

# Nineteenth-Century Oxford as it was

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**A**NTHONY WOOD RECORDED IN 1669 THE START OF A SERVICE OF flying coaches, which were to travel, with luck and in summer only, from Oxford to London in one day. He left the tavern door against All Souls at six in the morning, "and at 7 the same night they were all set down in their inn in London."

In 1826 the Lord Mayor of London visited Oxford with his aldermen. He left the Mansion House at eight o'clock, and arrived at a quarter-past three after four changes of horses. Every ten years had knocked about a quarter of an hour off the journey. The Lord Mayor's return to London occupied three days, for he travelled in his state barge down the Thames, sleeping at Reading and Windsor. His chaplain wrote an account of the whole trip, which is perhaps the most sententious work of its size ever published.

So long as a day's journey lay between Oxford and the capital, the character of the former was not likely to suffer drastic change. Realising this fact, the university put up a strong opposition to the introduction of the railway. The first main line, projected in 1835, was not permitted, as a result of opposition in Parliament, to approach any nearer than Didcot. Not till ten years later was a branch line extended from Didcot to Oxford; and to this day the city occupies a very anomalous position on the railway map and in the time-table, for a place of its importance.

The coming of the railway did in fact coincide with the beginning of great changes in Oxford. In 1850 a Royal Commission was appointed to examine the state of both Oxford and Cambridge. Such an interference would have been inconceivable at the beginning of the century. It was to be but the first of several such inquiries, Acts of Parliament, and other indignities.

"Pre-Commission Oxford" was a community in which Anthony Wood or Thomas Hearne would have been perfectly at home. Cobbett on his Rural Rides was moved to wrath by its smug apathy. "Upon beholding the masses of buildings at Oxford,

devoted to what they call '*learning*,' I could not help reflecting on the drones that they contain and the wasps they send forth. . . . As I looked up at what they call *University Hall*, I could not help reflecting that what I had written, ever since I left Kensington on the 29th October, would produce more effect, and do more good in the world, than all that had, for a hundred years, been written by all the members of this University, who devour, perhaps, not less than a *million pounds a year*, arising from property, completely at the disposal of the 'Great Council of the Nation'; and I could not help exclaiming to myself: 'Stand forth, ye bewigged, ye gloriously feeding Doctors! Stand forth, ye rich of that Church whose *poor* have had given them a *hundred thousand pounds a year*, not out of your riches, but out of the *taxes*, raised, in part, from the *salt* of the labouring man! Stand forth and face me, who have, from the pen of my leisure hours, sent, amongst your flocks, a hundred thousand sermons in ten months! More than you have all done for the last half century!' I exclaimed in vain. I dare say (for it was at peep of day) that not a man of them had yet endeavoured to unclose his eyes."

Cobbett ranted as the spokesman of the labouring man. John Bright more neatly voiced the disdain of the middle classes when he called Oxford "the home of dead languages and undying prejudices."

Hearne and a Wood might have found the same ample scope for their censorious talents in the habits of the early 1800's. "Drinking," we learn yet again, "is the chief vice of the dons. In a College not a hundred miles from the Radcliffe, is a tutor—a clergyman, of course—and overseer of the youth of his house, who had two attacks of delirium tremens in my time. In another College, hard by the last, the Head himself is constantly put to bed by his servant." The curse of coffee-drinking was still a fruitful theme for complaint. A new and horrid indulgence was the smoking of cigars. Even the senior members were known to fall into this habit, though in the presence of an undergraduate they would hastily conceal the degenerate weed.

Dr. Buckland, the Professor of Geology, was a typical eccentric of the day. His methods of research were all his own. Jackals, monkeys, and bears inhabited his house in Tom Quad. He claimed to have eaten his way through the whole animal creation, and the most curious dishes were served to his guests—"horseflesh I remember more than once, crocodile another day, mice baked in batter on a third." He stated that a mole was the worst thing he had eaten. On one occasion he was visiting at Nuneham, and was shown a precious family relic, the heart of one of the kings of France. "I have eaten strange things," said Dr. Buckland, "but I have never eaten the heart of a king before"; and down it went. Dr. Buckland "endeavoured to show that the whole of the

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enormous superficial deposits of the globe are to be accounted for by Noah's flood." He was no Newton; as Dr. Shuttleworth expressed it :

"Some doubts were once expressed about the flood ;  
Buckland arose, and all was clear as mud."

With all their oddities and vices, these eighteenth-century relics, secure and celibate, moved in a singularly gracious world. Their manners were ceremonious. They wore their academic robes in the street, and no man dined in hall except in a frock coat. The Principal of Brasenose, then a foremost college, always took on extra horses for the last stage into Oxford "lest it should be said that the first Tutor of the first College of the first University of the world entered it with a pair."

The beauty of the coaching days was equal to their discomfort. "It is said in those days that the approach to Oxford by the Henley Road was the most beautiful in the world. Soon after passing Littlemore you came in sight of, and did not lose again, the sweet city with its dreaming spires. . . . At once, without suburban interval you entered the finest quarter of the town, rolling under Magdalen Tower, and past the Magdalen elms, then in full unmutated luxuriance, till the exquisite curves of the High Street opened on you, as you drew up at the Angel, or passed on to the Mitre and the Star. Along that road, or into Oxford by the St. Giles's entrance, lumbered at midnight Pickford's vast waggons with their six musically belled horses; sped stage-coaches all day long—Tantivy, Defiance, Rival, Regulator, Mazcappa, Dart, Magnet, Blenheim, and some thirty more; heaped high with ponderous luggage and with cloaked passengers, thickly hung at Christmas time with turkeys, with pheasants in October; their guards picked buglers, sending before them as they passed Magdalen Bridge, the now forgotten strains of 'Brignall Banks,' 'The Troubadour,' 'I'd be a Butterfly,' 'The Maid of Llangollen' or 'Begone Dull Care'; on the box their queer old purple-faced, many-caped drivers—Cheesman, Stevens, Fowles, Charles Horner, Jack Adams, and Black Will."

Nowhere do we see this twilit Oxford so well portrayed as in the exquisite water-colours of Rowlandson. Among glades of trees unlopped and in front of mellow colleges still unrestored, he paints the comings and goings of rotund doctors in flowing academicals, or the dalliance between young bucks of inhuman elegance and local beauties of robust development. Over all the paintings there broods a Thames-valley haze, a sense of timeless ease.

This old corrupt, self-satisfied Oxford, which had long since ceased to grow or to evolve, staged a dying triumph in the year 1814, when the Allied Sovereigns came to England in premature celebration of the downfall of Napoleon. The Prince Regent and

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the Duke of York ; the Tsar of Russia and the King of Prussia ; Wellington, Blücher, and Metternich all came to Oxford on a jaunt. Degrees were conferred in the Sheldonian amid undergraduate uproar ; banquets were partaken in the Radcliffe Camera and Christ Church Hall. The setting, the atmosphere was just as it might have been a century earlier ; but beneath all the unaltered ritual a deep change was at work.

Wellington himself is perhaps the last representative of the old order. He became Chancellor a few years later, and held the office till his death. His last days on earth were spent in an endeavour to master an immense Blue book produced by one of the Royal Commissions on the affairs of the university. Wellington was not an Oxford man. His Latin speeches were adorned with false quantities. Under the present system of examinations, it would have been impossible for this supreme soldier and diplomat ever to have entered the army or the civil service. It may be conceived that he was out of sympathy with the reforms of his day, for the chief of these was the introduction of the examination system.

Cyril Jackson, an assiduous Dean of Christ Church, was mainly responsible for the adoption of the Examination Statute of 1801. His still more assiduous pupil, Robert Peel, was the first man to achieve a "double first." Thus was a future Prime Minister to be identified by his ability to cram his adolescent brain with likely answers to likely questions. The merits of the new system were obvious ; its disadvantages were less obvious. It was good enough for the type of nineteenth-century progressive to whom the obvious was all in all.

From Jackson's time onwards there has been a tendency to classify all graduates as "first-class men" or otherwise, according to their fortuitous performance before the examiners at an age when they may either be quite undeveloped or fully qualified or already stale. It was the "first-class men," the Peels and the Gladstones, who were chosen to represent the university in Parliament ; it was they who used that trust to knock away the legal props of the university and the established Church ; it was they who sent Royal Commissions to superimpose their cocksure recommendations upon the development of centuries.

Oxford won back a brief renown by its own passionate resistance to the destructive activities of its own "first-class men." There was a great Provost of Oriel, Edward Copleston, who had no faith in what he called "the quackery of the schools." Oriel had lately initiated the revolutionary system of electing fellows from among the members of other colleges. Under the regime of Copleston, they were chosen for their intellects and not for their degrees. Keble came to Oriel from Corpus with a double first ; Newman followed him from Trinity, having all but failed to obtain a degree



88 Eminent Victorians: Sir Henry Acland, Jowett (centre), and Dr. Wood of Trinity



80 The Oxford Crew, 1860



90 Gentleman Commoner

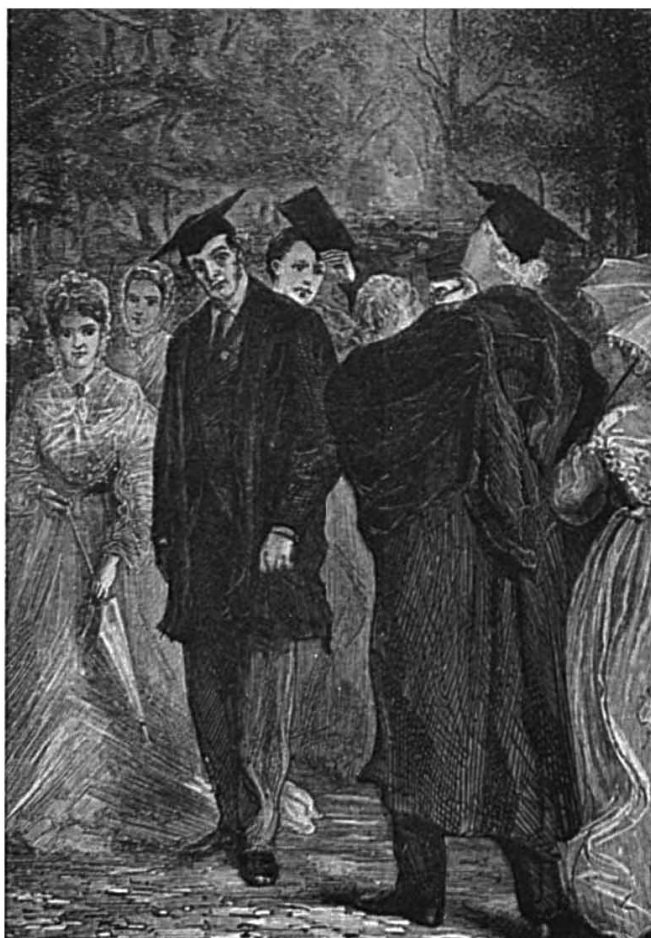


91 Nobleman



92 Pro proctor

From *Ackermann's "Oxford"*



93 "Show Sunday in the Long Walk," from *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1801)



04 Scholar



05 Bachelor of Arts



06 Student in Civil Law



07 "A Wine"



08 "After a Breakfast." Both from *Tom Brown at Oxford*



99 Rooms in College in the 'Seventies



100 The High in the 'Seventies



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at all. By the end of Copleston's period, the senior common room at Oriel was the admitted head and centre of the university.

Oriel College, founded by a Rector of St. Mary's, has always held the adwoson of the University Church. Newman was chosen for this important living at the age of twenty-seven, and he held it from 1828 to 1843. During those fifteen years the pews, in which generations of doctors had dutifully nodded, were packed with eager and excited listeners. The art of preaching was reborn. Newman was the master of an exquisite English style; and his message was further adorned with a wonderful modulation of voice. "Through the silence of that high Gothic building," wrote one who heard him, "the words fell on the ear like the measured drippings of water in some vast dim cave."

The year 1838, which followed the Reform Bill, saw the initiation of many legislative schemes in which the spirit of Jeremy Bentham and Joseph Hume was more conspicuous than the inspiration of Christianity. In that year the pulpit of St. Mary's upon which Newman had cast such lustre was occupied for a day by his friend Keble, who was to preach the usual assize sermon before one of His Majesty's judges. He took as his subject "National Apostasy," by which he meant the growing disrespect of the legislature for the establishment, and the divorce which the State appeared to be seeking from its spouse the Church. His sermon was a defiant re-statement after two centuries of the views which had brought Archbishop Laud to glory and disaster.

Keble's sermon created a stir in other places than Oxford. The spirit of the reformed Parliament was evangelical, if not dissenting. The vogue was all for legislation of the most scientific and secular description. Chadwick and Exeter Hall were the apostle and the temple of the prevailing worship; Blue books were its gospels. The Church and its privileges were regarded rather as the Lord Mayor of London and his satellites are regarded to-day. And if there was one place more than another which symbolised the decay of the establishment, it was Oxford.

Now, after generations of slightly alcoholic slumber, the Church aroused itself, and at Oxford of all places, to claim its Elizabethan status as an equal partner with the State in the affairs of men. The Oriel group, led by Keble, Newman, and Pusey, took full advantage of the sensational effect of Keble's sermon by starting at once the issue of their *Tracts for the Times*. They aroused fierce controversy. They were bitterly attacked; most notably by Arnold of Rugby, another fellow of Oriel. They were accused of ritualism, of an insidious tendency towards Rome. But for a time it seemed as if they would succeed in the regeneration of the Church of England. They were not ritualists; their whole claim was that the English Church was one with the mediæval church whose shrines it had inherited.

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The failure of the Oxford Movement showed that the English Church did not embrace this flattering pedigree. As a progenitor, it preferred Henry the Eighth to St. Peter. Newman, the leader of the movement, overstepped the mark with his ninetieth *Tract*, in which he sought to reconcile the Thirty-Nine Articles with Catholic doctrine. His tract was condemned in Convocation; he resigned the vicarage of St. Mary's, and went into retirement. After two years of tormented indecision, he was received into the Catholic Church. His conversion gave an affirmative answer to all the angry and hostile questions which had been aroused by the activities of the movement. From that moment it was utterly dead; its postulates were proved to be untenable by the action of its own leader. Among those who had fallen beneath Newman's spell there was a landslide of conversions. Keble retired to his Hampshire vicarage. The empty name of the movement only survived to give feeble impetus to an effeminate ritualism.

These controversies are being forgotten. Oxford no longer thunders with accusations and condemnations; Erastians and Socinians no longer cut one another in the streets; and the conversion to Rome of an occasional curate does not electrify the university. Pusey<sup>1</sup> is commemorated by an obscure institution in St. Giles's. Keble has given his name to a new college.

Amid this domestic storm of sermons, tracts, and conversions, Parliament proceeded to enforce its will upon the university. One by one the barriers so long manned against Catholics and non-conformists were torn down. Royal Commissions presented revolutionary reports; Convocation and Congregation retreated protesting before the force of national opinion. It seemed to the older members of the university that all their institutions would be swamped under the onrush of new sects and classes. Papists on one side and dissenters on the other were to invade the sacred territory of the established church. In one year, "non-collegiate students" were to be admitted; next, the establishment of women's colleges was mooted. And when the fellows were allowed to marry, it seemed that change and decay could go no farther.

The alarmed conservatives had underestimated their own powers of resistance. The university was very rich and arrogant; those who knocked at its gates were poor and shy. In fact, when the gates were opened, they were too shy to come inside. They camped outside the coveted city. The nonconformists had qualms lest the pure bigotry of their students should be corrupted; so they sat themselves down in mournful seclusion in the vicinity

<sup>1</sup> "He was in the three-horse omnibus which used to run from Oxford to the railway at Steventon, and a garrulous lady talked to him of the Newmanites and of Dr. Pusey, adding that the latter, she was credibly informed, sacrificed a lamb every Friday. 'I thought I ought to tell her,' he said; 'so I answered, "My dear Madam, I am Dr. Pusey, and I do not know how to kill a lamb."'"

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of the Parks. The staunch pioneers among the women remembered that there were dangers of another sort ; so they built themselves a chain of suburban fortresses, Bastilles of antiquated prejudice, at a safe distance from the infection of masculine ideas. Only the catholics discreetly installed themselves in quiet and advantageous positions, from which they exercise an unobtrusive but powerful influence upon the undergraduate body. The great waves of middle-class invasion have spent themselves : the citadel remains intact. All round the university has been established a medley of miscellaneous institutions for the instruction of this or that sect or class or sex or party. Within these institutions, the qualities of intolerance, prejudice, and exclusiveness thrive and pullulate. But inside the university and among the ancient colleges, they are extinct.