

ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

St. John's College, Oxford: Its History and Architecture

By H.M. Colvin

In the forty minutes of your time which your Chairman has been good enough to put at my disposal it is impossible for me to deal at length with more than four hundred years of architectural history, for it was well over 400 years ago — to be precise in 1555 — that Sir Thomas White (a City businessman whose portrait you can see hanging in the place of honour over the High Table, surrounded by the coats of arms of the many municipalities which also benefited from his charitable largesse) founded the College of St. John the Baptist of which both your Chairman, your Deputy Chairman and myself have the good fortune to be members. All I can hope to do this afternoon is to draw your attention to some interesting or instructive episodes in the College's architectural history.

The first concerns its prehistory rather than its history. For to house his new foundation Sir Thomas White acquired the vacant buildings of St. Bernard's College, a house of study for Cistercian monks founded over a hundred years earlier under the patronage of Archbishop Chichele and dissolved by Henry VIII together with the monasteries from which it drew both its students and its revenues.

Those of you who are familiar with the architecture of Oxford will see that today the medieval front quadrangle which the Fellows of St. John's inherited from the monks of St. Bernard's College follows the standard collegiate plan established by William of Wykeham at New College, with the hall and chapel end to end on the north side of the quadrangle. But this was originally not the case. For we know from a survey dated 1546 that the three easternmost bays of the hall in which you are now sitting then formed the kitchen, and that the hall occupied only the ground floor of what is now the buttery at the far end. If your eyes could penetrate the eighteenth-century plaster ceiling they would see above us at this end of the hall the fifteenth-century collar-beam roof of the medieval kitchen, and at the other a later roof of the early seventeenth century.

In other words, in St. Bernard's College the normal arrangement of hall and kitchen was reversed, which is odd. What is odder still, the kitchen, 42 feet long and covered by a lofty open roof, was on a much larger scale than the hall, a mere 30 feet long and occupying only the ground floor of a two-storey building.

How are we to explain this architectural anomaly? It is difficult to believe that the builders of St. Bernard's College envisaged a college with so small and insignificant a hall, and it is possible that the intention was ultimately to build a larger hall projecting

from the north side of the quadrangle, as at All Souls. All Souls and St. Bernard's College shared the same founder, Archbishop Chichele. All Souls was, as Anthony Wood long ago pointed out, built 'after the same mode and fashion for matters of workmanship' as St. Bernard's, and such a position for the hall or refectory in relation to the cloister quadrangle was, moreover, a well-known feature of Cistercian monastic planning. If this hypothesis is correct, it follows that the building described in 1546 as the hall was designed to be what it now is, namely a buttery placed in the angle between the kitchen and the projected hall.

From the Cistercian archives now at Dijon we know that the building of St. Bernard's College was a painfully slow business owing to the reluctance of the English abbeys to contribute to the cost. Letters from Marmaduke Huby, Abbot of Fountains — the one who, to our delight, but in defiance of the original statutes of his Order, which forbade the building of towers, built the great bell-tower at Fountains — letters from this energetic builder lament the miserliness of his fellow-abbots and record his embarrassment at hearing passers-by in St. Giles' asking how it was that whereas the poor Friars were putting up large buildings everywhere, the well-endowed Cistercians could not finish even one.

So a great hall to match the great kitchen was never built, and it was left to Sir Thomas White to solve the problem, not by building a new hall, but by making one out of the spacious kitchen and by building a new kitchen on the north side of the buttery.

The present appearance of the hall dates largely from the mid-eighteenth century. The stone screen was the work of James Gibbs, the architect of the Radcliffe Library, the marble chimney-piece of the Oxford mason-architect Townesend. It houses a curiosity of eighteenth-century art — a reproduction in scagliola of Raphael's 'John the Baptist', brought back from Italy by a Fellow on the Grand Tour. Scagliola, as many of you will know, was a sort of plastic marble much used for architectural decoration and in particular for inlaid tables and the like, but rarely for anything so ambitious as a picture. Indeed the task proved too much for the scagliola artist, for a close inspection will reveal that he has inadvertently given the saint six toes!

The ceiling too is Georgian, and would in all probability have been done away with in the course of the nineteenth century were it not for the awkward conjunction of two different roofs which its removal would reveal. In the Chapel, on the other hand, the successive changes in forms of worship and ecclesiastical taste have in almost every century but the present wrought havoc with what was there before. The Elizabethan Protestants naturally removed the relics of monastic popery which they found. The

Stuart Fellows under the presidency of Laud created a High Church interior which the Commonwealth in its turn vandalised. At the Restoration Sir Christopher Wren (whose father had once been a Fellow of the College) designed a most handsome classical screen which (alas!) was destroyed together with much else of beauty and interest during the reign of President Wynter (1828—71), a Low Churchman whose attitude to the past is indicated by the fact that he allowed his children to use the remarkable collection of vestments formed by Laud for acting charades. Even the monuments of former Fellows were banished to the walls of what was then the ante-chapel and is now the passage through which you will have passed, from which some of the best and most vulnerable have recently been rescued and replaced in a recess on the south side of the Chapel.

The major architectural contribution of the seventeenth century happily remains intact, at least externally. I refer, of course, to the Canterbury Quadrangle, built at the expense of William Laud, by then Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1631—5. One side of it already existed in the form of the Elizabethan library, to whose Tudor Gothic elevation Laud's architect was in large degree obliged to conform. Nevertheless this was, with its arcaded loggias and pedimented frontispieces, the first serious attempt to classicise an Oxford quadrangle, and the identity of the architect is a matter of some consequence for English architectural history. In the nineteenth century it was taken for granted that it was the work of Inigo Jones, the leading Court architect of the day, who moreover was being currently employed by Laud to restore St. Paul's Cathedral. But as the study of classical architecture became more critical it was perceived that the mannerist detailing which you will see later in the afternoon — the leather faces, displaced triglyphs, friezes full of angels' heads, and other delightful manifestations of Anglo-Flemish mannerism — were precisely the kind of architecture that it was Jones's mission to eschew if not to extirpate.

Then it was suggested that Nicholas Stone must have been the man, despite the fact that there is no mention of that excellent sculptor-architect in the exceptionally complete building-accounts, nor any reference to St. John's College in Stone's own very comprehensive record of his work in the Soane Museum. In fact, as the accounts show, the man who drew the drafts and made the moulds and negotiated with the masons on the College's behalf was a London craftsman named Adam Browne. He was a joiner by trade, Surveyor to Westminster Abbey, and a man much employed by Laud in architectural matters. It is Adam Browne, therefore, who must be regarded as the designer of the classical features in the Canterbury Quadrangle, and the building remains not only as proof (so far the only one known) of

his architectural ability, but also as an instructive demonstration of the limited range of Inigo Jones's influence.

From the diagrammatic plans which I have displayed you will see that the College did little building in the eighteenth century. Besides enlarging the library and adding a long gallery to the President's Lodgings, Laud had provided the College in the Canterbury Quadrangle with sets of rooms designed for letting to the Gentlemen Commoners for whose comfort many new buildings were to be erected in Oxford in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Only in the latter part of the nineteenth century was a handsomely detailed Gothic range (designed by George Gilbert Scott, junior) built facing St. Giles', whose continuation, in ever more diluted and emasculated Gothic, first by N.W. Harrison (1909) and then by Sir Edward Maufe (1933), created two sides of what is now the North Quadrangle. The east side was saved from more of Maufe's basic Gothic by the Beehive Building (Architects' Co-Partnership, 1958-60), which can claim to be (like the Canterbury Quadrangle) a pioneer work — the first major Oxford collegiate building to break away from the debilitated historicism represented by Sir Edward Maufe and Sir Hubert Worthington.

Since then we have built another major extension in the Sir Thomas White Quadrangle, a building whose external frame marks it is a characteristic work of Sir Philip Dowson of Arups, but whose alternation of skeletal rooms and stone staircase towers shows, I hope, how far modern British architecture has progressed from the box-like monotony of, for instance, the Waynflete Building at Magdalen.

In conclusion, as it is the Ancient Monuments Society that I am addressing, I would like to say a few words about the maintenance of our historic buildings.

An Oxford College differs from many other historic buildings in that it is still fully used for purposes akin to those for which it was built. There is luckily no need for a society called, shall we say, the 'Friends of Friendless Colleges'. But ancient buildings in daily use in the twentieth century cannot be maintained like Ancient Monuments in the care of the Department of the Environment. They need constantly to be adapted to changing circumstances. You can see evidence of such adaptation in the new heating arrangements that are being installed in the hall at this moment, not without a good deal of anxious debate about their relationship to the eighteenth-century panelling.

The maintenance of obsolete chimneys is a typical problem of this sort. Our policy at St. John's is to retain and where necessary to rebuild those that are an integral feature of the architecture of the College and to remove those that are not. In this way we have saved ourselves a lot of future maintenance and have restored the

original alternation of gables and chimneys which had in some instances been completely confused by the multiplication of chimneys in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Another and particularly difficult problem of this sort concerns roofing materials. This college like many others was originally roofed with Stonesfield slates, that is slates split by the action of frost. The disinclination of the Oxfordshire workman to adapt his hours of work to the incidence of frost has long ago brought the manufacture of these slates to an end, and they are now obtainable, at very great cost, only by stripping them off old barns and other existing buildings.

Already in the late nineteenth century they were sufficiently expensive for Westmorland slates to be a cheaper alternative, and the whole front quadrangle was reroofed with Westmorlands in the 1880's. They are quite different in size, colour and texture from the indigenous Stonesfield slates they replaced. The Westmorlands in their turn are now in need of replacement, but are now nearly as expensive as Stonesfields. The alternative is to use artificial concrete slates, which are now made in graduated sizes, with a colour and texture closely akin to Stonesfield and other Cotswold slates. Aesthetically they are probably preferable to Westmorlands, and certainly much cheaper.

Should one reject them on the purely intellectual ground that they are fakes? If so should one use Westmorlands again despite the fact that they are no longer cheap, and look what they are, alien intrusions into the oolite region, or should one pay an enormous price for second-hand Stonesfield slates, knowing that it is certainly the last time that they can be got, and knowing that by doing so one is encouraging their removal from some other building very likely of local historical importance?

This is a problem to which no simple answer can be given. In fact the College has adopted each solution in a different part of its buildings, with what degree of success I leave it to you to decide as we now proceed to walk round them.