thomas Borow, on the same subject. The parson of Dingley at the time was another brother of Sir Giles, named Thomas Russell.

He was right to be concerned about his belongings. It was only a few months later, on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1540, when the Act was passed that suppressed the Order and all property and goods were seized. The Hospitallers

were in fact the last religious Order to be suppressed by Henry VIII when he broke with Rome and created the Church of England with himself as its spiritual head. The monks and in the hospitallers' case, the members of the order, were offered a pension if they accepted the supremacy of Henry and renounced the Pope as head of the Church. During the dissolution monastic buildings throughout the country were dismantled, precious Catholic icons melted down and the monks' books and illuminated manuscripts burnt in fires that were fanned by Henry's anger at the Pope. The servants and lay members of the orders were just turned out with no home and no job and the care and aid that some orders had given to the poor and sick was instantly discontinued and they were left to fend for themselves.

Those who refused to accept King Henry as spiritual head of the Church were persecuted and several hospitallers were executed. These included Thomas Dingley and Adrian Fortesque, who were executed on Tower Hill in 1539. English State Papers contain a letter that was despatched from Sir Giles Russell in Malta saying that they were sending David Gunson over to England to report how things were in Malta. David Gunson was betrayed by Sir Philip Babington, who had a grudge against him. Gunson was arrested on his arrival which coincided with the Act of Suppression and he was sent to the Tower. He was charged with treason and heresy and although he had no trial, he was taken from the Kings Bench prison in Southwark on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1541, dragged on a hurdle to St Thomas Waterings and there hanged, drawn and



quartered for his crimes. His final comments are recorded, "That no person might appeale unto the Byssope of Rome on earth under God and they that would maynteyn the appellation to the King for good were worse than Turks and Lutheryans".

After this brutality it is not surprising that Sir Giles Russell and many hospitallers opted to accept Henry VIII as head of the Church and take the pension offered. Sir Giles died in 1543 and the title of Turcopolier died with him. Turcopolier was a title only used in the Hospitaller Order of Knights and this officer was commander of the turcoples, a light cavalry division, and he also had command of the coastal defences of Rhodes, the Order's headquarters and later of Malta's defence when Rhodes had been lost.

The Order of St John of Jerusalem, as it was originally known, was probably founded around 1100 by the armies of the First Crusade in an attempt to avoid such terrible suffering and annihilation from happening again. Stephen de Blois, (nephew of William I and half brother of Countess Judith) later King of England was on the First Crusade and the preceptory at Dingley was probably founded during his reign.

The members of the Order were under the patronage of St John the Baptist and lived under the rule of St Augustine with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The eight langues or groupings throughout Europe bore allegiance to the Grand Master and spiritual allegiance to the Pope. Their preoccupation was to defend Christian Europe against the Turks.



Much of the information in this leaflet and the following notes concerning the Dingley preceptory were extracted from British History online.

The Dingley preceptory received gifts of land in Clopton from William de Clopton and his wife, Emma, in the reign of Henry II. William, Earl Ferrers gave land in Passenham and Roger, Earl of Hereford a mill at Gowcester.

In 1296 there were two manors at Dingley, one was held by Hugh de Dingley and the other by the Hospitallers until the Dissolution

In 1338 this preceptory had an income of £79 4s. and expenditure of £37 0s.4d. leaving a handsome balance for the Grand Prior of England of £42 3s. 8d. The commander at the time was Sir William Waldechef assisted by Hugh le chaplain and Robert de Braibrock, a scutifier. (The order of St John had three classes, the knights, the chaplains and the serving brothers. Some serving brothers served the order hoping to win their spurs and join the knighthood. The

above Robert, acting as his master's shield bearer was probably hoping for better things to come. However, let us hope he gained recognition in time for this path to promotion to knight was abolished in 1357.)

Sir Henry Halley was preceptor, mentioned in a document dated 14<sup>th</sup> March 1482 when a complaint is made about the ruinous condition of a well which must be repaired forthwith or the preceptory will suffer a fine of 6s 8d.

Sir Giles Russell was the last commander at Dingley and also held the preceptory at Battisford in Suffolk.

After the loss of Jerusalem and the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land at Acre to the Turks in 1291, the Hospitallers retreated to Rhodes where they concentrated on the defence of Christendom at sea. Rhodes fell to Sultan Suleiman on Christmas Eve 1522 and the knights retreated to Malta. It was Napoleon who eventually drove the Knights Hospitaller out of Malta in 1798 although of course the English Language had disappeared by this time.

There was an attempt in England in 1826, by some French knights, to revive the order in the form of a mercenary army and they moved into the Old Jerusalem Tavern in Clerkenwell which had been the gatehouse of the medieval English Grand Priory. The chivalric order still exists with the Queen as its Sovereign and with the old ranks of Grand Prior, Chaplains, Serving Brothers etc. still maintained, but rather than fight their mission became the succour of victims of accidents through trained individuals and the provision of ambulances to ferry the injured to hospital. In 1877 the British Priory of the Order established St John Ambulance Associations in coal mining areas and railway centres. This was followed in 1887 by the creation of the St John Ambulance Brigade. Volunteers were involved during the Boer War, and World Wars I and II both at home and abroad. Today we are all familiar with St John's presence at big and small public events where they provide an immediate, on the spot, first aid cover.



St John Ambulance in attendance at our Anglo-Saxon year event 2004

### Footnotes:

Lord John Russell to whom his brother, Sir Giles Russell, wrote the urgent letter in 1539 was an important man in the Court of Henry VIII. First, he was a soldier in the war against France, when he was wounded and lost an eye, and later he acted as an ambassador for the King. At the time he was Lord Privy Seal. He was trusted by King Henry throughout his reign and profited greatly from the Dissolution of the Monasteries as did many of those who kept the favour of the King. He was created 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Bedford in 1549. Lord John lived on until 1555 and even kept his place at Court during the Catholic revival during Queen Mary's reign. He died aged 69 at Russell House on the Strand and was buried in great splendour at his estate of Chenies in Buckinghamshire.

The Russell family benefited enormously from land donations from the Crown including:

The forest and chase of Exmoor

The Abbey of Tavistock, including 30 manors

Thorney Abbey in Cambridgeshire with thousands of acres of the fens.

The Abbey of Woburn, Bedfordshire

And Covent Garden in London

Sir Giles only lived for three years following the loss of the preceptory lands but for the Russell family generally the loss of Battisford and Dingley must have featured very insignificantly amongst their enormous gains which of course they hold to this day.

In Bowden there is an, as yet, unexplained reference to the name Russell.

The Enclosure Award of 1776 refers to Russell's Lane which is today known as Burnmill Road and the field on the corner of Burnmill Road and Leicester Lane is known as Russell's Seeds.

Motto of the Knights Hospitaller

*Pro fide pro utilitate hominum*