

## Modern Oxford's Architecture

---

**T**HE MODERN ADDITIONS TO OXFORD'S ARCHITECTURAL RICHES constitute a tale that is quickly told, and the quicker the better.

To begin in South Parks Road, the recent School of Pathology and the new Radcliffe Science Library have already been commended as seemly additions to the colony of scientific buildings. Opposite to them on the south side of the road, in what was a part of the Wadham garden, stands an extraordinary edifice, like a Cotswold manor house with a circular temple of heroic scale deposited in its forecourt. This is Rhodes House, built by Sir Herbert Baker, and opened in 1929. Sir Herbert Baker was a friend of Cecil Rhodes; but he has performed a curious job of work for the Rhodes Trustees. One wing of the buildings houses the Secretary to the Trustees; another contains the colonial and American sections of the Bodleian Library; the third consists of various halls and public rooms which are lent or hired for many purposes. What the rotunda is for, nobody seems to know, except that it effectually destroys the proportions and harmony of this costly building.<sup>1</sup>

Another knightly architect is as ill represented in the new block of the Bodleian, which has taken the place of a charming row of houses at the corner of Broad Street. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the grandson of Sir George, is an architect of undoubted powers; but in this work he has done himself something less than justice. He has banished proportion along with symmetry. The body of the building is huge and formless: its ground floor is ornamented like a draper's shop with a veneer of commercial classical stonework. From the librarian's point of view the design is said to be excellent; but this can hardly excuse its eccentricities of fenestration, or its insipid effort in the direction of modernity. Millions of little-used books are housed in this fortress; they are conveyed to the readers

<sup>1</sup> Sir Herbert Baker has perhaps subconsciously evoked the miraculous helmet which appeared in the courtyard of the Castle of Otranto.

---

## OXFORD

---

by an endless belt or conveyor passing through a tunnel underneath the street. The total cost has been about a million pounds, of which more than half has been given by the Rockefeller Trust.

Cat Street gives its more genteel name to St. Catherine's Society, formerly housed in the Clarendon Buildings. This society embodies the male non-collegiate students, whose presence at Oxford was first tolerated by a statute of 1868. The idea of the innovation was to assist the poorest scholars; but in fact the pull of the collegiate system is irresistible. Lodgings are expensive and often hateful, while private munificence is without end. Already St. Catherine's has a home of its own, though still non-residential. It is only a matter of time before it houses its pupils under one roof, and for exactly the same reasons which drove the mediæval scholars to lodge together. The present quarters of the society, built in 1936, stand at the bottom of St. Aldate's beyond the Broad Walk, on the site of a lately demolished slum. The architect is the ever reliable Mr. Hubert Worthington, who, unlike most of his contemporaries, builds for posterity. His work is solid enough to last, and its freedom from fashionable oddities will commend it to later generations long after tastes have changed. It may be noticed that the St. Catherine's building, in common with Rhodes House, possesses a Cotswold flavour which is new to Oxford. This is due less to design than to material. The old soft Headington stone of which Oxford was originally built has proved in the long run unsuitable; and in many places it has had to be refaced. The hard rough Clipsham stone is taking its place. Butterfield's experiment in the use of brick has fortunately not gained ground except among the far-flung women's colleges.

Sir Edwin Lutyens, greatest and most erratic of living architects, is represented at Oxford by but a single work, the new Champion Hall which stands in Brewer Street, a few paces from the St. Catherine's Society. Champion Hall is a training college of the Society of Jesus. It honours the name of the great Jesuit martyr who was a fellow of St. John's College. Founded in 1897, it existed for many years in a large house in St. Giles's which was rented from St. John's; but by an amazing feat of faith and will it has earned within forty years not only a home of its own, but a prominent part of the affairs of the university.

Sir Edwin Lutyens was given a narrow site in a narrow side-street. By skilful planning he has endowed his building with a serene dignity which is far beyond the reach of younger architects. The street frontage of Champion Hall is not wholly successful. It has an unusual feature in its red roof; and the chapel is raised, by a masterly innovation, to the upper storey of the house. But, even allowing for the narrow area in which it can be viewed, this elevation is not wholly satisfying. From the little garden inside, the touch of the great architect can be seen more clearly. He has

---

## MODERN OXFORD'S ARCHITECTURE

---

turned his little patch of ground into something tranquil and full of dignity; while his interior is full of the riches of the incomparable Lutyens inventiveness.

Campion Hall, unlike the nonconformist "colleges," is a part of the university; its scholars can matriculate and graduate. Under a recent statute, it ranks as a Permanent Private Hall. Two other bodies enjoy the same status. St. Benet's Hall belongs to the Benedictines, and is ruled by the Abbot of Ampleforth. St. Peter's Hall is evangelical. Neither has claims to architectural renown.

Mention has been made of the new Playhouse, designed by Edward Maufe. It was opened in 1938, and its graceful frontage upon Beaumont Street is a model of architectural good manners.

The various women's colleges lie far afield, and all except Somerville are built of brick. Though designed by a variety of eminent architects, none of them deserves particular attention; nor does Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's new library in North Oxford for the Society of Oxford Home-Students. The abandonment by the women's colleges of the staircase system constitutes a fundamental departure from the Oxford plan, and any of their buildings might serve as a hospital or asylum in any provincial town. Balliol has lately built itself a block of cheap lodgings consisting of bed-sitting rooms and corridors; but it is unlikely that this hateful novelty will gain ground among the men.

The river is a last Oxford attraction. From Folly Bridge downwards for some distance its left bank is lined with ancient and elaborate barges, which serve as club rooms, dressing rooms, and grandstands to the various college rowing clubs. Many of these barges were formerly the state barges of the London City companies, and were bought about eighty years ago, when organised rowing began. Since then they have remained a picturesque feature of the riverside; but they incur the displeasure of the serious rowing man, who considers that the river is too narrow, even without them. The Oxford boat races are limited to bumping races, and the team which competes against Cambridge has to go down to Henley for its practice. These barges with their rafts take up some thirty feet of water; besides which, they are insanitary to a degree. But it is a pity that they have to go. Christ Church, which owns the river bank, has led the way by building the first boathouse—a design in hot red brick, by a former rowing blue. A row of these edifices will soon replace the cool willows: concrete ramps will oust the untidy grass banks. What matter if another mile an hour can be attained?—but at least the Christ Church authorities might soften the blow by putting a coat of whitewash on their box of bricks.