

An Oxford College and the Eighteenth-Century Gothic Revival

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SUMMARY

The renovation of the dining hall at University College Oxford between 1766 and 1768 was one of the earliest examples of Gothic Revival architecture and disrupts the teleological narrative of the movement's historiography. The collaborative product of the architect Henry Keene and Sir Roger Newdigate, MP for the University of Oxford, the hall loudly proclaimed the college's foundation by King Alfred and its dynamic position in the social and political life of the 1760s.

‘...though fan tracery and ribbed vaulting have a degree of prettiness everywhere and would, even if they were constructed topsy-turvy, or in any other imaginable position, yet nothing but the worst possible taste could have conceived the transmutation we have described.’¹

To go Gothic in 1766 was a striking decision when set against the pervasive, albeit not all-embracing, classicism of Georgian Oxford. By the 1840s, *The British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review* (quoted above) saw in the plaster fan vaults of the dining hall at University College Oxford (Univ.) an encapsulation of everything that the Victorians felt was wrong with eighteenth-century Gothic. But despite the significance of the original decision and the harshness of some nineteenth-century criticisms, the architectural anomaly produced by the redesign of the hall has only attracted the most fleeting of glances from scholars. Howard Colvin believed it to be a ‘charming example of the Georgian rediscovery of Gothic as a decorative style,’² whilst Geoffrey Tyack lamented that the work ‘fell victim to the more solemn taste of a later generation’ when the hall was extended and the elaborate plaster fan vaults removed in 1904.³ Even in Robin Darwall-Smith’s magisterial history the hall receives only a paragraph, although it is recognized that it was ‘the first major example of the Gothic Revival style in Oxford.’⁴ Yet the aesthetic decisions taken by Univ. between 1764 and 1766 were not the flippant decorative displays associated with the ‘Gothick’. Univ. sought to use Gothic to evoke both the Alfredian origins of the Society, to celebrate a period of unprecedented social and intellectual dynamism under the Mastership of Dr Nathan Wetherell, and provide an opportunity for the amateur architect Sir Roger Newdigate, MP for the university and owner of Arbury Hall (Warks.), to further explore his passion for medieval architecture.⁵

¹ *The British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review*, 29 (1841), p. 479.

² H.M. Colvin, ‘Architecture’, in L.G. Mitchell and L.S. Sutherland (eds.), *Eighteenth-Century Oxford. History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 5 (Oxford, 1986), p. 848.

³ G. Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide* (Oxford, 1997), p. 182. Significantly, Univ.’s contractor enclosed a copy of the *British Critic*’s article in his ‘Preliminary Report as to the Hall Roof’: University College Archives (UC), FA4/2/Y1/1 – Moore, ‘Preliminary Report as to the Hall Roof’ (Oct. 1899).

⁴ R. Darwall-Smith, *A History of University College, Oxford* (Oxford, 2008), p. 285.

⁵ Matriculated 1736; MP for Middlesex 1742–7, and for the University of Oxford 1751–80. Details of parliamentary positions here, and in subsequent references, are taken from L. Namier and J. Brooke, *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons 1754–1790* (London, 1964). For further biographical details see A.W.A. White, *The Correspondence of Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury, Warwickshire*, Publications of the Dugdale Society (1995), pp. xxv–lv; A.I. Lewer, ‘Newdigate, Sir Roger, Fifth Baronet (1719–1806)’, *ODNB*, online edn (accessed September 2011).

FUNDING GOTHIC INNOVATION

The conscious use of the Gothic style by Univ. in the redesign of its hall in the 1760s was a bold statement that reveals much about the personalities involved, and the self-perception of a Georgian college, which makes it all the more remarkable that the hall has remained little more than a footnote in histories of the Gothic Revival.⁶

The initial impetus for ‘beautifying and adorning the hall’⁷ came from a donation of fifty pounds made to the college by Thomas Kay, ‘an old friend and member of the college’,⁸ just before the death of John Browne, ‘the most obscure eighteenth-century Master of University College’,⁹ in 1764. Browne, however, clearly had an impact on Kay, who was his tutor before Kay became a Skirlaw Fellow in 1729 and was presented to the college living of Melsonby (Yorks.) in 1736.

I shall be glad to live to see the Master’s considerable benefact’ take place, his name as L^d [illegible] – he says, is a sacred deposit in my bosom, he was a most worthy, honest man, my tutor & constant good friend as long as he lived.¹⁰

Whether Browne had any intentions of overseeing the redesign of the hall himself is impossible to discern given a complete absence of documentation.¹¹ Kay’s will of 1787 gives an indication of what he was seeking to achieve through his donation in 1764:

...eight hundred pounds more to augment the Bennett Scholarship and the remainder to be applied to the rebuilding of a house that is contiguous to their college and now occupied as part of it and used to be called Deep Hall or to any other public use that the said Master and fellows shall think proper for the interest and reputation of the college.¹²

Kay might have been looking to provide a memorial to the late Master Browne that would in turn improve ‘the interest and reputation of the college’. But with the death of John Browne, his successor, the ambitious Dr Nathan Wetherell,¹³ saw in Kay’s donation the opportunity to mark the start of his mastership with a grand architectural statement in a college whose last major building project, Radcliffe Quadrangle (1716–19), was ‘answerable to the front already built’,¹⁴ and thus offered no opportunity for the then Master, Arthur Charlett, to impose himself upon it. Wetherell, who had been elected a fellow in 1750, was full of ambition, ‘of oily obsequiousness to the great’ and was a shrewd political networker.¹⁵ Earlier commentators, however, were more complementary. William Carr, who wrote the second complete history of

⁶ Only Michael McCarthy covers the developments at Univ. in any detail, closely linking then with Newdigate’s work at Arbury Hall: *The Origins of the Gothic Revival* (London, 1987), p. 133.

⁷ Warwickshire Record Office (WRO), CR136B/1860: Thomas Nelson (fellow of University College, 1737–60) to Sir Roger Newdigate (19 Oct. 1764).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Darwall-Smith, *History*, p. 267.

¹⁰ UC, Melsonby Uncatalogued Papers: Kay to Wetherell (9 Dec. 1772).

¹¹ Browne’s most important legacy is his library, which still resides in the (nineteenth-century) Master’s Lodgings of Univ. See E. Adams, ‘“To be esteemed and go with them as and in the manner of Heir looms”’: A Preliminary Introduction to the Browne Collection’, *University College Record*, 16.1 (2011), pp. 88–95.

¹² UC, Melsonby Uncatalogued Papers: Kay’s Will, (20 March 1787).

¹³ For a detailed account of Wetherell’s Mastership at Univ. see T.M. Curley, *Robert Chambers: Law, Literature, and Empire in the Age of Johnson* (London, 1998), pp. 52–66, and, at greater length, Darwall-Smith, *History*, esp. chapter 13, pp. 275–95. See also, D. Wetherell, ‘“In the double character of politician and divine”’: Nathan Wetherell and his Son Charles at Oxford, 1770–1846’, *History of Education Review*, 32.1 (2003), pp. 49–65.

¹⁴ Darwall-Smith, *History*, p. 238.

¹⁵ W.R. Ward, *Georgian Oxford: University Politics in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1958), p. 231.

Univ. after William Smith's *The Annals of University College*,¹⁶ believed Wetherell to be, 'a man of considerable personal dignity, with a wide circle of acquaintance...and a befitting Master for the now flourishing Society.'¹⁷

A letter from Thomas Nelson to Sir Roger Newdigate indicated Univ's aims:

An old friend and member of the college [Kay] having, it seems, just before the late Master's death, sent a bill of 50 [pounds] – as a beginning towards the expense of beautifying and adorning the hall – I make no doubt but there will be some endeavours used very soon to bring it into execution; and therefore as almost – as all the other college halls – that have been new fitted up, have been done with less judgement, than such fine old buildings seem to deserve, except Magdalene and Ch. Church: I cannot but wish that either you or Mr Conyers could be prevailed on, to design as well as to direct the execution, should it go forwards: and then there would be no doubt to see the old college appearing venerable in its antiquity, neat in its simplicity, and yet not quite beneath the dignity of its great founder K. Alfred.¹⁸

Nelson's letter to Newdigate was the starting point for a two-year correspondence between Univ. and its influential old member regarding the design, construction, and financing of the project. Whilst Gothic is not mentioned explicitly, Nelson's praise of Christ Church and Magdalen's building activities would suggest that this is the style in question due to his concern for the contextual setting of 'such fine old buildings'. The work referred to by Nelson at Christ Church was Dr Samuel Fell's completion of Cardinal Wolsey's great quadrangle, where the extant ranges were carefully copied, complete with the wall shaft and springers for the proposed cloister vaults. More importantly, he completed the fan-vaulted staircase vestibule to the hall (c.1640).¹⁹ The relevance of Magdalen to Nelson is more puzzling, as there were no major works carried out between the construction of the classical New Buildings (1733–4) and Wyatt's Gothic interventions between 1790 and 1795.²⁰

The early eighteenth century was also a period of remodelling for many college halls. Bare plaster walls were wainscoted, wall fireplaces replaced open braziers and new screens were constructed with Classical detailing. At Lincoln in 1701 and Oriel in 1710 new Classical plaster ceilings were inserted below the original hammer-beams, whilst work at St John's (1730–1), Jesus (1741–2) and Brasenose (1751) expressed the colleges' desire to modernize through using a Classical idiom.²¹ Univ., by contrast, modernized through the use of Gothic detailing.

Despite the Classical inroads of Aldrich's Peckwater Quadrangle at Christ Church (1705–14), All Saints Church (1706–9), and The Queen's College (1672–1707 for the North Quad, 1709–34

¹⁶ W. Smith, *The Annals of University-College. Proving William of Durham the True Founder: And Answering All Their Arguments Who Ascribe it to King Alfred* (Newcastle, 1728).

¹⁷ W. Carr, *University College* (London, 1902), p. 188.

¹⁸ WRO, CR136B/1860.

¹⁹ For Dean Fell at Christ Church see M. Batey and C. Cole, 'The Great Staircase Tower at Christ Church', *Oxoniensia*, 53 (1988), pp. 211–20; J. Newman, 'The Architectural Setting', in N. Tyacke (ed.), *The Seventeenth Century. History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1997), p. 162.

²⁰ Nelson may have been referring to the westernmost bay window in the north elevation of Magdalen College hall (c.1690–5): J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (London, 1974), p. 151; Keene won the commission for rebuilding the President's Lodgings for George Horne (a Univ. old member) in 1769 thanks to his work at Univ.: R. Darwall-Smith, 'The Monks of Magdalen, 1688–1854', in L.W.B. Brockliss (ed.), *Magdalen College Oxford: A History* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 352–4; that Nelson was referring to Magdalene College Cambridge seems unlikely, but the hall was 'greatly altered' in 1714 with a new wainscot and plaster ceiling.

²¹ Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide*, pp. 165–6. Like Univ., the plaster ceilings were removed from Lincoln and Oriel.

for the Front Quad), Gothic remained accepted in Oxford for its contextual use to repair ecclesiastical and collegiate buildings. Moreover, two main streams of Gothic architecture were present throughout the Georgian period, when the hegemony of Classicism in architecture has been repeatedly stressed. These were not outmoded creations of ignorant architects but a creative response to the values of the medieval world. In the Church of England, Gothic was deployed to repair existing ecclesiastical structures, but also as a means of proving that the Anglican Church had always maintained a separate identity from Rome. Much of this historical construction was carried out in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which produced all the Anglican clergy. Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century college growth in Oxford and Cambridge consciously deployed a Gothic semantic in order to reinforce the role these corporate bodies saw for themselves. These were not examples of Gothic Survival, where the Gothic was used because it was how building work had always been carried out in the Universities, but a conscious decision.²² Indeed, Gothic Revival and Survival overlapped in Oxford from the mid seventeenth century right through to the early nineteenth. In Brasenose College chapel with John Jackson's plaster fan vault (1659) the Gothic became visual, rather than constructional, enabling the associative qualities of the fan vault to be used solely for effect (Fig. 1); at Christ Church, Sir Christopher Wren responded to the medieval context of Tom Quad with Tom Tower (1681–2); and at All Souls Hawksmoor reinvented Gothic architecture as an elaborate theatrical stage set for academic performances (West Range, 1722–34).

Gothic, by the mid eighteenth century existed in Oxford either as a continuation of seventeenth-century building practices, as in Univ's Radcliffe Quadrangle, or in Hawksmoor's new form of Gothic at All Souls. Nelson's letter was to give rise to a third type of Gothic architecture, one that undermines the traditional teleological narrative of the Gothic Revival, which has stressed that the Whiggish progress towards complete fidelity to medieval sources only happened in the mid nineteenth century.

John Conyers 'was known to be an amateur architect of ability' and studied with Newdigate at Univ. between 1735 and 1738.²³ Their relationship was further strengthened by Newdigate's marriage to Conyers' sister, Sophia, in 1743. Newdigate and Conyers had worked together in the design of Conyers's seat at Copped Hall in Essex. Univ. turned to these men because they had experience in the Gothic style, Newdigate had influence as the university's MP, but also had the additional filial ties to their old college, which was a point emphasized by Newdigate in his draft response to Nelson:

...although I am very sensible of my inability to answer your expectations in such an undertaking, University College has too good a right to my gratitude and best endeavours to serve them, to leave any room to doubt my readiness to obey any commands the Society should think fit to lay upon me.²⁴

Despite Newdigate's enthusiastic response financial difficulties hampered progress. Wetherell twice attempted to solicit support from Charles Jenkinson, who was one of Univ's most influential old members of the period.²⁵ In March 1765, Wetherell and the fellows 'beg leave to

²² For the Gothick Revival versus Gothic Survival debate see H.M. Colvin, 'Gothick Survival and Gothick Revival', in idem (ed.), *Essays in Architectural History* (London, 1999), pp. 217–44; G. Worsley, 'The Origins of the Gothic Revival: A Reappraisal', *TRHS*, 6th series, 3 (1993), pp. 105–50; idem, 'What's in a 'K'?', *Country Life*, 188.16 (1994), pp. 74–7.

²³ M. McCarthy, 'Sir Roger Newdigate, Arbury Hall, Copped Hall and John Conyers', *The Burlington Magazine*, 121, no. 915 (1979), p. 382. John Conyers (1717–75): matriculated 1735; MP for Reading 1747–54, and Essex 1772–5. Details of Copped Hall: H.M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, 3rd edn (London, 1995), p. 847.

²⁴ WRO, CR136B/1860.

²⁵ Jenkinson was without doubt a rising political star but Wetherell was unable to secure his election as one of the university's MPs in 1768, where he stood against Sir Roger Newdigate.



Fig. 1. John Jackson's plaster fan vault in Brasenose College chapel (1659). Image © James Jago.

acquaint him that they propose soon to arch the cellars and ornament the hall of the old college' informing Liverpool that, 'any benefaction for this purpose...will be gratefully acknowledged by this Society.'²⁶ That Wetherell does not specify what the proposition entailed suggests that Univ. was seeking to raise the necessary funds before engaging any architect, amateur or otherwise, to produce drawings.

By February 1766 Henry Keene, whose most compelling architectural legacy remains his work for Newdigate at Arbury Hall, was involved in the project.²⁷ This work found an early precedent in Keene's chapel for the bishop of Worcester at Hartlebury Castle (1749–50) for 'it was in the chapel that Keene first revealed his inclination to make a vaulted roof the dominant feature of an interior'.²⁸ Keene was the pre-eminent exponent of the decorative plaster fan vault, which reached its ecclesiastical apotheosis at St Mary's Hartwell (1753–5), and its secular high point in the saloon of Arbury Hall (1798):

Keene can now be seen as an unconventional and courageous pioneer in promoting the [Gothic] style for new churches and Hartwell as at the very heart

²⁶ BL, Add. MS 38469, f. 120: Wetherell to Jenkinson (29 March 1765).

²⁷ WRO, CR136B/2322: Wetherell to Newdigate (14 Feb. 1766); Henry Keene has occupied a peripheral position in the history of eighteenth-century architecture. For a gazetteer of works see Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 571–4.

²⁸ T. Mowl, 'Henry Keene, 1726–1776: A Goth In spite of Himself', in R. Brown (ed.), *The Architectural Outsiders* (London, 1985), p. 88. Pevsner described Keene's work as, 'an extremely pretty fan vault (modelled on Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey)': A. Brooks and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Worcestershire* (London, 2007), p. 362.

of the mid eighteenth-century attempts to create a progressive ecclesiastical Gothic based on historical authenticity entirely free of Classical association, and furthermore as an avant-garde masterpiece.²⁹

As Keene was already engaged with Newdigate at Arbury Hall, his involvement at Univ. was a logical move.³⁰ Wetherell, however, could barely conceal his shock at Keene's estimate for the works:

I had your favour by yesterday's post attended with Mr Keen's extraordinary estimate. In truth, Sir Roger, £700 is a very serious sum; I must take the sentiments of the Society upon the subject, and will beg leave to trouble you with a line the latter end of this week intimating our final resolution.³¹

Newdigate, in his role as executant, sought to reassure Wetherell that the cost would be necessary in order to avoid replicating the errors of aesthetic judgement Thomas Nelson had highlighted in earlier projects:

[Keene] assures me it is impossible to do the work so as to do him and ourselves credit under the very large sum of £700. I have desired him to distinguish the necessary from the ornamental part which he has done and if we are to rob it of the whole which would be hardly to keep faith with our subscribers the amount is greatly beyond our intentions.³²

Newdigate, by this stage, had taken much closer control over the project, informing Wetherell in the same letter that he had been fundraising of his own accord – 'Lord Aylesford³³ tells me Lord Radnor³⁴ will subscribe handsomely, I have talked to Mr Best,³⁵ Mr Thrale³⁶ and Sir Charles Sedley³⁷ and hope they will contribute' – and that if the proposal were to be accepted by the college that he would, 'try some others who seem backward at present'. Newdigate's contacts were united both by their links to Univ., and also through their politics. None of the men contacted by him could be considered Whigs. Even with his filial obligation to his old college, the extent to which Newdigate involved himself in the project suggests that he was anxious to ensure that the design was derived from authentic historical sources. Newdigate's anxiety to ensure that the project was carried out with 'the ornamental part' finally resulted in him taking financial, as well as stylistic control, in April 1766:

²⁹ T. Friedman, 'Henry Keene and St Mary, Hartwell', in M. Hall (ed.), *Gothic Architecture and its Meanings, 1550–1830* (Reading, 2002), p. 152.

³⁰ For details of Keene and Newdigate's collaboration at Arbury Hall see, McCarthy, *The Origins of the Gothic Revival*, pp. 129–31, 134–5.

³¹ WRO, CR136B/2324: Wetherell to Newdigate (21 April 1766).

³² UC, FA4/1/C1/1: Newdigate to Wetherell (18 April 1766).

³³ Heneage Finch (1715–77): matriculated 1732; as Lord Guernsey sat as MP for Leicestershire 1739–1741, and Maidstone 1741–7 and 1754–7. Architectural exploits as 3rd earl at Packington Hall, Warwickshire: G. Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses* (Chichester, 1994), pp. 152–7; relationship with Newdigate: Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 138.

³⁴ William Bouverie (1725–76): matriculated 1743; MP for Salisbury 1747–61; created Earl of Radnor 1765; commissioned a medallion of Alfred for Longford Castle in 1767: S. Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 28 (1999), p. 321.

³⁵ Thomas Best (1713–95): matriculated 1732; MP for Canterbury 1741–54 and 1761–8; Lieutenant Governor of Dover and Deputy Warden of Cinque Ports 1762–95.

³⁶ Henry Thrale (1728–81): matriculated 1744; MP for Southwark 1765–80: P. Mathias, 'Thrall, Henry (1728–1781)', *ODNB*, online edn (accessed September 2011).

³⁷ Sir Charles Sedley (1721–78): matriculated 1739; MP for Nottingham 1747–54, 1774–8. Newdigate had been friends with the Sedley family from an early age.

I hope you will excuse the hurry in which I wrote on Friday, but I have much more to ask forgiveness for, having upon the [receipt] of your last taken into consideration the difficulties and delays which must necessarily proceed from the uncertainty of procuring the whole sum from which Mr Keene will not depart and the reasonable objections you and the Society may have to engaging yourselves for it, I have taken the liberty to agree with Mr Keene myself.³⁸

KEENE AND NEWDIGATE'S DESIGNS FOR UNIV.

With Newdigate taking financial control of the project in April 1766 Wetherell must have breathed a sigh of relief. Keene's letter of 4 December 1767 further confirms that Newdigate was the first to be consulted for any decisions, 'I left it [the building accounts] with Sir Roger Newdigate for his perusal as some of the extra matters were by his orders.'³⁹

With Newdigate at the helm, Keene advanced a form of scholarly Gothic that points forward to, and comfortably predates, the archaeological Gothic espoused by the Revivalists of the nineteenth-century. The architect's plans demonstrate an awareness of the theatrical possibilities of the Gothic; Keene's wash is textured, the Gothic wainscot casting deep shadows on the

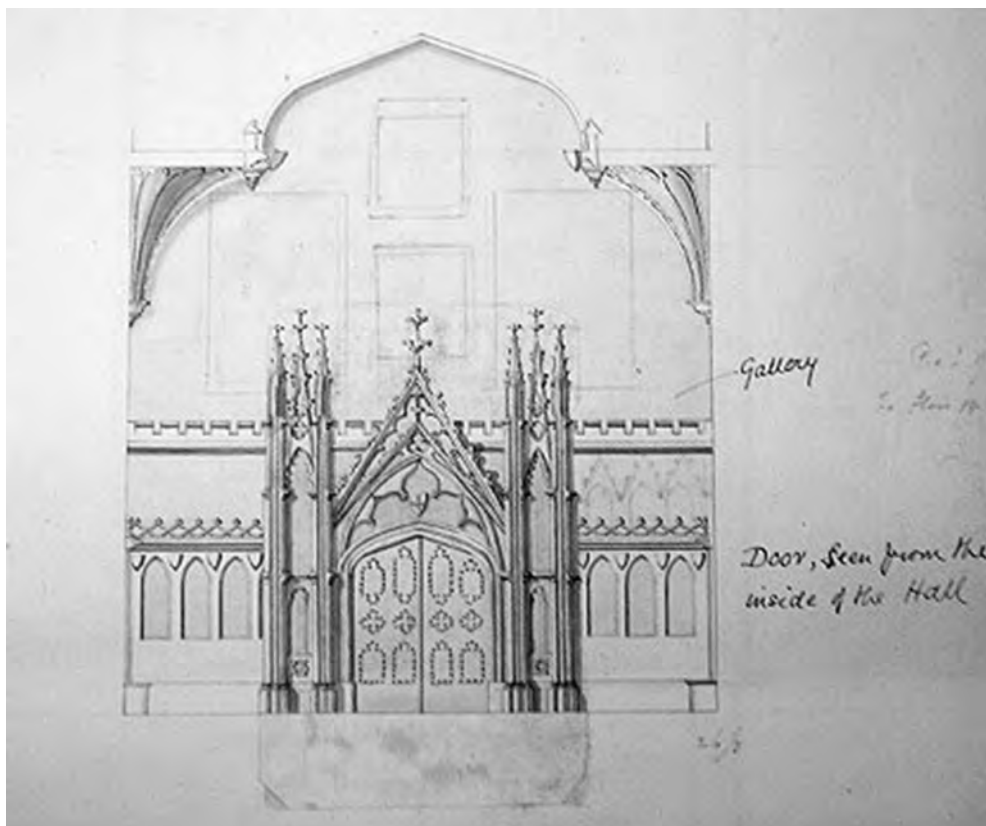
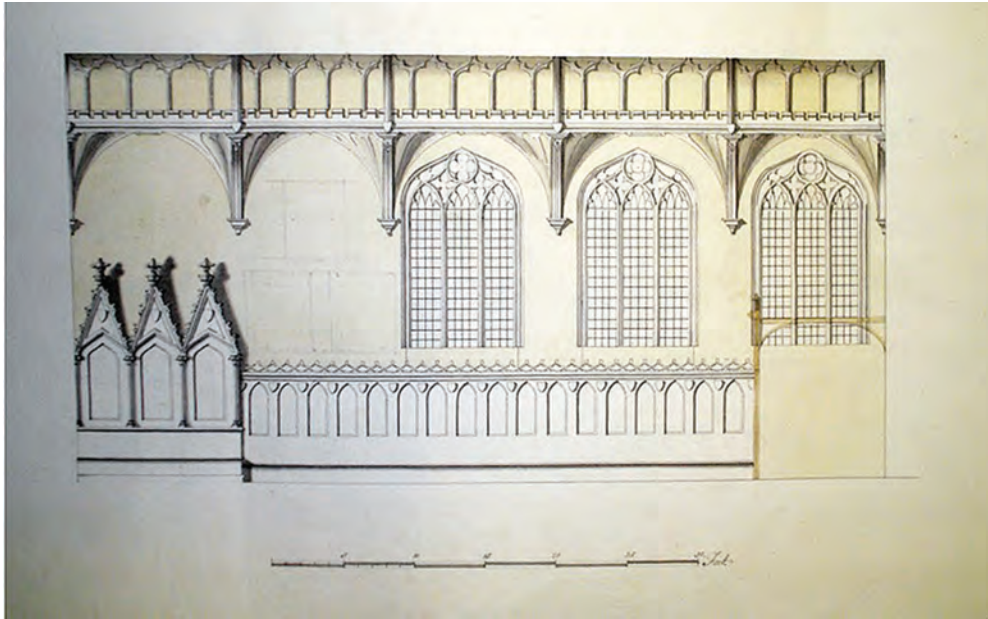


Fig. 2. Henry Keene's drawing of the east elevation of Univ. hall (UC, FA4/1/Y1/1-2).

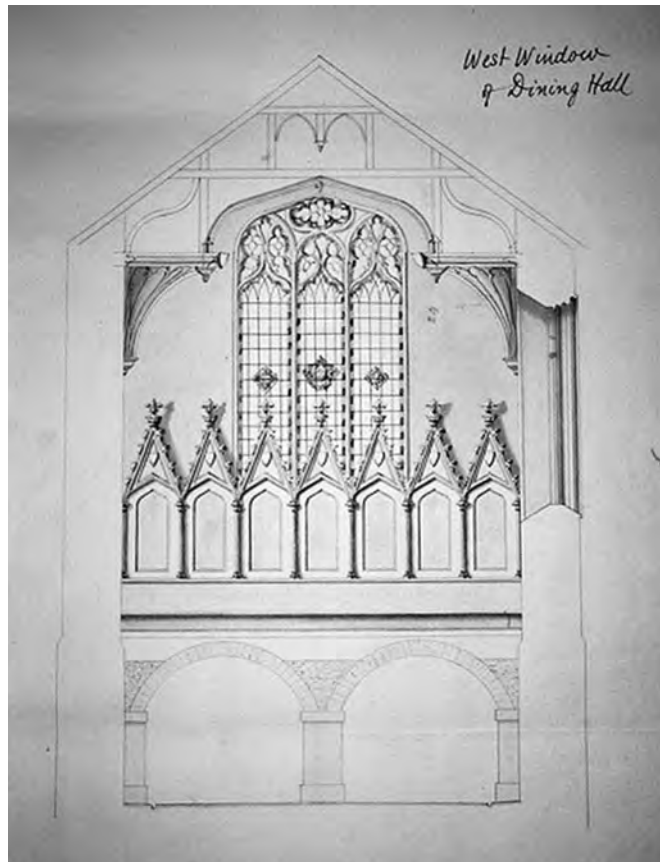
³⁸ UC, FA4/1/C1/2: Newdigate to Wetherell (4 April 1766).

³⁹ Ibid. FA4/1/F1/2: Keene to Wetherell (4 Dec. 1767).



ABOVE:
Fig. 3. Keene's drawing of the north elevation of Univ. hall (UC, FA4/1/Y1/1-2).

RIGHT:
Fig. 4. Keene's drawing of the west elevation of Univ. hall (UC, FA4/1/Y1/1-2).



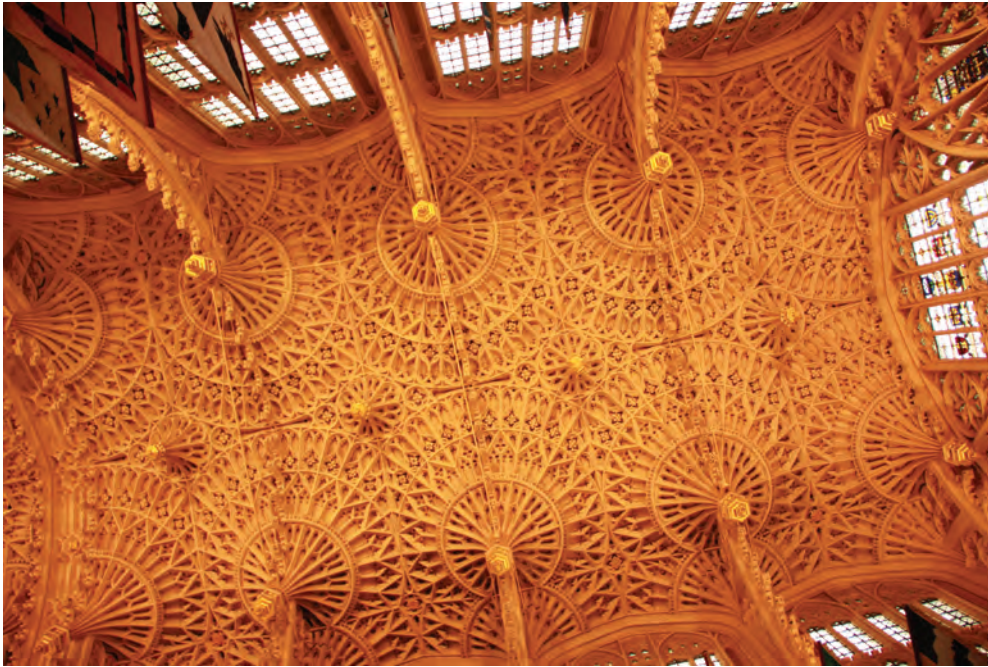


Fig. 5. Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey. Image © nursekiminlondon via Flickr.

existing walls (Figs. 2–4). Clustered Gothic columns richly decorated with elaborately crocketed pinnacles flanked the entrance to the hall, which included a galleried level mounted with crenulations. These perpendicular Gothic forms were carried around the north and south walls of the hall in a more subdued wainscot, ornamented with the arms of the college's donors, before being mirrored in the highly decorative panelling around High Table at the hall's west end.⁴⁰

Keene and Newdigate's source for the new Gothic interior of Univ. dining hall was Henry VII's chapel at Westminster Abbey (Fig. 5):⁴¹

I have several hands at work in London on the joiners' work: the carving I will venture to affirm will please you, for though we talked about turning in order to be cheaper, I find it will not please me, I have taken off casts in plaster at the abbey, and shall have the leaves all used from those exactly, only of different sizes.⁴²

As surveyor to the fabric of the abbey from 1746 to 1776, Keene would have had intimate access to one of the most celebrated monuments of English medieval architecture. Both men nursed a strong interest in the chapel's architecture. Keene's earlier work for the bishop of Worcester displayed a familiarity with fan vaulting and Newdigate, as a student at Westminster School, must have been familiar with the building from a young age. There are also indications that Newdigate was involved in a more systematic study of its architecture, as several drawings

⁴⁰ UC, FA4/1/Y1/1–2: Keene's specifications and plans (1766).

⁴¹ T. Tatton-Brown and R. Mortimer (eds.), *Westminster Abbey: The Lady Chapel of Henry VII* (Woodbridge, 2003). For other Gothic Revival buildings referencing Henry VII's chapel see J. McDonnell, 'Stone, Stucco and Papier Mâché: Fan Vaulting from Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey, to Monkstown Parish Church,' in M. McCarthy and K. O'Neill (eds.), *Studies in the Gothic Revival* (Dublin, 2008), pp. 3–20.

⁴² WRO, CR136B/1785: Keene to Newdigate (20 June 1766).

in his hand survive showing details of the chapel's fan vaulting.⁴³ In addition, Univ. had two excellent examples of pre-Revival fan vaulting under the entrance towers of Main and Radcliffe Quadrangles (1638 and 1719), providing Keene and Newdigate with another source of design inspiration.

Keene and Newdigate's approach was archaeological in its reliance on plaster moulds taken directly from 'a wonder of the world',⁴⁴ but the dining hall at Univ. was not a faithful reconstruction of a royal chapel. Keene stayed true to the outline design of his moulds but altered the size and scale to fit the dimensions of Univ.'s dining hall. The elements taken from Westminster Abbey – the pendant mouldings reproduced in plaster at the base of the fans at Univ. – were applied creatively to an existing structure. The plaster fan vaults supported a horizontal beam and a barrel vault used to disguise the original hammer-beam construction. Judged in parallel with the exactitude of nineteenth-century Revivalists, the hall cannot be considered an authentic recreation of an extant medieval structure, but can be seen as an early attempt to create a truly Gothic architecture prefiguring the cast collection of the Oxford Society for Promotion of Gothic Architecture by eighty years.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, such a dynamic response to medieval precedent only earned the hall a condescending mention from Nicholas Pevsner, who rejected it as 'rococo Gothic'.⁴⁶

Keene and Newdigate were not the only architectural partnership working in the mid eighteenth century to take inspiration from Westminster Abbey. At Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire, Lady Oxford's work on the great hall is the earliest example of plaster vaulting used in a secular, domestic context;⁴⁷ and at Strawberry Hill Horace Walpole began his Gothic experiments with his gallery complete with a plaster ceiling based on Henry VII's chapel in 1761 (Fig. 6).⁴⁸ Keene and Newdigate would also have been aware of Sanderson Miller's Gothic work for Robert Vansittart in the Old Library at All Souls (1750) (Fig. 7). Sir Roger Newdigate significantly elaborated upon Miller's wooden panelling with its blind gothic tracery to provide Oxford with its first large-scale example of Gothic revival architecture.⁴⁹

Like Walpole at Strawberry Hill, Keene and Newdigate took inspiration from the fan-vaulted roof of Henry VII's chapel and combined these Gothic forms with decorative detailing derived from other sources within the abbey:

I have taken the joiner to the abbey and taken off exact drawings from the best monuments, which I shall closely follow – had this not been the case, I should have sent you copies of what I intended – but supposed as you were so well acquainted with these originals, that would be needless.⁵⁰

Keene's flattery of his patron was by no means empty. Newdigate's detailed drawing of a proposed fireplace for Arbury Hall suggests that their working relationship was more that of a collaborative partnership. The primary inspiration for the wainscot and fireplace in Univ. dining

⁴³ WRO, CR764/213–6. As McCarthy has suggested, the inclusion of a drawing from John Dart's *Westminster Abbey, or the History and Antiquities of the Abbey Church of St Peter's Westminster* (London, 1723) in WRO, CR764/216 demonstrates that Newdigate used printed sources as well as his own sketches to help with his and Keene's designs for Arbury and Univ.: McCarthy, *Origins of the Gothic Revival*, p. 131.

⁴⁴ *An Historical Description of Westminster-Abbey, Its Monuments and Curiosities* (London, 1767), p. 17.

⁴⁵ D. Prout, 'The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture and The Oxford Architectural Society, 1839–1860', *Oxoniensia*, 54 (1989), pp. 379–91.

⁴⁶ Sherwood and Pevsner, *Oxfordshire*, p. 50.

⁴⁷ P. Smith, 'Lady Oxford's Alterations at Welbeck Abbey, 1741–1755', *The Georgian Group Journal*, 11 (2001), pp. 122–68.

⁴⁸ For the history and reception of Walpole's Strawberry Hill see M. Snodin (ed.), *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill* (London, 2009).

⁴⁹ Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide*, p. 181.

⁵⁰ WRO, CR136B/1785.



Fig. 6. The gallery at Strawberry Hill. Image © dajavous via Flickr.

hall came from the tomb of Aylmer de Valance (Fig. 8).⁵¹ The form and shape of the panelling at the west end was based upon the central pinnacle of the tomb, and the ceiling mouldings between vaults follow the clover shaped detailing below the finial.

The tomb of Aymer de Valance, like the roof of the Henry VII chapel in which it sat, was an important source of design inspiration for the secular, domestic Gothic Revival of the 1760s.⁵² However, the tomb was almost demolished in 1761 to make space for a monument to the hero of Quebec, General Wolfe.⁵³ Horace Walpole was outraged that 'one of the finest and most ancient monuments in the Abbey', was under threat, and quickly offered, should the tomb be moved, to 'erect and preserve it here [at Strawberry Hill]'.⁵⁴ Newdigate was also clearly fond of the tomb as the saloon fireplace of Arbury Hall predates its copy in Univ. hall by three years.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Aymer de Valance (c.1275–1324). For discussion of his tomb's position in medieval art see A. McGee Morganstern, *Gothic Tombs of Kinship in France, The Low Countries, and England* (Philadelphia, PA., 2000) pp. 79–81.

⁵² The tomb continued to be admired into the nineteenth century. Sir George Gilbert Scott reckoned it to 'rank among the finest specimens of medieval sculpture': G.G. Scott, *Gleanings from Westminster Abbey* (Oxford, 1861), p. 49; and John Ruskin argued that 'you will look at it, if you have true feeling, with deep reverence, with delighted admiration, but not with tears': E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 23 (London, 1903–12), p. 229.

⁵³ A. McNairn, *Behold the Hero: General Wolfe and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century* (Liverpool, 1997), p. 88.

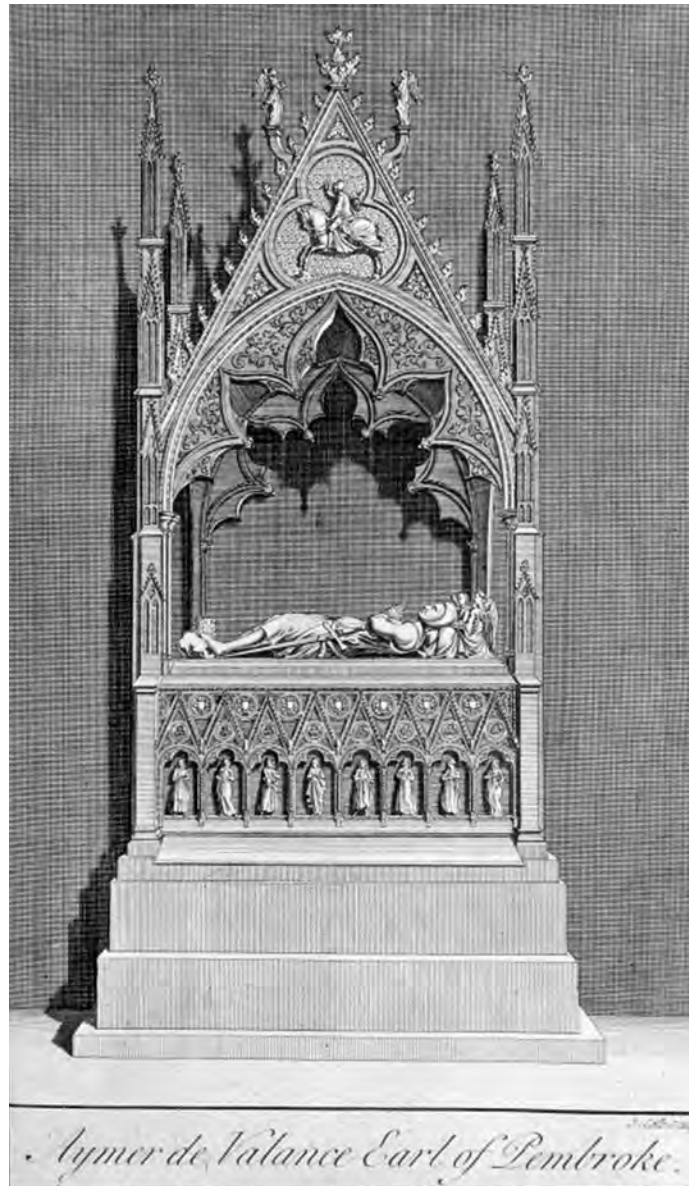
⁵⁴ W.S. Lewis (ed.), *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, vol. 38 (London, 1974), p. 110.

⁵⁵ M. McCarthy, 'Sir Roger Newdigate: Drawings for Copt Hall, Essex and Arbury Hall, Warwickshire', *Architectural History*, 16 (1973), p. 30.



Fig. 7. The Old Library, All Souls College, Oxford.

Fig. 8. 'Aymer de Valance Earl of Pembroke' in J. Dart, Westmonasterium. Or the History and Antiquities of the Abbey Church of St Peter's Westminster, vol. 2 (London, 1742).



At Univ., only the fireplace is described as Gothic in extant correspondence. Richard Hayward, the London mason employed by Newdigate, detailed his design for the 'size of the shield for the Gothick hall chimney piece', and in his subsequent letter to Newdigate alludes to the stylist intentions of the project, stating that, 'I have kept it [the chimney piece] very bold and I believe it will have a good effect.'⁵⁶

⁵⁶ WRO, CR136B/1730: Hayward to Newdigate (23 Aug. 1766); WRO, CR136B/1731: idem (Sep.[?] 1766). Hayward exhibited relief tablets for chimneypieces at the Society of Artists exhibitions in 1761, 1764 and 1766, and Newdigate was one of his most important patrons.

With the chimneypiece in Oxford by the end of October 1766 attention turned to the decorative detailing of the hall.⁵⁷ Gothic Revival chairs were commissioned for High Table,⁵⁸ and ornament was to be provided by a heraldic roll of donors, as described by Wetherell to Charles Jenkinson:

I must beg the favour of you to send me an exact blazon of your coat, as we design immediately to have the arms of our several benefactors painted and put up in our hall as some faint mark of our regard and gratitude for favours received.⁵⁹

Keene's plans provided a blank canvas for a roll of donors to be constructed.⁶⁰ The use of donors' coats of arms was a conscious attempt by the college to evoke the Alfredian origins of the Society, with Wetherell asking of Newdigate 'are we not to be favoured with a shield from the hands of Lady Newdigate?'⁶¹

RESPONDING TO GEORGIAN GOTHIC

Wetherell's final letter to Newdigate on the subject of the hall came in November 1768. The Master seemed content with the changes, noting that 'we think the hall very handsome, and it is much admired by strangers.'⁶² Newdigate's concerns, however, seemed more pedestrian, hoping that the Master would 'find great comfort in it in winter.'⁶³ Such remarks were deceptive. The newly Gothic hall, drawing inspiration from the precedent of Henry VII's chapel, was a powerful visual demonstration of Univ.'s dominant position within both Oxford and the nation at large.

Gothic was the architecture of a self-conscious college. Despite being the oldest foundation in Oxford, dating from 1249, the built environment of Univ. did not reflect this, so the college used Gothic as a means of reinforcing its claim to be founded by King Alfred.⁶⁴ During the 1760s the college was transformed from an intellectual and social backwater into a dynamic hub from which Wetherell was able to extend his correspondence with the great and the good of the period. That Wetherell should wish to express this through architecture was a mark of his own personal ambition, but also the desire of the college to consciously evoke its heritage. Gothic for Univ. was antiquarian in nature, as reflected by the stress laid on the importance of the coats of donors' arms. The status of the donors reflected favourably on Univ., 'in this hour of the college's greatest glory.'⁶⁵

Too long in the shadow of its imposing Classical neighbour Queen's College, Univ.'s fashionable Gothic architecture attracted widespread comment. In 1764, all the third edition of *The New Oxford Guide* could find to say about Univ. was that, 'the hall is a plain, but decent

⁵⁷ WRO, CR136B/1733: idem (20 Oct. 1766).

⁵⁸ Like Walpole at Strawberry Hill, Newdigate and Keene's Gothic detailing extended to furniture, creating a remarkably early example of a Gothic Revival Gesamtkunstwerk.

⁵⁹ BL, Add. MS 38205, f. 113: Wetherell to Jenkinson (12 Dec. 1766).

⁶⁰ UC, FA4/1/Y1/1: Keene's contract (5 May 1766).

⁶¹ CRO, 136B/2328: Wetherell to Newdigate (12 Nov. 1768). Lady Newdigate had expressed concern with her undertaking, as Newdigate confided to Wetherell, 'My wife, who has not forgotten her promise but is fearful of not doing Alfred justice': White, *Correspondence*, p. 146.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ White, *Correspondence*, p. 145.

⁶⁴ After a dispute between William Denison and Thomas Cockman over who was the rightful successor to Arthur Charlett as Master of Univ., Cockman was declared Master in May 1727 after the Court of the King's Bench ruled that King Alfred was the founder of the College. With the legal right to claim Alfred as their founder, the fellows wasted no time in publicising this fact. When the college appeared on the Oxford Almanacs of 1735 and 1753 King Alfred featured prominently: Darwall-Smith, *History*, pp. 249–61, 286.

⁶⁵ Carr, *University College*, p. 188.

room, adorned with a portrait of King Alfred, and their benefactors. It is of the age of the chapel.⁶⁶ *A Pocket Companion for Oxford* stretched to observing that, 'the principle buildings are the chapel, the hall, the library, and the master's lodging. The chapel and the hall are situated on the south side of the old quadrangle.'⁶⁷ With the completion of the hall praise was lavishly dispensed from the many competing guidebooks to Oxford. The seventh edition of *The New Oxford Guide* observed that, 'the hall has been lately fitted up in a very beautiful Gothic style, at the expense of many generous contributions, and is a most complete room of the kind.'⁶⁸ In 1814, 'the hall, which was fitted up some years since in the Gothic style', could be considered as 'one of the most beautiful rooms in Oxford';⁶⁹ in 1817 William Wade described the hall as 'among the most splendid refectories in the University. Its principle decorations have been executed with peculiar elegance, and an apparently total disregard of expence'.⁷⁰

By 1821, descriptions of the hall had developed substantially from the terse summaries of the previous century:

In the year 1766, its interior received considerable alterations and improvements. The fire-place in the centre of the room, as was the custom in the halls of large buildings, was removed, and a chimney erected on the south-side. The roof was ceiled, the wainscot put up, a screen erected at the lower end, the floor newly paved, and the whole ornamented in the Gothic style. The expense, which amounted to nearly £1,200, was defrayed by the generous contributions of the Master and Fellows, and many others who had been, or were then, members of the Society. The chimney-piece, which is of an elegant design, suited to the character of the place, was the donation of Sir Roger Newdigate, Bart. D.C.L. some time gentleman commoner of this college, and during many years one of the representatives in parliament of the University. The arms of the contributors decorate the wainscot...On the fine roof are displayed the arms of the principal benefactors.⁷¹

The hall could still be admired for its 'elegant Gothic' chimneypiece and 'screen of wood, tastefully arranged in the same style' in 1831,⁷² but by 1847, praise was no longer lavished on the hall, as a creeping suspicion of the aesthetic value of Georgian Gothic meant accounts became simply descriptive:

The present hall was completed about 1657, but the interior entirely refitted in 1766, at the expense of members of the college, whose armorial bearings are painted on the wainscot. The fire-place was the gift of Sir Roger Newdigate, founder of the University prize for English verse, which bears his name, and a gentleman commoner of this college. The floor is of Swedish and Danish marble.⁷³

⁶⁶ *The New Oxford Guide: Or, Companion through the University. Exhibiting Every Particular Worthy the Observation of the Curious in Each of the Public Buildings, Colleges, Halls, &c...*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1764), p. 30.

⁶⁷ *A New Pocket Companion for Oxford...* (Oxford, 1753), p. 53.

⁶⁸ *The New Oxford Guide...*, 7th edn (Oxford, 1787), p. 27.

⁶⁹ *A New Pocket Companion for Oxford...* (Oxford, 1814), p. 48.

⁷⁰ W.M. Wade, *Walks in Oxford: Comprising an Original, Historical, and Descriptive Account of the Colleges, Halls and Public Buildings of the University...*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1817), p. 151.

⁷¹ *The Oxford University and City Guide, to which is added a Description of Blenheim and Nuneham* (Oxford, 1821), pp. 50–1. This passage is copied verbatim from R. Ackermann, *A History of the University of Oxford, its Colleges, Halls, and Public Buildings*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1814), p. 39. It also suggests that the scheme, originally costed at £700, went considerably over budget.

⁷² *Oxford Delineated...* (Oxford, 1831), p. 56.

⁷³ J.H. Parker, *A Hand-Book for Visitors to Oxford* (Oxford, 1847), p. 144.

In an article focussing on timber-roofed halls published in 1841, *The British Critic and Quarterly Review* launched a stinging attack on Univ.'s hall labelling it 'an architectural monster'.⁷⁴ In order to understand the changing meanings of the Gothic it is necessary to understand the shift in conception of the medieval past. By the mid nineteenth century, the growing popularity of the Gothic as a style for the middle classes, and the increasing freedom of interpretation by builders led to a need to redefine what Gothic meant.

A.W.N. Pugin – 'the towering figure of the Gothic Revival'⁷⁵ – reconceptualised architecture as a moral force. He was the most powerful exponent of the young Victorian view that aesthetics and ethics were linked and this relationship could be expressed through architecture. Architecture was no longer for architecture's sake. It had to serve a moral purpose. As Rosemary Hill has suggested, Pugin 'pointed to the Middle Ages as a model not just for architecture, but for society, for a coherent, Christian civic order in which the poor would be fed, the old cared for, the children taught'.⁷⁶ The early years of Queen Victoria's reign were characterized by an unprecedented dominance of youth and new ideals. The most influential of these architecturally was the quest for 'reality', which 'stood for integrity and solidarity, for high seriousness, for everything the Georgians seemed to their children to have lacked in religion, in architecture and in life'.⁷⁷

It is possible to trace these ideas in the evident disdain for the hall shown by *The British Critic*:

A roof, as well as any other fabric, ought to be either fact or poetry, it should still seem to do so; that is, it should still be a consistent theory. It is best of course where it is both. The original roof was fact i.e. its real construction was manifest, and it had some degree of poetry suited to the purpose of the building. Ribbed vaulting is also fact, and has a still higher degree of poetry suitable to its usual sacred purpose. Perhaps such vaulting as that of Henry VII's Chapel is poetry carried to an extreme, too much overlaying and disguising fact. Yet in point of *apparent* construction, what can be more absurd than the modern roof in instance before us?⁷⁸

For the writer in question, what was so offensive about Keene and Newdigate's work at Univ. was that it did not serve a structural purpose. Whilst for eighteenth-century Gothic enthusiasts the fan vaulting of Henry VII's chapel was the pre-eminent source of inspiration and believed to be the apogee of medieval Gothic creativity, Pugin's remarks on the chapel in his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* are almost identical to those espoused in *The British Critic* and illustrate the belief that ornament should be derived only from the function of the structure:

Henry the Seventh's Chapel at Westminster is justly considered one of the most wonderful examples of ingenious construction and elaborate fan groining in the world, but at the same time it exhibits the commencement of the bad taste, by constructing its ornament instead of confining it to the enrichment of its construction.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ UC, FA4/2/Y1/1.

⁷⁵ M. Aldrich, *Gothic Revival* (London, 1994), p. 141.

⁷⁶ R. Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (London, 2008), p. 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 213.

⁷⁸ UC, FA4/2/Y1/1.

⁷⁹ A.W.N. Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*; idem. *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture* (Leominster, 2003), p. 7.

For the Revivalists of the nineteenth century, the highpoint for Gothic architecture in Britain was in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, when the Gothic had developed beyond the massy structures of the Norman Conquest and had not yet become 'florid, exaggerated or infected with symmetry and imitations of the Renaissance' as the Perpendicular was thought to be.⁸⁰ The essential characteristics of the Gothic as a moral system suggested by Pugin were set down in *True Principles*:

- 1st, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety.
- 2nd, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building.⁸¹

Propriety for Pugin meant that 'all the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of, and in accordance with, the purpose for which it is designed'.⁸² The Gothic deployed in Univ. was therefore offensive for two reasons. Firstly, the fan vaulting, derived as it was from the already condemned Henry VII Chapel, was purely decorative. To use plaster for any other purpose than for smoothing walls was seen as 'a mere modern deception'.⁸³ The optical illusion of a plaster fan vault was interpreted as a moral failing. Secondly, the meaning of Gothic for the fellows of Univ. can be broadly described as antiquarian as the college sought to evoke its association with King Alfred. By removing the Gothic from its ecclesiastical context the hall caused the greatest possible offence to *The British Critic*, 'the de facto house magazine of the Tractarianism':⁸⁴

Both in taste and piety there is absolute discordance and contradiction between fan tracery and eating and drinking. A common use of such sacred ornaments has at least a certain ideal resemblance to Belshazzar's profaneness...By a most extraordinary consistency of error, there has been an attempt to substitute sacred for domestic features throughout the whole fabric, so that it may now be pronounced unquestionably the most derided and elaborate piece of bad taste in Oxford.⁸⁵

In both *The British Critic* and in Pugin's formulation of a Gothic system of architecture as a moral crusade against industrial society there is a failure to deploy the historicism so keenly promoted with regards to the medieval past to the actions of eighteenth-century enthusiasts for Gothic architecture. The generational shift away from the supposed 'unrealities' of the Georgians has blinkered our understanding of what the eighteenth-century Gothic Revivalists were trying to achieve. In its own time, the style was anything but 'light, frivolous, witty and even slightly naughty'.⁸⁶ In striving to assert their independence from the frivolous 'Gothick' of the eighteenth-century, Victorian critics overlooked the precedents set by the work of Keene and Newdigate at Univ. The obsession with 'reality' prevented nineteenth-century critics from seeing in the hall an example of a constructive engagement with medieval sources and a concern for contextuality, in doing so pre-dating their own efforts by eighty years.

⁸⁰ Hill, *God's Architect*, p. 226.

⁸¹ Pugin, *True Principles*, p. ix.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 42.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 2.

⁸⁴ Hill, *God's Architect*, p. 220.

⁸⁵ UC, FA4/2/Y1/1.

⁸⁶ Hall, *Gothic Architecture and its Meanings*, p. 10.



Fig. 9. Univ. hall from the north-east in 2012. Photography by Edmund Blok © University College, Oxford.

CONCLUSION

But I, who have seen Cheverel Manor, as he bequeathed it to his heirs rather attribute that unswerving architectural purpose of his, conceived and carried out through long years of systematic personal exertion, to something of the fervour of genius, as well as inflexibility of will...some of that sublime spirit which distinguishes art from luxury, and worships beauty apart from self-indulgence.⁸⁷

George Eliot, daughter of Sir Roger Newdigate's agent at Arbury Hall, used her father's employer as a model for Christopher Cheverel in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'. In so doing she captured the essence of Newdigate's passion for Gothic architecture, anchored in his undergraduate years at Univ., much more effectively than Pevsner, who believed Newdigate's Gothic to be 'gay, amusingly pretty – not at all venerable'⁸⁸ and Brooks who saw Arbury as 'the slightly unnerving outcome of a private fascination, as if Newdigate had spun himself an inner world of Gothic lacework.'⁸⁹

Such interpretations underestimate the seriousness with which eighteenth-century amateur architects engaged with Gothic, and go some way to explaining why architectural historians have neglected the programme of Gothicisation at Univ. Just as eighteenth-century Oxford graduates looked towards the Midlands gentry as a rich source of patronage, preferment and

⁸⁷ G. Eliot, quoted in McCarthy, *Origins of the Gothic Revival*, p. 142.

⁸⁸ N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Warwickshire* (London, 1966), p. 765.

⁸⁹ Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, pp. 77–8.

employment – whenever Newdigate was in need of a chaplain or curate he looked first to the university –⁹⁰ so Univ. looked towards the web of Gothic architectural endeavour spreading from Arbury Hall. We must extend our analysis of the eighteenth-century Gothic Revival away from the clutches of the private Gothicists – Walpole at Strawberry Hill, and even Newdigate at Arbury – to consider the importance of Gothic as a form of public architecture. Given Oxford's growing prominence in eighteenth-century political and social life the decision to disguise the original hammer-beam roof with a barrel vault and plaster fans must be seen as an attempt by the college to proclaim a certain Alfredian truth about its history, and the validity of the Gothic style in demonstrating that truth. In doing so, Keene and Newdigate's work at Univ. laid the foundations for the medievalising spirit that swept through Oxford in the nineteenth century.

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⁹⁰ White, *Correspondence*, p. 146.

