

CORRESPONDENCE

(To the Editors of the Journal of the Institute of Actuaries)

DEAR SIRS,

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Staple Inn

A reference in a recent leading article in *The Times* has led me to search out some remarks made about Staple Inn by the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. They occur in *Passages from the English Note-Books of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, published posthumously in London in two volumes in 1870. There is a passing allusion to Hawthorne's remarks in Archibald Day's well-known Presidential Address (*J.I.A.* xxvii, 28), but it is thought that they will be new to most members of the Institute and that it may be of interest to record them in the *Journal*. It is a coincidence that 1870 was also the year of publication of Dickens's posthumous *Mystery of Edwin Drood* in which occurs the description of Staple Inn (also quoted in Day's Address) that has become familiar to members on account of its being reproduced in the Institute *Year Book*.

Hawthorne lived from 1804 to 1864, and is probably best known in this country as the author of the children's book *Tanglewood Tales*. He was United States Consul in Liverpool from 1853 to 1857, and it was during this period that the *English Note-Books* were written. (There have also been published *American and Italian Note-Books*.) They are in diary form and it seems that they were not originally intended for publication.

There are two references to Staple Inn; they are to be found (in the 1870 edition) in Vol. I, p. 318 and in Vol. II, p. 428. The passages are appended to this letter. In the first extract 'Staple Inn' is misspelt. The second extract, written two years later, is rather curious for it would almost appear from it that Hawthorne had then forgotten about his earlier visit. It will be noticed, however, that the impressions left on Hawthorne's mind were very much the same on both occasions. It is perhaps somewhat strange that no mention is made of the Hall of Staple Inn—nor, for that matter, of Gray's Inn Hall.

Hawthorne's picture of the Inn on a summer afternoon is delightful. The 'sunflowers in full bloom' and the 'sense that bees were humming' are in marked contrast to the 'smoky sparrows' and 'smoky trees' described by Dickens. Common to both authors, however, is the emphasis laid on the quietude of the courtyards; this indeed is the motif throughout Hawthorne's remarks.

25-31, Moorgate,
London, E.C. 2.
19 December 1950

Yours faithfully,
C. D. RICH

September 8th, 1855

... From this point I went through Covent Garden Market, and got astray in the City, so that I can give no clear account of my afternoon's wanderings. I passed through Holborn, however, and I think it was from that street that I passed through an archway (which I almost invariably do when I see one), and found

myself in a very spacious, gravelled square, surrounded on the four sides by a continuous edifice of dark brick, very plain, and of cold and stern aspect. This was Gray's Inn, all tenanted by a multitude of lawyers. Passing thence, I saw 'Furnival's Inn' over another archway, but, being on the opposite side of the street, I did not go thither. In Holborn, still, I went through another arched entrance, over which was 'Staples Inn', and here likewise seemed to be offices; but, in a court opening inwards from this, there was a surrounding seclusion of quiet dwelling-houses, with beautiful green shrubbery and grass-plots in the court, and a great many sunflowers in full bloom. The windows were open; it was a lovely summer afternoon, and I have a sense that bees were humming in the court, though this may have been suggested by my fancy, because the sound would have been so well suited to the scene. A boy was reading at one of the windows. There was not a quieter spot in England than this, and it was very strange to have drifted into it so suddenly out of the bustle and rumble of Holborn; and to lose all this repose as suddenly, on passing through the arch of the outer court. In all the hundreds of years since London was built, it has not been able to sweep its roaring tide over that little island of quiet. In Holborn I saw the most antique-looking houses that I have yet met with in London, but none of very remarkable aspect.

December 6th, 1857

. . . After leaving Lincoln's Inn, we looked at Gray's Inn, which is a great, quiet domain, quadrangle beyond quadrangle, close beside Holborn, and a large space of green-sward enclosed within it. It is very strange to find so much of ancient quietude right in the monster city's very jaws, which yet the monster shall not eat up,—right in its very belly, indeed, which yet, in all these ages, it shall not digest and convert into the same substance as the rest of its bustling streets. Nothing else in London is so like the effect of a spell, as to pass under one of these archways, and find yourself transported from the jumble, mob, tumult, uproar, as of an age of weekdays condensed into the present hour, into what seems an eternal sabbath. Thence we went into Staple Inn, I think it was,—which has a front upon Holborn of four or five ancient gables in a row, and a low arch under the impending story, admitting you into a paved quadrangle, beyond which you have the vista of another. I do not understand that residences and chambers in these Inns of Court are now exclusively let to lawyers; though such inhabitants certainly seem to preponderate there.