

Renaissance Oxford as it was

THE NEXT STAGE IN OXFORD'S DEVELOPMENT COVERS THE period when the Renaissance dawned in England, a hundred years after it had reached its zenith in Italy, and the period when England first broke away from Rome. It starts about the year 1450, when Merton Tower was raised, and ends with the death in 1558 of Bloody Mary. During this period five more colleges were founded, the last which saw the light beneath the auspices of the Church of Rome.

Another man of outstanding personality now takes the place of Wykeham. This is William Waynflete. Born in 1395, he was one of the earliest of all the thousands who have progressed from Winchester to New College. He became in turn head master of Winchester, fellow of Eton, Provost of Eton, Bishop of Winchester, and Lord Chancellor. Eton owes him much, but Oxford owes him more. For following in the footsteps of the benefactor to whom he owed his start in life, he founded the College of St. Mary Magdalen in 1458. Though there is no statutory connection between the two bodies, the lilies of Eton adorn the Magdalen coat of arms; and Magdalen, which has always maintained a foremost place among Oxford colleges, has claimed at every period a fair quota of Etonians.

There is about Magdalen a certain spaciousness and serenity which seems to breathe the very spirit of its age. The clash of arms was giving way to the conflict of philosophers, and all over Europe the bars and battlements were being taken down and the windows were being opened to the light and air of a new knowledge and understanding. The "wars for the crown of France" were over; travel abroad was safer than it was in England; men felt that a new and more generous age had begun. Waynflete was not afraid to set his college beyond the east gate and outside the shelter of the city walls. His gardens and his park ran down to the undefended river. He built no stronghold against a half-savage mob; he fortified no belfry against a civil war. Instead, soon after his death his college raised the tower that greets you upon



18 The Approach to Oxford, 1814 (*Ackermann's "Oxford"*)



19 Magdalen Tower from Merton Garden



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Magdalen bridge, that exquisite miracle in stone which James I so truly called "the most absolute building in Oxford." In 1504 they opened this tower by giving a concert upon the leads; and the voices of the choristers were raised to greet not only a new spring and a new peal of bells, but also the high hopes of a new century. Men like Erasmus, Grocyn, Colet, and Thomas More, returning from travel all full of the new Greek learning, met and disputed to the first music of the Magdalen bells.

Still we are concerned with benefactors who drew their wealth and their precepts from the Mother Church. But the renaissance of Oxford is deeply indebted to a royal lover of learning. Far more than the lore of the monks, the new classical learning was dependent upon the dissemination of books; and at the present the books of the university were all contained in one room above the Congregation House. Its first great library was the gift of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, the youngest son of Henry IV. "Good Duke Humphrey," as those who lived upon his bounty called him, was very fond of reading, and he left his books to Oxford. But he did far more than this; for he gave money to the university to start a reconstruction of a drastic kind.

Nobody knows the number of the students at Oxford in the fifteenth century, but some estimates make them up to three thousand. Only a fraction of these resided in the nine colleges that existed before Magdalen. It is said that there were no fewer than eighty-four halls of various sizes. And innumerable students merely lodged in the town. This want of organisation in the residential system was matched in the educational sphere. A "school" could be set up by anybody, genius or charlatan, who cared to try it. There was a street of schools, in which more than thirty teachers competed to attract custom. It was clearly time to introduce some regularity into the system, and the benefactions of Duke Humphrey were employed for this purpose. As early as 1439 a central School of Arts had been built; four years later the university approached the Duke for funds to build a School of Divinity. He did not live to see it; and the work went slowly, because the King took off his builders to complete the great chapel at Eton. But in 1480 the work was done, and Duke Humphrey is commemorated by a building of a double utility. Lectures were to be given in the divinity school itself; the room above it housed his famous library. Thus did the university acquire its first important building.

Within a stone's throw of the new divinity school there stood a famous hall whose history well illustrates the vicissitudes of the earlier times. The knocker of this hall was in the shape of a bronze lion's head, from which the name of Brazen Nose Hall had come to be applied. In the year 1334 the students of this hall, dissatisfied by some part of the university's teaching or discipline,

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left Oxford in a body, taking their precious knocker with them. They made their way to Stamford, where apparently some sort of educational centre existed; and there they reconstituted their society. The Oxford authorities were so furious at this secession that they laid Stamford under an interdict; they insisted that every candidate for a Mastership of Arts should swear never to give or attend a lecture at Stamford. This oath was not eliminated until the year 1827, centuries after poor Stamford had lost all cultural pretensions; while in 1509 the parent hall had become Brasenose College, thus ranking eleventh among the foundations of Oxford. Sir Richard Sutton, its co-founder with the Bishop of Lincoln, was the first lay founder of a college.

Most men in the Oxford of this time were aware that they stood on the verge of a great change. All these printed books, all this Continental travel, all this reading of scripture in the Greek caused much misgiving as to the sufficiency of the monastic life. When the great world produced such a generous bounty of piety and learning, men looked with a more contemptuous eye upon the refugees of the cloister. The feeling of the times is well expressed in a short fragment of recorded talk. Richard Foxe, yet another Bishop of Winchester, wished to apply some of the excessive emoluments of that see to some new work in Oxford, and he discussed his plans with his friend Hugh Oldham, Bishop of Exeter, who thus expressed himself: "What, my Lord, shall we build houses and provide livelihoods for a company of bussing monks whose end and fall we ourselves may live to see; no, no, it is more meet that we should have care to provide for the increase of learning, and for such as by their learning shall do good in the Church and the Commonwealth." Foxe fell in with this vigorous advice; and he and Oldham between them became the founders of the college of Corpus Christi in the year 1516. It was expressly provided in the statutes of this college that no member could assume monastic vows and remain on the foundation. Professors of Greek and Latin were attached to the foundation and the fellows and scholars were encouraged to travel abroad. Thus Corpus became at the very start what it has remained to this day, a shrine of classical learning at its highest.

Foxe did not quite live to see the end and fall of the bussing monks, but he came within a few years of it. In truth the monks were falling fast when Henry VIII administered the last blows to them. Long before he thought of looting the monastic houses upon principle, many of them were empty and others existed for the benefit of a dozen or half a dozen occupants. It was no impiety in Cardinal Wolsey to attack these useless bodies in the interest of Oxford's next and greatest foundation.¹

¹ For example, All Souls, a century earlier, was largely endowed by Archbishop Chichele from the revenues of suppressed priories.

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Wolsey was an Oxford man who had put his learning to good use in the Church and in the Commonwealth. He was in turn a scholar, fellow, and bursar of Magdalen, and secretary to Bishop Foxe. At the age of forty he became Lord Chancellor and a Cardinal. Some ten years later he obtained a papal bull entitling him to suppress and take over St. Frideswide's Priory and any other religious houses which had less than seven remaining members. In exercise of this power he mopped up some forty institutions, sent their monks elsewhere, and set about the grandiose scheme of "Cardinal College" in the year 1525, on the site where the sainted virgin's soul had received the benefit of eight centuries of prayer.

Rather to the annoyance of historians, Wolsey never fails to seize the imagination. His stupendous fortune, palaces, and banquets remain in the memory while more important aspects of foreign, religious, or domestic policy escape. So it is with Wolsey's work at Oxford. All that has been written about the new learning may be very dull, but "Cardinal College" is an unflinching thrill. Down comes the great man, with his red hat, his papal bull, and his forty-two effete houses. Away goes St. Frideswide's, its refectories, its dormitories, even a part of its Norman church. And up there springs in its place—a kitchen, a gigantic, a truly Wolseyan kitchen. Oxford had its first great laugh over Wolsey's kitchen, whose immense proportions foreshadowed not only the scale but also the wealth and luxury of the new college. Next they marked out an enormous quad, and the city wall was knocked down to make way for a hall far larger than any Oxford had yet seen, and men talked about a chapel on the other side which was to be the rival of King's College Chapel at Cambridge. Avenues were being planted in the meadows, and money was being poured out like water, when suddenly the great man fell and everything was taken from him. This was in 1529, so that "Cardinal College" had ~~four~~ four years of life before King Henry confiscated it. But the fallen Wolsey wrote to the King and begged him to spare "the poor College"; and three years later, it saw the light again as "King Henry VIII's College." Under this name it staggered on for several years, till in a general loot of likely foundations the King suppressed his own. Finally, not long before his death, Henry VIII decided upon a new arrangement which has lasted ~~ever~~ since. Having set up the new reformed diocese of Oxford, he turned the last Abbot of Osney into the first Bishop of Oxford, and gave him St. Frideswide's as his cathedral, by the name of the Cathedral Church of Christ. But since St. Frideswide's was surrounded by Wolsey's unfinished buildings, he also reconstituted the former college under the name of the "House of Christ" or Christ Church, and put it in charge of the Dean of the cathedral. And finally by way of benefaction he added to it the neighbouring properties of Peckwater and Canterbury.

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This last reconstitution took place in 1546, and a few months later Henry VIII was dead. Though he ranks legally as the parent of Oxford's greatest foundation, he despoiled the university in other ways. Commissioners sent down by Thomas Cromwell to Oxford were expressly warned by the King to keep their rapacious hands off his own college; but they did suppress three of the old monastic colleges—St. Bernard's, Durham, and Gloucester. Under Henry's successor Oxford fared even worse. A fresh lot of commissioners arrived in 1549 and 1550, and in the name of the infant Edward VI they indulged a Protestant orgy, pillaging the chapels, and, above all, destroying the libraries. Duke Humphrey's library, so proudly housed not a century before, was wholly destroyed. Most of the valuable manuscripts were burnt, and even the very shelves were taken down and sold by these good Calvinists.

Needless to say, there was no new building done in Oxford while such lovers of learning as these held power. But another three years brought back the old religion under the doughty auspices of Bloody Mary. She and Cardinal Pole lost no time in getting even with the time-servers of the last two reigns; and Oxford came into the limelight once more when in 1554 there arrived from the Tower of London three distinguished prisoners in the persons of Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley. They had been sent to Oxford to defend their views before an assembly of divines, and this they attempted to do in April 1554; but in the circumstances it is not strange that they came off second best. They were sent back to wait another eighteen months, pending the decision of their fate, in a prison called Bocardo which spanned the Cornmarket at the North Gate beside St. Michael's Tower. In the next year both Latimer and Ridley were tried in St. Mary's Church and condemned to be burnt at the stake; and a few days later burnt they were, outside the north wall and opposite to Balliol. A small cross let into the roadway and a taxi-rank now mark the place of their martyrdom. It is said that Cranmer watched their sufferings from the window of Bocardo; for with him, who had originally received his archbishopric from Rome, a more formal procedure had to be adopted. He too was tried in St. Mary's, but by a representative of the Pope, who then excommunicated him. Months later he was taken to the new Cathedral to be degraded; and finally he was taken to St. Mary's once more to recant his heresies. Six written recantations had failed to avert the death sentence, and Cranmer knew he was to be burnt immediately after his appearance in the church. He would not be further humiliated, and he mounted the platform and withdrew his writings with the famous prayer that his right hand might be the first burnt. So he died on the same spot as the two others, an honourable end to a not very edifying life.

Later generations of Puritans have seen to it that the burning





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of the bishops should not be forgotten ; but Oxford owes more to the reign of Bloody Mary than a solitary *auto-da-fé*. The year 1555 saw the rebirth of two of the suppressed monastic colleges in unmonastic guise. Two wealthy Catholic laymen, Sir Thomas Pope and Sir Thomas White, purchased respectively the properties of Durham College and St. Bernard's, and founded the new colleges of Trinity and St. John's. These were the last colleges to originate under the old religion. In 1558 Queen Mary died, and thenceforward Oxford has slept securely beneath the peaceful shelter of the established Church of England.