THE BUILDINGS OF KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Anniversary Address delivered at the Society's AGM in 1985
held in the College Hall

by Christopher Morris

Plate 1
Late 18th century view of Interior of Chapel
(Photo, courtesy Edward Leigh)

In the year 1732 Sarah, widow of the great Duke of Marlborough, was shown York Minster and recorded that it had 'a vast deal of what they call architecture, which is nowhere so well as in a church'. I propose to align myself with Duchess Sarah and talk mostly about King's College Chapel—though I shall not wholly neglect our other buildings.

King's Chapel is full of surprises—only one of them unpleasant—but the most surprising thing about it is that the whole Chapel, indeed in a sense the whole College, was an afterthought. What Henry VI first envisaged was a modest band of 12 poor scholars (the number of apostles) to be one more of Cambridge's quite numerous 'techs'; for their learning was to be strictly vocational—no nonsense about a liberal education. The University existed to provide more and better doctors, lawyers and clergy. The 12 scholars were to be specially fitted for the extirpation of heresy. Nor was there an immediate connection with Eton. Henry was at first quite prepared for Etonians to go to Oxford.

His 'scanty band', to use Wordsworth's phrase, was housed in what came to be known as the Old Court, north of the present Chapel, now buried and (since 1835) almost wholly demolished, inside the Old Schools which house the University's administrators. Only the lower part of a handsome gate-tower, facing Clare College, is now left. There was even a proto-chapel, brick or brick-faced, in the space between the Old Schools and our present Chapel. Undergraduates were expressly forbidden to throw stones or balls inside it. From whatever cause, the old chapel most opportunely fell down in 1536 exactly when the new one was almost ready to be used.

What changed the Founder's mind was probably the first of several visits to Winchester, made in 1441; for his new concept was closely modelled on William of Wykeham's twin foundations of Winchester and New College in 1382. The king may also have wanted to remind his bellicose nobility that 'peace hath her victories no less renowned than war' and is certainly more cost-effective; in other words, that royal or even national prestige might be enhanced in better ways than by fighting unsuccessfully to retain the allegiance and the vineyards of Henry's French subjects. The King's mental illness was still a decade distant. Even so the grandeur of his scheme may appear to verge on megalomania. Careful measurements were taken at Salisbury and Winchester to ensure that Eton's Chapel should exceed them in length and breadth (Eton's present Chapel is only the choir of the vast edifice originally planned).

Here something no less grandiose was projected, as befitted a fully royal foundation. To make room for his College Henry laid

waste more of Cambridge than anyone since that great devastator William the Conqueror cleared a space for his castle. Henry's new site involved the removal of one parish church (St. John Zachary), two inns, four student hostels, the small college of Godshouse (which was moved to a new site where it became the germ of Christ's College), a riverside quay, three gardens, nine houses and two cottages—altogether substantial sections of four streets. The town got off £26 a year in taxes by way of compensation. The Founder also gave the College land in 21 different counties and spent years and money procuring a papal bull to exempt us from the University's jurisdiction. No wonder the jealous undergraduates of other colleges attacked King's in 1454 with 'guns and habiliments of war'; or that as early as 1451 Parliament was taxing the royal saint with vain expense, calling the scheme 'over-chargeful and noyus'. The College in fact cost the taxpayer nothing, being wholly endowed out of the King's private wealth as Duke of Lancaster, and by the dissolution of alien priories.

Parliament may have shared the view of one recent guide who was heard telling the tourists that 'it was all done for the rich kids, of course'. Actually it was all done for 70 poor scholars, the number this time being that of Christ's earliest missionaries. It is true that there were also to be 10 conducts (or chaplains), six singing clerks and sixteen choristers to maintain the *opus dei,* the perpetual offering of worship. It is true also that the scholars were not to be of 'villein blood' nor physically deformed. But they were disqualified if they had more than £5 a year of private means; and villeinage, in any case, was dying out. Sixty of the seventy fellows were expected to study theology—a regulation now somewhat laxly enforced.

What was planned was intended almost to fill the immense acreage the king had cleared. The project included a three-storied building with a gate-tower to the east, where Wilkins' screen stands now (to provide living rooms), a hall and library on the future site of Gibbs' Building, and a mid-court conduit. On the south side of the court were to be more 'chambers' and, further west towards the river, a Provost's Lodge. On what is now the back lawn there was to be a large cloistered cemetery with a four-storey bell-tower, possibly free-standing, and further south a smaller kitchen court. Of all this the Chapel alone reached completion, though not for some seventy years. Work on the East range did begin and remained just above ground level into the early eighteenth century.

The Founder's project was a colossal innovation, since hitherto Oxbridge Colleges were mostly poky little places squashed between shops, inns and dwelling-houses, in Cambridge averaging ten fellows apiece. Henry's College took several centuries to fill its allotted space, but it had set a precedent. The king had fired the

imaginations of other men, and elsewhere great and spacious colleges came into being—Trinity, St. John's and Jesus here, Magdalen and Christchurch in another place. The Founder of Magdalen, Bishop Waynflete, was one of Henry VI's closest collaborators here and at Eton.

Serious work on the Chapel began in 1448 using a white magnesian limestone from Hudleston in Yorkshire. You can see it high up at the east end and dropping to foundation level at the west, nearly but not quite showing how far the Founder got before he was interrupted by the Wars of the Roses in 1455. He continued the work at intervals until his deposition in 1461, but in an oolite freestone from King's Cliffe near Rockingham. At his death Henry left the five eastern bays still roofless and truncated.

The architect had been Reginald Ely, a Norfolk man who did much work in and around Cambridge, especially in Queens' College; and the style was of course Perpendicular, the last form of English Gothic and, incidentally, unique to England. But in one sense our Chapel might be called the first of all modern buildings if, as perhaps we may, we define a modern building as one designed to keep as much glass as possible suspended in the air.

Ely died, like his employer, in 1471; and when, from 1476 onwards, the two Yorkist kings in turn decided to continue building, the man in charge was Simon Clerk of Bury St. Edmunds where he had rebuilt the great west tower of the Abbey. His is the tracery of our East Window and the panelwork above the choir windows. By 1485 the five eastern bays were finished as far as the battlements but covered only with a wooden roof and temporarily walled off from the west. There work stopped till Henry VII, after a visit with his mother in 1506, was persuaded to give or leave the College not quite £15,000. This paid for completing the fabric, though not for its furniture, decoration or glazing.

The new architect was John Wastell, also of Bury, where he built St. James's Church, now the cathedral. He had worked with Simon Clerk on the splendid church at Saffron Walden; and he certainly designed the Bell Harry tower at Canterbury, probably the retro-choir at Peterborough, and possibly most of the east range of Trinity's Great Court, the tower of Great St. Mary's and the nave and porch at Lavenham. His salary from King's was £13:6:8 a year; and his fan vaults cost £100 for each bay, his twenty-two pinnacles and four corner towers £540, his two porches and sixteen new side-chapels between £12 and £20 apiece. The stone came from Weldon in Northamptonshire.

Reginald Ely's corner towers had ended with the battlements and small pinnacles below the crowning cones you now see. What

Wastell added was, in each case, the top cone with its heraldry, crockets and pierced latticework—not only for decorative but for structural reasons, by adding weight to help the buttresses withstand the outward thrust of the new roof. He also added, to the eight western buttresses, the Tudor roses, Welsh dragons, Beaufort portcullises and greyhounds, also a yale (another Beaufort supporter) wrongly dubbed an antelope by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. The yale differs from the antelope in being mythical, in having spots like a leopard and in having one horn pointing forward and one back.

What Wastell added inside was the vault. If Henry VI had finished the Chapel it would have had lierne vaulting like many cathedrals and like our two northeastern side-chapels. But fan vaulting, first seen late in the fourteenth century at Tewkesbury and Gloucester, had been coming slowly into fashion, its most notable achievements being Sherborne Abbey and Wastell's own work at Peterborough. At Sherborne the bounding circles of the fans do not meet the roof ridge, leaving space to be filled by intricate intersecting ribs some of which are the fans' sticks continued. At King's the circles meet, leaving only a narrow lozenge containing each pendant roof boss and carrying the eye forward for the whole length of the Chapel. Each pendant hangs down nearly six feet and is covered with elaborate heraldic carving scarcely appreciated by the naked eye unless the vault is floodlit.

The ribs of Wastell's fans do not in fact hold up the roof but they outline the structure of what does. Behind each fan lie graduated converging layers of stone forming a conoid of half-cone—a shape designed by nature to withstand maximal pressure. The conoids are interlocked above by enormous round keystones, from which the pendants hang. The whole structure amounts to a miracle of engineering. Some feet above the keystones is the outer roof of wooden beams, some given by Richard III, with its leaden covering. In Horace Walpole's time there was, he says, 'a tradition that Sir Christopher Wren went once a year to survey the roof of the Chapel . . . and said that if any man would show him where to place the first stone, he would engage to build such another'.

Wastell's work was all done between the spring of 1508 and July 1515, though he himself died two months before it ended. The Chapel still lacked doors, roodloft, organ, lectern, stalls, paving, glass windows, a high altar, statues for its niches and the gilding and painting intended for the vault. Some of these it never got.

The vault was not the only thing the Founder had not planned. Henry VI was a relatively simple, very pious man with rather austere tastes. The Chapel he commissioned was to be 'in large form, clean and substantial, setting apart superfluity of too great

curious work of entail and busy moulding'. His end of the Chapel conforms largely to these requirements; and his corbel angels are pure and unearthly, majestic and not pretty. The central one on the south side almost foreshadows Epstein. But Henry VIII, who took over after 1509, had tastes and interests less simple, less pious and less austere. His end, the western, is wholly secular, a riot of Tudor heraldry and a shrine of what historians call the Tudor Myth, making manifest how the Tudors had united the warring factions and brought the realm prosperity and concord. Here is a vast stone menagerie of Welsh dragons and Beaufort greyhounds, prancing among portcullises and double roses, and supporting shields of that imagined dual monarchy of France and England. Close inspection will reveal that no two animals or emblems are quite the same in detail.

All is secular, except in one dark corner (the south western) where a devout workman has lovingly inserted in the middle of a Tudor rose a small Virgin in glory (Plate 2). Perhaps he hoped that the foreman, Thomas Stockton the Master Carver, would not notice. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments has dubbed her Elizabeth of York, but the Queen's son would not have wanted her hidden in so dark a corner; nor did that Queen ever, to my knowledge, sit upon a cloud. The mistake, I think, arose because behind her is a sunburst, admittedly a Yorkist emblem, but also indispensible for any virgin on or under any cloud. In any case the predominance of Lancastrian and Beaufort heraldry throughout the Chapel may suggest that Henry VIII thought more of his grandmother the Lady Margaret than of his Yorkist mother. There are no Yorkist emblems in the stonework; and in the 361 small tracery lights above the great windows there are 101 red roses, 53 portcullises and only 12 white roses with their sunbursts.

My brief is the buildings, not their contents, so I must not dwell on the Chapel furniture. In any case the glass, possibly the Chapel's chief glory, could hardly be dealt with in anything less than a whole lecture. But I cannot resist the temptation to apprise you of three random details in the glass which are of historical as well as aesthetic interest. The King's Flemish glaziers, following the model of a Holbein pastel, have given to Solomon receiving the Queen of Sheba the unquestionable features of bluff King Hal. They have provided St. Paul, for his voyage from Miletus, with what is virtually a sister ship of the *Mary Rose.* And one glazier, a clandestine Protestant, has made it clear, to anyone who knows Latin, that in his view Caiaphas signified the Pope.

The organ screen, however, in its capacity as a triumphal arch, has claims to be an architectural feature. The work on it was designed and overseen by a foreigner, Philip the Carver. It is still

Plate 2
Virgin in Glory on west wall of ante-chapel
(Photo, courtesy, RCHM)

unsettled whether he was Italian, French or even Dutch or Spanish. At the moment the betting slightly favours France. We can date the screen exactly between 1531 and 1536 for it is covered with insignia of Anne Boleyn, including her monogram, together with a sceptred falcon and a bull's head which were her badges.

The screen, like the glass, could be a life-study in itself, covered as it is with elaborate grotesques and arabesques. On its east side in a medallion is a superb mannerist St. George with a swirling cloak, not to mention several satyrs with and without wings. On the west, leaning out from his lunette in high relief, God throws the rebel angels out of heaven. All the angels, rebel or subservient, are unmistakeable renaissance putti.

The choir floor may originally have been tiled but was re-paved in 1702 in black and white marble. The ante-chapel was re-paved in 1774 when it was given its square slabs or Portland stone. The chewing gum often found there is of later date. The new paving cost £400, the gift of Lord Godolphin who lived in the great house (now demolished) at Wandlebury up on the Gog Magog hills, where the Godolphin Arabian, ancestor of so much English bloodstock, lies buried. According to a legend, his Lordship when approached said we could have the £400 owed him by Mr. Pemberton the squire of Trumpington, if we could induce him to pay up. The squire was run to earth at the Rose Inn where he was kidnapped by the undergraduates and held to ransom till the debt was paid.

The Chapel, as I mentioned, holds one unpleasant surprise. As you go eastward through the screen some of you may feel a slight aesthetic shock. About twenty-five years ago the College was given Rubens' Adoration of the Magi, painted in 1634 for the White Nuns of Louvain. It was felt desirable to put the picture on the Chapel's central axis and to retain its character as essentially an altarpiece. This meant giving it an altar; and in order to get altar and picture underneath the east window, the floor had to be lowered (it had previously risen by steps to a high altar). Furthermore, to set the picture off, some late eighteenth and early twentieth century panelling was removed from the east end. This left bare walls which looked embarrassingly naked next to the ornate Tudor and Jacobean stalls. Nor were the walls intended to be bare, for there were hooks in them for tapestries or hangings. To clothe their nakedness the walls were given the candelabra which you now see and on which I had better make no comment. Nor will I comment on the altar frontal, on the new frame provided for the picture (wrongly suggesting that it was once a triptych with side-pieces, now missing); nor yet on the clash in tone as well as style between the picture and the window, a contest which you may think the window wins.

To the east of the Chapel there was till about 1825 a Provost's

Lodge, partly built before the Chapel, added to in later centuries and extended southwards to include a tiny choir school. In that Lodge Elizabeth I was entertained in 1564, and she must have found it moderately comfortable, for she said she would have stayed longer if the beer had not run out. To the west of the Chapel was another ephemeral edifice, a wooden belfry about a third of the Chapel's height. Though meant to be temporary it appears in old pictures, up to and including Loggan's (1690), and survived till 1739 when it was deemed unsafe and pulled down. In dry weather its foundations still reappear in the back lawn. There was also, for a time, a swan-house on the river bank.

The College was not unmindful of the Founder's plans but for nearly two centuries could not find the money, since many of Henry's endowments had perished with him. Nor could we enlist another sovereign's interest. Elizabeth was parsimonious and the three earlier Stuarts preferred to spend money, respectively, on Scotsmen, on pictures or on mistresses. By the late seventeenth century, however, there was an influential Kingsman in the person of Lord Dartmouth. When Provost Sir Thomas Page died suddenly in 1681 while reprimanding an undergraduate for irregular attendance in Chapel, it was Darmouth who contrived that his old tutor, John Coplestone, should get the job—in spite of some feelers put out on behalf of a certain Samuel Pepys. In 1686 Darmouth urged the new Provost to undertake some building. As Dartmouth was an admiral on good terms with James II, he might have been able to tap some royal fund if James had not made his sudden exit. Dartmouth died in the Tower as a suspected Jacobite, in 1691; and William III did not look with favour on a College which refused in 1689 to elect as Provost the royal nominee, whose name was Isaac Newton. Something was hoped for from Queen Anne, but we have it on good authority that she died.

In 1712, however, Provost Adams started a building fund by selling timber from the College's manor at Toft Monks in Norfolk. Furthermore he went to consult the eighty-year-old Wren who recommended his favourite pupil Hawksmoor. Hawksmoor produced a grand Palladian plan for completion of the Court—in fact two plans, the first of which struck the Provost as too 'luxuriant', too expensive and out of keeping with the Founder's known taste for 'plainness'. Money was then lost in the South Sea Bubble, and it was not till 1724 that work on the Fellows' Building could begin—after some encouragement from the Kingsmen Sir Robert Walpole and 'Turnip' Townshend.

The new architect was James Gibbs, designer of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, of our Senate House and, later, of the Radcliffe Camera. His building relates to Hawksmoor's second model but

is even more pared down. Only certain encrustations on and above the archway and the projecting keystones over doors and windows betray Gibbs' own baroque taste. The cost was just under £13,000, which was not paid off till 1759—partly by selling the now cracked chapel bells. The money would not run to the statues Gibbs had intended for the pediment and balustrade—like those on Wren's Library at Trinity.

Gibbs' Building is austere and has not always been admired. Several attempts, fortunately resisted, were later made to Gothicise it. And when I was an undergraduate Lowes Dickinson told me that, when he was an undergraduate in the eighties, he had genuinely thought the building a grim, soulless affair which ought to be pulled down and replaced by something Mr. Ruskin would like better.

Over the ages tastes have indeed differed. Even the Chapel has had its detractors. In 1639 the traveller Peter Mundy thought it 'not so artificial, neat and true as nowadays are made of that kind'. Defoe allowed that it was 'a very gay thing' but compared it most unfavourably with York Minster. The Reverend William Gilpin, aquatintist and topographer, felt in 1769 that 'its disproportion disgusts. Such height, and such length, united by such straitened parallels, hurt the eye. You feel immured'; while of course to Ruskin it was a mere 'piece of architectural juggling'.

Gibbs' Building, though built for Fellows, proved expensive to furnish and difficult to heat, and so never acquired its full complement of residents. Several fellows and all the undergraduates continued to live in cramped quarters in the Old Court until at last, early in the nineteenth century, the College began to claim its birthright.

The old bridge, opposite the arch in Gibbs', after several restorations was finally replaced in 1819. Its elegant successor was deliberately placed further to the south and put at a slight angle to the avenue in order to surprise the visitor with a sudden sight of the great King's-Clare vista. The bridge was generously paid for by Charles Simeon, Fellow, the famous evangelical preacher.

The architect was William Wilkins, designer of the National Gallery and, in his earlier 'Grecian' vein, of Downing College and of the terrace front and 'Quad' at Haileybury. But Wilkins was no less adaptable than Wren or Hawksmoor; he submitted unsuccessfully both a Gothic and a Renaissance scheme for the new Houses of Parliament. The College, then as later, like to jump on what was deemed the latest bandwaggon. (Though more than one has proved to be the last but two). Wilkins at any rate was asked to show what he could do in the new Gothic fashion. The results

were the old Provost's Lodge (facing Clare across the Back Lawn), the Library, the Dining Hall and the front Screen—all erected in the 1820s.

A further illustration of the whirligig of fashion emerges when I recall that in my undergraduate days we all ridiculed the Old Lodge and assumed that it would soon give way to something functional or even newly brutal. But the Goths and the Victorians have been making a big come-back. The Screen has admittedly a certain comic charm and is a listed building which, unlike the Chapel, we cannot legally pull down. Pevsner calls it 'utterly un-Gothic', but perhaps he concentrated unduly on the cruet-stand that does duty for a porters' lodge and has a bulbous cupola, faintly Turkish and perhaps distantly related to Hawksmoor's little dome at All Souls.

The Hall is largely modelled on Crosby Hall in Chelsea, especially its roof. The stucco ceiling was, for over a century, painted chocolate brown, pretending to be oak beams. We have at least improved on that. The original lanterns sprang leaks some forty years ago and were replaced by replicas of the one over the Great Hall of Trinity. The oriel is centrally placed, presumably more for symmetry than for utility.

I will not dwell on certain later out-growths to the south and west—Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's (1873), W.M. Fawcett's (1885), G.F. Bodley's (1893), Sir Aston Webb's (1909)—these last two neo-Tudor—or G.L. Kennedy's (1927)—except to say that in Scott's building, which is not unpleasing seen from King's Parade, the rooms are much too high. I spent my freshman's year in one of them, and it was like living at the bottom of a mineshaft.

In 1879 the Founder at last got his mid-court conduit—a fountain designed by H.A. Armstead. On it, in bronze now much oxydised, Henry himself, anticipating co-education, is supervising two female students—Religion with her back to the Chapel and Learning with her back to the Library.

Of the recent Keynes Building let me say that we were handicapped by having an almost purely internal site, with no real elevation facing the outer world, and by the problem of constructing a joint building with our neighbour College. The result seems just a piece of modern civic architecture, almost an office block. Moreover, the interior is an exact replica of the Cretan labyrinth in which you cannot hope to find your room without an Ariadne thread. But each room does have 'all mod. con.', because we need conferences during vacations to keep the kitchens solvent; and you can't invite the Mayor of Blackpool to a conference unless you give him 'all mod. con.'. In my undergraduate days almost all of us had to cross at least half a court for such purposes.

We have one more whole range of buildings, a range where the pressure of architecture to the square inch is very high; and, with few exceptions, it is classical. Look into the background of the Chapel windows, except for the very earliest, and you will see. Let me take a few examples: Hell Gate, in the harrowing of Hell, is severely classical though behind it the green flames of hell are licking the battlements of a mediaeval keep. The resurrected Lazarus is about to enter the portals of a Renaissance mansion whereas, in the window above, his Old Testament prototype, the Shunamite's dead child is restored to a humbler, still respectable but essentially Gothic dwelling-house. Jacob steals both his father's blessing and his brother's birthright inside a High Renaissance palace. The return of the Prodigal, the incredulity of St. Thomas, the supper at Emmaus and even the Last Supper take place in something no less classical and hardly less palatial.

One inference would seem to follow. If you want to plot the arrival of Renaissance taste in England, you may find that not all roads lead to Italy. Henry VIII's glaziers were Flemish and the carvers of the screen may well have come from France. Not far away is Bishop West's chantry at Ely, finished in 1534 with its indubitable Renaissance ceiling. The Bishop, though a man of many embassies, had never been to Italy. He was, however, a Kingsman who had outgrown his undergraduate propensity for arson in the Provost's Lodge and for stealing College plate and was now a benefactor of the College. As a near neighbour he may have been a frequent visitor and just possibly a copy-cat.

Perhaps I may be allowed to end with a moral, albeit a very trite one. Just as late Gothic and Renaissance blend inside the Chapel, and just as Reginald Ely and John Wastell do not clash with one another nor yet with Gibbs or Wilkins, it seems probable that art and architecture of widely different epochs, if they are good enough each in its own kind, can and do harmonise when juxtaposed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

R. Willis and J.W. Clark — *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* 1886

R.A. Austen Leigh — *History of the King's College, Cambridge* 1899

R.A. Austen Leigh — *Bygone King's* 1907

Christopher Hussey — *King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and the College Buildings* 1926

Kenneth Harrison — *The Windows of King's College Chapel* 1952

Arthur Oswald	Contributions to J. Harvey, *A Dictionary of English Mediaeval Architects* 1954
N. Pevsner	*The Buildings of England, Cambridgeshire* 1954
Bryan Little	*The Life and Work of James Gibbs* 1955
John Saltmarsh	'King's College. A Short History' in *The Victoria County History. Cambridgeshire* Vol. III 1958
	The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. City of Cambridge Part I 1959
John Saltmarsh	*King Henry VI and His Foundations* 1959
H.G. Wayment	*The Windows of King's College Chapel, Cambridge* 1972
R.W. Liscombe	*William Wilkins 1778-1839* 1980
B. Wolffe	*Henry VI* 1981
Ralph A. Griffiths	*The Reign of Henry VI* 1981
H.G. Wayment	*King's College Chapel. The Great Windows* 1982
Terry Friedman	*James Gibbs* 1984
Francis Woodman	*The Architectural History of King's College Chapel* 1985