

Nineteenth-Century Oxford as it is

A TOUR OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY OXFORD HAS ITS PAINFUL moments; but it starts pleasantly enough in Beaumont Street, which leads down to the front of Worcester College, past the former grounds of Beaumont Palace.

Beaumont Street is Oxford's only specimen of the Regency style. Its pleasant curve, its harmonious lines of cornice and balcony, form a composition more characteristic of a once fashionable spa, such as Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells. In a city so packed with architectural ostentation, this unassuming residential street is singularly charming, though its attraction is apparently lost upon the modernistic eye. It has miraculously survived the nineteenth century, unmarred by so much as a doorway out of keeping: may it have equal good fortune in the twentieth.

At the east end of Beaumont Street, facing the Randolph Hotel, stand the imposing buildings of the Ashmolean and Taylorian Institutes. This block, a perfect example of the short-lived Greek revival, was built in the 1840's by Samuel Pepys Cockerell, the most successful of the little group of architects who stood out against the Gothic revival.

The Taylorian, which occupies the wing facing St. Giles's, is an institute for the study of modern languages, which keeps a fine collection of books in a fine library. The rest of the building constitutes the Ashmolean Museum. This is the university's private collection of curiosities. It consists mainly of (a) the remains of Elias Ashmole's collection, transferred from the "Old Ashmolean"; (b) the Arundel Marbles, a gallery-full of Greek and Roman sculpture bought on his travels by the "magnificent Earl of Arundel," and secured for the university by his friend John Evelyn; (c) a quantity of pre-Raphaelite works, bequeathed by a deceased official of the University Press; (d) Sir Flinders Petrie's collection of Egyptian antiquities; (e) a vast collection of drawings and sketches, from Michelangelo downwards; and (f) such objects as Guy Fawkes' lantern, Queen Anne's gloves, and a lock of

CHRIST CHURCH MEADOW.

The Meadow Keepers and Constables are hereby instructed to prevent the entrance into the Meadow of all beggars, all persons in ragged or very dirty clothes, persons of improper character or who are not decent in appearance and behaviour: and to prevent indecent, rude, or disorderly conduct of every description.

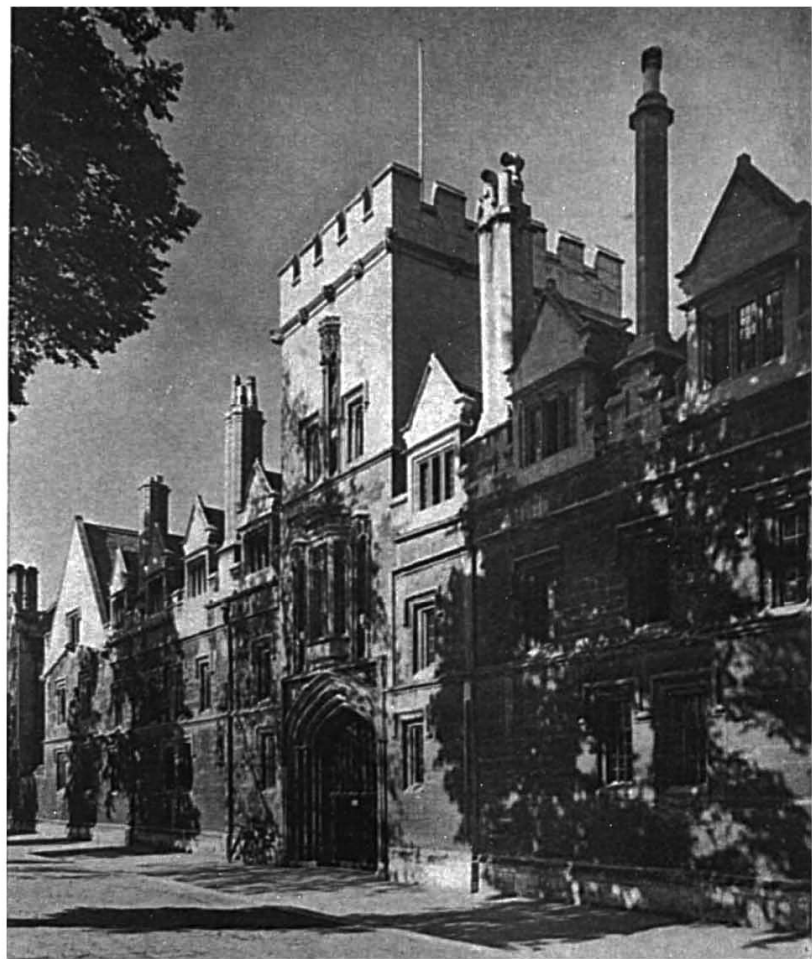
To allow no handcarts, wheelbarrows, bath-chairs or perambulators (unless they have previous permission from the Very Reverend the Dean); no hawkers or persons carrying parcels or bundles so as to obstruct the walks.

To prevent the flying of kites, throwing stones, throwing balls, bowling hoops, shooting arrows, firing guns or pistols, or playing games attended with danger or inconvenience to passers-by: also fishing in the waters, catching birds, or bird-nesting.

To prevent all persons cutting names on, breaking or injuring the seats, shrubs, plants, trees or turf.

To prevent the fastening of boats or rafts to the iron palisading or river wall, and to prevent encroachments of every kind by the river-side.

THE GATES WILL BE CLOSED



102 St. John's : the Gate

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Cobden's hair. One way and another, it is not easy to discern the purpose of this weird collection. Its contents are of no use for reference, like books in the Bodleian, or for adornment, like portraits in a college hall. The university is no better off for the possession of a quantity of statues and potsherds arranged in top-lit galleries: Egypt, Greece, and Rome are all the poorer for their removal. However, museums are the rage. Anyone who dislikes museums is a Philistine. So you will be expected to examine Oxford's mantelpiece array with suitable intelligence and awe.

The worst of these kleptomaniac institutions is that they never cease to grow. Once inside the walls, no museum piece is ever seen again by the world. The Ashmolean piles gallery upon dreary gallery. Already the Taylorian has added a wing on the St. Giles's front, of which the half-baked design is a poor tribute to the system of education by imitation. Now, not two years later, it is the turn of the Ashmolean to extend itself. This time it is proposed to tear down a group of the pleasant houses on the north side of Beaumont Street, in order to accommodate more pots and pans.

Some individuals cannot see beauty unless it is imprisoned in a glass case, labelled and (approximately) dated by bookish authority. To the collectors of Assyrian brooches and pins, the unpretentious charm of Beaumont Street is of no account; it is not accepted or recognised; it is uncatalogued; there is no leading authority upon the subject. But there are others less expert and less blind. On the south side of Beaumont Street, facing the scene of the intended outrage, is a new theatre, the Playhouse, opened in 1988. Its façade has been so built as to preserve in all their innocence the quiet proportions of the street. The architect is Mr. Edward Maufe, to whom high credit is due for this civilised design.

Many people suppose that the Gothic revival started almost overnight; that after a given date around the time of Queen Victoria's accession, the classical tradition abruptly expired. It will surprise them to discover that the Ashmolean was built *after* the Martyr's Memorial, which stands nearby at the bifurcation of St. Giles's. This was erected in 1841, on the third centenary of the combustion of Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer, which took place just round the corner of Balliol. It is a very early work of George Gilbert Scott, then only thirty years old, who was to lay such a heavy hand on Oxford in the next forty years. The intricate design of this memorial renders it a popular trial slope for the night-climbers who abound in Oxford.

The Rubicon is passed. The Gothic revival has begun, and its worst excesses are at hand. The back entrance of Balliol faces the Martyr's Memorial.

Balliol is the third in antiquity of all Oxford's colleges. Wyclif was once its Master; Duke Humphrey is thought to have been a

student. Only one corner of the mediæval college now survives. The main entrance from Broad Street gives on to a diminutive front quadrangle. Here on the left is the ancient dining-hall, now used as a library: in front is a short range of mellow Gothic of the fifteenth century, the upper storey of which has always been a library. Formerly this range continued beyond the archway in the shape of a small chapel of unusual beauty. Its place is occupied by a Victorian chapel whose colours and proportions can only be described as obscene.

It is hard to say why the rage for improvement took so strong a hold upon Balliol in particular. It started when Augustus Welby Pugin made a plan for the rebuilding of the entire college in the mediæval style of which he was so great a master. This scheme fell through for the reason that Pugin was a Papist. At later dates the work of destruction was done piecemeal by various hands. The chapel with its priapic bell-tower in the neo-Lombardic Gothic style was built "at enormous cost" by Henry Butterfield in 1857. It is a building so violently offensive to all the senses that half a century later its demolition was seriously discussed. Though the exterior survives, the interior has lately been expurgated by the installation of slick classical woodwork, reminiscent of a company board room.

The greater part of Balliol's front to Broad Street, including the main gate and the east side of the first quad, was built by Alfred Waterhouse in 1867-9. It is a clumsy and grotesque heap of staircases, but is without the actively poisonous character of Butterfield's work.

Two archways give access to the Garden quadrangle, a great straggling area adorned by some noble trees. In a corner of this quadrangle, adjoining the Master's house, are two pleasant classical blocks. That on the south side is by Henry Keene, contemporary with his work at Worcester. Its neighbour, on the east, was added by Basevi as late as 1825. Next in this gallery of styles comes an insipid post-war block, with huge effeminate casements; next some inoffensive Gothic as far as the back gate; and next a jumble of less inoffensive Gothic, hidden behind which is an excellent single staircase built by E. P. Warren in 1907 to finish off the St. Giles's front. Lastly, there is the gigantic hall which lords it over the whole quadrangle. This was a further work of Waterhouse, dating from 1877. The ten years which had elapsed since the Broad Street elevations would seem to have mellowed him considerably. The hall is at least a virile and energetic work, though without the slightest merit in its proportions.

Balliol is a college of fame and character. Innumerable jokes are based upon the supposition that its undergraduates include an exceptionally high proportion of Indians, negroes and others of darker complexion than our own. There is not the slightest

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basis for this popular belief. What Balliol does contain is an inordinate number of Scotchmen. It was founded by the parents of a King of Scotland. In the seventeenth century one John Snell founded fourteen "Snell exhibitions" to enable students from Glasgow University to proceed to Oxford. A Court of Chancery decided for some reason that they must go to Balliol, and they have done so ever since. Adam Smith was a Snell exhibitor, and there have been many others hardly less distinguished.

Not all of these Scotchmen are young when they arrive at Balliol. Few of them are enlivening company. They drag on into their thirties, continuing researches which Glasgow should have completed, pounding like bulls around the rigger field, soaking in a dreary and indigestible culture. Their accents win them instant respect from English intellectuals: yet their performances in the academic world are far from brilliant.

In spite of this dead weight of earnest Scots, Balliol gained for a time, in succession to Oriel, the intellectual leadership of Oxford. This was due mainly to the personality of Benjamin Jowett, who was Master from 1870 to 1893. No book of Victorian memoirs is complete without a few anecdotes concerning Jowett; but nowadays they seem to have lost their savour. He was a crabbed and whimsical old man. Yet there is no doubt that he exercised an extraordinary influence. Not only did he raise his college to the first place, but he contrived to advise and direct the lives of his pupils after they had gone from Oxford. Asquith, Milner, Grey, Curzon, and Bishop Gore were some of the undergraduates of the Jowett regime. Success and leadership seemed to be theirs as of right.

This spell of brilliance is over, though the jealousy which it aroused still clings to the name of Balliol. The college has fallen back into its Scottish rut. A staunch old-fashioned socialism of the H. M. Hyndman type is now the hall-mark of the Balliol man.

John Balliol was flogged by a Bishop of Durham at his cathedral door: two Bishops of Durham founded the original Trinity College next door. To this day the wall between the two colleges is a veritable Hadrian's Wall. Though the President of Trinity no longer stones his neighbours' chapel, insults are nightly exchanged. On festive occasions, the men of Balliol gather on their lawn to sing weird and offensive incantations in disparagement of their rivals.¹

Across the road from Balliol, occupying the corner of Broad Street and the Turl, stands Exeter College, another ancient

¹ Another curious instance of how hard tradition dies. The great Lord Bacon had a sister, Lady Periam, who presented a new building to Balliol. On its site there is now an underground lavatory. In Balliol language, to make use of this convenience is to "visit Lady Periam," though few know why.

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foundation in Victorian disguise. Founded as early as 1814 by a Bishop of Exeter, it was established in its original buildings just inside the city's north wall, in which the "turl" was a minor gateway. It was as a college particularly set aside for students of the West Country, and had bred some of England's most notable Parliamentarians, including Eliot, Shaftesbury, and Maynard. Its buildings were of all ages, while the garden crept delightfully up to the walls of the Divinity School.

The transformation of Exeter began about 1884, when the whole front towards the Turl was rebuilt in the Gothic of that day. Twenty years later, Sir George Gilbert Scott arrived and took things in hand in a still more vigorous style. He built the depressing block around the corner overlooking Broad Street; he built the library; above all, he built the stupendous chapel. This enormous "Early Decorated" edifice, which dominates the whole of the first quadrangle, is said to be based upon the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. It takes the place of a seventeenth-century chapel of great charm, which was so well built that it had to be destroyed with gunpowder. Nothing can extenuate the building which Scott substituted. It is a sudden departure from the whole architectural tradition of the university. It is out of scale with the college and out of keeping with Oxford. The most ingenious apologist of the Gothic revival cannot explain away its monstrous lack of proportion and reticence.

Inside the chapel is a fine Burne-Jones tapestry, woven in William Morris's workshops, representing the Adoration of the Magi. Across the quadrangle, on its south side, is a pleasant Jacobean hall, much altered in its interior. The fellows' garden, which is private, affords an exquisite view of the Divinity School. Apart from these features, Exeter has few claims to attention.

William Morris and Burne-Jones were both undergraduates at Exeter at the same time; and at Exeter was born the friendship which produced the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. In 1857, when they were twenty-three and twenty-four respectively, a curious piece of good fortune brought them in touch with the born leader of their movement. In that year Dante Gabriel Rossetti came to Oxford and visited the new hall of the Oxford Union Society. It was his suggestion that the hall should be adorned with mural paintings; and the two eager undergraduates from Exeter rapturously volunteered to help. Their friend Swinburne, of Balliol, also made the acquaintance of the master at this time.

The Oxford Union, scene of these hopeful labours, stands not far from Exeter, down Ship Street, and hidden behind the other frontage of the Cornmarket. The Society was founded as a debating club in 1828. The original hall, which now contains the excellent Union Library, was begun just over thirty years later, the architect being Benjamin Woodward, of the Dublin firm of

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Deane and Woodward. It is a strange, high-pitched, octagonal hall, the gallery of which, interrupted as it is by circular windows, Rossetti and his young friends set out with so much enthusiasm to adorn. They chose as their theme the Arthurian legend, though curiously it was two years before the "Morte d'Arthur" was published. Rossetti himself undertook the Vision of Sir Lancelot, but never finished it; Morris painted Tristram and Iseult; Burne-Jones, the death of Merlin. The admirable decorations of the roof itself are also the handiwork of Morris.

This labour of love was not even rewarded by success. The young enthusiasts painted upon a coat of whitewash over damp brickwork, and within six months the work began to fade. In a few years it was scarcely distinguishable; and so it remained until 1936, when the skilful brush of Professor Tristram was employed to revive it.

When the Union Library moved into Woodward's building, a new hall, in imitation of the old, was built by Waterhouse a few yards away. The other rooms are dreary club-rooms, redolent of linoleum and lincrusta; but they still contain a few excellent Morris wall-papers.

For another and far more important work by Benjamin Woodward, it is necessary to go farther afield, as far as the outskirts of the Parks, where stands the Oxford Museum. This institution was built in the 1850's for the study of natural history, and its originator, a Professor Acland, was the intimate friend of John Ruskin.¹ From the first moment in 1854, when Woodward's design was successful in a public competition, Ruskin took an active interest in its completion; and the Museum may be said to be the only building in England in which the principles enunciated in the *Seven Lamps* and the *Stones of Venice* found a chance of authoritative expression.

Ruskin wrote with resonant eloquence of the successful use of his favourite Gothic for a scientific building. "Here was this architecture which I had learned to know and love in pensive ruins, deserted by the hopes and efforts of men, or in dismantled fortress-fragments recording only their cruelty; here was this very architecture lending itself, as if created only for these, to the foremost activities of human discovery, and the tenderest functions of human mercy. No other architecture, I felt in an instant, could have thus adapted itself to a new and strange office. No fixed arrangements of frieze and pillar, nor accepted proportions of wall and roof, nor practised refinements of classical decoration, could

¹ Ruskin was still quite a young man, but his prestige and influence were enormous. He was an undergraduate at Christ Church from 1836 to 1842, and his mother came to live in Oxford with him. After 1870 he was Slade Professor of Fine Arts. His lectures were riotously successful—in contrast to his attempt to exalt the dignity of labour by digging up the village street at Hinksey.

have otherwise than absurdly and fantastically yielded its bed to the crucible, and its blast to the furnace ; but these old vaultings and strong buttresses—ready always to do service to man, whatever his bidding—to shake the waves of war back from his seats of rock, or prolong through faint twilights of sanctuary the sighs of his superstition—he had but to ask it of them, and they entered at once into the lowliest ministries of the arts of healing, and the sternest and clearest offices in the service of science.”

It was characteristic of Ruskin’s ideals that he should wish each column in the hall of the museum to be made of some distinct mineral, so as to illustrate the science of geology, while the carvings of each capital embodied a different botanical form. One column, however, which he erected with his own hands, required to be taken down and replaced by a more experienced artisan.

The workmen engaged on the building of the Museum found themselves the objects of unusual attention. They “began each day with simple prayers from willing hearts,” while “various volumes” were placed in the mess-room for their benefit. Ruskin had faith in “the genius of the unassisted workman.” His faith was to some extent justified. Woodward brought over from Ireland his own workmen, and one of them, named O’Shea, proved to be a singularly gifted sculptor. Too gifted; in fact, for the various committees and delegacies in charge of the work. O’Shea’s vigorous and insubordinate fancy gave offence ; he was dismissed : but even after his dismissal he was found at work upon the main porch of the building, furiously carving—“Parrhots and Owls !” as he explained, “Parrhots and Owls ! Members of Convocation !” He was made to deface these figures. Shortly afterwards, the funds for the building of the Museum came to an end ; and the stonework where O’Shea had hacked it may be seen to this day, just as he left it.

The interior of the Museum is a forest of cast-iron ribs and columns ; it houses a ghoulish collection of skeletons and embryos¹ ; but the hall is worth entering for a glimpse of faded Ruskinian glories. Ruskin himself was not over-pleased by the result ; nobody else has ever liked it ; Lord Tennyson considered it “perfectly indecent.” Even the happy notion of a chemical laboratory copied from the Abbots’ Kitchen at Glastonbury fails to redeem the prickly and insipid design.

The Museum has spawned around itself a litter of newer institutions : the Pitt-Rivers Museum, an Observatory, an Electrical Laboratory, and so forth. Two members of this scientific colony

¹ The Museum contains one great rarity, the head and claw of a Dodo. This bird, formerly complete, formed part of Elias Ashmole’s original bequest. Having deteriorated in condition, it was ordered to be burnt by the Vice-Chancellor in 1755 : but the present relics were saved.

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have architectural merits. One is the School of Pathology in South Parks Road. The other is the new Radcliffe Science Library upon the corner, built in 1934 by Mr. Hubert Worthington of Manchester: this library now houses the scientific collections from the Bodleian and the Radcliffe Camera.

Opposite to the front of the Museum stands a vast block of intensely Ruskinian buildings from which John Ruskin himself used to avert his outraged glance each time he passed them. Long before the 'seventies, the author of the *Stones of Venice* had been disabused of his ideas about the application of Venetian Gothic to English needs. But by that time they had branded themselves upon the orthodox architectural mind. Butterfield's chapel at Balliol was an early essay, contemporary with the Museum itself. The same architect is found at work in the same style at Keble College, nearly twenty years later.

Keble is not strictly a college, being what is called a "new foundation." It adheres to the university, but does not belong. It was first opened in 1870 as a memorial to the life and work of John Keble, and as a shrine of "sober living and high culture of the mind." Built mostly at the expense of the great Bristol family of Gibbs, it provides a comparatively cheap and inflexibly Church-of-England education for a large number of pious young men. They live in corridors instead of staircases, as a token of simplicity. Their quadrangles, whose level is sunk so as to prevent riotous assembly, go by the names of Pusey and Liddon.

As an architectural specimen, Keble exhibits in its most striking form the godlike self-confidence of the Victorian architect. Butterfield had no qualms about building in brick, although every Oxford college before his own was entirely built in stone. He was not in the least afraid of that tremendous variegation of colour and material which he thought necessary to offset the English climate. Above all, he braved heroic proportions. His chapel triumphs by sheer boldness. Butterfield's choice of materials is unspeakable. His glass and mosaics, bricks and tiles, brasswork and paint, all stand out as glaring and vivid as the day they were new. But his scale is superb, and his proportions are manly. Inside or out, there is nothing timid or mean about Keble chapel. Butterfield, in other words, had become a true architect. Only a crank could like his work, but it is a mistake not to admire it.

No visitor who is genuinely interested in architecture should omit to visit Keble and the Oxford Museum. If his appetite for Victorian monuments is whetted by the experience, he has only to follow in a northerly direction up the Banbury or the Woodstock Road to find himself plunged into the territory known as North Oxford. This district is a "dormitory area," entirely covered with large and solid houses of Ruskinian Gothic, which sprang up all at once when the rule of celibacy for the fellows of colleges

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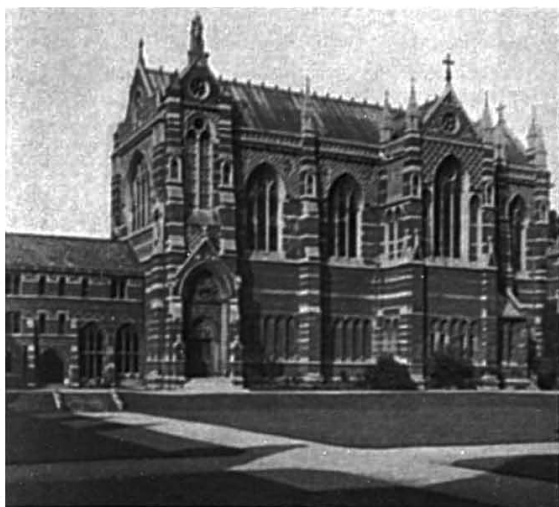
was abolished. Nowadays, the senior members being less fecund and less well-to-do, many of these houses are converted into lodgings. North Oxford is also plentifully supplied with Victorian places of worship. Those who have acquired the taste will find a valuable guide to all these mysteries in *An Oxford University Chest*, by John Betjeman.

Those, on the other hand, whose interests are more limited, need go no farther afield than the Parks. It is worth while to return by Mansfield Road; for in this desolate spot are established two colonies of those hopeful invaders who have failed so entirely to take the university by storm. Mansfield "College" transferred here from Birmingham in 1886; Manchester "College," from Manchester in 1889. One is Congregational, the other Unitarian. Neither is connected with the university. Their buildings, the work of Basil Champneys in one case, and of the Manchester Worthingtons in the other, are in both cases surprisingly good.

The Gothic revival disappears as suddenly as it began. The figure of Sir Thomas Graham Jackson looms enormous on the architectural horizon towards the close of the century. We have seen his handiwork at Trinity, at B.N.C., and in countless minor restorations and additions. He is perhaps best represented in Oxford's last genuine college, which is Hertford College.

The line of Parks Road is continued down to St. Mary's by Cat Street. In the nineteenth century the name of this thoroughfare was altered to St. Catherine's Street; at present, the signs describe it as "Catte Street"; but Cat Street it is and always was. Both the corners at which New College Lane debouches into Cat Street, opposite the Clarendon building, are occupied by Hertford College. They are united by an unmistakably Jacksonian "bridge of sighs."

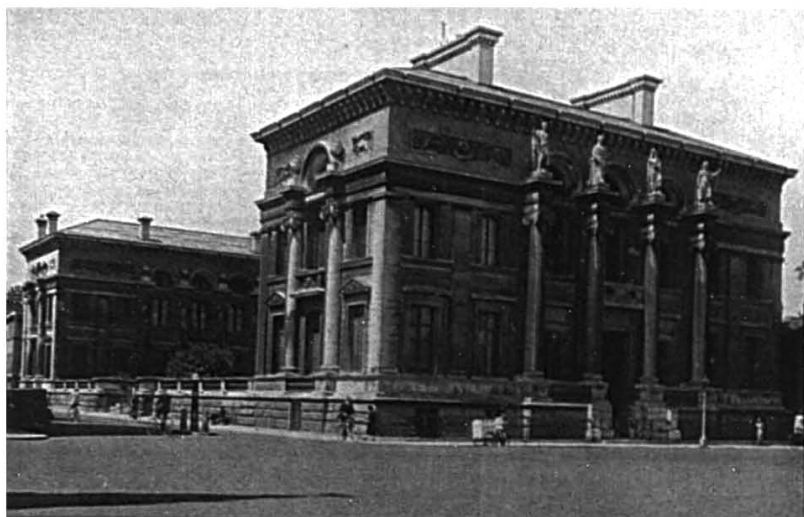
The new college inherited an old tradition. Hart Hall was established on the site by Elias of Hertford as early as 1284. For more than four centuries it was an appendage to Exeter College, until in 1740 an enterprising Principal succeeded in obtaining a royal charter exalting it to the status of an independent college. Unfortunately he could not obtain the necessary endowments. In the 1760's Hertford was sufficiently distinguished for Lord Holland to choose it for his brilliant son Charles James Fox. But this brief splendour lasted scarcely more than half a century. By the year 1805 all the students and all but two of the fellows had disappeared. Another decade elapsed, and there remained but a single fellow, who not unnaturally elected himself Principal. Even this barren distinction did not last long, for in 1820 the greater part of the building collapsed "with a great crash and a dense cloud of dust." It was then discovered that the ruins had no owner, since the corporative body had ceased to exist. They were



103 Keble Chapel



104 The University Museum



105 The Ashmolean



106 Beaumont Street

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therefore made over by the university as a site to rehouse Magdalen Hall, an ancient offshoot of that college. The present front dates from 1822. Hertford's final re-emergence as a college was due to the generosity of a Mr. Baring, of the great family of bankers. It was established by an Act of Parliament in 1874; but most of the buildings belong to the turn of the century. They are not really worth description, for Jackson was an architectural scholar without insight. The curious octagon which serves as an entrance to the northern half of the buildings takes the place of an ancient octagonal chapel in the city wall, known as Our Lady of Smith Gate.

Before abandoning the subject of nineteenth-century architecture in Oxford, mention should be made of two non-collegiate buildings by Jackson and Champneys respectively, both built in the 1880's. Jackson's vast Examination Schools stand on the south side of the High Street, at the corner of Merton Street. Champney's Indian Institute stands next door to Hertford, where Holywell joins the Broad. Neither building has many admirers to-day; and indeed, both Jackson and Champneys have been beaten at their own game by a Mr. Hare, the architect of the inimitable Town Hall in St. Aldate's.