

Mediaeval Oxford as it was

FRIDESWIDE, THE DAUGHTER OF "KING" DIDAN, BEING pursued by an importunate though royal lover, had taken refuge in a pigsty, when she was relieved to learn that her tormentor had miraculously been struck with blindness. She celebrated the removal of this menace to her chastity by the foundation of a priory, close to a spit of gravel where oxen were wont to ford the Thames. This was about the year 700, and it is the first we know about Oxford, mythology apart. The place was never a Roman settlement. The actual name of Oxford first occurs in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 912, when it is referred to as though it were a place of some importance. And it was probably about this time that the tall mound which can be seen in the grounds of the prison on the way from the railway station was erected as a protection against the Danes.¹

Oxford was clearly cut out for a place of importance. It stood on the boundaries of Mercia and Wessex; it was protected by the Thames on two sides and on a third by the Cherwell; to a primitive strategist the two rivers form a peninsula of some integrity. It was taken and burnt by Danes in 1010; in 1018 the great Canute, as King of Denmark and all England, held a *gemot* in Oxford, where he made fine promises to rule justly; and at Oxford his son Harold was crowned. Thus before the Norman Conquest Oxford already served as an occasional capital city. But shortly after, whether through pestilence or fire or through the severity of the conqueror, the town suffered some mysterious disaster. No man knows the cause of it: but Domesday Book records that Oxford has rather more than a thousand houses of which the half are in ruins, together with eight churches and two thousand inhabitants.

The Norman governor of this stricken town was a Robert d'Oily,

¹ This mound is now thought to have been proved to be of Norman origin; but since it is clearly set up as a defence against attack from the river, which was the Danish method of approach, common sense would reject the archaeologists' conclusions.

OXFORD

who not only left behind him the great square tower of the Castle at the western end of the town, but also either built or repaired the tower of St. Michael's beside the north gate, that curious rough rubble tower at the top of the Cornmarket. East of the town d'Oily's nephew and successor founded an immense priory, later the Abbey of Osney, of which only a doorway now remains, not far from the Great Western Railway station. The Castle stood by the road which led to Osney and the West Country; St. Michael's stood by the road which led north to royal Woodstock; and the two roads crossed at the Carrefours, or Quatrevois or Carfax, then as now. The tower at Carfax is the tower of St. Martin's Church, which stood there a full thirty years before the Norman Conquest. To the north-west of Carfax, where Beaumont Street now runs, Henry I built Beaumont Palace, of which there is no trace remaining. His daughter Matilda took refuge in the Castle from her cousin Stephen; but being closely besieged for several weeks, she slipped out one night across the frozen river and got away to Abingdon. Henry II favoured the people of Oxford with a charter in the year 1155; and two years later his son Richard Cœur de Lion was born in Beaumont Palace.

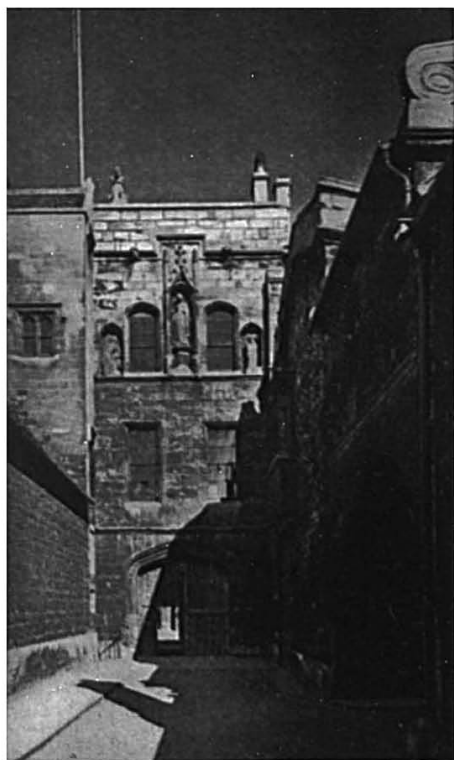
What schools or teachers there may have been in Oxford during the hundred years that followed the Norman Conquest nobody knows. At that time any Englishman in search of learning would have most likely made his way to the great University of Paris. But in the year 1167 there was a migration from Paris to Oxford. Some say that Henry II recalled the English students; some say that the French expelled them. Be that as it may, it is improbable that they would have chosen to come to Oxford if the town had not already been known for its teaching. But it is from that date onwards that Oxford became known and recognised as a place of general resort for men of learning.

The town to which these scholars of Paris transferred was not yet encircled with the massive wall whose remnants still bind it together. These fortifications were probably built in the next century. In 1167 most of the houses were of wood, and those which were built of stone belonged for the most part to the Jews, who abounded in the town. There existed a great hatred between the Jewry and the Priory of St. Frideswide; while what with St. Frideswide's and Osney Abbey, the mercenary citizens had quite enough of piety and learning. So the poor students, unprivileged and unendowed, were hard put to it to get a foothold in the place. A later ordinance by which the Jews were forbidden to charge them interest at more than 48 per cent. gives some idea of the sort of difficulty with which their slender means contended.

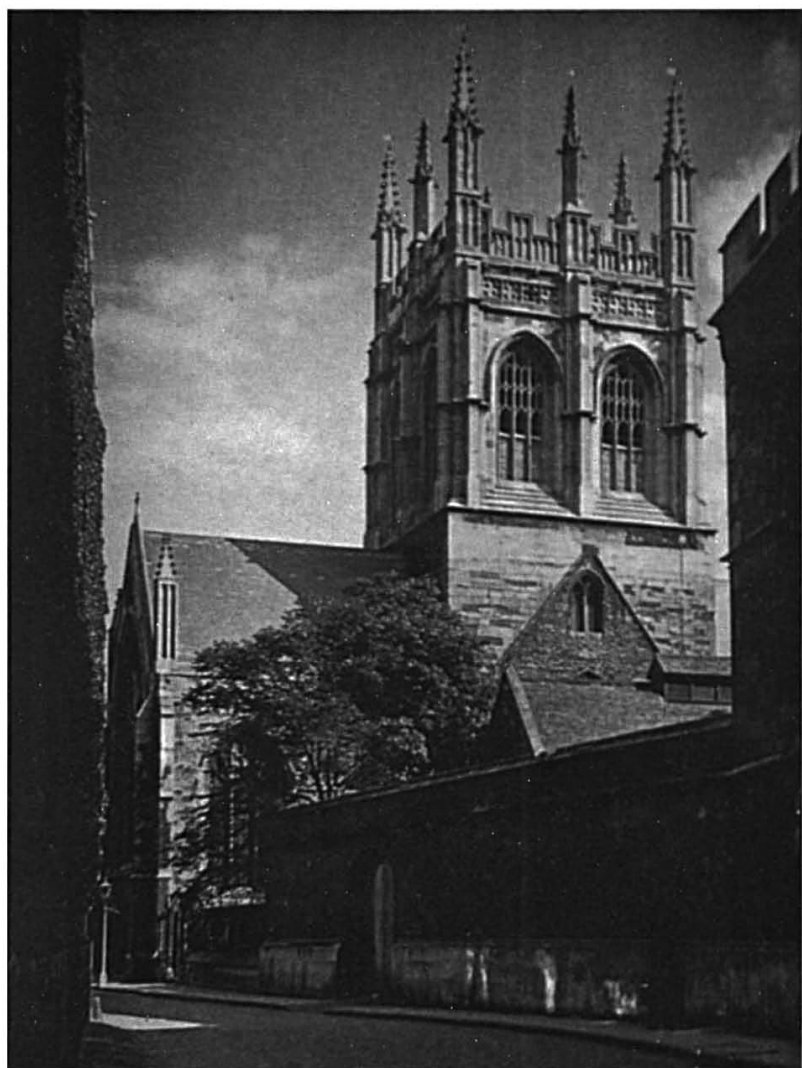
To circumvent the hostility of the citizens and the extortion of the landlords, the scholars were forced to band themselves together. Instead of lodging out in all manner of houses and inns,



4 Part of the City Wall in New College Garden



5 The Lodge, New College



6 Merton College Chapel

MEDIÆVAL OXFORD AS IT WAS

as they had done (and as their successors still do) in Paris, they began to lodge in "halls" of their own, rented or bought by a co-operative effort, and each ruled by a principal elected among its members. In these halls they lived and dined; but for their instruction they went out to any teacher in the town, for every teacher, good or bad, was at liberty to set up his own school on whatever terms he pleased.

Within fifty years of the first influx of students this defenceless community was all but extinguished for good. In the year 1209 a scholar while practising his archery killed a good woman in the street. There ensued a terrible row. The city, longing to be rid of the whole pack of penniless clerks, took reprisal by hanging a few of them with the connivance of the bad King John. The remainder fled from the town, some of them to a still less healthy spot in the fenlands, where they started the University of Cambridge.

For five years the infant university remained suspended, until a Papal Legate reinstated it, conferring many privileges upon the scholars and corresponding penances upon the town. From this time onwards the university was a cuckoo in the nest so far as the city was concerned. The townsmen were no longer able to arrest a scholar; instead they must hand him over to an official called the Chancellor. Shortly after other officials called proctors made their appearance, whose business was to maintain a separate discipline among the scholars. In spite of these measures, town and gown often came to blows; but the outcome of every conflict was a fresh humiliation of the city and a fresh set of privileges for the university, whose interests were kindly regarded by the powers of Church and State.

Yet in spite of the protection of the great, the university was so desperately poor that many of its scholars were barely kept from starvation. Their community would scarcely have survived if it had not been for the arrival of the friars, whose influence was dominant throughout the thirteenth century. In 1221 the first Dominicans came from Bologna to Oxford and set to work to convert the Oxford Jews, with marvellous success. In 1224 the first Franciscans followed, and began their work of helping the poor, the sick, and the leprous. These bodies were followed by the Carmelites and later the Augustinians, who set up a friary where Wadham College now stands.

The friars made Oxford its reputation. Their good works and their excellent teaching put the whole breed of monks to shame. Until they had arrived the leading figure in Oxford's history had been Edmund Rich, who had taught divinity and canon law in a house where St. Edmund Hall now consecrates his memory. He is Oxford's first saint; but after he had left to become Archbishop of Canterbury, there began a period of great leaders and teachers.

OXFORD

The leading figure of this period is Robert Grosseteste. He was not a friar himself—indeed, he was a rather worldly ecclesiastic—but he acted as the first rector to the newly arrived Franciscans and one of the first Chancellors of the university.¹ Roger Bacon was probably a pupil of both Rich and Grosseteste. He was a Franciscan, though his brethren mistrusted his inquiring mind. From Oxford he went on, as many students did, to Paris; and from Paris he returned to his famous study on Folly Bridge, where for many years he groped his way through the darkness of his times, catching faint glimmers of reflected light where no other man had seen a thing. From grammar to astrology, from logic to alchemy, he pursued his searches into every corner of knowledge, collecting fragments of wisdom and fragments of trash into one amazing brain.

Paris at this epoch still stood easily supreme among universities. Paris also had its town-and-gown disturbances, and in 1229, after a riot of exceptional severity, there was a fresh exodus of English students from thence to Oxford. One of these was a certain William who later became Archdeacon of Durham, and died in 1249, leaving to the hospitable university a sum of 810 marks² for the endowment of masters of arts. This legacy was an astonishment to the university, whose staple income hitherto had been a shilling a week paid as a fine for the misbehaviour of the townsmen in 1209. This weekly shilling was paid by Grosseteste into a university "chest" from which loans were made to the poorest scholars. But three hundred marks was a very different matter, and since the most urgent need was to strengthen the segregation of the "halls" from the city, the authorities used the money in the purchase of what is now University College.

This is therefore the first college to acquire a habitation, though it did not attain its own statutes until the year 1280, and it may be argued that the possession of a body of statutes is the distinguishing feature of a college. If that is so, then University College cannot claim an absolute priority; for things were moving fast, and the example of William of Durham was swiftly followed by others. The Bishop of Durham, edified by the generosity of his late archdeacon, decided to achieve a similar end at someone else's expense. So when in 1260 John de Balliol, one of the regents of Scotland, made himself unduly odious to the episcopal authorities, the Bishop not only flogged him at his own cathedral door, but also commanded him by way of penance to endow a hostel for sixteen students at Oxford. Balliol can therefore claim to be the second college to be endowed and settled on its present site,

¹ Another Oxford saint of the thirteenth century was Thomas Cantelupe, a great pluralist and politician, lawyer and theologian, who twice became Chancellor of the university in the course of his very active career.

² About £2000 of our money.

MEDIÆVAL OXFORD AS IT WAS

though Sir John's designs were not carried through until after his death, when his energetic widow Dervorguilla came to Oxford for the purpose.

But while both University and Balliol were waiting for their statutes, one Walter de Merton had stolen a march on both. He was Lord Chancellor to Henry III, so that money and manors came to his bidding. His first idea, formed in about 1263, had been to found a college at his country place in Surrey; but he soon transferred to Oxford, and by 1274 he had not only bought his site and begun his buildings, but had secured a charter and statutes as well. Merton College therefore asserts itself to be the first of colleges, and there is one good reason why the claim should be supported, for it is the only one of these first three which has retained its founder's buildings.

Walter de Merton was a former student of Oxford who had risen to be Bishop of Rochester. It is significant that he laid down that any member of his college should be compelled to leave if he should take monastic vows. But though he aimed at a secular house, he was to give it a magnificent chapel, in which the uses of an oratory and a parish church were to be combined. Merton Chapel, of which only the half was ever built, was planned on the scale of a cathedral. For the next hundred and fifty years it arose by stages: the windows of its choir glowed in the faint lights of the thirteenth century; its tower was raised in time to catch the first glimmer of the Renaissance.

It is time to leave the thirteenth century. At its opening, a few poor scholars had been struggling to exist among a hostile crowd of merchants. Before it closed, a community of some thousands were building themselves three great colleges, with libraries, halls, and sumptuous places of worship. No longer was the university huddled into a little triangle around Carfax and St. Mary's Church. Merton was built to the south, abutting on the new city walls. Balliol, by a still bolder stroke, was laid outside the north gate, well beyond the wide ditch, so as not to impede the flight of arrows. Alongside of Balliol on the same side of Canditch arose the new Durham Hall, endowed by two Bishops of Durham for the use of Benedictines. To the east, where Wadham stands, was the new Augustinian friary. And along way to the west, set away by Beaumont Palace, to be at a distance from the distractions of the town, was a little cluster of houses each maintained by a separate diocese for the use of its own Benedictine scholars, and known collectively as Gloucester Hall. Every one of these new centres of piety and learning was a product of the years from 1260 to 1300; while the miraculous tower and spire of St. Mary's, the university church, were raised at the turn of the century between 1290 and 1310.

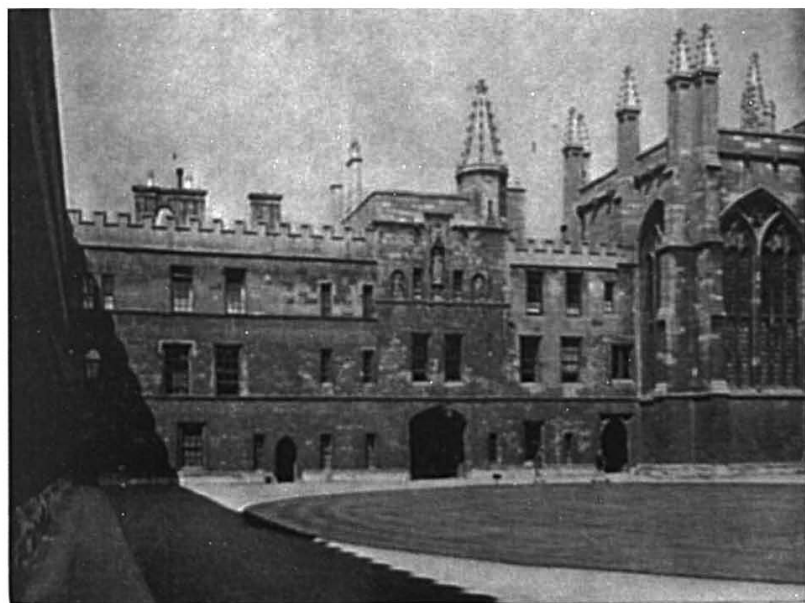
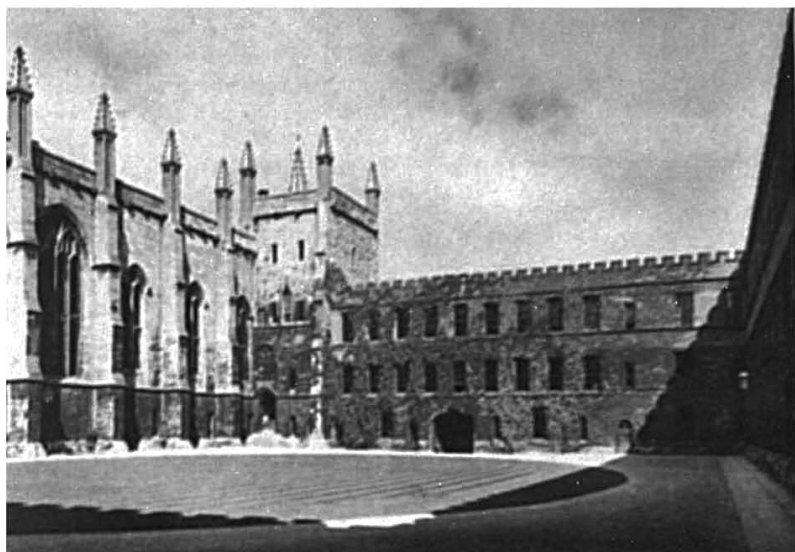
The fourteenth century added four more colleges to the list.

OXFORD

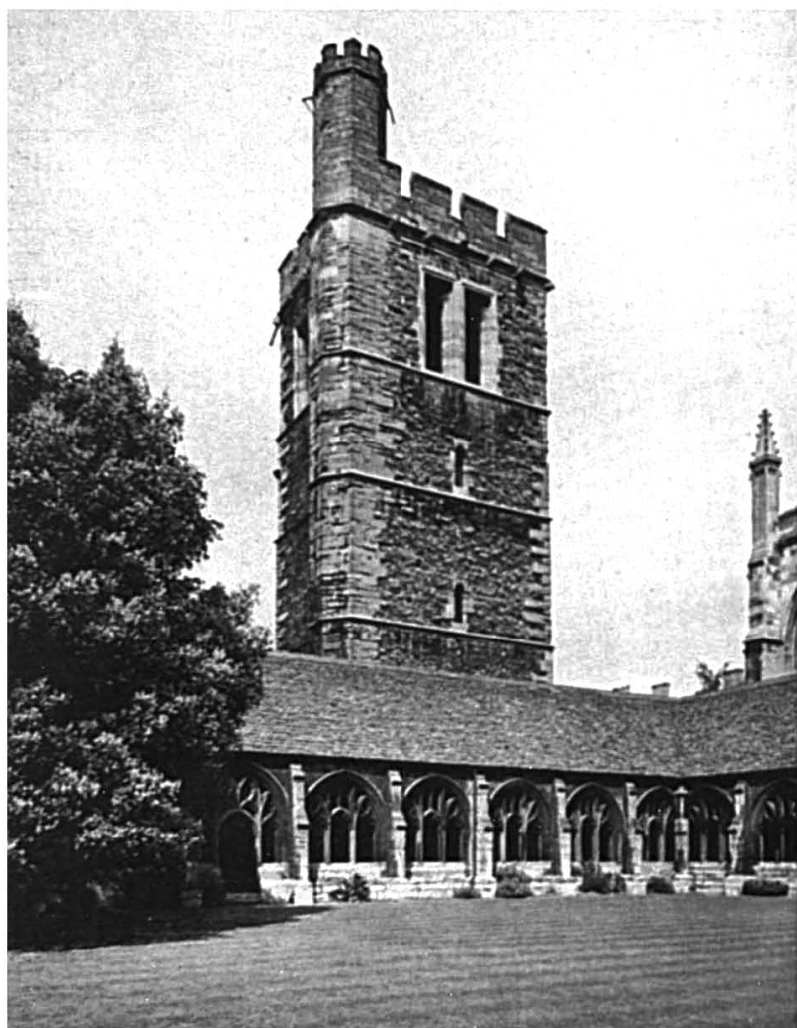
A Bishop of Exeter founded Exeter College for the students of the West Country. Oriel College was founded twice over, once by Adam de Brome, the rector of St. Mary's and almoner to King Edward II, and again two years later by the King himself. The Queen's College was founded by one Robert Eglesfield, chaplain to Queen Philippa, for the benefit of students from Cumberland and Westmorland. In this same period a certain Bishop Cobham also added to the old fabric of St. Mary's the curious crypt known as the Old Congregation House, where the authorities of the university thereafter met and deliberated, dealt out justice, hoarded treasure, and brought together their first diminutive collection of books.

All these benefactors were in holy orders; and, indeed, the greater part of Oxford has been built at the expense of clerics. This was due to two things that the Reformation killed—celibacy and pluralism. A successful cleric of the Middle Ages might accumulate any number of benefices and enjoy their large and elastic revenues; but if he kept his vows, he would have no heirs to inherit his savings. Sometimes he bethought himself of the cold, comfortless halls where he had learnt his divinity, of the days when there was no food to be had, of the friends with whom he used to stamp in unison up and down the fireless rooms. And he would decide that his own hall should have his endowment for the future, and should extend to its pupils the shelter and security of a college. From such impulses came the wealth of Oxford.

Exeter, Oriel, and Queen's have all discarded their original buildings for newer and grander edifices. No doubt their beginnings were small, but so was Oxford itself; and the erection within a narrow walled city of so many new and costly works gave to the citizens a cause for much misgiving and jealousy. Their ancient grievances, by no means soothed by two hundred years of proximity, came to a head in the classic "town and gown" riot of 1854. On February 10th of that year, the feast of St. Scholastica—the Virgin, a number of scholars looked in for a drink at a tavern aptly named Swyndlestock. "There calling for wine, John de Croydon the vintner brought them some, but they disliking it, as it should seem, and he avouching it to be good, several snappish words passed between them. At length the vintner giving them stubborn and saucy language, they threw the wine and vessel at his head. The vintner therefore receding with great passion, and aggravating the abuse to those of his family and neighbourhood, several came in, encouraged him not to put up the abuse, and withal told him they would faithfully stand by him." Other citizens "out of propensed malice seeking all occasions of conflict with the Scholars" took up the vintner's cause, and caused the bell of St. Martin's in Carfax Tower to be rung. This was always a tocsin to the townsmen in their clashes with the gown. The Chancellor came forward to appease the tumult, but was shot at



7, 8 New College : two views of the Front Quad



9 New College : the Tower and Cloister

MEDIÆVAL OXFORD AS IT WAS

with bows and arrows; retreating, he "caused the University Bell at St. Mary's to be rung out, whereupon the scholars got bows and arrows and maintained the fight with the townsmen till dark night." Next day the townsmen enlisted the help of the country-folk around Oxford; the two bells were rung again; many of the scholars were killed and five of their halls broke open with fire and sword. In the evening there arrived a proclamation in the King's name, but the townsmen paid no heed to it. More of the halls were looted; Merton College, to which most of the scholars retreated as a stronghold, was besieged for a week; and some sixty-three scholars in all were killed, so that "the gutter of Brewer's Lane ran with academic blood."

This outrage was severely visited upon the city. Apart from other reparations and safeguards, a penance was instituted, and on February 10th every year from 1355 until 1825 the mayor of Oxford and another sixty-two of the freemen were constrained to attend a service at St. Mary's and to offer a tribute of sixty-three pence. By such and other like measures did the university attain its exorbitant privileges over the inhospitable town.

Oxford had now definitely passed its two hundredth year, and its place in the national life was well assured. No less a man than Wyclif was Master of Balliol; and Oxford men were gaining fame in every diocese and in every branch of the King's service. But the outstanding figure of the second half of the century was not an Oxford man at all. The fifty years prior to St. Scholastica's day had seen the foundation of three colleges. The next fifty years saw but one, and that the foundation of a man of very humble birth. William of Wykeham had risen to fame through the profession of architecture, and had become surveyor of the royal castles. In this capacity he manifested such uncommon talents that he was made Keeper of the Privy Seal at the age of forty, and four years later Chancellor. Moreover, having been ordained a priest at the height of his career, he was rapidly promoted to the great Bishopric of Winchester. There he devoted some of his great revenues to the foundation of his school at Winchester and of his college at Oxford for the supply not of monks but of "fit persons for the service of God in Church and State"—in other words, to give to others the advantages that he had lacked.

New College dates from 1379. In those days it was new in many aspects; it was new in the scale of its endowments, in the admirable system of its statutes, new in its self-contained tutorial system, and newest of all in its plan and layout, every detail of which was contrived by Wykeham himself. New College is the work of a superb architect, and by good fortune its fabric has survived, little different from what it was when the Warden and scholars walked in tuneful procession to their new quarters five hundred and fifty years ago.

OXFORD

New College reached completion with the consecration of its cloisters in the year 1400. A new century opens, and the Middle Ages are drawing to an end. But before the burden of the Hundred Years War shall have been lifted from England, and the way left open to a rebirth of the humanities, there are two more foundations to be added to the seven that exist. In 1427, twelve years after Agincourt, we have the foundation of Lincoln College. Ten years later the war was still in progress when Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been one of the scholars who entered New College the day that it was opened, established his foundation of All Souls as a memorial and an offering (in the words of the royal warrant) "for the souls of the most illustrious Prince Henry, late King of England, of Thomas late Duke of Clarence our uncle, of the Dukes, Earls, Barons, Knights, Esquires, and other noble subjects of our father and ourselves who fell in the wars for the Crown of France, as also for the souls of all the faithful departed."

Upon this flourish of outspoken piety we take our leave of the Middle Ages.



10 Merton : the Library



11 Mediæval Roofs at Merton

