

The Tradition of Patronage in Oxford

Professor Steven Parissien summarises the how Oxford's architecture has evolved

From the days of Christopher Wren in the late seventeenth century, Oxford University has preferred to entrust its major architectural commissions to amenable, local master-masons who would be able, if necessary, to convert the architectural visions of their own dons into solid masonry or, alternatively, to execute, adapt and, where it was required, dilute the designs produced for them by trained architects. Generally these architects, too, were local men, or at least metropolitan names who were now out of favour in London and, consequently, were more acquiescent to the dons' whims – and, of course, were far less expensive than their fashionable equivalents.

Oxford has a long tradition of using building contractors to refine or even invent, as well as simply to build existing designs. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, figures such as Christopher Kempster, Edward Strong and William Townsend happily combined the professions of architect, mason, and builder. Townsend applied his family's talent for pragmatism and compromise to the full, adapting both Hawksmoor's ambitious but impractical design for the High Street front of Queen's College in 1733-6 and amateur architect-don Edward Holdsworth's scheme for the chastely austere New Buildings at Magdalen College in 1733-4.

Many of Townsend's new Oxford quads, such as the Radcliffe Quad at University College of 1717-19, were couched in a deliberately archaic late Gothic redolent of that earlier great building age: the later decades of the fifteenth and first years of the sixteenth century. At the Radcliffe Quad, Townsend even included a stone-vaulted ceiling in the form of a fan vault of the type first used in Oxford in c.1480, which had been used repeatedly as a eurosceptic symbol of Oxford's determined adherence to traditional English Gothic throughout the seventeenth century.

Equally archaic to many observers was the classical Radcliffe Camera, completed by the Townsends to Gibbs' design in 1748. In London, Palladianism had long been accepted as the default idiom for public and private buildings. Yet, in Oxford, the manner barely registered. The unmistakably Roman Baroque lines of Gibbs' Camera came from another era, and had little to do with the proportionality of Palladian masters such as Campbell, Burlington, Kent or Ware – none of whom were ever awarded commissions by the university city.

During the decades after the completion of the Radcliffe Camera, both the city and university effectively went to sleep. Almost nothing of any significance was built in Oxford after 1748 aside from Henry Keene's eccentric antiquarian-gothick Hall at University College of the mid-1760s and Keene and Wyatt's lofty Observatory, begun in 1773. The dreaming spires slumbered on, largely oblivious to the passing fashions of the outside world.

By 1815, indeed, Oxford appeared to be going in the other direction, as the gothicisation of Oxford's streets gathered pace. Exeter College's Turl Street and Broad

Street façades were refaced in a suitably appropriate Late Gothic style in 1833-4 under Underwood's direction and Jesus College followed suit in 1854, completing the Gothic streetscape and transforming Turl Street into a romantic, Early Victorian fantasy of what Henry VII's Oxford *should* have looked like.

Even in the later Victorian era, University dons remained unhappy with the demands and imagination of big-name architects, and invariably preferred to choose more agreeable, local professionals who would help them reshape the cityscape along traditional, time-honoured and less aggressively principled lines. A few colleges did, it is true, employ that most prolific and tireless of Victorian architects, George Gilbert Scott; but the University almost completely ignored his great rival George Edmund Street. Street actually established an Oxford office, in Beaumont, Street in 1852, at which the Arts and Crafts pioneers Philip Webb and William Morris worked for a time. Yet, aside from his splendid church of St Philip and St James of 1860-6 on Woodstock Road and his work elsewhere in the city as Oxford Diocesan Architect (having been appointed architect to the Oxford diocese in 1850), Street was never asked to build anything else by the University's colleges, aside from the minor commission of re-ordering Jesus College's Chapel.

Instead the colleges turned to local men like William Wilkinson or more flexible and amenable architects such as T G Jackson. William Wilkinson, who initiated the new suburb of North Oxford, was a local figure who was almost wholly unknown by the London architectural establishment when he began his Oxford practice; while the Jacobethan synthesis of T Graham Jackson and his followers came to dominate the Late Victorian and Edwardian city centre, and indeed continued to hold Oxford in stylistic thrall until well after 1945.

Most of the new large-scale university commissions during the early decades of the twentieth century were designed by similarly malleable men. If Paul Waterhouse's neo-Georgian Organic Chemistry Laboratory of 1913-16 was decidedly uninspired, then E P Warren's dispiritingly flat and lifeless Pathology Building of 1925-7 was worse. Warren's design showed how delight in the past could turn to tedium and apathy. The reason for his employment in Oxford, however, is not hard to fathom. Edward Prioleau Warren was not only closely connected to Oxford's beerage, having married Margaret Morrell of the local brewing dynasty, but was also the brother of the influential President of Magdalen College, Sir Herbert Warren, who had been Vice-Chancellor of the University between 1906 and 1910 and was still a highly influential figure. Oxford, as always, preferred to stick to its own.

In keeping with the old Oxford tradition of eschewing expensive and intransigent national figures in favour of more quiescent regional talent – men who were, ideally, personally recommended by fellow dons or others whom the college could trust – most of the architects at work in Oxford in the 1920s and 30s were, like Buckland and Haywood, were hardly household names. At Somerville, the architect Percy Morley Horder built a new Front Quad in a competent and austere vernacular neo-Georgian in 1932-3. Horder had won the commission for Somerville in a typically Oxonian way: he

was recommended by the Principal of Somerville's brother, the artist Roger Fry, who had met Horder in Sussex. In 1921 the Salisbury architect Edward Doran Webb (1864-1931) used his Catholic contacts in Oxford to encourage the Catholic foundation of Blackfriars Hall to hire him to create new college premises on St Giles. And at Corpus Christi, the obscure architect T Harold Hughes was, after 1927, employed to build a southern extension to the Front Quad and insert the new Thomas Building adjacent to Merton Grove in an appropriately retiring, Tudoresque style. A few years later, Hughes was also commissioned by Merton College to reface William Butterfield's assertively polychromic Grove Building at Merton College of 1864 in an appropriately 'Oxonian' Late Gothic manner.

Even more dispiriting than G G Scott's lifeless, lumpen New Bodleian was the other ambitious varsity project planned, if not executed, before the Second World War: Nuffield College. Adhering to the principle of choosing little-known yet amenable mediocrities rather than celebrated London names, the dons selected as the college's architect Austen St Barbe Harrison, supposedly a direct descendant of the family of Jane Austen who had trained as an architect in Canada and had, after 1918, worked in Macedonia and Palestine, but who had never built a building in Britain. Nuffield College was, indeed, to prove Harrison's only work in this country.

Some of these traditional buildings were barely distinguishable from their Georgian or Victorian predecessors. At Mansfield College, local architect Thomas Rayson was employed to design a new block in a playful Tudor Gothic idiom which one critic called a 'Cotswold cottage style'. In 1948 Edward Maufe was asked by his old college, St John's, to design the Dolphin Quad in the same sober and austere Georgian style that he had used at the Oxford Playhouse in Beaumont Street a decade before. Similarly, Hubert Worthington was asked back to revise his pre-war design for what was originally the History Faculty Library in Merton Street, a dull building couched in the rubble-faced idiom which Worthington had used before the war, and for the mundane and lifeless Forestry and Botany Building of 1947-50.

Perhaps the turning point for Oxford Modernism was the dramatic rejection of Maufe at his own college, St John's. This architectural saga started in 1956, with a proposal from the college authorities that Maufe be asked to design a new east range for the North Quad, which was strenuously opposed by a group of 'young turks' on the governing body. What was important about the St John's insurrection, however, was that it was not engineered by architects but by the dons themselves. In that sense, it was a very Oxonian coup, with college Fellows once more adopting the role of omniscient stylistic arbiters. While the style of architecture may have changed, Oxford University's old habits clearly had not.

At the same time, Merton had hired traditionalist Raymond Erith to build a small house which would supersede the functions of the somewhat pompous, robustly Renaissance Lodgings erected on the north side of Merton Street after 1903. Erith's design of 1957 was phrased in a well-mannered, neo-Georgian style, its façade dominated by an elliptical, Regency style oriel window supported on two porch

columns. As Whyte has noted, the manner of Erith's appointment was typically Oxonian: Merton's Estates Bursar knew Christopher Hussey, the architectural historian at *Country Life* magazine, who had in turn recommended Erith. However, Erith's handsome, well-proportioned design was ultimately rejected by the college – not, as at St John's, through a revolt of the dons, but on grounds of its excessive cost. Instead, Merton – whose Warden had famously declared that contemporary architecture was now merely a choice of 'pastiche or packing case' – opted for the packing case. Years later, Carden and Godfrey's cheaper, Modernist alternative was itself refaced in a reticent classical style redolent of Erith's rejected scheme. And project architect David Finlay had, in typically Oxonian fashion, been recommended to Merton by the furniture designer Luke Hughes, with whom the dons were already familiar.

It was left to Richard MacCormac to combine modern facilities and profiles with appropriate historic sympathies and references in the 1990s. His impressive new Garden Quad for St John's of 1993-4 won five major awards (from RIBA, the Civic Trust, the Oxford Preservation Trust, the *Independent on Sunday* (its Building of the Year for 1994) and the Concrete Society), and in a 2003 poll organised by the *Oxford Times*, locals judged the quad to be the best building erected in Oxford in the preceding 75 years.

At the same time, though, colleges had begun to embracing the sort of full-blooded traditionalism which would have been widely derided twenty year before. Pembroke College's Geoffrey Arthur Building, sited on the south bank of the Thames at Grandpont and completed in 1989, was boldly phrased by architects Maguire and Murray in an unapologetically neo-baronial and faintly Teutonic neo-Tudor style, which swiftly won it the affectionate local nickname of 'Colditz'. For every MacCormac commission, it seemed, there was always a corresponding Colditz...