



*Oxf. Alm.* 1849

THE TOWERS OF OXFORD

(From left :—New College, Merton, Music Room, All Souls, St. Mary's, Cathedral, Radcliffe Camera, Bodleian, Schools Tower, Wadham.)

PLATE I

# OXFORD

## OUTSIDE THE GUIDE-BOOKS

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#### IV.

### A MEDIEVAL STUDENT'S LIFE.

WE may proceed to depict, so far as it is possible, the average daily routine of a medieval student at Oxford, and to endeavour to realize some of the material conditions of that life.

The first thing is to dismiss from our minds the comforts of our own rooms, and (if we look out of window) all the cleanness of the streets, all public lights, pavements, paved streets, carriages with springs, and the like, and all ordinary forms of amusement. Every kind of filth accumulated in the roadway until a merciful downpour partly washed it away along the kennel. Life was short and full of struggle in those unhygienic days of 'Merry England.'

For the sake of definiteness we will suppose our scholar to be a young Benedictine at Gloucester College, where Worcester College now is, in the year 1440. The story of Gloucester College is interesting, and begins as early as 1283. That is to say the College comes in date next after the primary group of University College, Merton and Balliol, and before Exeter (1314), Oriel (1326), Queen's (1340), or New College (1379). It was first founded by John Giffard of Brimsfield Castle in Gloucestershire for thirteen Benedictine monks from the Abbey of St. Peter (now the Cathedral) at Gloucester. But the other great

### GLOUCESTER COLLEGE

Benedictine Abbeys soon saw the advantage of establishing a branch (as we should term it) at Oxford, and as early as 1290 they obtained an enlargement of the scheme to embrace all such abbeys in the Province of Canterbury, and by 1337 it was made open to all English Benedictines, for the education of their novices: so that in the end as many as thirty-eight religious houses had connexion with Gloucester College, and no fewer than fifteen had their separate *Mansiones* (houses) or *Cameræ* (rooms) there. This had an extraordinary result, in that the community was too heterogeneous to be made into a Corporation. In the eye of the law it was a cluster of small houses and no more. This circumstance hampered the development of the College, and confused its history, for every student served six masters:—

The Monastery he came from, which provided an allowance of money.

The *Prior studentium* of the College.

The University.

The Abbot of Abingdon, as Visitor.

The General Benedictine Chapter, and

The Pope, acting through the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Still, the normal tide of academical life flowed into and about the place, and our Unknown Scholar was blissfully ignorant of his six-fold servitude. After all, Gloucester College provided one pleasant thing which could at that time be found nowhere else in Oxford by any student—a home owned by his own abbey,

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bearing its well-known arms on the door, and welcoming him as a friend and not as a chance new-comer; and that counted for much. In some such place, therefore, we may picture him as having been 'up' for several terms in the *mansio* of his own religious house, whether Gloucester itself or some other Benedictine abbey, and having, after a busy or an idle day, stretched himself on his truckle bed and courted

'The innocent sleep,

Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care.'

And now to start the day. What would first meet his awakening eyes between 6 and 7 (or perhaps earlier) in the morning? We can tell with some clearness, for in 1448 the University stationer made an inventory and valuation of the rooms of one Simon Beryngton of Colsell Hall in what is now Merton Street, and both are duly entered in the University Register marked *Aaa*. With the omission of a few indifferent details, and translation of the Latin original, the following represents his earthly possessions:—

	Valued at
A black gown, turned by the fuller ..	4d.
A counterpane of blue and red .. ..	16d.
A blanket .. .. .	2d.
A shirt and a cushion .. ..	1d.
A coffer .. .. .	2d.
A lantern .. .. .	2d.
A hornpipe .. .. .	1d.
Four candlesticks .. ..	10d.
Twelve books .. .. .	4d.

## A STUDENT'S ROOM

Which, with one or two other articles, came to a total of 4s. 3½d., say two guineas of our money.

One may perhaps assume that Simon had hired a bedstead and perhaps a chair. It is touching to see the affection for a little colour (the blue and red counterpane), and to note his indulging in a hornpipe, in spite of it costing a penny. The coffer was, it may be supposed, a little box to keep safe some trinkets and treasures and a little money. But the list contains almost all he possessed which could be valued.

After contemplating these cheerful and exhilarating articles with half-opened eyes, and being thereby stimulated to some activity, our Ignotus would arise, the time being (let us say) about half-past six, since dressing (we need not think about baths) and a scanty breakfast must be over and he off to School Street by perhaps seven o'clock, the hour of his first lecture.

We can reconstruct in some detail the manner of his going from Gloucester College (now *Worcester College*<sup>1</sup>) to School Street.

It is no use thinking of *Beaumont Street*, for it was not formed till 1825. The White Friars or Carmelites had their own way to St. Mary Magdalene Church by Friars' Entry, and no doubt from the Palace of Beaumont (where *Beaumont Street* and *Beaumont Buildings* now stand) there was a way into St. Giles's. But Gloucester College was a remote and isolated building 'almost like a country farm or

<sup>1</sup> Names in italic are, in this chapter, modern nomenclature, non-existent in our hero's time.

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mansion.' So our humble student would pick his way along a country lane (*Worcester Street*) for a couple of hundred yards, and perhaps then turn aside to the right for a moment for a cool draught of water at Plato's Well (near the *Worcester College Fives Court*). He must then cross Broken Hayes, a waste uneven piece of open ground, and following the line of the City Wall (*George Street*), struggle out at last to the outer portal of one of the great Gates of the City, called the North Gate. Entering it he found himself in a kind of tunnel not wider than 12 feet at the two ends and some 70 feet long, with the famous old lock-up called Bocardo<sup>1</sup> above him, and the base of St. Michael's Tower, built in the 11th century, on his left as he went forward. Beyond the gate in Northgate Street (*Cornmarket Street*), the houses were set close together, and if it were market day the stalls of the corn-factors would meet his eye, so far as the merchants had escaped from forestallers<sup>2</sup> and regrators<sup>2</sup> on the way to the Corn Market. We may hope that our student did not step aside to the Lane

<sup>1</sup> Used for University prisoners. The discipline was imperfect; an occasion is recorded when a prisoner, allowed to sleep on the roof, slipped off and was killed. Debtors used to let down a basket from a window into the street to receive charitable contributions.

<sup>2</sup> That is, the unscrupulous dealers who met folk coming in from the country and tried to buy up their goods before they reached the market, so as to form a 'corner' in some special commodity, to their great pecuniary advantage.



THE OLD NORTH GATE (BOCARDO) PLATE 3  
(With St. Michael's Tower (11th cent.), from the South.  
Observe the bag for contributions hanging from the debtors'  
window. From Malchair's engraving of about 1770.)

## CORNMARKET STREET

of the Seven Deadly Sins (*New Inn Hall Street*), but kept straight on to Carfax, the centre and highest part of the City. Part of its height, though our friend knew it not, was due to the extraordinary 14th century cellars (we may say catacombs) with which Carfax is still honey combed. Arrived at this notable spot of the Four Forks (*Quatuor Furcas=Car-fax*), he would perhaps think of the Great Affray of St. Scholastica's Day on February 10th, 1355, a certain black Tuesday when some scholars had a row at the Swindlestock Tavern (now *Boffin's*, the S.W. corner of Carfax), which set the City and University in a blaze for three days. The bell of St. Martin's at Carfax summoned the City to arms, and that of St. Mary the Virgin gathered the University. From the country there poured in, it is said, 2,000 men bearing a black flag, and shouting 'Havac, Havoc: Give no quarter: Smite hard, give good knocks.'<sup>1</sup> Sixty scholars were killed, the Chancellor himself shot at, and very many students grievously wounded and their houses pillaged. The fortress formed by the stone quadrangle of Merton College was no doubt a refuge for the scholars, and may even have saved the University from extinction. The City was laid under a papal interdict for three years, the University

<sup>1</sup> 'Clamant *Havak* et *Havok*: *non sit qui salvificetur Smyt fast, gyt gode knockes*; *nullus post hoc dominetur.*' Bodl. MS. 2722, fol. 294<sup>v</sup>, col. 1. (two hexameters: 'They cry, Havoc, havoc: no quarter: smite hard: give good blows: we will have no masters.')

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acquiring as compensation some valuable privileges at the expense of the City.

However this may be, the student would turn to the left down the High Street, threading his way between the Mercery and the Poultry, and between the Aurifabry and the Butchery, stumbling over the sellers of Ale and Coal and Furs and Gloves, and other merchants of a medieval street market, until passing by All Saints, where the miracle took place in the Churchyard,<sup>1</sup> he reached the Church of St. Mary the Virgin. The street he had followed so far had no pavement, but sloped from each side to the kennel<sup>2</sup> (canal, open drain) running down the centre. Well was it if a good shower washed the street and all the refuse of the market down to the Cherwell: and ill, indeed, if a fortnight had passed without this cleansing.

At last he was near his goal, the lecture room of which he was in search, and though his course had not been the most direct, it was the most interesting, and therefore he took it. As he turned to the left under the West Window of St. Mary's, along School Street (the West part of *Radcliffe Square*), he may have noticed the scenes portrayed in the Window, each illustrating academic history and studies, and each with its Latin pentameter beneath it<sup>3</sup>; and he may

<sup>1</sup> When St. Edmund (Riche) preached therein, and no rain fell there, though the rest of the City was drenched.

<sup>2</sup> There is still a kennel, a relic of the old time, in one place in Oxford, namely Brasenose Lane; as any one may see.

<sup>3</sup> Preserved in Brian Twyne's *Apologia* (1608), p. 202.

## THE LECTURE

have noticed some strange scaffolding beyond the Church where All Souls was to be; but we cannot expect that he should have recognized the little old building at the North-East corner of the Churchyard, which is of such interest as the veritable Cradle of the University.<sup>1</sup> He must hurry on, remembering that both lecturer and pupil are fined if late. He passes within some portal out of sight, but we can follow and note that there he would find a regent master ready first of all to read out a sentence of some text book on his subject, and then to adopt one of two courses: *either* to put the sentence in a clearer form, indicating its connexion with what preceded and followed; *or*—and this his scholars would tumultuously prefer—if only the theme admitted of a difference of opinion, to pose the arguments for and against the point, urging his hearers to discuss it in logical form, he himself summing up and determining the debate. This and similar lectures lasted off and on till about eleven, when for the nonce the scholar's work is done, and he returns to his College. Then came one of the two substantial meals of the day—the dinner, about noon—after which lectures and disputations were resumed or supposed to be resumed for some three or four hours, unless some University Commemoration or kindly Saint caused a Feast Day and provided a free afternoon. On certain occasions, such as St. Philip and St. James's Day, there may have been some of the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 84.



indignation to which Charles Lamb testifies during his school days, at Christ's Hospital, when two saints did so unfeelingly 'club their sanctities,' and provide *one* half holiday instead of two. The actual religious observance of Feast or Fast, however, seems to have come to very little for the first three-fourths of our period, 1300-1500; but the freedom from the Schools was a real and present boon. Sometimes a Master of Arts would die within the City, and the bedells of the University went round to hale out the lecturers to attend the funeral. These would be grand times for the students.

But whether it were early or late in the afternoon, the time for recreation came at last, though it did not loom large in the plan of the day. There was nothing like organization of Athletics, or anything of the kind. In spite of this, our scholar would know what to do. The streets of Oxford, undrained and unpaved though they were, were always full of life, and even, after a shower, wholesome. But there were other possibilities when the town was riotous or unwholesome. He might well, on leaving the College, turn to the left towards Rats and Mice Hill, or try the nearer attractions of the Beaumont Fields, north of Beaumont Palace. Was there not archery there, and pike-staff play? If he were lucky enough to escape a quarrel and free fight on the way, he would meet his fellows there in fair competition. So uncertain, however, were the roads and fields that more than one College forbade its men to stir out of its precincts except with

a Master of Arts. The following example is from the earliest University Register (*Aaa*, in Latin), under date July 1442:—John Felerd, servant, deposed that he was walking with William Bishop and talking about a game called *Sword and Buckler* (this is corrected in the margin to *Piked Staff*), and by accident struck Bishop with his staff. Bishop said 'Soft and fair,' and Felerd replied 'Soft and fair enough.' However, Bishop was not content, but went off and brought two other scholars who said 'Where's the fellow who wanted to play at Pike-staff, and where's his staff?' Felerd said 'I'm the man, and here's my staff.' Bishop said, 'Give up the stick,' and when Felerd refused, promptly seized the staff, and a violent struggle ensued, in which Felerd hit Bishop a good whack over the head, drawing blood. At that everyone seems to have lost his head, and one of the scholars drew his knife, 'called a hangere,' and tried to stab Felerd. However a posse (of Proctors' men?) arrived, and the whole case came before the Chancellor in his Court, and John Felerd, after being securely lodged in Bocardo, was convicted and punished.

Doubtless this was not quite an every-day occurrence, and our scholar would come back safe to supper, to discuss his doings and adventures and prospects with some friends, over as much beer as could be got, until the time arrived for rest.

So begins, waxes and wanes the day for our scholar, and so it was and is and will be as long as there are at

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Oxford the two classes — on the one side the Man who Knows (the Artist, the Jurist, the Leech, the Divine), and on the other, that thirst for knowledge which drew the medieval student to a University and which was the salt of the place.

As Quiller Couch wrote in 1907, of the 'Secret of Oxford'

'Tower tall, city wall,  
A river running past;  
Youth played when each was made,  
And shall them all outlast.'

## AN OXFORD STUDENT ABOUT 1390.

So familiar is Chaucer's description of the Oxford Scholar in the Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*, that it need not here be quoted; but the following passage from the Prologue to his *Miller's Tale* is less well-known and may fitly close our sketch of medieval life.

. . . At Oxenford . . . A Carpenter,

- 3190 With him ther was dwellinge a povre scoler,  
Had lerned art, but al his fantasye  
Was turned for to lerne astrologye . . .
- 3203 A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye  
Allone, with-outen any companye,  
Ful fetisly y-dight with herbes swote . . .
- 3208 His Almageste and bokes grete and smale,  
His astrelabie, longing for his art,

## CARFAX TO MAGDALEN

- 3210 His augrim-stones layen faire a-part,  
On shelves couched at his beddes heed :  
His presse y-covered with a falding reed.  
And al above ther lay a gay sautrye,  
On which he made a nightes melodye  
So swetely, that al the chambre rong ;  
3215 And *Angelus ad Virginem* he song ;  
And after that he song the Kinges note ;  
Ful often blessed was his mery throte ;  
And thus this swete clerk his tyme spent  
3220 After his freendes finding and his rente.