

ETON COLLEGE BUILDINGS

The Anniversary Address given by Peter Foster, M.A., A.R.I.B.A., to the 47th Annual General Meeting of the Society, held in Lower School, Eton College, 13th June, 1970.

ONE summer day in the year of our Lord 1441 King Henry VI laid the foundation stone of the Church of the Assumption of our Lady of Eton. This event was the symbolic beginning of Eton College, but the motives which caused the King to found this college, the character of the King himself and the age in which he lived must briefly be considered. His motives are set forth in the foundation charter as "Most fitting honour to our mistress and most holy mother the Church, to the pleasure of her great Spouse . . . to found a College in honour and support of that our mother". If such motives are today almost inconceivable this is surely the measure of the change which separates the Age of Faith from the present age of technology and permissive licence. Henry was essentially a mediaeval king and his saintliness and integrity have not been seriously challenged but few doubt that he was most unfit to govern in a world of arrogant magnates forever seeking the advancement of their own power. That Henry VI was not canonized by the Pope is due more to chance than want of the evidence which King Henry VII was so keen to supply for reasons which one would suspect were to his own political advantage rather than to genuine veneration.

In practical terms, the support of "that our Mother" required firstly the daily sacrifice of the Mass and the offering of prayers for the dead, and secondly the teaching of Grammar, Latin and presumably Theology. The former needed a church and the latter a school-room and accommodation for the Provost, Fellows, clerks, scholars and choristers. This foundation was Henry VI's answer to the challenge of heresy exemplified in the teachings of Wycliffe and the activities of the Lollards. It must not be forgotten too that Henry obtained for Eton papal encouragement and unique privileges in the granting of plenary indulgences.

The complex of buildings which we shall discuss and visit is roughly bounded by a triangle with Fellows' Eyot and the River Thames to the east, the present Slough road to the west and College Field to the north. The sight was chosen for its river communications, its gravel soil and its proximity to Windsor Castle with its important and marvellous view of Eton, so splendidly reciprocated from the reverse direction. Indeed there are few points of view that do not provide some special picturesque quality. You will be familiar with Canaletto's view from across the river showing a completely incorrect "capriccio" of the chapel and college buildings translated into a fantasy of Venetian gothic. Not only painters but poets also have come under Eton's spell:

"Ye distant spires, ye antique towers
That crown the wat'ry glade,
Where grateful Science still adores
Her Henry's holy shade".

(Read Gray's Ode if you can in the edition with designs by Mr. R. Bentley.)

Let us first consider the Chapel. I am not going to expound in detail the plans and rebuilding of the Chapel which the King imposed upon his master mason, Robert Westerley. Henry VI, as has been well said, had no idea of money, nor I suspect was he necessarily brilliant at reading his master mason's plans. The first failing is no disqualification for saintliness and the second is (speaking as an architect) almost universal to some degree among clients. However, there has been much scholarly and delightful speculation about Henry's intentions and the extent of his rebuilding of the Chapel. In brief, the Chapel was nearly complete by 1448 (as the accounts refer to the timber of the roof), at which date Henry is said to have taken a dislike to the structure, whereupon he re-designed it 3 ft. wider and 15 ft. longer, then changed his mind again and sent Roger Keys, the master of the works, to measure the choirs and naves of Winchester and Salisbury; and finally set the masons to work on his third and most ambitious plan for a nave 168 ft. long, 40 ft. broad and 80 ft. high externally. The master-mason, faced with Henry's appalling decision to

rebuild the whole structure when almost complete, might well have been tempted to suggest the retention of at least one side of the choir but, if the first church was built according to the details of the "Wille" (that is, 103 ft. long and 32 ft. wide with seven four-light windows on each side between eight buttresses), such a solution would have been impossible, for the new design in the "Avyse" called for five-light windows and buttresses at different centerings. When careful examination is made of the ashlar below the east window, the unevenness of the coursing on both sides about four feet inwards from each buttress suggests that here is perhaps the only portion of the walls retained, for an extension of four feet on each side after the buttresses had been moved outwards would make up the extra eight feet needed to attain the present width of forty feet.

The nave, as you know, was never built and the Chapel was finally terminated with the present ante-chapel, built in 1482 by Provost Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester. He also supervised the construction of the choir, which is generally assumed to have been entirely rebuilt from the foundations owing to its altered size. The original stone was re-used, and economies were effected in the east window where the stone was not re-dressed to the new curve of the arch, now wider than previously. For this east window nine lights or "daies" were substituted for the original seven.

One odd feature of the church is that the floor is thirteen feet higher than School Yard and is filled solid with some 2,600 tons of rubble rag stone, some of it thought to have come from John of Gaunt's Savoy palace at that time being demolished. In Henry VI's "Wille and myne entent" which is, as it were, a detailed brief to the contractors, the "enhancement" of all the site is most carefully specified: one learns that Henry's intention was to make up the ground and structures near the church to within two or three feet of its level. That this making-up was never done except for the church itself and the Hall must, I suspect, have been due to the enormous cost. It seems clear that Lower School and the Cloisters were never constructed at the "enchanced" levels proposed, and presumably the King himself must have agreed to this change of plan, but we do not know. It is evident, however, that

the customary base drip mould and splayed offset of the Chapel is in the correct place *only* if the general ground level had been raised to within two feet of the existing chapel floor level. Below this intended level is a series of offsets which appear more in the nature of footings in dressed stone—but in the event they had to be exposed. The Chapel should be viewed with this in mind.

The Chapel is built in a pure and simple perpendicular style peculiar to England at a time when France was experimenting with the flamboyant. Contemporary parallels are often interesting and, by way of example, I would remind you that in 1450 Alberti was remodelling for Sigismonde Malatesta (a very different prince from the saintly Henry VI) the Duomo at Rimini in pure early Renaissance style with external arcading not unlike Upper School at Eton as rebuilt 250 years later. Comparisons are also naturally made with King's College Chapel, Cambridge, Henry's sister foundation, which was larger, being 289 ft. long and 43 ft. wide, excluding the chapels between the buttresses not repeated at Eton (where the buttresses are only ten feet wide). The Chapel at King's is more ornate and was not finished until 1515, nine years after Bramante's St. Peter's had been begun.

The perpendicular style in common with its continental counterparts was designed to take most of the thrust of the vault or weight of the roof onto the pinnacled buttresses, leaving the spaces between to be filled as lightly as possible with two- or four-centred windows divided by long mullions and cusped transoms to display glass, and to allow as much light as possible into the building to illumine the wall paintings and other furnishings. Both the glass and wall paintings were intended to be devotional and didactic in an age when the idea of every Christian having access to, or even being able to read a Bible or other works was inconceivable. It is true that in Mainz the last folios of the famous '42 Line Bible' were coming from the press late in 1455 or early in 1456, but the consequence of this new technology had scarcely been appreciated save by the most imaginative. That there was glass in the chapel at Eton is certain but its extent is less so. A few re-assembled remains may exist in the west window over the organ. The Victorian glass which replaced the original was "not good" as M. R. James said, and he quotes with relish Tatham's description

of the glass in one window showing the viands provided for Belshazzar's feast: "they consisted of three toads in a plate and a bath-can of lemonade". This glass, damaged by enemy action, was replaced after the war by a Crucifixion and Last Supper in the east window by the late Evie Hone (the mediaeval glass had been of the Annunciation with a particularly large lily pot). Eight of the western windows have armorial glass by Miss Moira Forsyth and the remainder have miracles and parables by John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens. Their work is, I think, comparable with that of the masters of the past.

Although time compels me to ignore many important events and features connected with the Chapel, the famous wall paintings compel our attention. In 1907 Spottiswoode and Co. issued in a limited edition M. R. James's *Frescoes in the Chapel at Eton College*. This book contains facsimiles of drawings by R. H. Essex made in 1847 and a brilliant study of the iconography of the paintings, and comparisons with those at Winchester. I have always taken this work as the first broadside in James's battle to remove the stalls and reveal the paintings, a battle which was triumphantly won in 1923 when the stalls were taken captive to Lancing and Professor Tristram was let loose to restore the paintings. The professor has received some unkind criticism: like Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, it was hinted that his imagination was at times a little too fertile. However, at Eton wherever the paintings were very badly damaged the restorations have been made on canvases fixed over the originals. Since 1961 Miss Pauline Plummer has been engaged on further restoration, now to be seen. The paintings, in two rows (the upper ones all gone except for one or two fragments) were painted between 1479 and 1487 by at least two painters, whose names appear in the College accounts, one as Gilbert and the other as William Baker. The subjects are an apocryphal cycle of miracles of the Virgin, divided by gothic niches containing saints, and have Latin inscriptions in black-letter below each incident. The paintings appear to be in an oil medium in grisaille over gesso or red lead with a little colour added, and not in fresco or tempera as might have been guessed before they were revealed. Their importance is due to their exceptional quality and the fact that they were in all probability painted by English

artists (though I must own that there is a least one notable scholar who denies this attribution). The influence of the Flemish School is demonstrably evident and masters such as Van Eyck and Hugo van der Goes come to mind. Nevertheless these are mediaeval paintings of rare beauty and, as M. R. James says, "Eton possesses a treasure which is honestly unrivalled in this country". It is tempting, of course, to exaggerate their excellence so it is well to remember that Piero della Francesca had already completed the frescoes at Arezzo (begun in 1452) and Mantegna those at the Palazzo Ducale (begun in 1472) before Eton's paintings were begun. With typical mediaeval economy each panel at Eton represents the whole event or miracle by depicting more than one incident in the same panel: thus the imprudent man who throws the stone so sacrilegiously at the statue of the Virgin is shown in both the act and its fatal consequence. The convention of confining each panel to one incident only, like a photograph, is a later development. When you see the paintings the reason they were covered by Reformers and Puritans alike will become immediately apparent, even if it is not already so from the subjects, which were taken from the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais and the well-known *Golden Legend*.

I must now reluctantly leave the paintings, but mention must be made of the roof of the Chapel. The present roof was designed by Professor Holford in a simplified form of fan vault and I think the result looks well. The actual method of construction does not claim to be mediaeval and there are certain queries as to whether Henry VI intended a stone vault. These objections are based upon the fact that there is only a ten-foot projection of the buttresses compared with seventeen feet at King's, and also that there is a constricted distance between the head of the window and the string course of the parapet. Suffice it to say that the first chapel had a wooden roof as also had the second, completed in 1475 after Henry VI had been murdered and the Yorkist Edward IV was on the throne. It was the remains of this second roof as remodelled in 1698 and 1845 which were removed and replaced by the present vault.

I have, I know, spent a disproportionate time on the Chapel in relation to the School but this would at least have seemed right

to the Founder. If we leave the Chapel by the north door and steps, the balustrade of which (partly within the famous Fives Court) was, as Christopher Hussey with good logic suggested, an interesting case of "Gothic" revival of about 1690, we descend into School Yard, paved in 1707. Observe the statue of the Founder, set up by Provost Godolphin in 1719. It is by Francis Bird, a sculptor employed by Wren for the skyline statues on the pediment of St. Paul's Cathedral. Observe also the railings enclosing the statue, for they are among the earliest known dated examples of cast iron railings in England and resemble those by Gibbs outside the Senate House in Cambridge. The only earlier dated railings are those at St. Paul's, of 1714.

I shall now continue my survey so far as is convenient in chronological sequence. Thomas Bekyngton, sometime Secretary to Henry VI, mentions in his correspondence of 1442 a banquet held "in the new buildings of the College on the north"—that is, north of the Chapel. This letter gives good reason to support the view that Lower School was the oldest part of Eton College. Furthermore, the stylistic evidence of the door hood-moulds and battlements, and the evidence in the "Wille" concerning a cloister, its construction in the present School Yard and its final removal by Provost Lupton in 1504, all confirm this conclusion. Lower School in which we are now assembled is therefore in some degree the school-room of Henry's intention, above which is the Long Chamber where the scholars sleep and where the quarters of the Master in College are to be found. It was Provost Roger Lupton who re-formed Lower School, altered Henry's layout by siting the main school entrance in the west, and built the splendid tower which bears his name and leads to the Cloisters and the range of buildings around them. Needless to say, what you see around you in this room does not all date from Lupton's time. The pillars of Spanish chestnut forming the aisles and giving extra support to the floor above were inserted by another Provost, Sir Henry Wootton, in Charles I's reign. Sir Henry Wootton was an astonishing man; and as an architect I feel compelled to quote his famous definition of what he considered was the true nature of architecture. "A good building", he said, "should have the qualities of firmness, commodity and delight", a civilised defini-

tion if ever there was one but a statement which can seldom be invoked successfully in our day! Before continuing with Provost Lupton's works, it is convenient to consider Upper School, which encloses the west side of School Yard. Until Upper School was built there was no school-room other than Lower School. The present Upper School is in part a rebuild in 1694 of Provost Allestree's structure of 1665, with rather more of the original building remaining than was until lately thought. The old mullioned windows were retained in preference to sash windows, just becoming fashionable. Upper School was damaged badly in the last war but has been skilfully reconstructed. It is a good English Renaissance building in brick with stone dressings and a balustrade very much in the manner of Wren. The first floor is approached by two fine staircases of the period to the north and south, the latter serving the Chapel as well. Between the staircases is a long apartment completely panelled in oak. Here a virtue has been made of necessity in that the habit of boys carving their names has become a normal tradition and the resulting texture is most pleasing. Just as the name of Byron incised on a column of the Temple of Poseidon at Sunium intensifies the already potent "spirit of the place" so surely do the names of Shelley and other illustrious men enhance our appreciation of Upper School. In the centre of the block below this apartment is the school's main entrance with a flat arch into School Yard on the axis of Lupton's Tower and the Founder's statue. On either side of this entrance are various rooms, with the Headmaster's at the northern extremity. On the School Yard side facing east there extends a colonnade, to which I have already made reference. Between its arches against the piers are paired Roman Doric columns with entablature which have a certain resemblance to Wren's Trinity College Library at Cambridge. The ceiling of this loggia and of the gateway was reconstructed in carved oak by Messrs. Romaine Walker and Jenkins as a memorial to the fallen in World War I.

Perhaps one of the best remembered features of Eton is Lupton's Tower on the east side of School Yard. It was in 1517 that Provost Lupton was able to set the masons to work on this entrance, as he had by then completed his beautiful chantry on the north side of the Chapel. The design for the tower was the

combined work of three men, *viz.* Humphrey Coke, Henry Redman and Mr. Vertue, the last mentioned being the mason who contracted for the roof of St. George's Chapel, Windsor. The tower is contemporary with the gateway of Wolsey's palace and was built twenty years earlier than that of St. James's Palace. The delightful cupolas or "shapes" were only added in 1766 and the result, as Hussey says, leaves Lupton an easy prize-winner. Below the great bay window over the archway are carved the royal Coat of Arms, within traceried panels, and a statue of the Virgin with the moon at her feet, curiously unmutilated by the Reformers and Puritans (who also spared St. George and St. Edmund the Martyr in the ante-chapel). Above the bay window Provost Barnard in 1766 inseted another royal Coat of Arms below the crenellated parapet.

Over the Tower archway is the Election Chamber, intended as the Library by Lupton, and to the north are the Election Hall and Lupton's Lodgings for the Provost. The position and history of the Provost's Lodge is too complicated to describe in detail. It occupies a central site roughly in the form of a cross between the arms of which are School Yard, Cloister Court, Weston's Yard and the Provost's garden. For most of Eton's history the Provost's position was paramount: the increased importance of the Headmaster and Lower Master was a later development. When in 1547 Sir Thomas Smith was appointed Provost, by Protector Somerset, just before he "put off" his clerical garb and took a wife, he became the first married Provost. He and Lady Smith naturally found it necessary to enlarge the Lodge, which was now made to embrace the full extent of the West Cloister range and the north-west exterior angle tower. The interesting Election Hall screen with its Tuscan columns bears witness to Sir Thomas's knowledge of Italy, where he took his doctor's degree at Padua. During Sir Henry Wootton's Provostship the walls of the *Magna Parlura* were panelled. This room has been much altered but still retains some of the Founder's work. It was later in the century that Provost Zachary Cradock made considerable internal alterations to the Lodge, including the introduction of sash windows with the heavy glazing bars used at that time. However, it was in Barnard's time that the Lodge took its present form: by

1765 Barnard had almost doubled its size. The top storey of the east cloister was added in 1759 and that of the north in 1766. It was Barnard too who placed the clock and the bells in Lupton's Tower. The character of his work was naturally typical of the period, having interiors with modillion cornices, dados, sash windows, and moulded and carved architraves—indeed, all the ingredients which still make an appeal to us.

The Library has seen even more changes than the Provost's Lodging. It was not moved into its present position until the new building, designed by Mr. Rowland, had been constructed in 1729 on the south side of the Cloisters against the Hall. Below the Library, with its four front bays extending forward into the court, the cloister has semi-circular arches, and the Hall can be entered here by a flight of steps. The remaining three sides of the Cloisters retained their original four-centred arches from the Founder's period, and one side has cast railings of Sussex iron dated 1724. Each corner of the Cloister Court contains a spiral staircase, with an extra one, made in 1618, encircling the north-west corner stair to serve the Provost's Lodging. A late sixteenth-century occupant of this was Sir Henry Savile, appointed Provost in 1595, who had an obsession for the work of St. Chrysostom, apparently to the great distress of his much tried wife and others around him. In order to publish his Chrysostom Savile decided to set up his own printing press, with a Greek fount from the continent. He therefore pulled down the remains of the Founder's Almshouse and farm and built Savile House with its famous seven chimneys facing the Slough road, and there set up his press. Savile House was later used for other purposes including the Headmaster's residence until Dr. Warre moved to the north-east corner of Cloister Court, where the Headmaster's apartments are still to be found.

To return to the Library, after Provost Lupton's time this was housed in various parts of the College, and just before the present building was planned an interesting scheme was submitted for an octagonal library building in Brewhouse Yard, east of the Chapel and south of the Hall. The central bay of the present Library is lined with shelves and cases, and has Roman Ionic pilasters and columns admitting to the adjoining rooms, and a cornice. Above

this are Corinthian columns, another cornice and a contemporary plaster ceiling with *guilloche* and floral ornament. As for the contents of the Library, I have already mentioned the "42 Line Bible" and, when I tell you that the College possesses a copy in a binding by Johannes Fogel and that this is just one item among a wealth of remarkable manuscripts and other books of beauty and rarity, you will appreciate the reason why this collection is so envied.

If you enter the Hall from the Cloister below the Library, you will ascend a flight of stairs constructed in 1691 which required the cutting away of an arch to give head-room. Observe the diamond shaped stop to the hood mould which still remains, for this motif is characteristic of Henry VI's masons and can be seen elsewhere. The Hall is the only building other than the Chapel to be "enhanced" and is still on the same site as the Founder specified in the "Wille", but here the extra height was obtained by raising the floor on a vaulted cellar. The size of the Hall (82 ft. by 32 ft.), is also in accordance with the "Wille". Nevertheless, the actual building poses many puzzling questions: Did Henry VI intend to have another bay window to the north which was most probably never built? How is it that only part of the Hall is built of stone? Why were three fireplaces without flues or stacks found in 1858 behind the old panelling?

The major restorations of the Hall took place in 1720, when Mr. Rowland built the present Library, and in 1858, when there was a more complete restoration. The roof was entirely reconstructed (probably more or less as a replica of the original), the panelling restored or renewed, the floor tiles laid, and a screen and gallery erected at the west end. However much we may regret such extensive "restoration" we can still imagine Boswell dining at High Table and in his always revealing manner describing the event in a letter: "I certainly have the art of making the most of what I have. How should one who has had only a Scotch education be quite at home at Eton? I had my classical quotations very ready". Does this extract not reveal in but a few words a whole book on both Boswell, society and eighteenth-century Eton?

On leaving the Hall you pass the Buttery, much as it was after

Rowland's reconstruction, and proceed down to the Kitchen by a flight of solid wooden steps possibly as old as 1484. The Kitchen, square in plan and with the lower part of its wall contemporary with the Hall, is surmounted by an octagon dating from Provost Lupton's day and always referred to as the "upper kitchen". It is indeed a splendid example of the period. John Davies of Windsor made the kitchen's clockwork spit in 1736. He had already in 1690 made the clock in School Yard and the one in the Curfew Tower. There must be few Etonians who do not remember the bells even if they have forgotten or never knew the name of the clockmaker.

The architecture of Oppidan Eton I have so far wholly omitted but not because of its lack of interest, for it is in large measure due to the development of "the Oppidans" as opposed to Collegiate Eton that has made the Eton of more recent centuries so important a facet in our country's story. In the triangle of land there are boarding houses dispersed among the buildings we have been discussing. Notice especially the seventeenth century Bekynton or Corner House as viewed from Barnes Pool Bridge. This building has recently been reconstructed but not, I rather regret, with its feathered edge casements and leaded lights, all of which were complete in 1860. You will see elsewhere many a good simple Georgian front which used to conceal a maze of boarding-house rooms, now mostly reconstructed. Carter House (1740) opposite the Ante-chapel and Godolphin House (1722) in Keate's Lane are typical examples.

I am aware that I have served you with only a reheated dish and therefore for the benefit of the curious I must mention a few of those who prepared the ingredients. These include Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte with his indispensable history, and Willis and Clark's chapters on Eton and King's in their work on the University of Cambridge. These authors are indispensable for any student. Montague Rhodes James must, of course, be consulted for instruction and for pleasure too. Christopher Hussey, whose recent death is such a grievous loss, has—as I am sure you all know—written on Eton College in *Country Life* (1923, re-issued in book form and finally revised in 1956). Nor should I neglect the engaging and peculiar guide written by R. A. Austin-Leigh

and revised by Mr. Martineau in 1965 or, for a serious social history, Christopher Hollis' work. Lastly, of course, there are J. D. Hill's publications and, but a few days ago, J. P. R. McConnell's *Eton Repointed*.

You have honoured me by asking me to speak to your Society, distinguished in its scholarly defence of our country's heritage. As this is Conservation Year, I should like to end this address with a quotation which I think to be appropriate. It is from John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Aphorism 29:

"God has lent us the earth for our life; it is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who are to come after us, and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us; and we have no right, by anything that we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath".