

TEMPLE CHEVALLIER – Victorian Polymath

February 2024

It is not unusual for our website to attract enquiries. One such example was an email from the production company making an episode of *Songs of Praise* for the BBC. It was to feature Durham University, and the producers were anxious to learn more about one of Durham's famous fellows: none other than **Temple Chevallier (1794–1873)** #2116 on the web family tree. We were not only able to answer their questions but we had a photograph of him and, better still, we were able to put them in touch with his first cousin, though many times removed, **Hugh Chevallier (1962)** #9062. Hugh is Co-Editor of *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*.

Temple was an extraordinary man. There is a comprehensive biography on the website, but briefly he was a Cambridge scholar, wrangler and prizeman, a Fellow of Pembroke College; a vicar of St Andrew the Great and twice Hulsean lecturer, before going to Durham University at around the time of its foundation, where he became Professor of Mathematics, Professor of Astronomy and Reader in Hebrew as well as being perpetual curate at Esh and a canon of Durham Cathedral. His passion for astronomical observation led to his establishing the Durham Observatory, and to a lunar crater bearing his name.

One of the duties of the occupant of the Temple Chevallier Chair of Astronomy at Durham University is to deliver an occasional lecture. Somewhat delayed by Covid the present incumbent, Professor Martin Ward (a renowned observational astrophysicist) kindly invited Hugh and me to attend his lecture last November. Sadly, I was unable to accept the invitation but Hugh attended and sent me the following comments:

It was a long way from rural Hampshire to the city of Durham, but it was well worth the effort. In truth, the trains worked very smoothly, and the university generously put me up in a city-centre hotel, so the hardship was minimal. And the reward great.

*Martin Ward, the Temple Chevallier Chair of Astronomy, divided his lecture – *The End is Not Yet Nigh: The Ultimate Fate of the Universe* – into three distinct parts: a short biographical note on Temple; a brief look at eschatology in various faiths; and the scientific view of the end of everything. It was serious stuff, but riveting, and Martin lectures with such clarity that even someone as scientifically illiterate as I can understand what he's driving at. Or at least I thought I could at the time.*

The dinner afterwards was a civilised affair. It was held in the senior common room of St Chad's College, and in attendance was a raft of impressive intellects: the dean of Durham cathedral; an astrobiologist; a world expert in dark matter; the head of physics; the head of astronomy; a professor of bioengineering; plus many others. And me. But everyone was very kind, and one or two professed an interest in Wisden, my employer. The food and drink were excellent. Martin had even procured a bottle of Chevalier brandy (single L, but the thought was appreciated) to pass round the table.

Talking of Wisden and of substantial intellects, I have today commissioned your nephew (I believe) to write for us. I have absolutely no doubt James will produce a magnificent and original piece for Wisden 2024.

‘James,’ I assume to be **James Runcie (1959)** #3786, author, inter alia of the famous *Grantchester* series.

While at Durham University, Temple Chevallier, in his capacity as perpetual curate of Esh, lived at nearby Flass Hall, rented from the miserly Jane Peat. He reported it to be dilapidated, having been lived in for decades by a resident who had cut his own throat after squandering his fortune on gambling. By chance, the Hall was on the market at the time of Hugh’s visit to Durham and looked anything but dilapidated.

Temple Chevallier was indeed a remarkable man.

Anthony Cobbold 2024