

## THE BRITISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY DAY TRIP TO TOMAR

Twenty seven 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. She 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 re-conquest 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 Santarem, as a reward for their role in expelling the Moors from Santarem 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, 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, Dom 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. We were also shown the Guest Book page where Princess Margaret's signature was

recorded in 1959, when she spent a weekend at Bizelga during a State visit to Portugal. Over 1,000 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 Governors and Viceroys. 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, when an ancestor was Minister of Agriculture.

*Article written by Jackie Kennard and Mark Crathorne*

*Photographs courtesy of Ian Yarwood, Selwyn Kennard and Mark Crathorne*

For further information see the websites below:

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

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

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