

# The Empty Lab

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*At this place New Year's Day, 1881 were spoken these deathless words "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive" by Mr. Sherlock Holmes in greeting to John H. Watson, MD at their first meeting*



This plaque can be found today on the wall of the pathology lab of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. I know. I've

seen it. First I had to get past two security guards who'd never heard of it, and who were convinced I was an inexperienced Russian spy who couldn't come up with a better story than that.

Then I had to locate someone who knew where it was. And finally I had to interrupt the lunch of the very patient but not terribly amiable Dr. Norton, in whose office the plaque resides. Norton claims few people make the pilgrimage nowadays, most of his Holmesian visitors are Japanese tourists who are dismayed and disappointed London is not the mystical, hansom-laden city of which they have read.

But I've been to Mecca and have seen the holy shrine, and even have a slightly blurred photograph to prove it. If the plaque is to be believed, it was placed there in 1953 by the Baker Street Irregulars and the Amateur Mendicants.

Now why, you may ask, would I say such a terrible and blasphemous thing as "if the plaque is to be believed?" I say this because I am convinced the plaque is wrong on at least one other noteworthy count. Why do we believe the first meeting of Holmes and Watson to be on January 1?

Tradition says so, you answer. Granted, it was believed by many great Sherlockians of

the past: Christopher Morley and Michael Hardwick, to mention two. And yet what evidence is there? About as much as there is for believing Christ's birth to have occurred on December 25th - none. December 25 was originally a midwinter worship of Saturn and Bacchus.

When Constantine, in the fourth century, legalized Christianity, he also made it mandatory. The church in Rome made a "pact with the pagans" when it settled on December 25th to observe the Nativity- and in exchange for this date's name change, people were allowed to celebrate the holiday pretty much as they always had. Most of the trappings of Christmas, from the mistletoe to the Yule log to the Christmas tree, are pagan in origin. In fact, it was not until the Victorian era Christmas started gaining popularity as a true "Christian" celebration.



Fine, but what does that have to do with Holmes? It only serves to demonstrate traditions are frequently without solid footing. I can think of very few reasons for giving the New Year's Day holiday as THE GREAT MEETING day. I



believe the one that's most often foisted upon us is the absence of other students in the pathology lab. But that's pretty weak

stuff to me. Watson makes no mention of the holiday. The city is bustling with activity, unlike most holidays when only a few brave souls are out and about.

Nothing is closed, from the pubs to the restaurants. If it were truly New Year's Day, wouldn't most of the pub crowd (to include the pub owners) be at home nursing their sleep deprivation and hangovers from the festivities of the night before?

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence for the lab to have been occupied just prior to the arrival of Stamford and Watson. Let's consider the account Watson lays out for us: "This was a lofty chamber, lined and littered with countless bottles. Broad, low tables were scattered about, which bristled with retorts, test-tubes, and little Bunsen lamps, with their flickering

blue flames..."

There were several tables scattered throughout that room, and each table was BRISTLING with retorts, test-

tubes, and Bunsen burners -- burners which had been lit and were all running, with flickering blue flames. Holmes may have been a genius, but even he couldn't be in two places at once, and lit Bunsen burners need monitoring. Besides, his experiment involved only a few chemicals, or it did as he demonstrated it to Watson and Stamford. I believe this was a normal school day, and in fact not 15 minutes before the arrival of Watson and Stamford, that lab had been full of students and a beehive of activity. Remember Stamford's hesitation about describing Holmes.

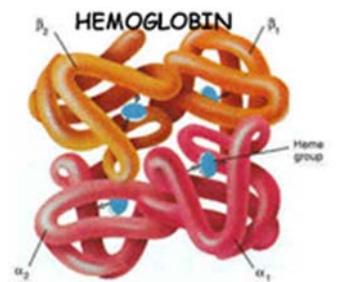
Watson had to urge him to not be "mealy-mouthed" about it, and Stamford admits under questioning Holmes is "a little queer in some of his ideas," and was given to



weird experiments sometimes involved violence, such as beating corpses with a stick. Surely Stamford wasn't the only one who knew of Holmes's odd nature. In fact, by his own admission, Holmes had no friends in college, and if we take Stamford at his word, Holmes had been unable to find a roommate before Watson arrived.

"He was bemoaning himself ... because he could not get someone to go halves with him in some nice rooms which he had found." Watson describes the rooms later as being "desirable in every way," and the financial terms "so moderate when divided between us" arrangements were concluded on the spot. So no one had an objection to the rooms. Their objection was to Holmes as a roommate, and this was only gotten around because Watson moved in without knowing Holmes at all. But getting back to my theory, I believe the room had been fully occupied just a few minutes before Watson's arrival. So what happened to empty it out so fast? Sherlock Holmes -- "a little queer," the fellow who'd stop at nothing to learn the effects of the latest vegetable alkaloid, the guy who'd beat up dead people on a whim, Sherlock "a little too scientific for my taste."

Holmes, who approached cold-bloodedness with his passion for definite and exact knowledge -- looked up, quivering with excitement from his own table, and proclaimed in his strident voice, "I need a volunteer blood donor for my haemoglobin experiment!"



**Presto. Empty lab.**