

## THE BRITISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY DAY TRIP TO TOMAR – 17 APRIL 2017

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Photographs courtesy of Ian Yarwood, Selwyn Kennard and Mark Crathorne

Thirty two members of the British Historical Society visited the **Convent of Christ, Tomar** on Saturday, 8<sup>th</sup> April, where they were welcomed by Helen de Castro, who was to be our guide for the visit. Helen, who lives nearby, was highly knowledgeable about the monastery and its history. The Convent is perched high on a hill and Helen gave us a brief history of the Tomar region and the history of the Knights Templar, and pointed



out many historical facts as she guided us around the Convent. She explained the distinct architectural styles of the buildings constructed by the Grand Masters Henry the Navigator, D. Manuel I and D. João III. Of particular interest were the original castle built in 1160 by the First Grand Master, Gualdim Pais, with the sloping bases of its walls, the Charola, where the Knights attended Mass on horseback, and the Manueline window, with an impressive sculpture of a dragon, inspired by voyages by Portuguese navigators to China.



The Order of the Knights Templar was formed in 1119 to protect pilgrims on the dangerous route to Jerusalem, which had been occupied during the Second Crusade 20 years earlier. The name originates from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The Templars took an active role in the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. They came to Portugal in 1128 as Crusaders, and in 1159, King Afonso Henriques awarded them a vast territory situated halfway between Coimbra and Santarém, as a reward for their role in expelling the Moors from Santarém and Lisbon (1147). As a result of persecution by King Philip IV of France, the Knights Templar Order was extinguished by Pope Clement V in 1312, and the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar - Jacques de Molay - was burnt at the stake in October, 1314. The Portuguese King Dinis avoided repatriating the wealth of the Knights Templar by converting them to the Order of Christ in 1318.



After the tour, we were invited by Helen and her husband, D. Luis de Castro, Conde de Nova Goa, for lunch at **Quinta da Bizelga**, his ancestral home. They gave us a brief tour of the Quinta and gardens and showed us the page of the Guest Book where Princess Margaret's signature was recorded in 1959, when

she spent a weekend at Bizelga during a State visit to Portugal. One thousand candles and oil lamps were lit, as the estate had no electric power until 1980. Quinta da Bizelga was purchased in 1577 by Antonio de Abreu. The Abreus were commanders of ships 'de alto bordo' (large warships), which spent four years at a time in India or other Portuguese colonies. Through

marriage the estate passed to the de Castro family in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ten generations of the de Castro family served the Portuguese Crown in India without interruption, since 1550, often as Govenors and Vice-Roys. They returned to Portugal in 1855 and often stayed at Quinta de Bizelga, which became a 'model farm' at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.



For further information see the websites below:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convent\\_of\\_Christ\\_\(Tomar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convent_of_Christ_(Tomar))

<http://www.conventocriso.pt/en/index.php?s=white&pid=185>

<http://www.conventocriso.pt/en/index.php?s=white&pid=11&identificador=>

<http://www.templarknights.eu/about-tomar/>