

ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

The Architecture and History of the Buildings of Magdalen College, Oxford

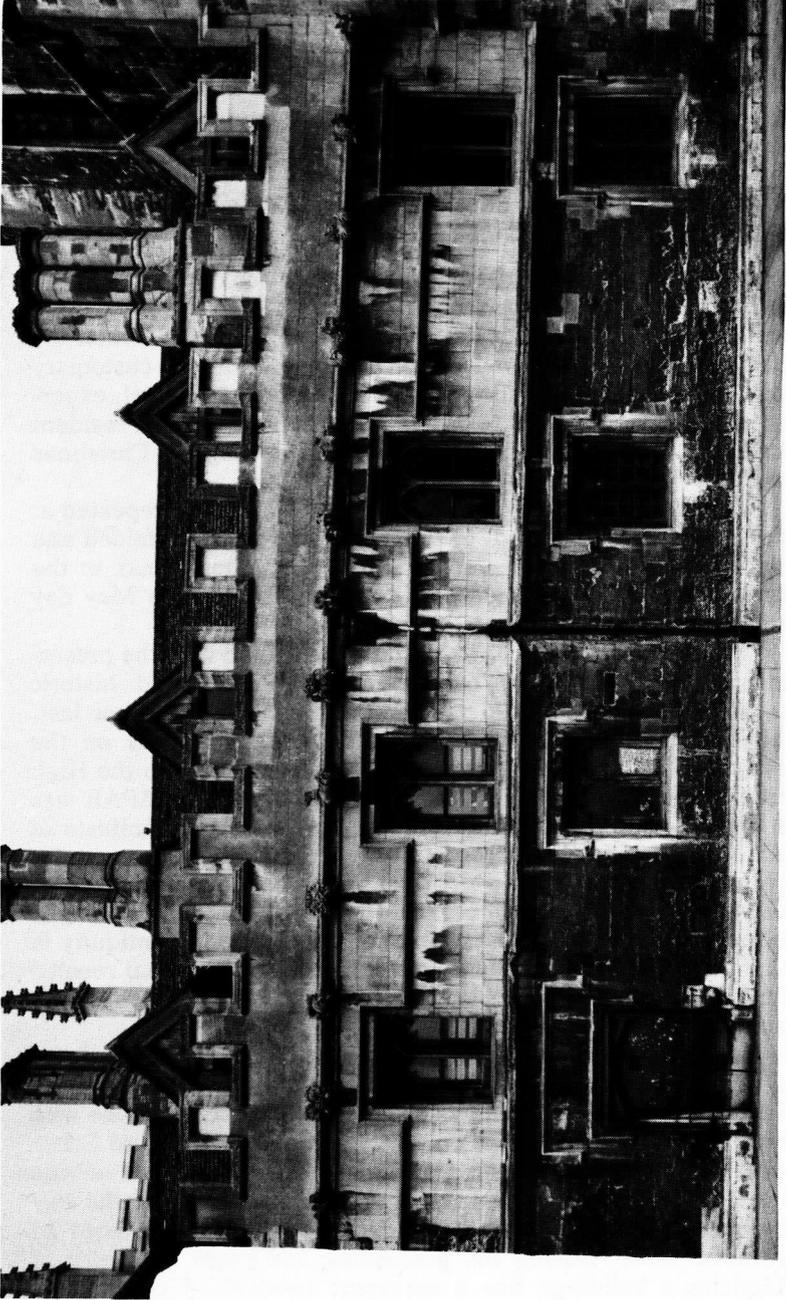
By A. D. Saunders

To be invited to join the distinguished company of those who have given the Anniversary Address to your Society is an honour indeed. To do so in the hall of Magdalen College is to me a pleasurable and nostalgic task. As your Chairman has said I am doubly 'Magdalensis'. It was within two or three days of my ninth birthday that I first became a member of this college and my earliest recollection of this hall is Christmas Eve, 1940, when the choristers, who had stayed on at the school for the customary 'extra week' to perform their service in the College chapel, experienced the climax of their year in the carol concert for the President and Fellows until the bells in the Great Tower rang out Christmas itself.

For an ex-chorister it comes as a particular shock, repeated at each recent visit to Oxford, to see the Great Tower scaffolded and missing its parapet and pinnacles—for that other climax in the chorister's year was to sing on top of the Tower each May day morning.

It also came as a shock to all those concerned with the preservation and conservation of ancient monuments and historic buildings to read in the Architects Journal of 23 November last, under the headline 'New Buildings for Old', an attack on the restoration being carried out on the Great Tower and on the High Street frontage as 'precisely the type of work that the SPAB was formed to stop'. The article went on, 'In the SPAB manifesto of 1877, William Morris attacked 'those who make changes...under the name of restoration which results in the double process of destruction and addition where the whole surface of the building is necessarily tampered with so that the appearance of antiquity is taken away and...a feeble and useless forgery is the final result.' Almost 100 years later, this is exactly', the article continued, 'what has happened at Magdalen'.

Yet, leaving on one side for the moment the validity of the arguments expressed, does criticism of the treatment of Magdalen's buildings come as so much of a shock to those who know and love them? It was only 24 years before that Lord Esher wrote to *The Times* drawing attention to the fact that various letters had appeared in the leading newspapers deploring the way in which the same High Street facade was being refaced in synthetic stone. During the preceding 200 years the story of Magdalen's buildings has a recurrent element of controversy



The High Street frontage before 1970 with plastic stone repair to the upper storey and the second drip mould over the blocked doorway.

whether in their repair, alteration or in new designs. The architect J. C. Buckler who died in 1894 wrote that 'the assaults on the architecture of Magdalen College have been more numerous than those on any other of the renowned Colleges in Oxford, but without the amount of mischief which might be expected. Fortunately, so much time was passed in former years in contention and controversy, that before the subject proposed was talked into tangible shape, it died away, and expired generally without regret'. It is therefore my purpose this afternoon in no spirit of disrespect of disloyalty to use these controversies as a peg on which to consider the buildings themselves.

Whether in 1474 there were critics of William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester, and Lord Chancellor, when he proceeded to build his newly founded college within the confines of the Hospital of St John the Baptist we do not know but it would be surprising if there were none. William Waynflete possessed the ruthlessness of a man who knows what he wants and has the means of achieving it.

Born about 1395, son of Richard Patten, a prosperous merchant, William Waynflete was appointed master of Winchester College in 1429. In 1441 Henry VI appointed him foundation fellow of his new College of Eton. The next year he was Master of Eton and Provost the following. In 1447 he succeeded Cardinal Beaufort as Bishop of Winchester—the first of a long line of schoolmaster-bishops. With new found power and wealth he immediately founded Magdalen Hall in 1448 renting a site from the hospital of St John on the south side of High Street where the Examination Schools now stand. Then in 1456 William was made Lord Chancellor and within a month, without warning, the scheme was formed to dissolve the Hospital and to grant the site to Magdalen Hall. On October 27th, that year the King was persuaded to grant to him the patronage and advowson of the Hospital of St John and by July 5th, 1457 the Hospital came to an end. The transfer of the property was delayed by the need to obtain papal sanction so that the new College was not founded until the next year 1458.

It is more than likely that there were those who regretted the ruthless treatment of the Hospital's buildings since the regular plan of Waynflete's rectangular cloister quadrangle with hall and chapel along its southern side was unrelated to the street frontage and only marginally made use of earlier buildings. Only on the periphery were the old Hospital buildings retained because they could be used during the construction period.

The Hospital of St John was first situated in the region of Longwall outside the East Gate of the City. It began in the latter half of the reign of Henry II and probably owed its origin to the development of the University about the years 1170 to 1190

bringing to Oxford a large and often destitute population. Even in later days, when better preparation had been made for scholars, the Hospital was still reckoned to have been founded for the benefit of 'poor scholars and other miserable persons'. In 1234 Henry III provided a new site and new buildings for the Hospital where the college now stands.

There is no list of the buildings of the Hospital nor plan of their grouping. The Cartulary supplies evidence for the following—a refectory for the brethren and sisters capable of holding about 18, a dormitory for the brethren to hold about 10, a dormitory for the sisters to hold about 8, a ward for the infirm of whom there were probably never more than 8 or 10, a chapel for the brethren, a chapel for the infirm, some small rooms for corrodians or those of his servants sent by the King to reside there for life, a charnel house and a chapter house.

Of the Hospital buildings which survived the completion of Waynflete's foundation a few may be identified—the infirmary block formerly on the north side of the College cloister, likewise a range north of the Infirmary. The chapel of c. 1234 and the present college kitchen are now the only visible elements.

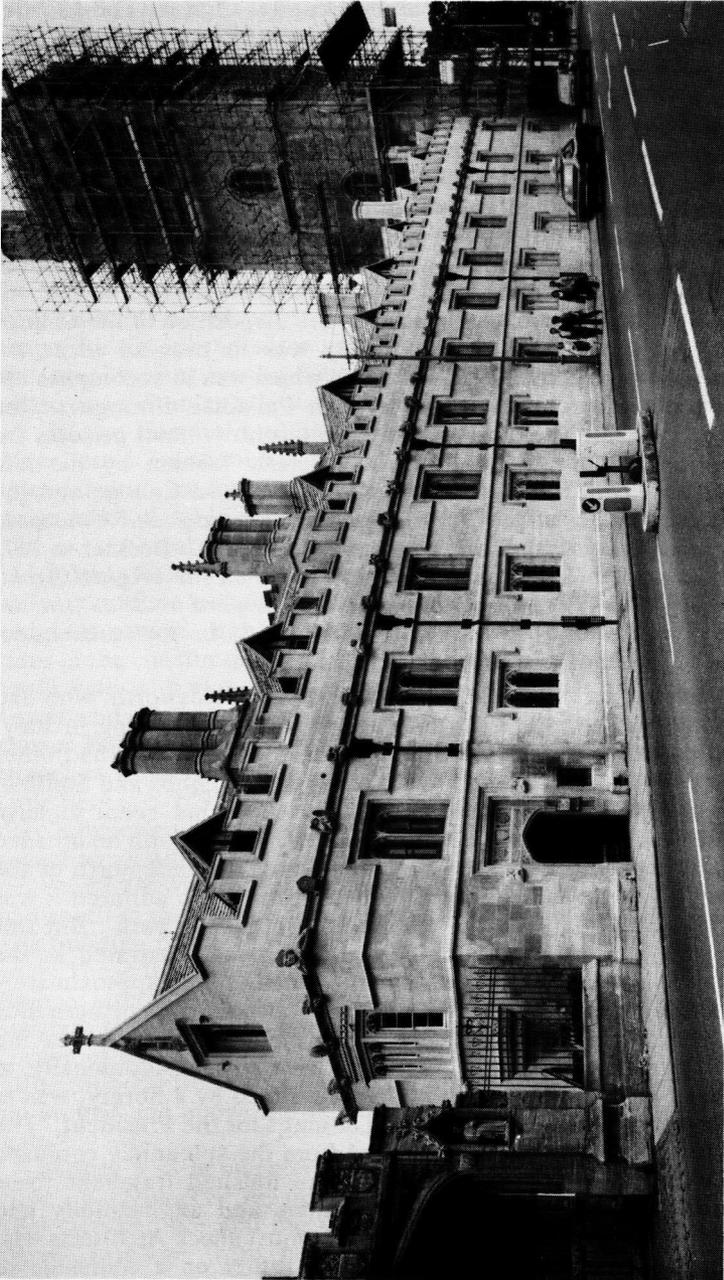
Within the embattled enclosing wall, the first structure to be built, Waynflete's concept for the fabric of the College was simple and four-square. Ranges of rooms were designed round three sides of the cloister quadrangle with the chapel and hall closing the south side with the entrance on the west under the Founder's Tower and all was probably complete by 1490 under the master mason William Orchard who had earlier worked on the College chapel at Eton. The Great Tower which should stand alone was built between 1492 and 1509. Yet almost from the start Waynflete's experience as an educator led him to establish a grammar school as an adjunct of the College. In all probability the School began in 1478 when grammar teaching was taking place in the low hall south of the chapel, the undercroft of the old Hospital chapel. The building of the first schoolroom proper was begun the same year. These first school buildings were west of and apart from the College stretching from the so-called Grammar Hall of 1614, which survives today as a much patched 'Gothic folly', to the south east corner of the present St Swithun's building. Magdalen Hall, a different body from Waynflete's original foundation, was to grow up around and above the school outside Magdalen College great gate.

Other less anticipated accretions developed outside Waynflete's nucleus. The President spread his lodgings westward on to their present site and the old Hospital buildings along the High Street frontage were never pulled down thereby preserving

elements of the thirteenth century Hospital Chapel. The Cloister Quadrangle was raised by a third storey in the 16th century. The Kitchen occupied part of the old Hospital and to judge by the blocked lancets and roundel in its north wall this may have been the refectory. Between 1629 and 1635 the interior of the chapel was renewed and also, at about the same time, a fine Renaissance gateway to the College was set up, variously and erroneously attributed to either Inigo Jones or Nicholas Stone, and for long a subject of contention and abuse. The 17th century also saw additional building south of the kitchen closing Chaplain's Quad, and High Street front was further adapted and refaced.

The first fundamental change in the disposition of the College buildings came in 1733 and fitfully was to provoke ideas for grandiose enlargement and alteration which was to encompass the movement of architectural style from Palladian through to the Gothic Revival. The story of the highly controversial projects for The Great Quadrangle is told in scholarly fashion by the late President, Tom Boase, in his article 'An Oxford College and the Gothic Revival', in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* for 1955 and, more polemically, by J. C. Buckler in 1823 in his anonymously published *Observations on the original Architecture of St Mary Magdalene College Oxford and on the Innovations anciently or recently attempted*. In my subsequent account I have drawn heavily on both sources.

Behind the project of 1733 was Edward Holdsworth, who had recently resigned his demyship and had been travelling in Italy. The design in fact was that of William Townsend who had other Oxford buildings in classical style to his credit. Gibbs and Smith of Warwick were to be consulted but this does not seem to have occurred. The result was the three-storey building with an arcaded ground floor and a five-bay pediment some distance north of the Cloisters known as the New Buildings. Now much admired it was described by Pugin as 'the Italian Barrack in the park'. But this was only part of a grander design, which as illustrated in the Oxford Almanac, envisaged a large quadrangle (approximately 225 ft square) of which New Buildings was only the northern side and which would replace most of the medieval cloisters leaving little more than the Chapel, Hall and Great Tower. Additionally, to the west of the Great Quadrangle, and linked by a library, was to be a circular court including new Lodgings for the President. 'The worst design which ever proceeded from the splendidly confused fancy of Palladio' wrote Buckler. 'The finished fragment (New Buildings) betrays defective proportions and an insipidity and baldness of design which in these days must shock Architects who seem to rest the merit of their works rather on a confusion of



The High Street frontage following refacing in stone. The second drip mould over the blocked doorway has been removed.

angles and ornaments.'

The idea of the Great Quadrangle was not forgotten but it was not seriously revived until 1791 and with this revival must be associated the venerable and long-lived President Routh who at the time of his election was negotiating with James Wyatt over alterations in the Chapel. That same year Wyatt produced a sketch for a quadrangle entirely in the Gothic style, and Buckler says 'It is a very singular fact that although the President would discourse from morn to night upon ancient architecture, he had no real regard for it. Wyatt's plans owe their origin to the President who never faltered in his admiration of what that architect had done and what he proposed to do'.

Boase has pointed out that in 1791 'it was still slightly unusual, even in a complex of medieval buildings, to undertake new schemes in the Gothic style'. Yet the College had shown an interest in its revival by rebuilding in 1782 the old latrine block in the Gothic style with crocketed pinnacles, battlements and little quatrefoil windows. Originally known as West's buildings in my day it was simply called 'the Gothics'.

In 1796 a new set of designs for the Great Quadrangle was prepared by John Buckler senior. Nothing was done at the time but the project was taken up again in 1801. J. C. Buckler states that 'besides Mr Wyatt, Mr Repton, a landscape gardener, and Mr Nash, a well-known professional architect severally produced volumes of designs for the disfigurement of Magdalen College and the disposal of its pleasure grounds'. The main feature of Repton's plan, as of Nash, was the abandonment of a closed quadrangle for a 3-sided one open on the eastern side towards Addison's Walk. Underlying the proposals was the fact that a particularly pleasing view of the Chapel Hall and Tower could be obtained by lowering the north side of Cloisters. 'View a hateful word', wrote Buckler, 'who, save alas the Sons of Magdalen would consent to remove or mutilate one wing of a large mansion because it impeded some 'pretty' object from the view of the other'. The Bucklers, father and son were nevertheless consulted over adaptations of the original Wyatt scheme. They, themselves, took an opinion from Thomas Harrison of Chester, who, while he worked mainly in the classical style, believed that additional buildings should correspond in style with the ancient parts of the College.

Although Harrison was providing drawings in 1822 the College had the year earlier appointed Joseph Parkinson as its consultant architect. He reported that the north side of the Cloister quadrangle was unsafe (how often have we heard this!) and without ado in July 1822 one hundred men were assembled at 4 am to begin demolition. The September issue of *The Gentleman's*

Magazine contained a letter lamenting that 'the north side of the late incomparable Cloister of Magdalen (has) disappeared.....a few hours served to destroy that which the currents of centuries had scarcely impaired'. Buckler wrote in the same issue that the timbers were thoroughly sound and that the excuse that the roof was decayed and dangerous was trite and flimsy. It was 'disgraceful in the 19th century—a period that has effected more towards restoring 'Gothic' architecture to respect and use than the two preceding centuries'. In the College, itself, the mood of the undergraduates was expressed by the heaping of some of the scattered stones into the form of a large and lofty house with the inscription 'To be pulled down at the shortest notice, and rebuilt at leisure; no estimate is required'. The destruction was stopped through the energy of Dr Ellerton soon to be Bursar, and the President was reportedly 'painfully timid and recoiled before even a feeble opposition'.

With Parkinson discomfited, another architect, Francis Goodwin submitted a speculative scheme without invitation. His work was written off by Buckler 'The vast and gaudy productions of Mr Goodwin's fancy. I know nothing of Mr Goodwin but from his wooden model should guess him to be a young man whose ideas of beauty in architecture are yet unchastened. Experience may teach him to avoid in future any unnecessary display'.

The north face of cloisters was rebuilt inexpertly and, indeed, since the original had incorporated elements of the medieval hospital buildings these were lost. The building was so badly carried out that it had to be taken down immediately and a fresh start made under a new consultant, Henry Hakewill. By October, 1824, the northern face had been completely restored on something like the old lines. In the same year one of Harrison's designs was used for facing up the ends of the New Building which had been left with their tothing ready for the completion of the Great Quadrangle and thus that grandiose scheme was at an end never since revived.

If the controversies over the Great Quadrangle had been public the quarrels over the treatment of the chapel were largely within the College. Even here, as we have come to expect, Buckler had scathing words for Wyatt who removed the medieval roofs of both hall and chapel and raised their pitch covering them with slates instead of the old lead and ceiling the interior with plaster, in the case of the chapel producing imitation stone groining. 'It was a principal fault of Mr Wyatt', wrote Buckler, 'that in 'Gothic' Architecture he built more for show than real use'. In the Hall in 1902 the plaster ceiling was taken down and replaced by a version of the old roof, reconstructed by Bodley. In the Chapel, Wyatt's

alterations have only been modified. Not all Wyatt's work in the college was removed. A. J. P. Taylor tells how the Old Library had a magnificent Gothic plaster ceiling by Wyatt. 'In 1941 our medievalists persuaded us to destroy it, allegedly as an ARP precaution (to prevent a fire bomb lodging between roof and ceiling and with the inducement that beautiful medieval beams would be revealed. We kicked it down, literally, and what were revealed were nineteenth century pine rafters. A commonplace ceiling was substituted after the war'.

Buckler was also critical of the new glazing of the West Window and a further eight windows by Francis Eginton for the ante-chapel. The glass is a remarkable brown bistre colour. 'The painted glass, for by this name it is dignified, and I must not change it, is decidedly the worst in Oxford...it casts a feverish hue over the interior', I must myself admit to being fascinated by such gloomy and unconventional glass as a chorister.



Pinnacle showing stone decay and the effect of old plastic stone repair.

The chapel's interior by the end of the eighteenth century reflected the taste of the early-mid seventeenth century, resulting from renovations following the destructions of the Reformation. In place of the original reredos the east wall was covered by a huge Last Judgement painted by Isaac Fuller. Wyatt wished to abolish all these including the contemporary choir stalls and organ screen, but there were no funds available. However, after the Great Quadrangle project had finally been laid to rest the College advertised in the London papers 'offering a premium of one hundred guineas for the best plan for fitting up the interior of the Chapel'. The design selected was by Lewis Cottingham. It was his work at Magdalen that was to establish him as one of the chief exponents of Gothic in the country at the time. Among the improvements Cottingham restored a reredos to the east wall. He wished to fill the niches with figures but this was vigorously opposed by the redoubtable Dr Ellerton, the hero of the defence of the north side of Cloisters. Cottingham was limited to a frieze of angels carrying heraldic shields, an Annunciation and Visitation in the spandrels of the new doorways and with 'providing the figures representing Christ meeting Mary Magdalen executed in a most superior manner and under the immediate direction of Mr Chantrey, by an eminent artist.'

The old stalls were now removed and new ones made from 'the very best Riga Wainscott'. There followed a sale of the former contents of the Chapel in the stable yard of the College on 11th December, 1837. It was not until 1864 that the niches in the reredos were filled with statues after bitter opposition from Professor Daubeny who was opposed to a form of decoration which might seem to savour of High Church notions. The eventual compromise was based on a decision only to include characters from the Old Testament, St John the Baptist being the one exception. Earlier there had been similar arguments over the present glass in the chapel windows and a correspondent in *The Clerical Journal* of October, 1857 dismissed the new windows by Hardman. 'The effect *may* prove good: but *the* Magdalen Chapel with which the ideas of all old Oxford men are associated, has now ceased to exist'.

The greatly despised Renaissance Gateway was eventually destroyed and replaced in 1844 by a gateway by Pugin, his only work in Oxford. 'There was' says Boase, 'not surprisingly given the theological climate of Oxford at the time, some criticism'. 'How strange and odd' Buckler wrote to one of the fellows 'are the remarks we hear of your present Gateway! I have scarcely patience to listen to the absurdities I sometimes hear uttered. Depend upon it half a century hence the fine Gateway will be admired and duly

appreciated'. In fact Pugin's Gate lasted less than 40 years.

The enlargement of the College in the nineteenth century was less fraught with polemic in respect to architectural style; no doubt due to the fact that, as Boase says 'having at the opening of the century rejected the Grecian style the college remained faithful to Gothic buildings'. Both Harrison and Goodwin drew up plans for the expansion of St John's Quadrangle, west of the Chapel. The college for some time had been negotiating for the removal to another site of Magdalen Hall which had developed around the College School and become an independent society. The fire that destroyed much of Magdalen Hall in 1822 solved the problem and the College enabled its migration to the site of Hertford College and the incorporation of the Society into that College.

Despite arguments that there was a pressing need for expansion it was not until 1849 that any part of the site was used for further College building and then it was for the building of the School Hall on the site of the Greyhound Inn at the corner of the High Street and Longwall, to the design of J. C. Buckler himself. The Grammar School was pulled down in 1828 and the schoolroom transferred to the former Lodgings of the Principal of Magdalen Hall. It was decided however to preserve the turret 'on account of its antiquity and unusual shape'. As it survives today as a picturesque feature of St John's Quadrangle it incorporates elements of the original fifteenth century schoolroom with additions of 1614.

The expansion of the College itself did not take place until Bodley and Garner built the St Swithun's Quadrangle between 1880 and 1884. Four architects had been invited to submit designs, all of them adherents of Gothic. The chosen scheme was specifically intended to harmonise with the original buildings and the same principles were applied to the replacement of the President's Lodging built 1886-1888. The new buildings meant the alteration of the entrance arrangements into the College. Bodley and Garner produced a new and insipid gateway along the High Street frontage and Pugin's shortlived work was demolished.

In 1928-30 the School Hall was turned into the Library and the College School moved to its present site on the east side of Magdalen Bridge. In its place Sir Giles Gilbert Scott built the Longwall Quadrangle still in traditional Gothic fashion but without the force of his nineteenth century predecessors.

In more recent years we have the Waynflete Building on the eastern side of Magdalen Bridge—concrete and red-brick panels. It is difficult to speak kindly of it; it resembles a conventional office block rather than part of a collegiate tradition, and perhaps its separation from the College proper is the best that can be said for it.

Apart from new construction there has been inevitable necessity for repair and maintenance. Extensive work is recorded during the latter part of the last century and early this. During the late 1930s the College took the advice of Sir Charles Peers, previously Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and used plastic stone repair in the Cloisters and elsewhere. I find this surprising since the use of synthetic stone, while it has its uses for small scale repair, was not used over large areas by the then Office of Works, indeed such use was condemned. The College continued to use this method after the War and it was the all too visible replacement of the weathered decorative string course along the High Street frontage in this medium which produced the uproar in 1953.

The structural weaknesses which have required urgent attention during the past two years have arisen, in no small measure, from the adoption of this form of repair. The existence of hair cracks between the hard synthetic stone and the original masonry allowed in water and have led to rapid decay and fracturing so there was very real danger of pieces falling from the



A telling example of stone decay.

top of the Tower as well as the very pinnacles themselves. Along the High Street front the same factors accentuated the spread of dry rot and beetle attack on the ends of the tie beams and after a college workman had fallen through the roof while attending to minor gutter repairs the whole front appeared to be detached and liable to fall into the street. No one can deny the need for immediate repair on a considerable scale. Why then the bitter attack in the Architect's Journal last year?

The core of the argument was that the building has lost the patina of age. It could hardly be otherwise since in order to maintain it as a viable part of the College the refacing was almost total. But we must be sure what is being criticised. Invoking the sacred name of William Morris is not enough. Given that the structural condition was as bad as has been claimed, and the photographs I have seen leave little doubt that that judgement was correct, then the alternative to refacing was the demolition of that range or its replacement by another design. Patching and piecing in new stone for the decayed as was advocated by the S.P.A.B. in 1953, and clearly the best approach, was by 1976 apparently not feasible whereas it is on the Tower. We should be grateful to Magdalen for going to great pains and expense in refacing in real stone and not repeating the unfortunate exercise in synthetic materials. Undoubtedly, there is a temporary aesthetic loss while the stone is new but the greater gain is the retention of that familiar piece of Oxford townscape.

Where I believe there are stronger grounds for criticism is the failure of the College to take into account the archaeological qualities of the High Street range. It was, as we have seen, a complex structure of several periods. Roughly central to the range west of the Tower was the Hospital Chapel. How early the buildings on either side of it were is unknown. Certainly in the mid seventeenth century they had a totally different elevation from the buttressed two-storey chapel. Subsequently the whole range took on a regular appearance with ordered and spaced fenestration. There were substantial alterations in the late 19th century and much of the south side was refaced. Then in the 1950s roughly half was treated with synthetic stone.

In structures such as this it is vital to retain the evidence, such as it is, for the reuse and changes the buildings have undergone; not just as examples of changing architectural style but for what they tell us of the purposes to which the building has been put. In such respects a building can contribute to our historical knowledge in the same way as a written document.

In this archaeological aspect the refacing has not played fair with all the details. Most noticeable is the omission of a second

label moulding above the blocked doorway immediately east of the Hospital chapel. What its significance was I cannot be sure but it was of sufficient interest to be commented upon by Buckler in 1823. Because the second label does not seem to appear on the mid 17th century painting it was thought reasonable to omit it on the grounds that this was restoring the building to an earlier condition. Likewise on the north side of the range, in Chaplains Quad, while the rubble masonry of the 13th century was sensibly washed and pointed and the elevation as a whole was carefully replaced, a number of liberties were taken with the details of doors and windows.

In repairing a building of this importance archaeological advice is essential and it should not be left to architects or surveyors to make assumptions which will affect the historical integrity and validity of the buildings they are repairing.

Magdalen is about to embark upon an imaginative scheme of internal redevelopment and modernisation which will undoubtedly benefit future generations of undergraduates and the fabric of the College. The scheme by Maguire and Murray for modernising the existing kitchen and providing for social activities in the south east corner of the college has been acclaimed. I hope that here there will be opportunities for research and record before and during the work of conversion, and that this next stage in the college's building history will not prove as controversial as some of its predecessors. I therefore end with the College toast 'Floreat Magdalena'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anon (J. C. Buckler), *Observations on the original Architecture of Saint Mary Magdalen College, Oxford; and on the Innovations anciently or recently attempted, 1823.*
- Architects Journal*, 30 April 1975, 900; 23 November 1977, 1017
- T. S. R. Boase, An Oxford College and The Gothic Revival, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XVIII, 1955, 145
- Oxford University Archaeological Society, *Magdalen College* 1953
- Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *City of Oxford*, 1949
- H. E. Salter (ed.) *A Cartulary of the Hospital of St John the Baptist* Appendix III, on the Architecture of the Hospital of St John by R. T. Gunther, 1916
- S.P.A.B. Report* 1952-57, 71
- R. S. Stanier, *Magdalen School*, 1940