

The Society's 150th Anniversary

1989 was the year in which the Society celebrated the 150th anniversary of its foundation.

The first four lectures in the annual programme concentrated on the present work of the Society and its early history. David Prout's lecture at the beginning of the year (printed below, pp. 379-91) describes the establishment of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture and its subsequent history over the next forty years or so. The work of the Society's Victorian Group over the last twenty-five years was discussed by Peter Howell, and Julian Munby talked about the work of the Listed Buildings Sub-Committee under the dramatic title of 'Goths versus Vandals?' David Sturdy's talk on the history of the Ashmole Club reminded us that this is the junior branch of the Society.

An anniversary celebration was included in the excursion programme. On 10 June members travelled to Stamford, there to meet with members of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society who celebrate their 150th anniversary in 1990. After a buffet lunch and short speeches by both Presidents four groups followed conducted tours of Stamford, cleverly organised so that not too many of us were all at the same place at the same time. The Society is grateful to the members of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society for their company and for help in making the arrangements.

The Annual General Meeting was held at Corpus Christi College. Members met in the new Music Room, created out of one of the bastions of the City Wall. After the business, we listened to the President's talk about the wall and were able to stand on the inner bank and look out over Christ Church meadow. We then adjourned to the Rainolds Room and enjoyed strawberries and cream and sparkling white wine. Selections of Ian Taylor's photographs taken during some of the Society's recent excursions were on exhibition.

An innovation was the Anniversary Dinner on 18 September, attended by about seventy members and also held at Corpus. The idea came from Don Wild, the Society's Hon. Treasurer, and he was responsible, together with the Domestic Bursar, for most of the arrangements. Members enjoyed an excellent meal, generously accompanied by appropriate wines, and the success of the evening was apparent from the steady buzz of conversation throughout. After the loyal toast, proposed by the President, Tom Hassall, he again rose to his feet to address us for twenty minutes or so and then to propose the health of the Society.

The four lectures in the second half of the programme were arranged in an attempt to demonstrate the wide coverage of the Society's interests. John Blair talked about St. Frideswide, a central figure in the last volume of *Oxoniensia*. Turbulent elections in Banbury featured in David Eastwood's account of politics in early 19th-century Oxfordshire. The visit to the Museum of the History of Science marked a departure from the normal practice of lectures, but was arranged in this particular year because of links with the early history of the Society. Malcolm Airs's talk on Buildings in Dorchester-on-Thames was a follow-up to a successful visit there, in unkind weather, in October. This lecture, and the one on politics, reminded us that ours is a county society; and the range

of subjects throughout the year, both in lectures and in excursions, demonstrated the Society's concern for archaeology, architecture, archives and history.

JEAN M. COOK, Hon. Secretary

THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

Good evening, members of the O.A.H.S. and guests. It is a very great privilege for me to address you tonight here in the hall of Corpus Christi College. I hope that you will agree with me that this is a very suitable setting for our celebrations. This is, of course, our Honorary Treasurer's College and we have Dr. Wild to thank for making this evening possible; it is also my own undergraduate College. Little did I think, twenty-five years ago when I participated in a particularly rowdy Bump Supper, that I would have the honour of presiding over such an august occasion as the 150th birthday of our Society. But apart from the personal connections of your officers with this College I think that there is another, and deeper, reason why we should gather here: for Corpus was the College of Brian Twyne.

Brian Twyne was one of the greatest of Oxford antiquaries. His life has been described by Strickland Gibson, who was incidentally my godfather, in *Oxoniensia*, v (1940). He was born in 1580 and was admitted as *discipulus* at Corpus in 1594, later becoming a Fellow. He must have dined often in this hall. Twyne's only published work was *Antiquitatis Academiae Oxoniensis Apologia*. This book, printed in 1608, was intended both to champion the antiquity of Oxford against Cambridge's spurious claims and also to support King Alfred's supposed connection with the University.

Twyne's unpublished transcriptions and research into the early history of both the City and the University were unmercifully plagiarised by his younger contemporary Anthony Wood, an old boy of Lord Williams's Grammar School at Thame where I too was a pupil. Nevertheless, Wood paid tribute to Twyne on one occasion when he wrote that 'Twyne was a loving and a constant friend to his mother the University and to his College, a severe student and an adorer of venerable antiquity'.

The tradition of scholarly interest in Oxford and its history established by Twyne and Wood was continued in the 18th century by antiquaries such as Thomas Hearne who was, like my father, an assistant keeper at the Bodleian Library. Hearne is famous for his diaries, in which he gives a very personal and at times acerbic view of Oxford and his contemporaries. He was dismissive of Wood and described Dr. White Kennet, Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall and author of *Parochial Antiquities attempted in the History of Ambrosden, Burcester and other Adjacent Parts in the Counties of Oxford and Bucks*, as 'a man of trimming, diabolical principles' with a 'haughty insolent temper'. Hardly, you would think, qualifications for a later Bishop of Peterborough.

These early antiquaries had not yet felt the need to come together in an organised Society, like – say – the Society of Antiquaries of London, although they did apparently meet for convivial purposes. Thus if you look at Joseph Skelton's *Oxonia Antiqua Restaurata*, printed in 1823, you will find an engraving of Antiquity Hall. This was a hostelry which stood in Hythe Bridge Street, on the S. side of the road at its eastern end, almost opposite the offices of the Oxford Archaeological Unit. The sign of this illustrious watering-hole was three cups, out of which the Oxford Antiquaries drank 'mild ale'. How much serious discussion of Oxford's past was conducted there history does not relate, but Antiquity Hall seems, nevertheless, to have fulfilled the human need for those with a common interest to meet together at one place to discuss matters of mutual interest.

It was this human imperative which must, in part, have led to the actual formation of our Society in 1839. Our founding fathers were, however, made of more sober stuff than the frequenters of Antiquity Hall. Our Society was founded at the height of the period of the Oxford Movement as a Society for promoting the study of Gothic architecture. Because it met in Oxford, 'Oxford' was prefixed to the title. The early years of the Society were described by Dr. Billy Pantin in *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), and David Prout has given us a new version in one of our lectures during this anniversary year (below, pp. 379-91). In 1848 the Society incorporated the 'Oxford Heraldic and Archaeological Society' and then became known as the 'Oxford Architectural Society', adopting the title 'Oxford Architectural and Historical Society' by 1860. The Society operated in parallel with several sister societies which were subsequently founded in later years: the Oxfordshire Archaeological Society (1852), the Oxford Historical Society (1884) and the Oxford Record Society (1919).

By the early decades of this century the character of our Society had changed; in Pantin's words, 'from being a champion of the true principles of Christian or pointed architecture, it was gradually becoming a champion of the preservation of ancient monuments'. Fundamental to this role was the foundation of the Old Houses Sub-Committee in 1912, which still survives in our Listed Buildings Sub-Committee whose history and current work was described by Julian Munby in his lecture to us.

1936 was the next notable milestone in the Society's history when the first volume of *Oxoniensia* was published, with the sub-title 'A Journal dealing with the archaeology, history and architecture of Oxford and its neighbourhood'. *Oxoniensia* quickly established the reputation, which it has maintained, as one of England's leading county journals.

Three years later we celebrated our centenary. The celebrations were presided over by the redoubtable Miss M.V. Taylor. A party was held at the Ashmolean Museum on 7 June of that year, and what was described as a 'modest programme' of celebrations took place: 'it is the utmost the Society can do without embarking on expenditure which it cannot afford'. Thus in our centenary year the Society had the still familiar problem of a shortage of funds caused by a lack of members. As our journal recorded, 'for a county like Oxfordshire, which is so rich in antiquities of every age, and whose historical associations are so strong and so interesting, the numbers are far from encouraging'. I can see our current Honorary Treasurer nodding in agreement fifty years later.

Nevertheless, in spite of the Society's perennial problem, Pantin delivered an astute verdict on us when he wrote in 1939: 'It is impossible not to admire the vitality, flexibility and adaptability of the Society; there is the same institution, but with constantly developing and changing functions'. Those same characteristics of vitality, flexibility and adaptability have, I believe, continued to distinguish us.

Consider, if you will, some of the changes which have taken place in the environment in which the Society has operated since Pantin's words were written. The County has, after many years of campaigning, its own museum service; the study of archaeology and local history has been encouraged by the spectacular expansion of the Oxford University Department for External Studies; rescue archaeology has become professional and is now conducted by the Oxford Archaeological Unit; other 'competing' societies have been established at a county level (I am thinking particularly here of the Friends of the Ashmolean and the Oxfordshire Local History Association) and in several of the towns in the county; many of the district councils, established in 1974, employ their own conservation officers. All these changes have taken place at the local level, while at the national level there have been equally significant changes with, for instance, the introduction of listed building control and conservation areas, the growth

in 'period societies', guidelines on the publication of archaeological reports published in the Frere and Cunliffe reports and, most significant of all, the establishment of English Heritage.

Yet the Society has responded to all these and other changes. It is, I believe, as vigorous as ever. The programme of lectures, in spite of various changes in location, is well attended. The Listed Buildings Sub-Committee continues the tradition of guarding our stock of historic buildings. The Victorian Group's activities echo the intentions of our founding fathers by championing buildings of the Gothic Revival which was itself in part stimulated by our early activities. Our Library is still maintained in a happy collaboration with the Ashmolean Library and we try to cater for the young through the Ashmole Club. *Oxoniensia* remains the jewel in our crown.

The reasons for the Society's continual success are not hard to find. First we have an inexhaustible supply of our subject-matter, and what is particularly exciting is the constant stream of new discoveries. For example, the first volume of *Oxoniensia* contained Sir Frank Stenton's seminal article on St. Frideswide. That, you might think, was all that could be said on the matter; and yet our Honorary Editor, John Blair, in a recent article and in the set of papers which formed the greater part of the last volume, has demonstrated just how much more has been learnt about Oxford's patron saint and her monastery. Modesty should make us believe that we are but pygmies on the shoulders of giants, but our Society has its own giants even today.

Secondly, in spite of the 'competition', the Society continues to fulfill a need and to provide a framework for like-minded individuals. However, the framework has not remained static. I would draw attention to the changing of the name of the Society to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society in 1972, thus recognising our amalgamation with the Oxfordshire Archaeological Society (without changing our initials O.A.H.S., which we tend to use as the shorthand description of ourselves). Similarly, after local government reorganisation in 1974 old North Berkshire, which from my totally Oxfordshire perspective I still think of as the 'liberated areas', was brought more firmly into our concerns.

But above all our success is due to those self-same individuals who collectively make up the Society. We have been extremely fortunate in the calibre of our past officers, who have included such names as Howard Colvin, Sheppard Frere, Donald Harden, Nowell Myres, Billy Pantin, H.E. Salter, Peter Spokes and Miss M.V. Taylor, to mention only a few. Above all we have been particularly fortunate in our secretaries, who actually hold the Society together. I am delighted to see Catherine Cole here tonight, who I always think of as *the* Secretary, since she held that office for so much of my own lifetime; and I myself have been fortunate to have had Jean Cook as secretary during my term of office. But a Society cannot survive on officers alone, and all of you as ordinary members supporting our lectures, excursions and publications have a vital role to play.

What of the future? The world around us is changing rapidly. Our Society must now be seen in the context of a world in which there is a growing awareness of environmental, or 'green', issues. We are told that we shall have increasing amounts of leisure, perhaps to attend yet more lectures and excursions or carry out individual research. We are also moving into a world where information, including our own areas of interest, is becoming even more highly valued. I am confident that the Society will continue to rise to these challenges. We shall have no shortage of material to study, no slackening in the need for campaigning and guarding against the needless destruction of our past, and nothing yet has replaced the printed word, even though processes of achieving it have changed.

I would like to think that the shade of Brian Twyne is looking down benignly on our celebrations tonight. I am sure that he would have approved of the foundation of the

Society and of what we have achieved. He was himself a man of many parts. He was, for instance, interested in contemporary science and natural philosophy, in astrology, in Dr. Dee's magic mirror and Fair Rosamond's optical toy. He even searched for the secret of perpetual motion exemplified in a contraption made of wheels and buckets. Twyne did not discover the secret, but our Society, using Pantin's magic formula of vitality, fluidity and adaptability, seems to have found, if not perpetual motion, then perpetual utility; and long may it continue to do so.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like you therefore to be upstanding and to drink the Health of the Society.

TOM HASSALL