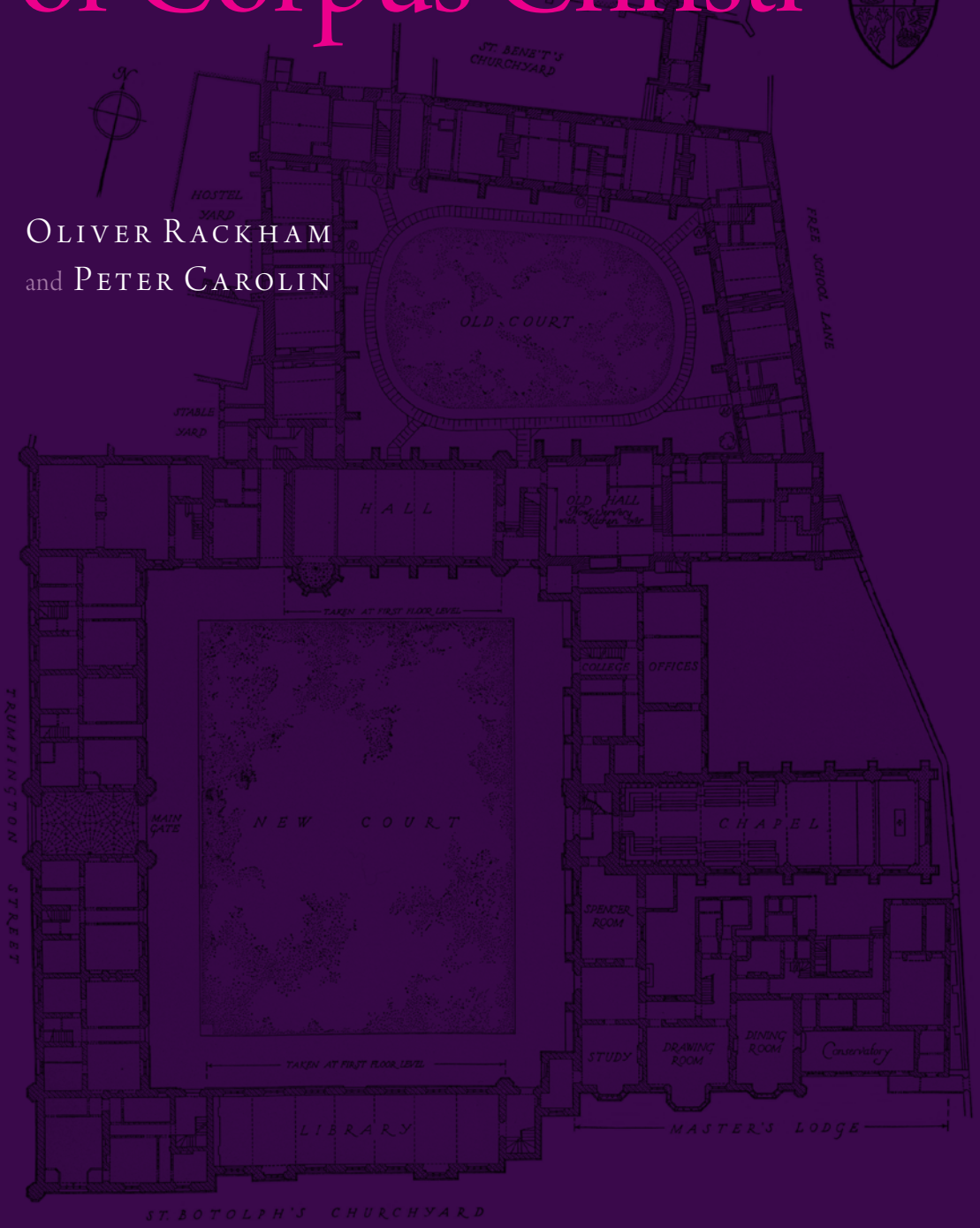
The Courts of Corpus Christi

Oliver Rackham
and Peter Carolin



CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE · CAMBRIDGE

The Courts of Corpus Christi

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Corpus Christi College · Cambridge

The idea for a publication of an edited version of 'The making of Old Court' was suggested by Michael Gwinnell (m. 1964) following the Commemorative Symposium for Oliver Rackham in August 2017. The content was subsequently expanded to include both Peter Carolin's recent essay on the design of New Court and an illustrated description of the works undertaken in the Old House Kitchen project of 2017–19.

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Contents

'The making of Old Court' was first published in the Letter of the Corpus Association *in two parts, in 1987 and 1988. This version was abridged and edited by Peter Carolin. Colour has been inserted in Oliver Rackham's original line drawings and a postscript and photographs have been added.*

'The theatre of New Court' was first published in The Letter *for 2018. It appears here with some amendments.*


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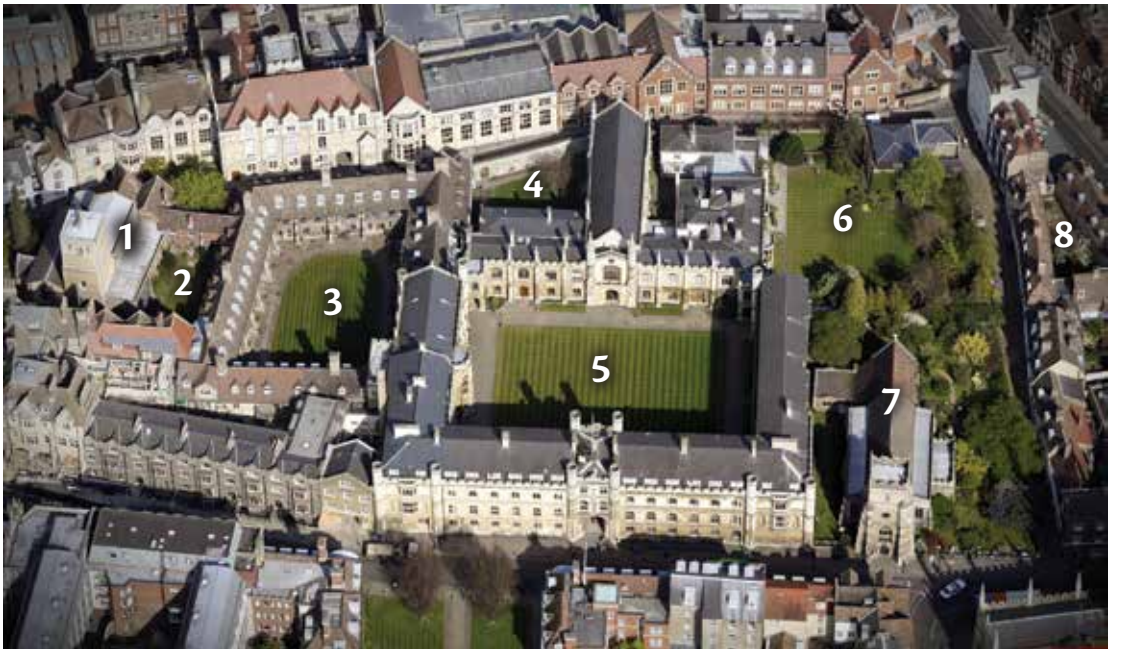
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Foreword

Nicholas Ray

What constitutes a college? Its people, surely: the fellows, staff, undergraduates and post-graduates, making up the community that bears its name. But also its fabric – the bricks and stone and timber. Both are continually renewed. Generations come and go and are celebrated, firstly in the memories of those that succeed, then in text and images, which go to make up the history of an enduring institution. Meanwhile the buildings reflect changes of climate and economic conditions, shifting requirements, or fashions, and in some cases the character and personality of those charged with their conception and design.

The fabric, however, needs to be arranged in a pattern, which in Cambridge is conventionally a courtyard form. We like to think of Cambridge courts and Oxford quads as peculiarly British, but the pattern is evident in Bologna from 1088, in Paris from 1150, and in Salamanca in 1218. It has precedents, in monastic buildings, in castles and also in manor houses: the great nineteenth-century historians of Oxford, Cambridge and Eton, Willis and Clark, argued that the medieval manor house was the closest predecessor. Our own climate has a bearing – courts, especially in Cambridge, being more generous than on continental Europe in order to allow winter sun penetration. There is also a social phenomenon associated with the courtyard form: since access is by staircase, it's necessary to descend and enter the courtyard before climbing a neighbour's stair to visit someone who may be only a few feet away. The open space of the court, rather than the corridor in hotel-like hostels built in many universities since the nineteenth century, acts as the place of social encounter. Twenty-first century building committees commissioning new undergraduate accommodation are therefore inclined to instruct their architects to provide it 'on the staircase pattern', despite the difficulties with contemporary fire legislation they will need to overcome. It is with the fabric and the architectural pattern, the courtyard form, that these two essays are principally concerned, one on each of the two courts that go to make up Corpus Christi's Old House.

Old Court, begun in 1352, is unique in Cambridge as being the oldest surviving enclosed courtyard in Cambridge retaining its form and (in general) its appearance, despite numerous alterations over time. Most medieval courts were modernised at a later date, Trinity Hall's Front Court, for instance, in the eighteenth century after a bequest by a former Master, being thoroughly

Nicholas Ray is author of *Cambridge Architecture: a Concise Guide* Cambridge University Press 1994. He was the architect of the Old House Kitchen project of 2017–19

Opposite page:
1. Cambridge and three of William Wilkins' buildings. His fourth court, New Court at Trinity College, is not shown here.
1. The Screen and South Range, King's College
2. New Court, Corpus Christi College
3. Downing College

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2. The Old House site, Corpus Christi College.
1. St Bene't's Church
2. Churchyard
3. Old Court
4. Fellows' garden
5. New Court
6. Master's Lodge garden
7. St Botolph's Church
8. Botolph Court

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classicised and clad in ashlar at the same time as they removed the medieval fabric in their Chapel and Hall. Of course the south side of Corpus's Old Court was considerably altered where Wilkins replaced the old kitchens and buttery by his new hall, but the sense of complete enclosure and a certain stylistic consistency prevails. And fortunately for us, on the north range, the window pattern in Corpus's Old Court remains, at least in part, illustrating the common pattern of larger shared rooms occupied by Fellows or up to four students off which were smaller individual chambers. The first floor used to be open to the pitched roof so dormers did not arrive until the sixteenth century at the same time as the chimneys – the present ones are eighteenth-century replacements. There was no heating until then and the fourteenth-century openings may well have been largely unglazed.

3. Old Court, north side, with the tower of St Bene't's Church behind. The arched opening to the left used to be the entrance to the College. The square-headed windows, garrets, chimneys and buttresses are later changes and additions. *Development Office photograph*

Oliver Rackham's description of Old Court contains much knowledge: as an authority on medieval woodlands there was no one better equipped to tell us how much timber was used in its construction and where it came from. He agrees with Willis and Clark that the origin of the collegiate courtyard pattern is domestic, not ecclesiastical. He reveals how the incorporation of significant features, such as buttresses, and the choices of material and detail, were frequently dictated by convention and fashion, not by convenience or even necessity. He informs us that medieval carpenters were perfectly aware that their floors could be more efficient structurally, but they preferred to lay their joists 'sideways' in order that they should appear more imposing. He explains why the chimneys did not arrive until the sixteenth century, informing us that winters in the mid-fourteenth century were not as cold as we might believe, going on to describe how members of the College managed to keep themselves warm, and proceeding to detail the costs of doing so.

Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about those charged with designing and building Old Court. The reverse is the case with New Court, a quite deliberate and emphatic re-statement of the court form by the architect who, with his 1806 design for Downing, had shown how collegiate form could be reinterpreted quite differently in neo-classical vein: separate and distinct pavilions. Arguably it had a direct effect on Jefferson's plan for the University of Virginia, which was conceived some time after 1817, and hence the many American campuses that followed. Why, therefore, did Wilkins choose neo-Gothic? As Peter Carolin demonstrates, New Court is a highly self-conscious piece of artifice by an architect who was always an antiquarian by temperament and came from a family with close connections to the theatre. William Wilkins was clearly conscious of the ritual aspect of collegiate life and sought to provide an appropriate setting for a venerable medieval foundation, which is a completely different problem to that which he had encountered at Downing. The essay suggests that not only did he establish New Court as a raised level stage, on the previously uneven site, but that he manipulated the plan to provide precise alignments with significant buildings in Cambridge: the chapel at King's College, where he had just been commissioned to provide the stone screen and porters' lodge, and the tower of the medieval church of St Bene't's. The latter was all the more important to the College in view of its history in providing the original place of worship. These are bold hypotheses, but compellingly argued in this brief essay.

Between them, two Fellows of the College, from different academic disciplines and writing about the two courtyards that define Old House, help us to understand and re-read the evidence before our eyes, which is often un-noticed, or misinterpreted: Corpus scholarship creatively brought to bear on Corpus' fabric and form.

Cambridge's earliest surviving court described

The making of Old Court

Oliver Rackham

The College was founded by the united Cambridge Gilds of Corpus Christi and of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The date is indefinite. Was it 1352, when the Gilds got a licence, the equivalent of planning permission? or 1355, when the statutes were ratified? or 1353, when it acquired 'all the vessels and utensils needed for brewing'?

Exact dates are of some importance, for the College was founded in the shadow of the most terrible event that has ever befallen this country, the Black Death of 1349. Reputable estimates of the death-rate centre around one in three.[1] Fear and grief, such as we can hardly imagine, were to hang over many succeeding generations: for example, plague returned in 1361 and carried off Henry Duke of Lancaster, one of the original benefactors. It has been asserted that the College was founded in consequence of the Black Death. This is unlikely, for there would have hardly been time to go through the legal, financial and practical stages by 1352; but detailed dating of the buildings, through ascertaining from the annual rings in the timber in which years the trees were felled, might help to make up for the lack of evidence in the records.[2]

Colleges

In 1352, there were already seven colleges in Cambridge, six in Oxford, and one in Salisbury.[3] Corpus was called a College; others usually called themselves Houses *(domus scolarium)* or Halls.[4] Besides these academic colleges, there were many others up and down the country which were associations of priests for various, often ill-defined, purposes. For example, Edmund Gonville, a few years before, had founded two colleges: Rushford College in 1342 and what is now Gonville & Caius College in 1348. Rushford is a very obscure place in the Breckland, a most unlikely site for any kind of college. Its buildings still stand, and it is possible that they, and not Corpus *[1]*, are the prototype college court.

Early colleges, whether academic or not, were not monastic institutions. They all have an instantly recognizable, and emphatically secular, plan: Hall, buttery, pantry, Master's Lodge, chambers *[2]*. Corpus had the duty (which it still discharges) of praying for the souls of departed brethren and sisters of the Gilds, and many of its members were in priest's orders, but were never monks. The College's ground plan is that of a medieval private house, adapted by the addition of chambers and an integral kitchen. Monasteries are centred round churches because each monk had to say a daily Mass; early colleges, like

Oliver Rackham (1939–2015) was a longtime Fellow and, from 2007 to 2008, Master of the College. As a historical ecologist he specialised in trees and ancient woodlands. He was the author of *The History of the Countryside* (1986)

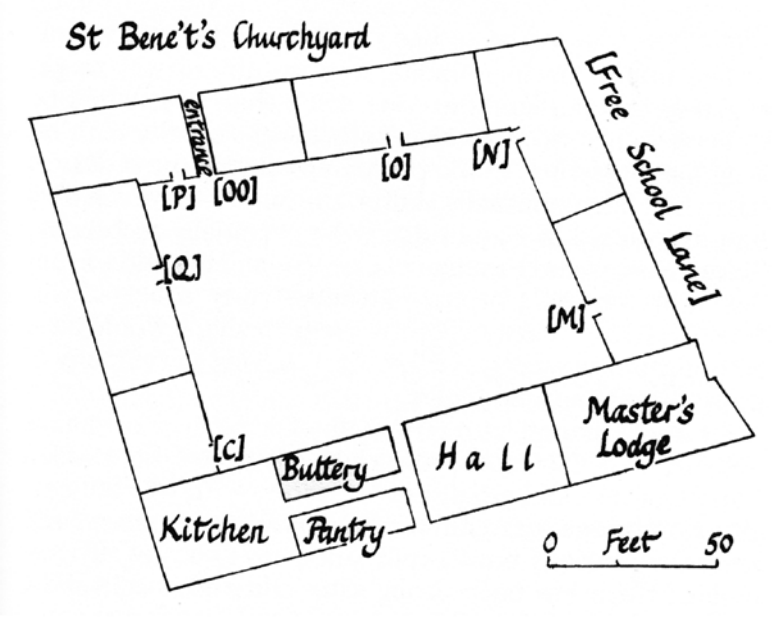
1. *Hatcher J 1977 'Plague, population and the English economy 1348–1530' London: Macmillan*

2. *In 2018, a programme of dendrochronological dating was undertaken in order to determine the precise age of some of these elements – but unfortunately insufficient tree rings were present in any of the timbers for dates to be obtained. See Newman R 2019 'The former Master's Lodge and Great Hall, Corpus Christi College: an Archaeological and Architectural Investigation' unpublished report by Cambridge Archaeological Unit, University of Cambridge, p. 15*

3. *De Vaux College, founded 1262, suppressed 1542*

4. *Willis R and Clark JW 1886 'The architectural history of the University of Cambridge' Cambridge: University Press*

Opposite page:
1. Old Court seen from the screens passage. The tower of St Bene't's Church can be glimpsed over the roof



2. Old Court plan – based on a large medieval private house. The letters indicate the staircases to Fellows' and students' chambers or rooms

Corpus and Rushford, did not even have chapels. Colleges had privacy which monasteries did not. In all monastic orders (except the Carthusian) monks had common dormitories; colleges had chambers, self-contained flats into which their members could retire and lock themselves in.

The Site

3. Botolph Court with its typical medieval half-timbered city house

The first stage in founding any institution was to get together enough land into one ownership. This could be difficult in a town, in which houses were usually built on long narrow strips. Corpus, like most early colleges, was squeezed into a back street. Its irregular shape would have complicated the work of carpenters, having to cut many of their joints to special angles.

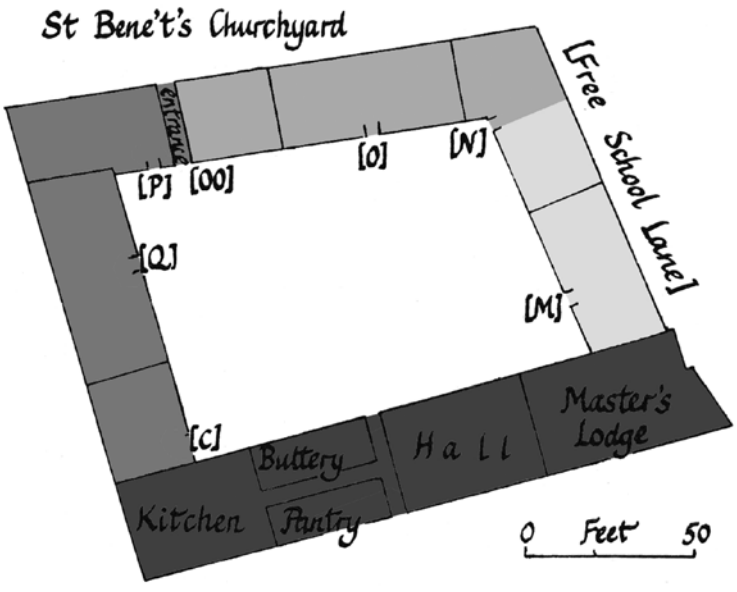
Until the seventeenth century the Old Court would have been quite conspicuous, towering above the little wooden houses of one-and-a-half or two storeys with which innercity Cambridge was crammed. Most of these have been swept away, but Corpus still owns two that survive. One of them has been brought to light and is splendidly displayed in Botolph Court *[3]*; the other is embedded in St Edward's Passage.

Order of building

The only written record of the College's early days is that of John Josselin, who wrote a history of the College *c.*1569, in which he says that the building was finished mainly in the reign of Thomas de Eltisley, the first Master, but partly in that of Richard Treton, his successor.[5] If Josselin is right (he quotes no source) this would mean that the Old Court took at least twenty years to build and was completed in 1377 or 1378.

The first part of the building was undoubtedly the south range, comprising the old Master's Lodge (now B staircase), the old Hall (now the kitchens), and

5. *Josselin J 1880 'Historiola Collegii Corporis Christi' ed. JW Clark Cambridge Antiquarian Society Octavo Publications 17*



4. Old Court plan showing sequence of construction in clock or sun-wise direction starting with the Master's Lodge – kitchen range (dark tone) and ending with the east range (light tone)

the kitchens with buttery and pantry (demolished in the 1820s and replaced by the present Hall). Probably this was intended as a free-standing building – it had a gable at each end – and making it into a quadrangle was one of those brilliant ideas which occasionally come out of College meetings. Internal evidence (chiefly of carpentry) shows that the rest of the Old Court was added, two half-staircases at a time, in a sun-wise direction beginning with C staircase and ending with M *[4]*. Where M staircase meets the old Master's Lodge, a blind half-arch has been built into the wall to avoid blocking one of the Lodge windows *[5]* – a makeshift which shows that the adding of M had not been anticipated when the Lodge was built.

5. The blind half-arch was constructed to avoid blocking a window formed 25 years earlier in the first phase of construction

Building in stone

Why is the Old Court built of stone? Architectural historians commonly gossip about 'local building materials', but the choice of what to use was determined by social conventions more subtle than the mere matter of what was nearby. The innumerable timber-framed houses of Suffolk do not mean that there was much woodland. There was not, but custom required that ordinary houses be of timber. There was a tradition of timber-framing in the Breckland and in Cambridge, with no local woodland at all, but not in the well-wooded parts of north Norfolk or Dorset.

In Cambridge, the local building-stone was the hard chalk known as clunch. It is easily worked, and before the days of acid rain was an ideal stone for all but the most costly edifices. There was a further convention that colleges, like churches, had to be in stone, even in areas where the local houses were of timber. There was evidently a rigid custom that it was improper for a College, however poor (like Corpus) to live in timber. Like a church, it had to build in stone.

The stones of Corpus

6. Clunch lumps in the Cherry Hinton quarry

7. Both the outer and inner walls of Old Court were faced in randomly-laid Barnack ragstone. The original golden-yellow colour can be glimpsed here through the sooty weathering

There are about 2500 tons of stone in the Old Court – of four different kinds, and only one of them local. White clunch from Cherry Hinton, used as rubble or hewn into rough blocks, forms the core and indoor face of the walls, whose foundations are boulders of the same. The College still has a charter of 1358 entitling it to dig stone in the great quarry there *[6]*. An even harder chalk, the grey clunch known as Burwell Rock, forms the window and door surrounds. It may have come from Burwell, 15 miles away, but there are nearer outcrops. It is quite easy to carve into ornamental mouldings and cusps, yet is durable if sheltered from the weather.

The facing stone of the Old Court is a golden-yellow limestone, full of fossil shells and split into slabs which are laid in the characteristic 'ragstone' manner *[7]*. It covers the outer walls, but its wonderful colour can be appreciated only in spots where the sooty filth has been washed off by leaks from gutters. It also faces the inner walls but is firmly covered up by a dingy but extremely solid rendering put on in the 1920s. This stone, much used by the builders of St Bene't's Church 300–400 years before, came from Barnack in Northamptonshire,[6] 68 miles away by the Fenland waterways.[7]

The other and much more famous Barnack stone is one of the two chief medieval building-stones all over East Anglia and the east Midlands. It is also a shelly limestone, but a freestone – it can be cut in any direction. In Corpus, this magnificently durable stone is used sparingly in exposed places, such as quoins and offsets, and the mysterious dog who sits on the Free School Lane gable [since identified as a lop-eared hound called a talbot]. The transport of stone would have cost something like £140 out of a total building cost of about £800.[8]

Timber roofs

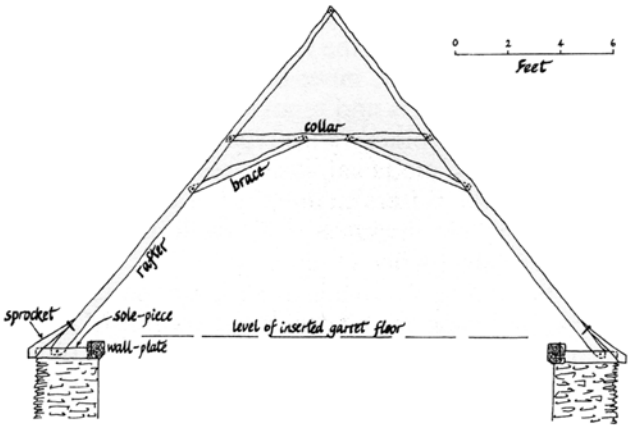
The roofs of the Old Court, which survive almost complete on the north and east sides of the old Master's Lodge, consist of the same unit repeated originally some 220 times *[8]*. Two rafters meet at the apex and are joined by a collar *(wyndbeme)* with two braces *(suthlates)*. At the base each rafter is founded on a short sole-piece lying across the top of the wall which joins it to a wall-plate against the inner face of the wall. All the joints are simple mortices and tenons; there are not the elaborately ingenious joints whose typology is a means of dating more complex medieval structures. Sprockets pegged to the base of the rafters enable the bottom courses of tiles to cover the whole thickness of the wall; they prove that the roofs have always been tiled.

Of the three surviving angles, the south-east has no special provision for a corner: the roof of M staircase has been added to the pre-existing roof of the old Master's Lodge without disturbing it *[9]*. At the north-west and northeast angles, however, corners were specially designed. Each corner is spanned diagonally by a pair of extra-stout rafters, originally joined at their feet by a tiebeam. As the ordinary rafters approach the corner they get shorter, and their feet (on the inner slope) or their heads (on the outer slope) are nailed to the diagonal rafters. This simple and practical kind of roof still survives on thousands of medieval houses, barns, and churches up and down the country.

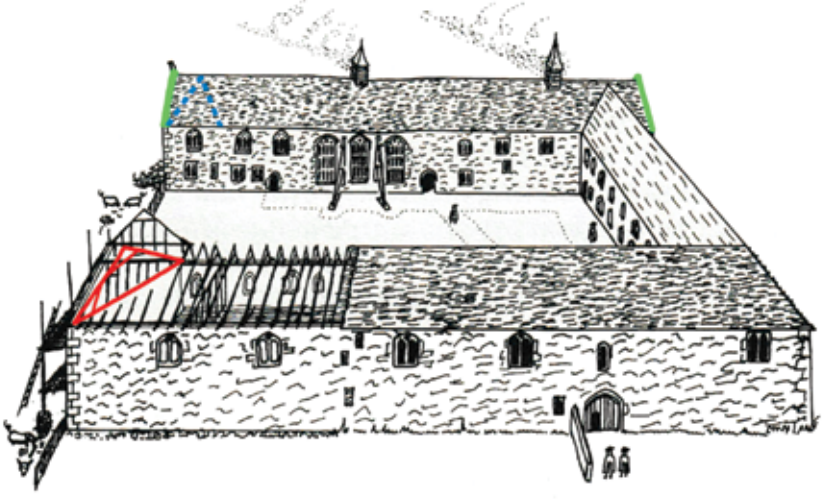
6. *Purcell D 1967 'Cambridge stone' London: Faber*

7. *Map by G. Fowler in 'A guide to Wicken Fen' National Trust, 3rd ed. 1959*

8. *Rogers JET 1866–1902 'A history of agriculture and prices in England' Oxford: Clarendon*

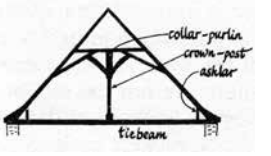


8. Roof construction. There are about 220 of these trusses connected to each other by nothing more than small tiling battens



9. Old Court under construction. On the far side is the south range which was constructed first. Note the shoring between the pointed arch windows of the Hall – the walls had started to move because there was no tie beam in the roof. Stone gable walls (green) terminated this range. Giant trusses (red) spanned the north-east and north-west corners. The roof of the yet-to-be built east range would abut the existing north range roof (blue). Note the smoke from the Hall and kitchen fires flowing from the roof louvres

The Old Court roof is typical of biggish workaday roofs of its period, except in two respects. It has never had a collar-purlin, a long timber running lengthwise under the middles of the collars and connecting the couples to each other, with, every 15 feet or so, a crown-post supporting the collar-purlin from a tiebeam spanning the walls *[10]*. Collar-purlins and crown-posts give the roof lengthwise stability and are nearly always present in roofs of this kind in wholly timber-framed houses and barns. They are sometimes omitted from the roofs of stone buildings (e.g. St Botolph's Church), because the stone gable ends prevent the roof-couples from tumbling over lengthwise. The lack of a crown-purlin in Corpus is further evidence that it was not planned as a court. Such a roof would have been appropriate for the south range, built first, which ended in two stone gables. When the rest of the court was added, the carpenters continued the same design, forgetting that it was not orthodox for buildings that had timber-framed corners. Surprisingly, it has survived: nothing but the tiling battens prevents the roof from collapsing lengthwise. A less significant omission is of ashlar pieces, short vertical posts joining the rafters to the wall-plates; Old Court has them only on the diagonal couples.

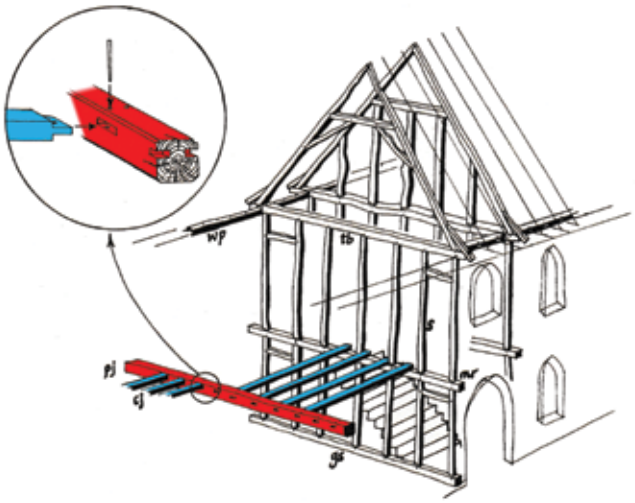


10. A collar-purlin roof would be the conventional form of construction – providing lengthwise stability to the trusses

Timber floors

The floors – only the first floors are original, the garrets being added later – are the only respect in which the carpentry can be called primitive. Principal joists, about a foot square, span the court from wall to wall and are connected by common joists which carry the floorboards *[11]*. The joint at the end of each common joist is a middle-third tenon, the simplest joint and least efficient for its purpose. Each floor is, in effect, treated as a partition lying on its side. Later centuries invented special loadbearing joints for floor joists, which can be seen in the garret floors.

The carpenter caused each principal joist to project a board's thickness above the common joists in order to save one floorboard. Very little of the boards survives, but in Botolph Court there is a medieval floor, complete with original boards, which has just this feature.



11. First floor construction. *pj* principal joist (red) *cj* common joist (blue) Detail in circle is of a middle-third tenon joint between the principal and common joists

Internal partitions and stairs

12. Half-timbered partition studs and middle rail on N staircase

All the internal walls of the Old Court were timberframed, notably the partitions that rise either side of each staircase *[12 and 13]*. At least eight partitions survive, though they are hidden except on N staircase. At the bottom is a massive timber called a groundsill. Seven vertical studs rise to a middle rail which carries the upper floor, from which rise seven more studs to a third big horizontal timber which acts as a tie-beam to the roof. The infill between each pair of studs consists of oak laths, tied with string or withies to three horizontal oak splints let into sockets cut in the studs *[14]*, and covered over with daub mixed from clay, chalk and chaff. This kind of wattle-and-daub, instead of the more usual sallow or hazel rods, can be seen in a number of medieval buildings in Cambridge and East Anglia; even where it no longer survives it can be inferred from the grooves cut in the horizontal timbers to receive the ends of the laths.

The doorways to the rooms on each staircase are usually in their original positions, although some of the doors themselves are hideously modern. One enters the ground-floor rooms by doors between studs 1 and 2 (tripping, if the hour be late, over the groundsill *[15]*, as many undergraduates have done).

13. Timber framed partitions on either side of staircase.
gs groundsill
mr middle rail
s studs
tb tie beam
wp wall-plate
The temporary end wall partition (red)is similar to the standard partition (blue) but extends up to the roof truss collar and would have been faced with a weatherproof cladding

The stairs rise in a single flight to a small landing from which doors between studs 6 and 7 lead into the upper rooms. The stairs are modern – the original ones would have been formed from solid oak beams cut to a triangular section.

At each staircase, one partition was carried up only to eaves level; the other was built into the roof and went up to the collar *[13]*. Since the latter partition is the one further round the court in a sun-wise direction, this suggests that the court was built in sections each ending with a staircase. The higher of the two partitions was intended as a temporary end wall.

Presumably there were further timber-framed partitions dividing the rooms of one staircase from those of the next. These would have been largely destroyed when the chimneys were added. If anything now remains, it is hidden. They would not have held up the floors as the staircase partitions do, for each of them came halfway between two principal joists.

Timbers in the Old Court were all meant to be seen and to form part of the architecture; they were not merely structural. The floor-joists, for instance, are set on the flat, so as to look as imposing as possible, although the medievals were well aware that a floor is stiffer if the joists are set on edge. Much more timber was used than mere engineering would require; this is why the College, like most medieval timber frames, has survived centuries of rot, abuse, and overloading. Every time a big party is held in an upstairs room, a single floor (with its 'primitive' construction) supports more people than the entire population of the College 650 years ago.

14. Wall construction of timber studs infilled with oak laths (shown here exposed in the central panel) covered with daub

15. Groundsill between studs framing a doorway

Timber sources

All the timber is oak, and most of it comes from small trees. The medieval carpenters made efficient use of the oak tree: they did not pretend that trees are straight and have flat surfaces. Each beam comes from a single tree and retains something of its crookedness, round section and the position of its branches. We can therefore examine the timbers and reconstruct how many trees were used, how old they were and in what environment they grew.[9]

9. *Rackham O 1972 'Grundle House: on the quantities of timber in certain East Anglian buildings in relation to local supplies' Vernacular Architecture 3 pp. 3–8; Rackham O, Blair WJ and Munby JT 1978 'The thirteenth-century roofs and floor of the Blackfriars priory at Gloucester' Medieval Archaeology 22 pp. 105–22.*

16. A possible source for the timber used in Old Court. Bradfield Woods near Bury St Edmunds

The timbers of the Old Court (allowing for those now missing) amounted to about 1400 oaks, of which 1250 were very small (about 7½ in diameter), 90 were small (11 in), and 60 were middle-sized (15 in). They would have added up to about 5500 cubic feet, or 100 tons, of timber. This quantity of oak would have cost something like £27. Trinity Hall paid £100 to the carpenter for materials and workmanship for one-third the amount of building; the timber therefore cost much less than the working.

Where did the timber come from? The distribution of branches indicates that the trees grew in a managed coppice-wood among underwood, much like the Bradfield Woods near Bury St Edmunds today *[16]*; not in wildwood, nor in hedges. In the fourteenth century there was no woodland near Cambridge apart from Madingley Wood.[10] Cambridge got its timber from places mostly about 20 miles away – e.g. Gonville Hall from Warboys and Ramsey (Huntingdonshire), probably from woods that still exist.[11] Timber might alternatively have come from the Continent via King's Lynn.

10. *Rackham O 1975 'Hayley Wood: its history and ecology' Cambridge: Cambridgeshire & Isle of Ely Naturalists' Trust*

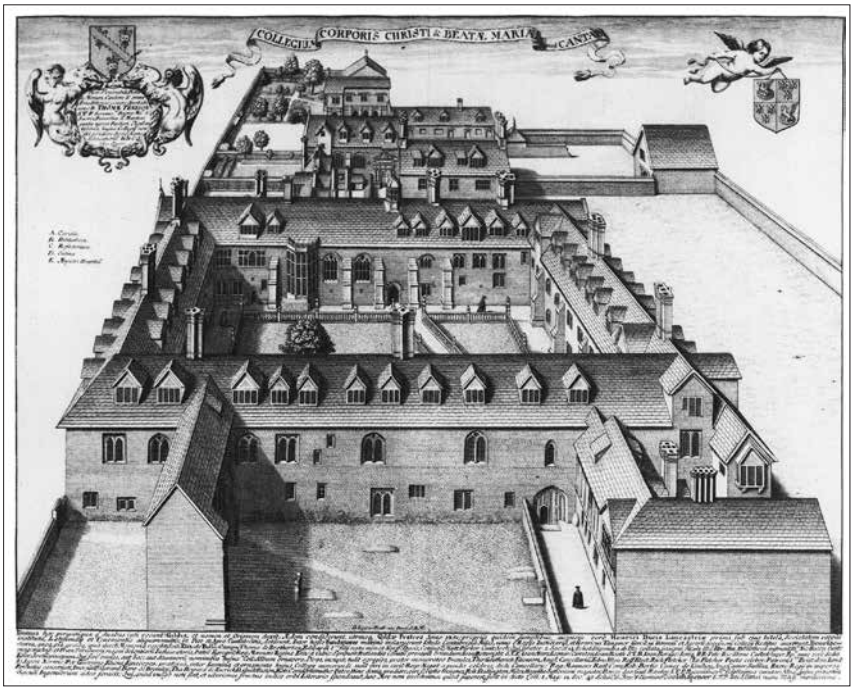
11. *Willis and Clark 1886*

What the rooms would have looked like

Each staircase originally had two nobly-proportioned rooms above, and two spacious but not so lofty rooms below. A reconstruction of one of the upper rooms *[17]*, illustrates the medieval love of high ceilings – so high that it has later been cut into two quite adequate storeys.

On the court side every room had three windows, one large between two small. These survive best on the ground floor. Upstairs less of the original remains – the upper rooms have been more important and have had more money spent on them – but there is enough to show that the arrangement was identical. On the outside, Loggan's view of *c.*1688 suggests that only the upper

17. A reconstruction of an upper room before the garret floor was inserted



18. Loggan's view of the College *c.* 1688

rooms had windows *[18]*. Only one very battered original survives; all the other outside windows are Victorian insertions, often in places where there could not have been a window originally. Apart from these, each staircase had three small windows: one for the landing, one for the little room over the stairs in front, one for the room under the stairs behind. The fenestration suggests that there may have been some internal partitions. We have no idea as to how the rooms would have been decorated or furnished.

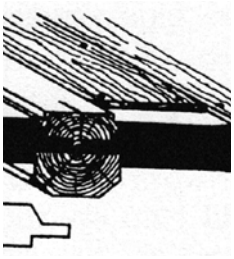
Early Alterations

Most of the structural alterations happened early in the history of the Old Court. Many of them are recorded in Josselin's history of the College, *c.* 1569; others are inferred from archaeological evidence. Since 1600 not much has changed. Even the windows, though often altered from the originals, are almost identical to those in Loggan's view.

Almost all the alterations were due to changing fashions and needs, rather than to the fabric decaying. A notable exception is the clunch window-surrounds, which have been dissolved by acid rain down the centuries and partly replaced by other materials. (Careful examination of early photographs reveals the remarkable fact that almost all this dissolution took place before 1900.) The first alteration was to the original main entrance along the passage to St Bene't's churchyard. Repairs in 1969 exposed evidence that clunch walls had been built on both sides of this passage; they were later faced with the present Ketton stone. These walls may have been a response to the sacking of the College by the revolting townspeople in 1381.

The garret floors

19. The east end of the south range seen from Free School Lane. The pointed arch window used to light a hall in the Master's Lodge. The modern wall on the left is similar in colour and construction to the original Old Court walls



20. A diminished-haunch tenon joint as used in the garret floors inserted over a century after the first floors. The top of the principal joist is level with the adjacent floor boards

The building had hardly been finished when the great upper rooms were altered to form garrets. The whole upstairs of the old Master's Lodge (B staircase) had originally been a first-floor hall nearly as big as the College Hall itself; it is tempting to suppose that it had been meant as the guildhall of the united Gild. Josselin says that John Kynne, third Master (1379–89) inserted a floor and plastered 'the upper bedroom next the beams'. This floor was replaced much later by another in the same position, and various partitions have been inserted; but the big Gothic east window onto Free School Lane *[19]*, which projects incongruously through the inserted floor, recalls the spacious proportions of the original hall. Other garret floors were inserted between 1480 and 1554, presumably because of increasing numbers of students. These insertions were piecemeal, not planned as the original building was, and hence the extended staircases are all different. Each of the windows in the roof was made by cutting a piece out of one rafter and bridging it by cross-pieces to its neighbours.

Garret floors are constructed much the same as the main floors, but are not so substantial. The floor-joist joint is a diminished-haunch tenon *[20]*, which is typical of the sixteenth century.[12] This is a more efficient load-bearing joint than the middle-third tenon used in the fourteenth century floors, provided it is pegged so that it cannot be pulled out of its mortice. However, the carpenters (as was not unusual at this period) did not understand this; they went to the trouble of cutting this more complex joint but forgot the pegs. They continued the medieval trick of omitting one floorboard over the principal joist.

The floor of the Master's Lodge hall was altered at the same time. During the Kitchen alterations of 1980, a beam was discovered, 24 ft long and nearly 18 in square, spanning from wall to wall. The original floor-joists had been shortened to fit into it; they have a fourteenth century joint at one end and a sixteenth century joint at the other. How did Matthew Parker (Master 1544–53) – for Josselin hints that it may have been him – contrive to manoeuvre this enormous timber into place in an existing building? Here it may have been made to carry a brick chimney-stack clear of the ground floor.

12. *Hewett, CA 1980 'English historic carpentry' Chichester: Phillimore*

Buttresses

The original roof of the Hall was more decorative than the others, and had no tiebeam *[21]*. As in many other roofs of this type, the timbers tended to bend and spread and to overturn the walls. This would have happened within a few years of its building. To correct this mistake, eight great buttresses were added *[22]* – three remain on the court side, one was removed for the bay window, and there were four others on the south side.[13] These buttresses were functional: the survivors hold up a wall which leans into the court by more than a foot.

13. *Willis and Clark 1886*

The buttresses on the west, north, and east sides of the Old Court are of later and uncertain dates. They are not such a clever imitation of the original as the earlier ones, although those on the west and north sides are also of Barnack stone. There is no evidence that they were structurally necessary. The roofs here have tiebeams and have not caused the walls to lean; buttresses were not put on the outside of the court, where they would have been equally necessary if needed

21. The former Hall seen when in use as a kitchen in 1931. The lack of any tie beams meant that the roof began to bend and spread not long after construction. This would have necessitated temporary shoring (as in 9) before the construction of buttresses

22. The Hall buttresses are the only functional buttresses in Old Court. The other buttresses are ancient but decorative

at all. The College was evidently following a fashion, as it has done with windows and countless lesser alterations down the centuries. Historians have long been misled by Josselin's statement that Lady Elizabeth, ex-Duchess of Norfolk, gave £147 for buttresses and other repairs and for investing in sheep. But Josselin misread the ex-Duchess's benefaction, which was really for repairs to College properties, one of which was later called Le Buttresse, elsewhere in the town. The buttresses on the west and north sides probably date from the fifteenth century, before the Barnack stone quarry became exhausted. Those on the east side are built of Ketton stone and of a post-Tudor kind of brick; they are probably of the seventeenth century.

The Hall windows

The Hall originally had six windows. Two survive in the present Kitchens [converted, in 2019, into the Servery] and the remains of another were discovered in 1980 on the south side. A fourth was on the site of the present bay window; the others were destroyed, one by a chimney, the other by a second bay window (now replaced by a lift shaft).

The present bay window was built in 1969 as a copy of a seventeenth or eighteenth century window in clunch, which in turn replaced a medieval half-octagonal window *[18]*, like that which survives in Queens'. I found remains of this earliest bay window in 1969, but was able to show that it was not original: the base of the original wall goes straight through at ground level.

For a long time I was puzzled by Josselin's remark that the windows in the Hall were made 'higher by nine feet in height' in the reign of William Sowoode (Master 1523–44). The two remaining windows are certainly undisturbed fourteenth century stonework. The solution came when the inside walls were unplastered in 1980. These windows (and the blocked ones on the south side) were made originally with three rows of lights, of which two remain. Making them

higher was done by blocking up the lower third of each window. The original sills of Burwell clunch are still buried in the walls. Josselin evidently heard of this through a garbled tradition. He does not tell us why it was done. Did the sixteenth century prefer short fat windows to the tall thin proportions of the fourteenth? or were the windows made to start higher to fit wainscoting added inside the Hall? or did the Dean of College not want the young men to be distracted from their lectures by being able to see what was going on outside?

Church and chapels

Like most early Colleges, originally Corpus had no chapel; it used St Bene't's Church. Thomas Cosyn (Master 1487–1515) built the first chapels, two of them, one above the other, against the chancel of the church, the upper chapel being joined to the Old Court by a bridge *[23]*. This curious building, in the then fashionable brick, has now long been part of a Fellow's rooms: the upper chapel is the bedroom, and the lower chapel is divided between the bathroom and the vestry of the church. Adjacent is a curious vaulted cell which may have been the College strongroom. A large squint allowed people in the upper chapel to look down into the church; this has long been blocked, but can still be discerned from inside the church. There may well be a fine medieval roof above the bedroom ceiling.

This ingenious arrangement closely parallels the chapels linking Peterhouse with Little St Mary's, the earliest of which dated from 1385. Corpus wanted to keep the connection with St Bene't's without letting undergraduates out of the College. It could not build a chapel directly against the church without blocking a path across the churchyard from Free School Lane. Hence the upper chapel and the bridge.

23. The link between Old Court and St Bene't's Church contained a small chapel on each floor. The archway provided access, through the churchyard, to the church. The church is now entered from the north

The conveniences of life

Sanitation

This was not so neglected by the medievals as is sometimes thought. Plot, the Oxford historian, considered the New College house of easement, with its never-emptied cesspit, to be one of the three wonders of Oxford. Corpus had nothing so grand as this, but in 1457, as Josselin says, it built a common washhouse *(communis Latrina)* 'paved with stone, with ample and commodious cisterns'. It seems to have stood on the site later occupied by the College dunghill.

Heating

The chimneys are certainly later than the roof of the Old Court, which has been cut away to insert them. Probably this was done at the same time as the garrets, although Josselin mentions only two chimneys. Chimneys became fashionable in the sixteenth century, and holes were cut for them in countless medieval roofs.

In the middle ages the usual heating was by an open hearth – a kind of bonfire in the middle of the floor of a hall. In effect, the hall itself was used as a wood-stove, and people lived inside it. Originally we had one fire, in the middle of the Hall floor (Josselin's *quadratus focus in medio aule),* with a louvre in the roof to let out the smoke *[9].* About 1500 John Seyntwary, President of the College, gave 'the great chimney in the hall', probably the first in the College; the central hearth was abolished, although we still had a roof-lantern in the eighteenth century. In the 1980 alterations a succession of great chimneys was found in the south wall, with brickwork of several periods intersecting, among which Seyntwary's is hard to distinguish. The chimney had shortly afterwards been adapted so that the flue divided, passed either side of a window, and was reunited above.

It may seem unlikely that upstairs rooms would be heated by fires on the floor, but in several medieval houses I have found soot-blackened rafters which prove that, somehow, this was done. Not so in the College: the rafters over rooms are not blackened, and there is no sign that the rooms were heated at all. To survive a Cambridge winter without heating may not have been as heroic as it sounds. The College would have been designed for the climate of the 1340s, a decade of appreciably warmer winters than now.[14] It would have been possible to stay alive by wearing plenty of clothes and by wrapping oneself in one's gown.

Fuel

Cambridge had five fuels, most of them brought from a distance: wood, charcoal, peat, sedge, and coal. Details of the prices of wood (faggots) and charcoal in Cambridge are known.[15] In real terms, the price of fuel went down slightly in the late fifteenth century, and fell rapidly from 1510 to 1550 – or, rather, the price stayed the same while the value of money went down by half. This is surprising: the supply (fixed by the rate at which trees grew) was roughly constant; while the demand should have been rising, as everybody was installing chimneys. However, much of the cost of faggots and charcoal was in the labour of making them, and the wages of woodcutters and charcoal-burners were not keeping up with inflation.[16] Moreover, it is very likely that the market for wood in Cambridge

14. *Lamb, HH 1977 'Climate: present, past and future' London: Methuen*

15. *Rogers 1866–1902*

16. *Brown EHP and Hopkins SV 1956 'Seven centuries of the prices of consumables, compared with builders' wage-rates' Economica 23 pp. 296–313*

was already being undercut by the import of coal. None of the original fireplaces in Corpus has been seen in living memory, but one of those brought to light in the demolition of Trinity Hall seems too small to burn wood. The present state of the Old Court clunch bears witness to the acid atmosphere in Cambridge between 1550 and 1900.

The early sixteenth century was a time for more heating. The price of fuel was falling and winters were getting colder. The chimneys in Old Court are monuments to a short period of cheap energy.

Windows and glass

Josselin says of the window-glass and wainscoting in the Master's Lodge and College rooms:

> *Certainly little, or rather nothing, was done in either the upper or the lower [rooms] before the arrival of the reign of Henry VIII – such was the frugality of our ancestors.*

Every later College historian has believed him. He does, however, contradict himself: he mentions glazing among improvements of the 1520s, 1530s and 1550s, but in several rooms he implies that this was replacing existing glass.

Window-glass was not at all rare in the middle ages, as even the humblest parish church attests. Medieval houses usually have huge windows, most of which have been partly blocked up later. Glass was not an unheard-of luxury but would have been roughly as costly as the more pretentious kinds of double-glazing now. It was within the means, not only of the wealthier, but of the middle classes. Neither merchant, nor well-to-do yeoman needed, if he wished for the indulgence, to debar himself the use of a material, a square foot of which in the year 1399 could have been bought at less than the price of a bushel of wheat; and we may be sure that if they were indifferent to the convenience, the real reason is to be found in the general rudeness or simplicity of manners.

Could the College have afforded glass? It was much more expensive in the mid-fourteenth century than earlier; but even in 1360 the cost of glazing 750 square feet of College windows would have been only about £50 in a total budget of something like £800. As the cost would have come at the end of each stage of building, we might have decided to economize on it if we had been overrunning our estimates. But we should have been able to add it later. It may have been the custom for individual benefactors to give windows, especially when the windows were being altered.

The medieval College probably did have glass windows. If it had not, shutters would have been needed, and I have not found any hooks for hanging them. By the early sixteenth century the windows would have been in disrepair, and since glass was another of the few things then falling in price this would have been a good time to replace them.

Acknowledgement

The author was indebted to Catherine Hall (Ancient Archivist of the College)

* * *

The greatest enemy

Oliver Rackham's original text included a very personal 'vision' of which this was the concluding part:

> *…more benefactors came before me: some were unacademically dressed in doublet and hose, and some even carried swords. They demanded what had happened to all the splendid linenfold panelling and other wainscot that they had lined their rooms with. I said that most of it had become unfashionable and been thrown away in the eighteenth century. I agreed with them that the Georgian panelling which had replaced it was very inferior. I pointed out that we still had one complete room left (the present Nicholas Bacon Room) and said that fragments of medieval and sixteenth-century wainscot remained in cupboards and on garret stairs.*
>
> *After some last reproaches they left me. I could smell a faint whiff of brimstone. Their last words were:* The greatest enemy of antiquities is too much money.

Rackham's visitors (and Rackham) were regretting the loss of parts of the original building. But it is also possible to look at their last words in another way. Corpus was never a rich college and this explains why so much of Old Court remains today and why the window types come from such a wide range of periods.

Postscript

The archaeological investigations of 2017–18

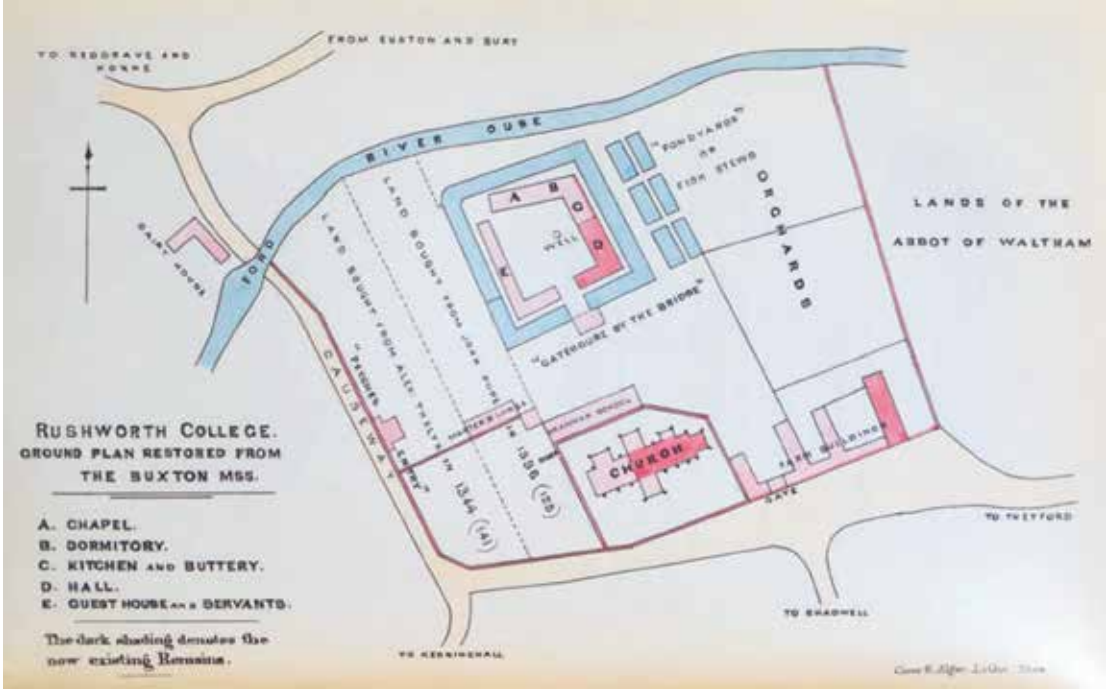
The research underpinning Oliver Rackham's 'The Making of Old Court' was based largely on his examination of the building fabric. Over the years, whenever repairs or alterations were in progress, Rackham, who died in 2015, could be seen exploring the works. Had he lived, he would have been in his element at the time of the most recent archaeological investigations. These covered the Master's Lodge garden, the New Court lawn and the former Hall and Master's Lodge.

Undertaken by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU), the investigation's findings were recorded by Richard Newman in an unpublished report, *Archaeological and architectural investigations at Corpus Christi College*. Among the discoveries were ancient tennis courts, the foundations of the Jacobean Chapel and fragments of WW2 air raid shelters. By far the most significant were the findings in the medieval Lodge and Hall. Although Rackham's study remains the principal source of information on the construction of the Fellows' and students' accommodation in Old Court, these recent investigations now form the basis for our understanding of the medieval Lodge and Hall, their fabric and inhabitation. Both buildings are the oldest of their kind in Cambridge.

It is hoped that Newman's report will form part of a CAU book on the archaeology of Cambridge colleges. In the meantime, we include here four illustrations from the report. These amplify both Rackham's 'The Making of Old Court' and the last part of this booklet, 'Recovering the past' (pp. 38–40).

Rushford College plan

Rackham makes a tantalising reference to Rushford College – and not Corpus – as being, possibly, 'the prototype college court.' Newman goes further and, making a link to the chantry colleges of mid to late fourteenth century, reproduces a plan of Rushworth (now Rushford) College *[24]*. Based on a reconstruction, the plan depicts a four-sided court containing both communal and private spaces within a discontinuous range surrounded by a moat. However, the accuracy of this reconstruction is questionable: the north sign points south. Was there really a chapel in the court or did the college use the church just outside its gate? Just one corner of the original court survives today – heavily restored by SS Teulon *c*.1850 and in private ownership.



24. The prototype college court? Plan of Rushworth (now Rushford) College. North sign is incorrect, it points to the south

The Hall hearth

Perhaps the single most exciting discovery of the excavations was the original open hearth in the Hall.

Measuring 1.67 by 1.58 m, it is formed in edge-set ceramic peg tiles set in a matrix of off-white heat-affected clay *[25]* and was discovered about 0.44 m below the surface of the kitchen floor slab laid in 1981. Rackham suggested that it was set in the middle of the open floor but, as Newman's simplified plan shows, it was set closer to High Table than to the centre of the Hall. Following its exposure, cleaning and recording, it was sealed up again. It lies below the new cooking area.

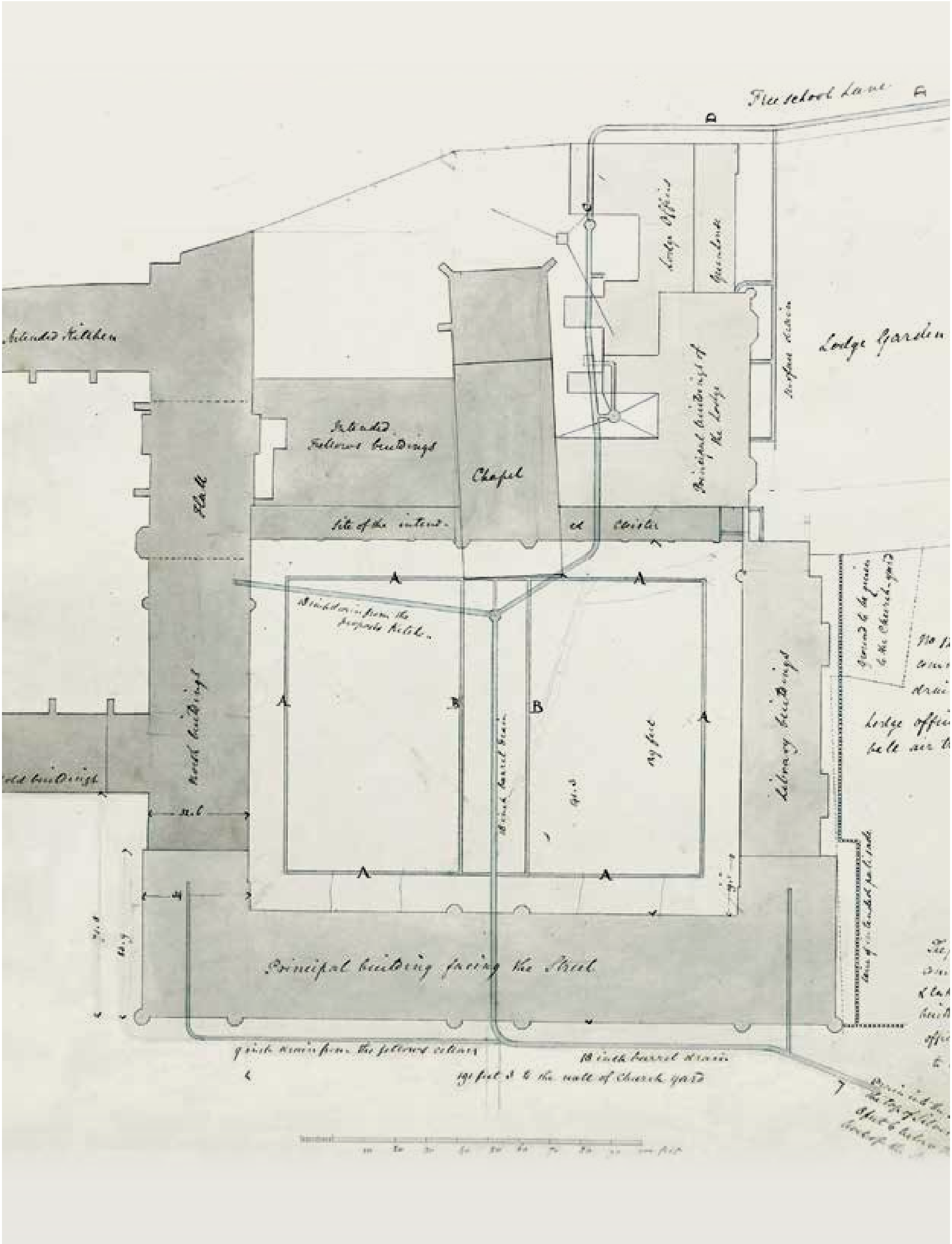
25. The original open hearth in the Hall was exposed during archaeological investigations in 2018. Smoke would have escaped through a louvre in the roof (see 9). The measuring rod is 1 metre long. *Photo by Cambridge Archaeological Unit*

The corbels

Also included in Newman's report is a photograph showing two of the fourteenth century carved clunch corbels shortly after they were exposed following the stripping-out of the 1981 kitchen *[26]*. The floor in the foreground forms part of the mezzanine inserted in 1949 into the former Hall to raise the kitchen cooking area to the level of the Wilkins Hall. This mezzanine now forms the floor to the new servery and has been cut away around the windows (as can be seen on p. 40). The wall posts and cornicing are medieval.

Peter Carolin

26. Part view of mezzanine floor following the stripping out of the 1949 kitchen. The two corbels supporting the roof trusses had been enclosed in 1981. *Photo by Cambridge Archaeological Unit*


Free school Lane
Lodge Offices
Greenhouse
Lodge Garden
Principal buildings of the Lodge
Intended Kitchen
Intended Fellows buildings
Chapel
Hall
Site of the intend- ed Cloister
Library buildings
old buildings
Principal building facing the Street
18 inch barrel drain
191 feet 3 to the wall of Church yard

William Wilkins's transformation of the College, 1823–28

The theatre of New Court

Peter Carolin

No other Oxbridge college so explicitly illustrates both the medieval collegiate form and its post-enlightenment reinvention as does Corpus. Such is the clarity of the overall idea that the combination of the two courts seems almost inevitable. It might be a stage set and, in a way, it is.

Peter Carolin (m.1957) is a Life Fellow and Emeritus Professor of Architecture.

Downing College: the first collegiate campus

The architect responsible for this work, William Wilkins, was born and schooled in Norwich. His father was a plasterer and self-taught architect who also owned the tenancies of the major theatres in East Anglia – which his son was to inherit.[1] William went up to Gonville and Caius in 1796, graduating as 6th Wrangler in 1800. While an undergraduate, he measured and drew King's College Chapel.[2] Both his involvement in the theatre and his love of King's Chapel were to influence his work for Corpus. Spurred on by his interest in classical architecture and, in particular, that of ancient Greece, he travelled to Italy, Sicily, Greece and Asia Minor. Returning in 1803, he was elected a fellow of Caius and started work on his account of the main Greek sites in Italy and Sicily. *The Antiquities of Magna Graecia* was published in 1807.

Wilkins's return to Cambridge coincided with the final stages of the selection of an architect for Downing College – the first new college to be established for over two centuries and the first to be planned in its entirety. James Wyatt had produced a design in a Roman Neo-Classical style but those who favoured Grecian classicism, among whom Wilkins was the man of the moment, won the day. He was appointed in 1806 on the basis of a design using the Ionic order and adopting what came to be known as the 'campus' plan.

Downing was the first example of this type of plan. Thomas Jefferson's plan for the University of Virginia followed a decade later. Symmetrically disposed around a large, grassed space distantly echoing the traditional court form, the Downing proposal consisted of two freestanding buildings and twelve pavilions linked by screen elements *[3]*. The pavilions contained the Master's Lodge, the Hall, two professors' houses and four buildings for students' and Fellows' apartments. The freestanding buildings were the propylaea and the Library and Chapel. The two latter were combined in a single building aligned with the Hall and Lodge and, like them and the propylaea, embellished with stylobates, columns and pediments. The accommodation ranges had, in contrast, an austere

1. *Norwich, Cambridge, Bury St Edmunds, Colchester, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich and King's Lynn. For this and other details, see Liscombe RW (1980) 'William Wilkins 1778–1839' CUP.*

2. *A volume of engravings based on the survey is held in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.*

Opposite page:
1. Wilkins's original site plan. North to left. Jacobean chapel shown retained and extended by two bays. Note cloister to each side of Chapel front. Old Hall retained with kitchen in old Master's Lodge and M staircase. Student accommodation ('North buildings') where the new Hall now is.

simplicity. The College owned the land to the north of its site and Wilkins proposed a formal approach lined on each side by terraces, leading from Downing Street to the propylaea which was to form the College entrance. But the money ran out – his approach, propylaea, chapel and library and much else remained unbuilt.[3]

3. *The present chapel and library at Downing are by others.*

Wilkins adopts a medieval style

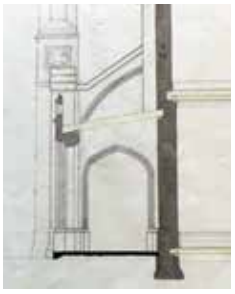
Following the Napoleonic wars, Cambridge expanded and, throughout the 1820s, Wilkins was working in the town. He fitted out the first, temporary, home of the recently established Fitzwilliam Museum and refurbished the University Church, Great St Mary's, providing additional galleries for the expanding congregation. Invitations to work at Trinity (New Court), Corpus (New Court) and King's (the South Range and Screen) came in 1821, 1822 and 1823 respectively. At Corpus, the proposed site was set in a medieval context; at Trinity, there was the challenge of Wren's great Library; and King's, dominated by its great late medieval Chapel and classical Fellows' Building was, as ever, a special case. In all three projects, Wilkins abandoned the classical architecture of Downing and adopted a medieval or Gothic style. It is most convincing at King's and has been most criticised at Corpus – notably by Hugh Casson who described the building front, quite correctly, as a Gothic 'veneer upon a Classical framework',[4] a form of scenery.

4. *Casson H (1948) 'An introduction to Victorian architecture', London: Art and Technics, p. 16.*

It is not so much the articulation of the facades that is of real interest at Corpus as that of the plan. Time has been unkind to the New Court facades – the Ketton stone has not weathered well and the attic floors added in the 1920s have for ever destroyed the proportions of the buildings as seen from both the street and the court. The plan, however, is masterly.

The cloister that never was

No record exists of the brief given by the College to Wilkins but we can assume that it was substantially to increase the residential accommodation and to do so on the land occupied by the Dolphin Inn, Small Court, Stable Yard and a portion of the Fellows' Garden *[4]*. We may also assume that the existing Jacobean Chapel and the Hall were to continue in use. These assumptions are confirmed by the only complete plan by Wilkins that exists for the New Court *[1, redrawn in 5]*. The Chapel, extended to the east by two bays, and the Hall are retained. The kitchens to the west of the Hall are replaced by the 'North Building' – almost certainly new accommodation. The new kitchens are shown as occupying the ground floor of the Master's Lodge and M staircase. The Master's Gallery, built by Matthew Parker in the 1540s, is replaced by a 'Fellows' Building'. The chapel facade formed the centre section of the new court's east side. Directly opposite, on the west side, was the gatehouse. This meant that, on entering, the first thing that the visitor saw inside the College was the Chapel, emphasising the religious aspect of the foundation.



2. Cloister section shown in one of Wilkins's original drawings for the Lodge

This first plan shows the east or Chapel side of the new court lined by an 'intended cloister' passing not in front of the Chapel but abutting it at each side. We know this was a serious intention because there are drawings for the new

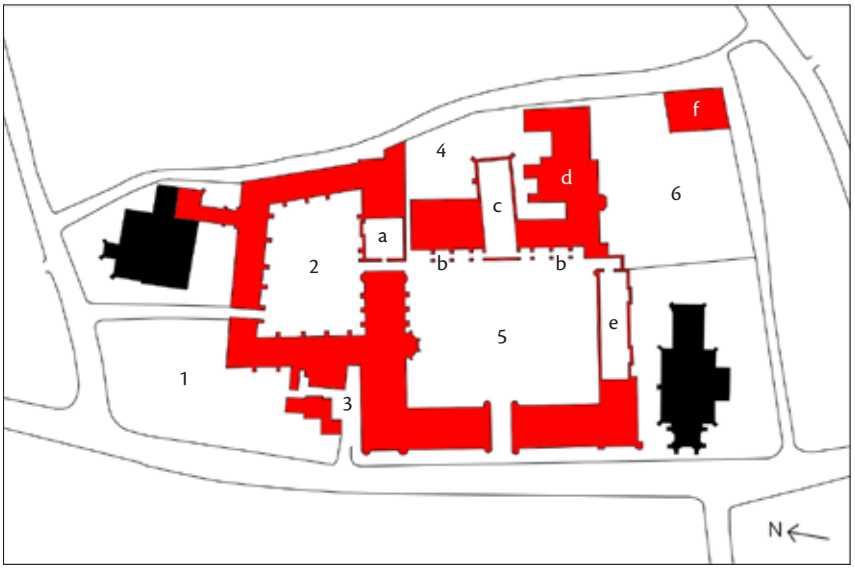
3. The first campus plan. Downing College as originally proposed by Wilkins, 1806. Foreground left to right: Hall, Library and Chapel, Master's Lodge. The entrance propylaea is at the rear centre.

Photo © Tim Rawle and Louis Sinclair. Model by Andrew Ingham Associates for The Age of Wilkins exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2000

4. Corpus in 1820, before the site was cleared for the new court

1. Houses belonging to College
2. Old Court
3. Master's garden
4. Small Court
5. Dolphin Inn
6. Stable Yard
7. Fellows' garden
   - a. Hall
   - b. Master's Lodge
   - c. Chapel with Library over
   - d. Pensionary
   - e. Tennis Court

All drawings by Max Turner developed from earlier versions by Ben Beach

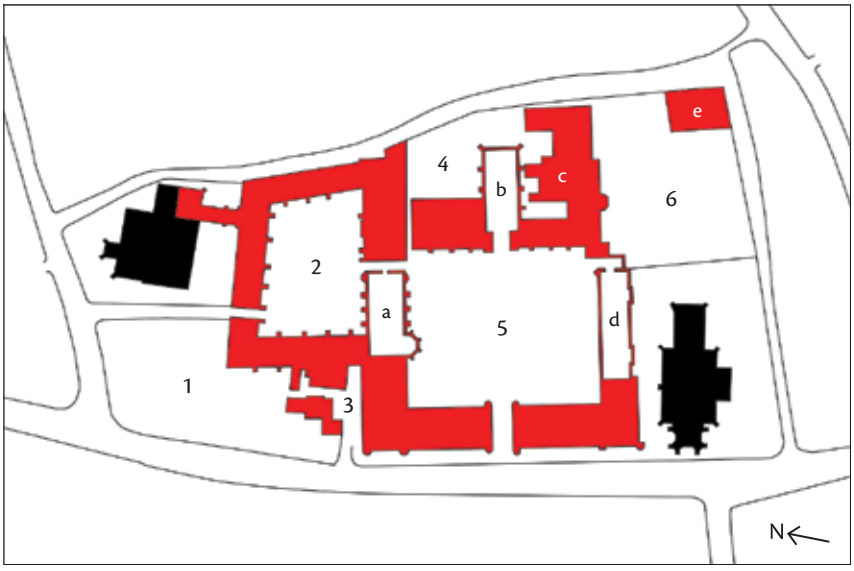


5. Wilkins's first plan for Corpus, 1823, incorporating a cloister. Note increase in width of Trumpington Street when compared to 1820 plan

1. Houses belonging to College
2. Old Court
3. Stable Yard
4. Fellows' Garden
5. New Court
6. Master's Garden
   - a. Hall
   - b. Cloister
   - c. Existing Chapel enlarged
   - d. Master's Lodge
   - e. Library
   - f. Coach house

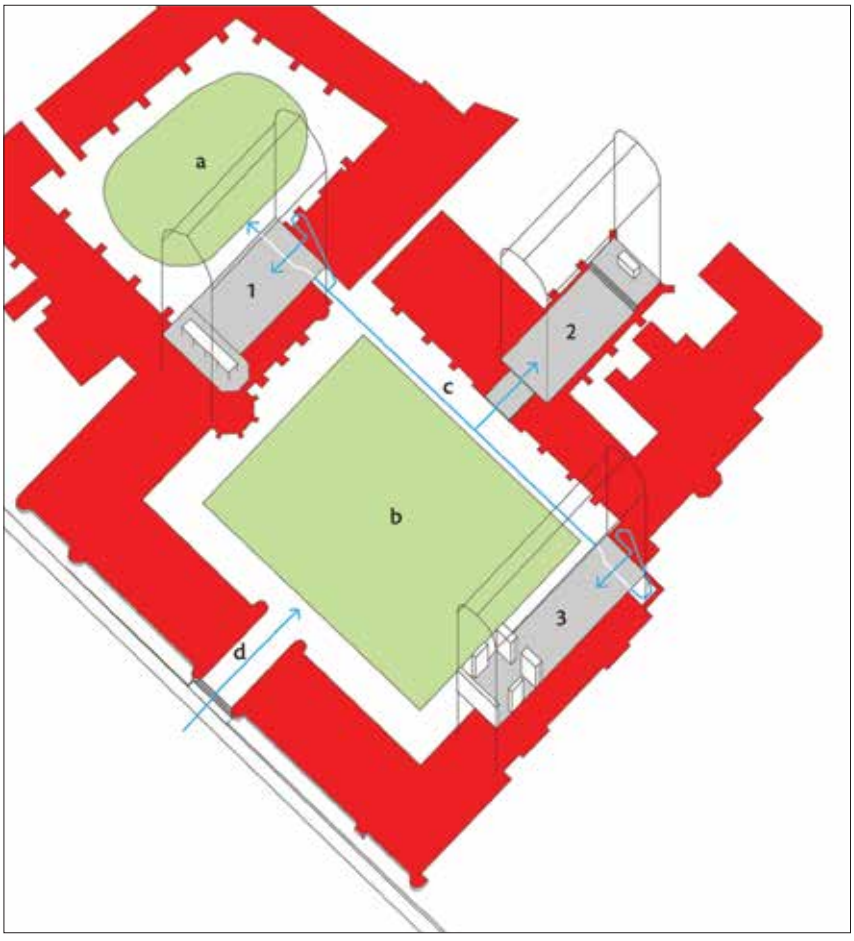
6. New Court, as built, with new Chapel and Hall

1. Houses belonging to College
2. Old Court
3. Stable yard
4. Fellows' garden
5. New Court
6. Master's garden
   a. Hall
   b. Chapel
   c. Master's lodge
   d. Library
   e. Coach house



7. The three principal spaces

1. Hall with high table at far end
2. Chapel with altar at far end
3. Library with Parker Collection enclosure at far end
   a. Old Court
   b. New Court
   c. Screens passage axis with stairs to Hall and Library at each end
   d. Gatehall entrance from street



Master's Lodge showing the cloister in section, with a sloping roof *[2]*. The northern half of this cloister runs from the screens passage and along the existing route to the fine stone doorway which formed the entrance to the ante-chapel – the foundations of which were partially excavated in 2017. But there are two flaws in this proposal for the Chapel. First, the axis of the Chapel interior is not aligned with its court facade. And second, the floor level of the existing Chapel is below that of the new court.

The cloister was never built. By now, the new Library was under construction and there must have been questions as to what would happen to the old Library, above the Chapel, when it was vacated. Wilkins must also have had doubts about the possibility of enlarging the existing flat-ceilinged Chapel in a satisfactory manner. Returning to the drawing board, he designed a completely new Chapel. The floor was raised to the level of the new court, the entrance and interior were aligned on the axis of the court and the west facade was flush with the Lodge and Fellows' accommodation to each side *[6]*. The cloister, which had been a device to solve the problem of the old Chapel's projection into the new court, was abandoned.[5]

5. *Wilkins's cloister proposal may owe something to John Masters' 1747 plan for a new court at Corpus. Masters, the Bursar, was not an architect and James Essex claimed that the design was his (see Willis R and Clark JW (1886) 'The architectural history of the University of Cambridge and of the colleges of Cambridge and Eton', CUP pp. 298–301.) The idea of a cloister with a centrally placed chapel must have been based on Christopher Wren's 1666 building at Emmanuel – itself based on the earlier chapel and arcade at Peterhouse.*

The screens passage axis

But it was not just the hearts of the College's spiritual and scholarly activities that were, respectively, to be rebuilt and relocated – the locus of its social activity was also altered in Wilkins's revised plan. Instead of the student rooms in the 'North Building', a new Hall was proposed and the old Hall converted into a kitchen. The latter's ground floor location was, clearly, less than ideal to serve the first floor Hall but it was far better than the original proposal involving M staircase *[1]*. The reordering, in 2017–19, of the kitchen and servery arrangements finally overcame the resulting inconveniences of the preceding 190 years.

Locating the new Hall at first floor level symmetrised the arrangement of the three principal communal spaces – the Hall and Library at an upper level, opposite each other, with the Chapel at court level between them *[7]*. This, surely, is what Wilkins always had in mind – but needed time to bring the Fellows round.

The entrances to all three major spaces are arranged in a straight line – an axis along which the daily rituals of College life, dining, worship and study, are acted out. That axis, moreover, is determined by the position of the screens passage which links the two parts of the College, the old and the new – combining them into a single entity and incorporating both the stairs up to the new Hall and the change in level between the two courts. There is something theatrical about the stairhall with its broad flight of steps rising up below the vaulted ceiling, to the landing from which the view of the lofty (candlelit) Hall is suddenly revealed *[8]*. The Library stairhall is a much more modest affair, sized – not for the entire student body noisily assembling for a meal – but for individuals arriving for quiet study, passing through the door into the book-lined interior *[10]*. As for the Chapel, the view from the entrance, through the ante-Chapel into Wilkins's luminous vaulted space would have evinced a feeling of awe *[9]*. But no longer – because that Chapel was virtually destroyed in the enlargement of the 1870s.

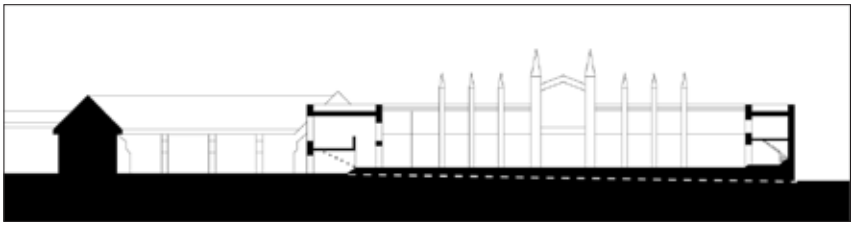
8. Hall with high table at west end, 1936. Before the Pugin wallpaper

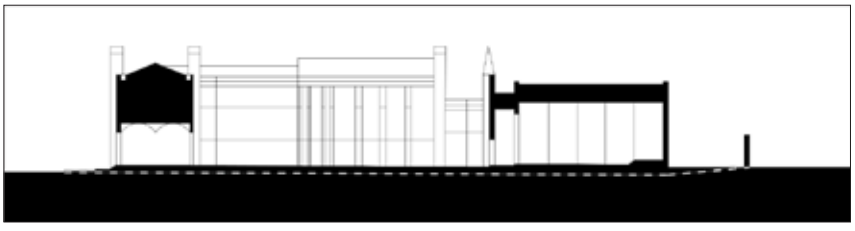
9. Chapel, before its alteration in 1870, with altar at east end. *J Le Keux*

10. Library with enclosed end bay for Parker Collection at west end

11. North-South section with Old Court at left, New Court to right. Note steps in screens passage. Broken line indicates site level before Wilkins raised it

12. West-East section with Gatehall at left, Chapel at right





13. Rituals of College life. Anthems on Corpus Christi Day …

14. … a Master's funeral …

15. … Mere's Sermon procession

16. New Court gave the College, for the first time, a street presence. Trumpington Street was widened by Wilkins and his work at King's opened up the view to the Senate House. *J Le Keux 1841*

The discovery, in 2018, that the partially enclosed two end bays of the Library (now known as the Wilkins Room) were intended for the Parker Collection confirms that the far ends of each of the three principal spaces accommodate, like stages, their most significant function: in Hall, for the high table; in the Chapel, for the altar; and in the Library, for the College's greatest treasure.[6]

6. The Parker Collection is now stored elsewhere, in a vault.

A setting for the rituals of College life

The sections across New Court are as interesting as its plan. The site for the new court was neither raised nor level *[11 and 12]*. From east to west, it fell from Free School Lane, across Small Court and the Stable Yard, down towards Trumpington Street. It also sloped gently in a north-south direction – as can be seen to this day along the street frontage. There had been many buildings on this site – the pensionary, the Dolphin Inn, numerous outhouses and dwellings. Following demolition, some of their brick, stone and tile remains were left on the site, gradually raising its level. So, too, were the remains of the old Chapel, kitchens and pantry as well as the excavated soil from the new crypt, cellars and foundations. Much of this material was found during the excavations of 2017.

Raising the level of the court had the effect of raising the height and thus the prominence of the new building, as seen from the street. It also separated the intimate world of learning inside from the busy life of the street outside. Having ascended the steps, visitors would pause in the gatehall, from where they could observe the daily rituals of college life (attendance at chapel and hall were compulsory) being acted out on the opposite side of the court, along the screens passage axis. Wilkins, theatre owner and impresario, surely saw the new court as a stage – which subsequent generations have adapted as the setting for Name Day anthems, for funerals and special processions *[13–15]*. The return to the street with its descent down the entrance steps had further symbolism – departing the college after graduation, the graduate was going forth into the world to perform 'good works'.

The Trumpington Street alignment

Hidden away, at the end of the Bene't Street passageway and turning its back onto Free School Lane, Corpus had never before had a street presence. Wilkins made the most of his opportunity. Having raised the building to the new court level, he terminated each end of the street elevation with attached towers *[16]*. Unfortunately, the construction in the 1930s of the Golden Gate, abutting the northernmost tower, greatly diminished the prominence of this street elevation. He also aligned the street façade with that of the tower of St Botolph's Church. The effect was significantly to widen and regularise Trumpington Street (and, in so doing, to require the College to give over some of its land to the town). This was part of a larger plan by Wilkins to reorder the southern approach to the city centre[7] for, at the same time, the houses which used to align the west side of what is now King's Parade were being torn down and the splendidly picturesque King's screen and porters' lodge which he had designed were under construction.

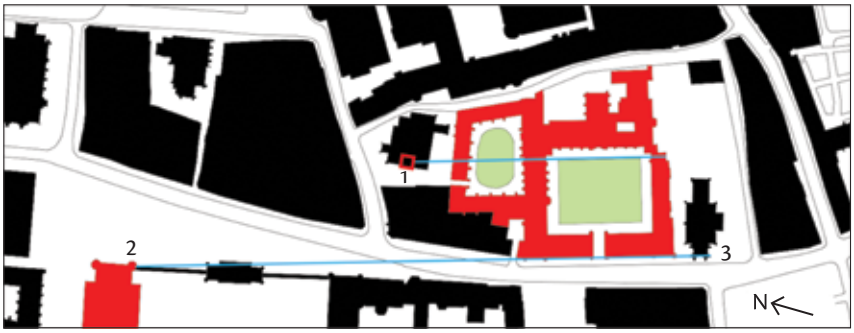
7. Wilkins set out his proposals in the Cambridge Chronicle, 6 and 10 November 1826.

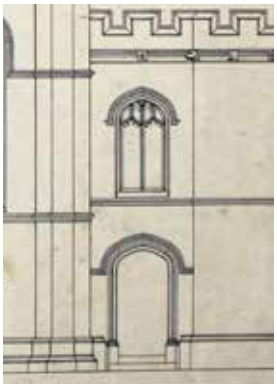
The link with King's went further. Corpus was, we know, Wilkins's favourite building – indeed, he is buried in the Chapel crypt. But there was another

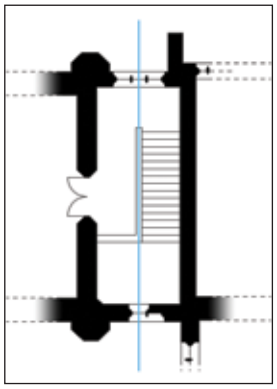
building to which he was greatly attached – King's College Chapel which, as an undergraduate, he had surveyed. New Court's Trumpington Street facade is aligned exactly with the southern of the Chapel's two eastern towers *[17]*. Is this alignment a coincidence or intentional? No drawing survives of the setting-out of New Court and its relation to the street and neither has any written explanation by Wilkins of the building. However, the plinth along the street frontage may offer a clue. The edge of the plinth marks the boundary between the street and the College. The generous space between that edge and the façade suggests that the façade was moved back in order to ensure the alignment with King's Chapel[8] – Wilkins's private link between the site of his first architectural endeavour and, later, his favourite building and final resting place.[9]

8. *And also to provide space for the attached towers.*

9. *Another link between Wilkins, the College and King's Chapel lies in some of the stained glass which had been installed in his own house and which Corpus sold to King's in the 1920s for the War Memorial Chapel.*







17. The two axes (shown in blue). The screens passage axis aligns with the fleche on the tower of St Bene't's (1). The Trumpington Street façade axis aligns at one end with the south-eastern tower of King's College Chapel (2) and at the other with the tower of St Botolph's (3). Wilkins was also responsible for the King's screen and porter's lodge and for the opening up of the view towards the Senate House
18. An unresolved relationship. Wilkins's stairhall wall does not align with the buttress which was an extension of the old Hall end wall
19. The double-light that …
20. … inside the stairhall, becomes a single light. *Photo by David Valinsky*
21. Wilkins's elevation drawing of the double-light above the entrance to the screens passage and stairhall
22. Plan of the stairhall as built by Wilkins, before the construction of the bridge linking the servery and Hall. The blue line indicates the axis which runs through the single light to the tower of St Bene't's
23. St Bene't's tower as seen from the Hall stairhall. The fleche aligns with the screens passage axis linking Old and New Courts and the entrances to the College's three principal internal spaces. *Photo by David Valinsky*

The link to St Bene't's

There's another hitherto unappreciated alignment. Until the reordering works of 2018–19, it had never been understood why Wilkins demolished the west wall of the old Hall and rebuilt it slightly to the east of its previous position *[18]*. As a result, the old Hall's westernmost roof truss (and its supporting corbels) were lost and the adjacent window reveal was cramped into a corner. Why had Wilkins not left the old Hall as it was, widened the new stairhall slightly to the west and shaved a foot or so off the length of the new Hall?

There was something else – seemingly unrelated to the stairhall positioning – that attracted interest. As seen from New Court, a double light is centred at the upper level of the stairhall bay *[19 and 21]*. But, inside, there is only a single light centred on the peak of the stairhall's vaulted ceiling *[20]* – one of the two external lights is blind. The significance of this wonderful stage trick was unappreciated until a partition, built in 1948 to separate the stairhall from the bridge linking the new servery and Hall, was demolished. For the first time in 70 years, it was possible to understand what a fine space Wilkins's stairhall had been before the bridge and partition obstructed it. Then, standing at the centre of that offending bridge, there was an astonishing revelation – the stairhall's centreline exactly aligns with the fleche on the top of the Saxon tower of St Bene't's Church *[17 and 23]*. By widening the old screens passage towards the east, Wilkins had ensured that the 'screens passage axis' links not just the College's three principal spaces and its two courts but also its first place of worship, after which, as Bene't College, it was for some time named. The reason why Wilkins had shifted the position of the old Hall's west wall became clear. So, too, did the significance of the transformation of the double light to a single light *[22]*.

A master class in scene-setting

Wilkins loved the theatre – he and his family appear attired in Caroline dress in the family portrait painted by Chalon at the time New Court was being built *[24]*. As a theatre owner, he was ultimately unfortunate. The times were against him and, at one point, only the profits from his architectural practice kept the theatres in business. Today, all that remains to remind us of his theatre buildings is the beautifully restored and currently thriving Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds.[10] As an architect, he is best remembered in Cambridge for the astonishing invention of Downing's campus plan and the subtle elegance of the King's screen. New Court at Corpus, subverted by its 1870s chapel enlargement, its intrusive 1920s attics addition and its inappropriate Hall wallpaper,[11] is widely seen as of little interest.

Such a perception is, perhaps, misleading. Wilkins gave the College a court that has fulfilled its purpose well. It certainly cost more than was expected but he built with economy – innovating and economising by the use of cast iron and reinforced plaster and only using stone for the fronts of his buildings (the backs are in brickwork).[12] The almost seamless way the two courts combine[13] *[25]*, the clarity and elegance of the three principal spaces and the extraordinary development of the screens passage axis and its link to St Bene't's reflect Wilkins's

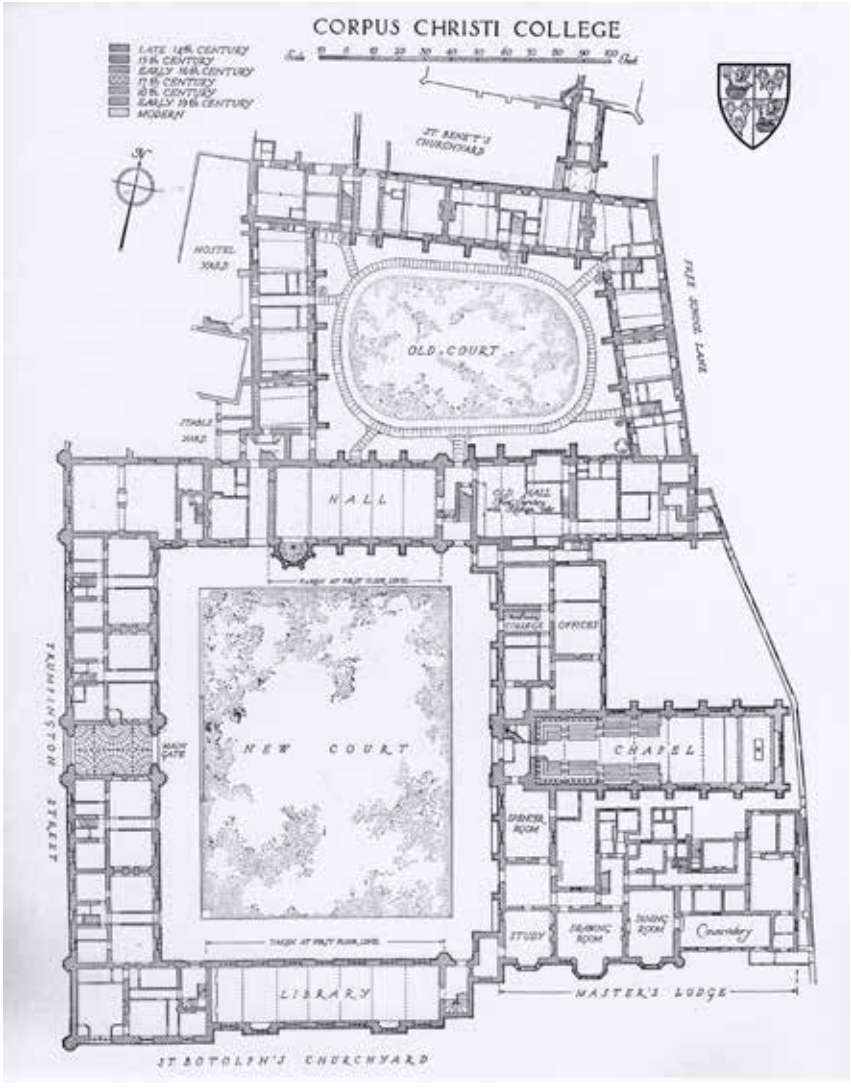
24. William Wilkins and his family in theatrical dress. Painted by AE Chalon in 1824. *Photo by Mike Roberts of the painting in the possession of William Powell Wilkins*

10. *The Festival Theatre in Cambridge is now used as the local Buddhist Centre.*

11. *Originally, above the wainscot, the Hall walls were white and the ceiling ochre. This set off Wilkins's stained glass to its full advantage. The introduction, in 1962, of the Pugin-designed wallpaper resulted in an unsightly daytime clash between the heavily patterned dark wallpaper and the armorial stained glass introduced by Wilkins as part of his decorative scheme.*

12. *There is evidence of haste and cost cutting by the builder, Phipps. Part of the Lodge was poorly set out, some of the accommodation stairs are thrown together and the Hall wall construction is of poor quality.*

13. *Seamless in plan, perhaps, but not as seen in Old Court. The demolition of the old kitchens to make space for the new Hall was an unfortunate necessity.*



25. The almost seamless combination of Old and New Courts. Plan from the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England *An inventory of the historical monuments in the City of Cambridge*. *Crown copyright 1959*

26. New Court *c.* 1840. *Line engraving by J Le Keux after F Mackenzie. Welcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 international (CC BY 4.0)*

compositional skill. All this comes together in his scene-setting, which reflects his love of the theatre. The three great interiors are (or were) stage sets for three scenes, the court *[26]* forms a setting for both regular and occasional College rituals, and the widened street outside ensured an appropriate prominence for the newly visible college – 'A fine pile' as one contemporary described it. Progressing northwards, the street opened up between the new parade and Wilkins' screen, terminating at the University's heart, the Senate House. Wilkins had overseen all of these moves. It is not difficult to understand why New Court was his favourite building.[14]

14. *Although, as Nikolaus Pevsner remarked, 'it can hardly be ours' – which was the King's screen.*

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Nicholas Ray (architect of the Old House Kitchen project of 2017–19) and Tony Baggs (sometime architectural editor of the Victoria County History) for sharing their insights into the design of New Court.

The Old House Kitchen project of 2017–19

Recovering the past

Peter Carolin

1. Corbel figure with pipe or sackbut. Only five of the original ten corbels have survived. Carved in clunch, four are winged angels. This, the only corner corbel, is anthropomorphic.

All photographs by David Valinsky

In 1826, when William Wilkins designed the new Hall, he moved the kitchens into the former Hall. It was an unsatisfactory solution. Everything had to be carried between the ground floor kitchens and the new first floor Hall. Eventually, in 1949, after 123 years of inconvenience, the construction of a mezzanine elevated cooking operations to Hall level. At the same time, a bridge linking the mezzanine to the Hall was formed across the south end of the Wilkins stairhall. Sadly, this bridge and its enclosure had a devastating impact on one of the most elegantly designed spaces in the College. Combining both the Hall stairs and the screens passage linking the two courts, it is also the most heavily used area in the college.

Over the years, as the College expanded, eating customs changed and the kitchens required upgrading, the search continued for a more appropriate kitchen and servery arrangement. In 1979, a plan to relocate the kitchens below the Hall was abandoned. In 2013, a proposal to place them under Old Court was also rejected. Finally, in 2016, it was resolved to concentrate all kitchen operations at ground level in the former Master's Lodge and Hall and to convert the mezzanine area into a free-flow servery.

2. The south side of Old Court with the former Master's Lodge and Hall to left, Wilkins's stairhall at centre and his Hall to right. The upper part of the former hall is now a free-flow servery.

This project was seen as much more than a mere rearrangement and upgrading of the catering accommodation. The opportunity was seized to recover many of the qualities of the original Wilkins stairhall, to restore lost medieval details in the new servery, to reanimate the south side of Old Court and to refurbish the College's finest room, the Parker Room.

In some cases, as with the medieval corbels, the final outcome was the result of quite dramatic intervention – exposure, cleaning and spotlighting *[1]*. In others, as with the south side of Old Court, the transformation is entirely the result of the internal changes and new lighting arrangements – nothing has been done to the exterior. In the evening, in particular, as the servery, stairhall and Hall lights come on, this side of the court now reflects the rhythm of college life in a way that it had not done for 194 years *[2]*.

3. The reordered stairhall. Both the wall that divided this space and the modern entrance screen at the foot of the stairs have been removed. The new stone balustrade is to Wilkins's design

4. View into Hall as seen from the servery exit. The casing and framing of the door opening are new. The stone ledge to the left encloses the upper part of the restored entrance from New Court

5. View through the new Wilkins doorway into the servery. Two of the corbels can be seen on either side of one of the pointed arch windows. The mezzanine floor has been cut back to reveal the full height of the windows

6. Another view from the new doorway. The concertina doors at the far right provide access to a lift which provides, for the first time, disabled access to Hall level

The stairhall, no longer divided by a wall, is once again a single space under its ribbed and newly illuminated vaulting. The crude entrance screen at the foot of the stairs has been removed, and the stone balustrade returned over the bridge in identical form to Wilkins's original *[3]*. The opening from the bridge into the Hall has been carefully lined in timber panelling *[4]*.

The naturally lit, lofty new servery contains many reminders of its past as the upper part of the medieval Hall – the roof trusses, the corbels, and the upper parts of the pointed-arch windows *[5–7]*. Below, the high-tech kitchens function unobtrusively, linked to the servery by lifts *[8]*. Linked, too, by stairs cleverly inserted into the space within the oriel window bay *[9]* at the back of which a ceramic relief alluding to the lilies of the Virgin has been placed. This complements the beautiful wood carving of the pelican in its piety which, since 1949, has hung on the wall above the door to the former Master's Lodge.

7. The free-flow servery is a lofty daylit space. The entrance door from the stairhall can be seen at left

8. The ground floor kitchens utilise the latest developments in cooking technology

9. The kitchen stairs sit in the oriel window bay at the centre of which, above the ledge at left, a ceramic relief has been placed

10. The New Court entrance to the screens passage and stairhall has been reconfigured and the twentieth century insertions removed