

Changes Through Time: John Combes's Charity School, its Architecture, Function, and History

DAVID CLARK and DIANA WOOD

SUMMARY

John Combes's House in the churchyard of St Thomas the Martyr, Oxford, was founded by John Combes in 1702 as a charity school to educate ten poor parish boys. A stone panel set into its south wall explains this. An opportunity arose in 2007, ahead of some planned modernization, to examine the building, record its appearance and dimensions, and study the documentary evidence for its history, its inhabitants, its different functions, and its changes over time. What emerges is the remarkable survival of an almost unaltered eighteenth-century school house, some details about its founder and the people who lived in it, and some unanswered questions.

The Parochial Church Council of St Thomas the Martyr, Becket Street, Oxford, after the inconveniences of a long interregnum decided in 2007 to advertise a 'house for duty'. A part-time, non-stipendiary priest would be appointed to the living, in return for which the parish would provide a house, namely, John Combes's House, at the south-east corner of the churchyard (see Plates 1 and 2). This inevitably led to plans for modernization, and it seemed appropriate to make an architectural record of the structure before work started and to place it within its historical context. During this research some information has emerged about the founder of the charity school, John Combes (the spelling used in the documentary evidence, although several variants of it occur) and some of the schoolmasters and their families who lived in the house.

A plaque (Fig. 1) on the front of the building conveniently records the year of its foundation, some information about its founder, and details of the charity which he established:

This Parrish School house was built in the year of Our Lord 1702 and in the first year of the reign of QUEEN ANN at the charge of M^r JOHN COOMBES, Cityzen and Plaisterer of London, Borne in this Parrish and free of this City, for the Benefit of as many Poor children as the rent of this house will Pay for their teaching to read and write the teacher to be ye clerk of this Parrish (if duely qualified) but if not the teacher as well as the Children to be Elected by the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor and such Elders as have executed both these offices in this Parrish with the assistance of the minister.

This raises several questions to which answers will be attempted in what follows, bearing in mind that such plaques are not necessarily accurate. Is the house really typical of a schoolhouse built in 1702? How, if at all, has it changed over time? How were its different spaces used? Can anything be discovered about the founder? How far were the terms of his charity honoured, and for how long? Who lived in the house and when? Finally, what became of the house when the school no longer functioned as such?

LOCATION AND SITE

John Combes's House sits in a corner of the churchyard of St Thomas the Martyr, at the end of what is now St Thomas's Street (formerly High Street, St Thomas). There was no previous structure on the site, as the land is shown as part of the churchyard in Loggan's (1675) map. Its front door to the east gives on to a pathway (formerly Church Street) which led to the convent of the Sisters of the Community of St Thomas the Martyr. To the south are a single-storey extension, a vestibule, and the boys' school of 1839, with a later parish room behind.

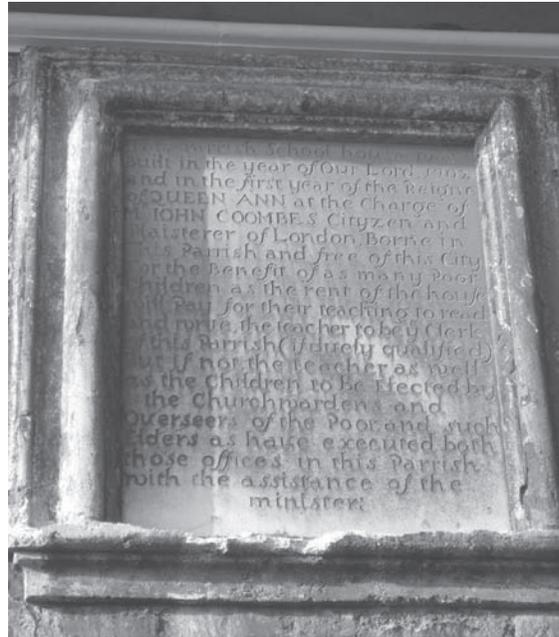


Fig. 1. The wall plaque. (Photograph by David Clark.)

SCHOOLHOUSE EXTERIOR

The exterior is described in the Royal Commission's Oxford volume and in the List Description.¹ The house was depicted by the well-known engraver James Basire in an article on Combes in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* of January 1809 (Fig. 2) and drawn by J. C. Buckler in 1821 (Fig. 3). It is a rectangular stone building of two storeys and attics under a gabled roof. A plat band links the lintels of the ground-floor windows. The gables have stone copings and kneelers. The roof has a Cotswold-stone slate covering.² The building stone is a shelly limestone, possibly from Headington or Wheatley. It is mostly used as rubble, roughly laid in courses, but with an almost ashlar quality to the north (churchyard) elevation. There is considerable blackening from smoke pollution, and some stones were replaced in the 1960s. The front door (not now used) is central to the east gable. The pedimented doorframe, the dressings of the windows to either side, and the facing of the upper part of the gable have also been renewed. Figure 3 also shows the intended symmetry of the wall, although one window on the first floor is now blocked.

Similarly, the north elevation also strives for symmetry, and, as can be seen from Plate 1, the design is driven by the central commemorative panel at first-floor level. The window to its left is blocked with stone, while that to the ground floor directly below has a cement infill, scored to simulate stone. Each window frame has residual evidence for insertion points probably for shutter hinges. There are two attic dormers, but three are shown in Figures 2 and 3. The west gable windows shown in 1809 have been replaced by twin-light windows with plain two-centred arched heads and drip-moulds, a Victorian insertion and perhaps a conscious reference to the church nearby.

¹ RCHME, Oxford (1936), p. 177 (no. 172 'Gate House') and Images of England ref. no. 245882 (Combe House [sic]).

² The parish borrowed money to re-roof the house with Stonesfield slates in 1967: see p. 34 below. It seems clear from Figs 2 and 3 that the earlier covering was also stone slate.

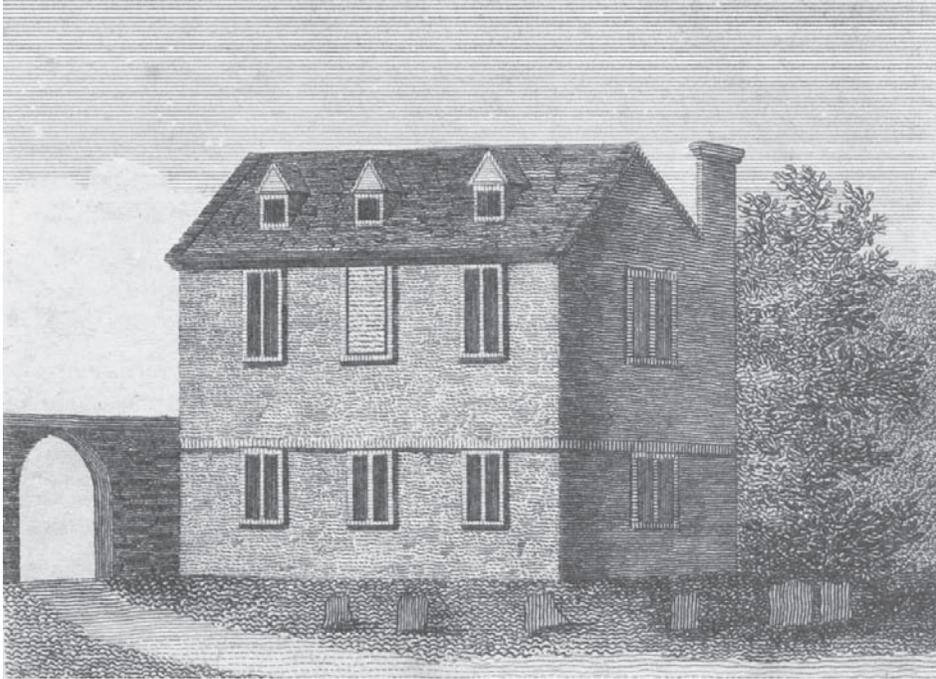


Fig. 2. Engraving of John Combes's House by James Basire, c.1800. (By kind permission of the Churchwardens of St Thomas the Martyr, Oxford.)



Fig. 3. J. C. Buckler drawing of 1821, showing three gables. From Squires, *In West Oxford*, opposite p. 126. (By kind permission of Oxfordshire Studies.)

In the south-west corner is a stone chimney-stack, integral to the original build, but with a twentieth-century brick upper part. There is a further apparently original stack central to the south wall, again rebuilt in modern brick. Each stack serves three fireplaces. These are shown in Plate 3.

The south elevation is largely obscured by a single-storey kitchen-and-bathroom extension, the roof of which can be seen in Figure 3. Buckler shows a building here in 1821, but apart from the walls, nothing of this date survives. There are two casements to the first floor. Behind the kitchen extension is a timber lean-to porch which also covers a former doorway to the main building.

Most of the windows have rectangular glass quarries in lead comes, but the glass is modern, and in some of the windows there are casements.

SCHOOLHOUSE INTERIOR

The ground plan is shown in Figure 4. Each of the three floors follows roughly the same pattern: to the east, a single large room; to the west, a timber stud partition with lath-and-plaster infill divides the space into a smaller room on the south side, with an ante-room to the north-west, and in the remaining quarter, a stairwell containing a winder stair ascending the full height of the building.

All the partition doors in the house are of wide tongue-and-groove vertical planks, the battens keeping them together being mitred to form two large panels which face in to the stairwell – so this side was intended to impress the visitor.

The large east room on the ground floor is now entered from the south; the dimensions and crude finishing of the lower part of the doorway show that it was created from a former window in the south wall. The central blocked window to the north has been used to form a shelved wall-alcove. Across the room, and supported on the central partition, is a spine beam, some nine inches wide, chamfered with run-out stops at each end. In the south-west corner is a blocked fireplace. All the doors to this room open inwards.

The western room has an apparently original doorway from the garden to the south, squashed in next to the central partition. The south window reveal extends to the floor; the (replaced) west window has a seat in the reveal. The corner fireplace has a mid-twentieth-century solid fuel stove, illustrated in Plate 4. To the north is a small chamber, with a floor level below that of the main room, the stone slabs of which are cracked and uneven, probably due to subsidence. There is a stone dwarf wall, with a partition above separating this room from the stairwell. The rear (west) wall of the staircase lies partly across the north window, allowing a small amount of light to reach the stairs. At first-floor level the eastern room also has a chamfered spine beam; the blocked windows to the north and east are articulated in the rooms as shelved wall-alcoves. There is a corner fireplace with Victorian surround and grate. In the west room is a corner fireplace, but the grate has been removed.

The roof construction is partly visible in the attic rooms. Figure 5 shows part of the central queen-post truss with clasped purlins, which divides the space into two bays. The pegs for the common rafters at eighteen-inch intervals can be seen in the purlins. The infill is lath and plaster on studwork, mostly of poor quality, thin scantling. There is no visible evidence for the central dormer, but the upper part of the stairwell is dark, and it would have provided useful light at this level.

The stairway is a significant feature of the house. The newel post rises the full height of the stair, and is in two parts, joined together above first-floor level. The construction is, however, consistent throughout, although some strengthening and repair is visible on the underside. It is lit by borrowing light from the main north-facing windows.

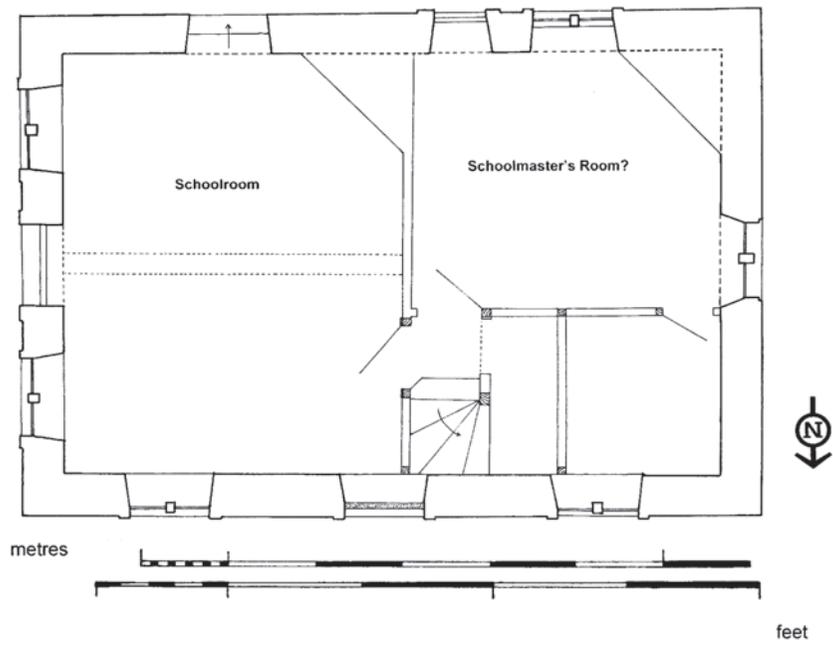


Fig. 4. Ground plan of John Combes's House. (Drawn by David Clark.)



Fig. 5. The central truss.
(Photograph by David Clark.)



Fig. 6. Schoolroom from Charles Hoole's translation of J. A. Comenius, *Orbis sensualium pictus* (London, 1672), plate 97, p. 198.

PHASES AND DATES OF CONSTRUCTION

The structure and features of John Combes's House are consistent with the documented date of construction of 1702. The somewhat crude fitting out of the interior, with the staircase borrowing light from the chamber windows, might suggest a different, later, phase, but the central partition supports the spine-beams of the first and second floors and so is original. Neither is there any evidence for the staircase having been anywhere else than in its present position. Although altered and in some cases blocked, the corner fireplaces are also part of the original build.

Accordingly, we conclude that almost the entire internal structure is original. The capturing of light and the discontinuity between the external three-bay symmetry and the internal two-bay space is not unknown. A documented example is The Priory, Brant Broughton, Lincolnshire, of 1658, where the central windows light rooms either side of a central partition wall.³ At some point before 1821 a single-storey extension was built to the south, and at the same time a new doorway into the ground-floor east room was made, using the south window opening. This was probably to create extra space for the larger number of pupils attending the school (see below). The main alteration in the nineteenth century was the replacement of the two windows on the west elevation and the introduction of smaller fireplaces of Victorian design in the eastern rooms, probably after 1839 when a new school was built and John Combes's House became entirely residential. Some of the blocked windows may well date from the same period. The ground-floor window, facing the churchyard, however, was blocked in the twentieth century. Some accounts from F. Cousins, 'Painter, Decorator, & C.' from 1912 to 1919 show that most of the leaded casements date from this period.⁴ The kitchen and bathroom area is late twentieth century inside, including most of the roof structure, although the outbuilding in which they are situated is older.

³ See Maurice Barley, *Houses and History* (London, 1979), p. 219.

⁴ Oxford St Thomas the Martyr Parish Chest [hereafter Parish Chest]. See pp. 31–2 below.

ORIGINAL USE OF SPACE

The basic requirements for a schoolhouse of the early eighteenth century would have been a schoolroom and a schoolmaster's room. As it was built for ten poor boys of the parish, only one schoolroom would have been needed. Space in the rest of the house would have been required to create revenue through rent in order to pay for the children's education. It is unlikely that any pupils boarded at the school, although at this time charity education for the poor was seen as an important agent of social and economic change, and such schools often operated like workhouses.⁵ The larger Grey Coat Hospital in Westminster of 1701 was for boys and girls, but the boys' half had a schoolroom and dining room on the ground floor, master's room, board room, and chapel on the first floor, and dormitories on the second. There is no evidence of any of these facilities in the main block of John Combes's House. The school is possibly unique in having letting accommodation under the same roof. Combes's House may be compared with other charitable schoolhouses in the area of around the same period. The small school founded in 1617 by Thomas Saunders of nearby Woolstone, just off the churchyard in Uffington, was a single room in which the boys were taught. The schoolmaster's house was separate. The school at Steeple Aston, founded in 1640 by Dr Samuel Radcliffe, principal of Brasenose College, and probably rebuilt in the late seventeenth century is a three-bay schoolroom with attic rooms above, probably for the schoolmaster, before a late eighteenth-century schoolhouse was built beside it. In 1709 William Malthus, a merchant, built and endowed a charity school in Blewbury. This is a five-bay brick house with a grand half-domed door hood supported by carved brackets. In Islip Dr Robert South provided a school similar to Combes's in 1710 – a three-bay structure with two storeys, although the attic windows derive from a nineteenth-century remodelling. Apart from the tiny school in Uffington, all the others have been converted to domestic use.

The schoolroom at Combes's House would almost certainly have been the east ground-floor room – large, and accessible from the street. This is the pattern in many schools of the time, but an entrance shared with the schoolmaster was also common.⁶ The schoolmaster would have sat on a raised chair; the pupils on 'forms', perhaps in the manner of Figure 6, which shows pupils reading, writing, and receiving individual tuition; there is also a blackboard and instruments of discipline.

The west ground-floor room would have been the schoolmaster's room – the doorway allowing him separate access. The small rear chamber could have been his bedroom, although another possibility is that the space was modelled on an Oxford college set, with the main room as the bedchamber, the smaller as a study alcove. One unanswered question is whether he had any cooking facilities, apart from over the open fire. The tenants, if indeed there were any, would have entered through the front door and schoolroom, presumably only out of school hours. The upper rooms seem to have been individual heated bedchambers for the tenants, again with only the corner fireplace as a cooking option.

THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

The design and structure of John Combes's House thus leaves several questions unanswered, especially about how its space was used. By examining the historical evidence about the founder, his charitable intentions, the extent to which they were honoured, and the resident schoolmasters it may be possible to suggest some answers.

John Combes (Fig. 7) is an elusive figure. The baptismal registers of St Thomas the Martyr start only in 1655, which is too late for him, since he would almost certainly have been born in

⁵ Malcolm Seaborne, *The English School: its Architecture and Organisation, 1370–1870* (London, 1971), pp. 102–25.

⁶ E.g., Sir John Moore's School, Appleby (Leics) (1693–7), Orford's School, Chippenham (Wilts) c.1714: *ibid.*, pp. 68, 120.



Fig. 7. Engraving of John Combes by James Basire 'from a picture in the school house'. (By kind permission of the Churchwardens of St Thomas the Martyr, Oxford.)

the 1630s. He is said to have been apprenticed to a tiler at the expense of the parish,⁷ but there is no record of this. He was, however, admitted as a freeman of the City of Oxford on 19 September 1653, and the record describes him as 'eldest sonne of John Combes slatter'.⁸ It is possible that he was apprenticed to his father, a slater or tiler, which would explain the tradition. By the year 1665 John Combes, 'of the Citie of Oxford plasterer' took on his own apprentice, Robert Rouncifull.⁹ At some point he left Oxford for London, for he worked on Monmouth House, in the Soho Square area, in 1681, and then on 30 Soho Square (the Hospital for Women) in 1685–6.¹⁰ By 1688 he was a churchwarden of the newly built church of St James's Piccadilly, and he may have been employed on the building of the church.¹¹ Later he offered to plaster the outside walls 'with lime and sand and other materialls like Stone work call'd finishing'.¹² The vestry, after 'serious Consideracon and debate', decided that the sum of £160, plus interest, was exorbitant. In anticipation, Combes had already had the necessary lime and sand moved into the churchyard, and had to be warned not to do anything to the walls without consulting the vestry.¹³ In the early 1690s he was employed to plaster the new vestry room. The total bills on this occasion, at over £324, were also considered excessive, and had to be referred to Wren.¹⁴ John Combes's final mention in the records of St

⁷ 'L. R. I.' letter to 'Mr Urban', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 79 (1809), p. 9.

⁸ MS ORO L.5.3: Register of Freemen and Apprentices, 1639–1662 (unfoliated).

⁹ MS ORO L.5.4: Register of Freemen and Apprentices, 1662–99, fol. 55, no. 19.

¹⁰ *Survey of London*, 33, *Parish of St Anne, Soho*, pt 1 (London, 1966), p. 107, p. 114n.

¹¹ *Survey of London*, 29, *The Parish of St James Westminster*, pt 1 (London, 1960), p. 36.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

James's is on his memorial stone up in the gallery, on the south side, which records 'John Combes, citizen and plasterer of London, 17 Sept. 1711; his wife Damaris, 6 April 1707'.¹⁵

John had married Damaris Collett on 28 July 1657 at St Peter, Paul's Wharf, London.¹⁶ The baptismal registers of St Martin-in-the Fields record the baptism of 'Maria Combes, daughter of Johannis and Thamarisca' on 29 July 1660; 'Johannes Combes, son of Johannis and Damrazae', on 14 February 1663, and on 19 August 1666 'Maria Combs, daughter of Joannis and Damaris', followed by other children. If the spellings 'Damrazae' and 'Thamarisca' and others can be seen as variations on the spelling of Damaris, then John seems to have been living and working in both Oxford and London in the 1660s, given that he took on his Oxford apprentice as late as 1665. As well as the baptism of two Marias, the registers record two Elizabeths, one on 11 June 1671, again allowing for some eccentric spelling of Damaris, this time Damathiae, the second on 9 February 1678, born to John and Dummarris.¹⁷ In an age of high mortality it is likely that the first Maria and the first Elizabeth died. John's will suggests that four daughters survived him – Maria, Elizabeth, Damaris, and Joanna; John is not mentioned,¹⁸ and probably died also, suggesting that four out of seven children died.

The most interesting evidence about John Combes's Oxford charity school comes from two sources. The first of these is the plaque attached to the outside wall of the school house, already mentioned. The other main source is Combes's will, which elaborates on the details on the plaque. The will was made on 9 July 1709, and it and a codicil were proved on 30 October 1711.¹⁹ In the clauses about the charity John declared:

I give devise and bequeath to the Parish of St Thomas in or near the City of Oxford all that School house and Garden with the appurtenances lately built and made by me on part of the Church Yard of the said Parish (the Ground for the same being appointed for that purpose by the then Churchwardens Overseers of the poor and Elders of the said Parish by and with the consent and approbation of Dr. Aldrich the Deane of Christs Church in Oxford and sett out by Dr. Hammond Sub Deane of Christs Church aforesaid) upon Trust and to the intent that the Rents issues and profitts thereof shall from time to time be applyed to pay a Schoolmaster to teach and instruct in reading English writing and Arithmetick ten poor children borne in the said Parish And my Will is that the said Schoolmaster and also the said Children shall from time to time be appointed and approved of by the Churchwardens and Overseers of the poor of the said Parish for the time being and the Nine persons hereafter named (with the assistance of the Minister of the said Parish) that is to say Mr. John Kendall Mr. Thomas Crouch Mr. John Potter Mr. John Curtis Mr. Francis Loder Mr. Richard Robinson Mr. William Carter Mr. Thomas Combes and Mr. John Gadney And my Will is that when and as often as any of the said nine persons shall dye the room and place of them so dyeing shall from time to time be supplied by one or more person or persons whom the survivors of them shall choose and think most usefull and likely to be benefactors to the said School as is usually done in such cases in London And if any difference happen the same shall from time to time be referred to the Deane of Christs Church for the time being to whom I do give full power to determine the same.²⁰

The number of ten poor children is also mentioned on the charity board on the wall of the church under the west tower. The Thomas Combes referred to was almost certainly John's brother. In the will he is referred to as 'my loving brother Thomas Combes' and left an income of ten pounds a year and 'all my wearing clothes and the best of my burial rings that I wear'.²¹ The rings

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ *The Register of St Benet and St Peter, Paul's Wharf, London*, ed. Willoughby A. Littledeale, 3: Marriages, 1607–1837, Harleian Society Register, 40 (1911), p. 301.

¹⁷ London, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Baptismal Register: from <http://www.combs-families.org/combs/records/england/index/westminster.htm>.

¹⁸ PRO: TNA, prob. 11/523, image ref. 232, will of John Combes, fols 186r–188v.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, fols 188r, 188v.

²⁰ Will of John Combes, fol. 187r.

²¹ *Ibid.*

were presumably mourning rings. Thomas Combes was sufficiently prosperous to pay tax on six windows in the parish of St Thomas in 1696,²² and, according to the instructions on the plaque, would have been both a churchwarden and overseer of the poor to qualify him as one of the elders administering the charity.

John Combes was clearly no pauper. He was not just a plasterer, but also a wealthy property tycoon. In his will he left extensive properties to various members of his family in his own parish of St James's Westminster: three tenements in Portugal Street, one of which was his home, two tenements in Little Swallow Street,²³ three tenements in Jermyn Street,²⁴ four tenements in Black Swan Court, near St James's market, and two houses in Market Street, with two small tenements behind them.²⁵ These were all wholly or partly let, including part of his own home, and the names and occupations of the tenants given. In Old Change, in the City of London, he also had two tenements, one of which had land attached.²⁶ Then there was the extensive freehold 'country' estate he had 'lately purchased' in Paddington, then in Middlesex, which he left to his only unmarried daughter, Mary. He also owned properties and grounds which adjoined the new estate: three other houses, one of which he had built to live in himself and another which was a 'little house which was a Coach house and Stable', two orchards, one with another stable, and a piece of enclosed land 104 feet long and 44 feet wide.²⁷ His intention was that the 'rents issues and profitts' from the various tenements should be spent in educating and apprenticing his grandchildren and setting them up in business.²⁸

The school in Oxford cost its founder £209 to build,²⁹ but this was not the only expense involved. He had to build a vestry on the north side of the chancel of St Thomas's Church to compensate for the encroachment of the schoolhouse on the churchyard.³⁰ The vestry was demolished during church restorations in 1848. The *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1809 reproduced a somewhat peevish memorandum from Combes, stating that the chapter of Christ Church had forced him to build it, and that it had cost him the equivalent of sixty years' rent for the land on which the schoolhouse was built.

Memorandum, that before I began to build the School-house above-mentioned, I had the consent and approbation of Dr. Aldrich and Dr. Hammond, and others of the said Chapter of Christ Church; and the ground was set out by Dr. Hammond, and I had all the encouragement from them that could be, to go on; yet, when I had finished my design, I was forced to build the Room adjoining to the Chancel of St. Thomas at my sole charge for the conveniency of the Minister, before I could get their confirmation for the School-house ground under their seal; which building cost me so much as that if I had bought the ground whereon the School-house only stands, would have paid sixty years' purchase according to the rate land lets thereabout.

JOHN COMBE.³¹

Given this indignation, it is not surprising that he did not endow the school. In any case, he expected it to earn 'rents issues and profitts'. We know that by a will dated 31 March 1714 Mrs Ann Kendall, a well-known parish benefactress, left 20s. a year to help pay the schoolmaster. This was not particularly generous, since she left the same amount to the parish clerk 'for his trouble

²² M. G. Hobson, ed., *Oxford Council Acts, 1666–1701* (Oxford, 1939), Appendix 3, Window tax, 1696, p. 345.

²³ Will of John Combes, fol. 186r.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, fols 186r, 186v.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 186v.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 187r.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 187v.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, fols 186r–v, 186v–187r.

²⁹ Anon, *An Account of Charity Schools in Great Britain and Ireland*, 11th edn (London, 1712), p. 40.

³⁰ John Whitehead, *Parish of St Thomas the Martyr Oxford* (Oxford, 2003), p. 23.

³¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 79 (1809), p. 9, col. b. The provenance of the document is not given. Unfortunately the papers of Dr Aldrich, which might have reported the dispute, are not extant. The memorandum is also reproduced in Bodl. MS Top Oxon. c. 300, fol. 29v.

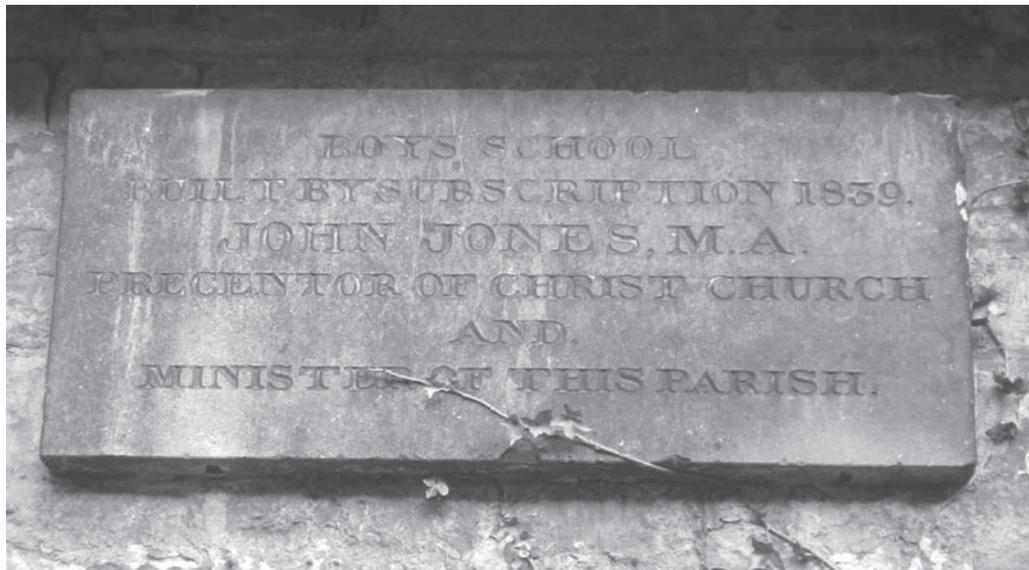


Fig. 8. Plaque attached to the wall of the boys' school. (Photograph by David Clark.)

and pains in cleaning the brass candlesticks or branch in the church, which was lately given by the testatrix and her sisters'. More generously she left £4 to the minister 'for a sermon on Christmas day in the afternoon',³² showing where her priorities lay. The poverty of the schoolmaster is underlined by a note in the Christ Church Archives: 'March 4th. The sum of £3-14.0 subscribed annually for the better support of the School-master'.³³ Unfortunately there is no year given, although it appears to be eighteenth century.

The name of the first schoolmaster is not recorded. The appointment of what was probably the second in 1732, however, provoked disagreement. According to Combes's will, if that occurred, the Dean of Christ Church was to arbitrate. Two candidates, both parishioners, were formally recommended to the Dean of Christ Church, William Bradshaw, Bishop of Bristol, by the minister, two churchwardens, and two overseers.³⁴ The Dean chose William Cox on 14 August 1732.³⁵ Cox had been baptized at St Thomas's in July 1703,³⁶ so he would probably have been 29 years old. What happened to him is a mystery. His burial is recorded at St Thomas's on 7 February 1779, by which time he would have been in his late seventies.³⁷ Despite this, his appointment as schoolmaster lasted at best only until the appointment of James King in 1739, before which the school appears to have been closed.

The new master placed a notice in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* on 22 May 1779 thanking his friends

for the Encouragement he has met with since his opening of the above School, and begs leave to inform them and the Publick that he will endeavour to merit their future Favours and Recommendations by a diligent Attention being paid to the Education of the Children committed to his charge.³⁸

³² Sixth Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring Concerning Charities, HC 12 (1822), ix, p. 451.

³³ Christ Church Oxford, MS Estates 78, fol. 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Oxford St Thomas Parish Register, Baptisms, c.1655–1840, transcribed Susan Shaw (1984), 23 July 1703.

³⁷ Oxford St Thomas Parish Registers, Burials, 1561–1850, transcribed Susan Shaw (1988), 7 Feb. 1779.

³⁸ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, Sat. 22 May 1779, no. 1360, p. 3, col. 3.

The school was to reopen, seemingly for the second time, on 31 May. The baptism of three children of James King and his wife Esther, or Hester, is recorded in the baptismal register of St Thomas,³⁹ but James King's burial is not recorded. Indeed, this branch of the King family vanishes from the records after the birth of the third child in 1785.

There is no indication that either William Cox or James King was parish clerk, unlike the masters of the nineteenth century. The next one for whom there is evidence was James Maltby. It is unclear when he became schoolmaster. He was parish clerk of St Thomas's by 1816,⁴⁰ but is not noted as living in the schoolhouse until 1821,⁴¹ nor given the title of schoolmaster until 1824.⁴² James married twice, having eleven children by his first wife, Sarah Lucas,⁴³ and eight by the second, Caroline Payne.⁴⁴ Surprisingly all but one of the eleven survived, but four children of the second marriage died.⁴⁵ Maltby was buried at St Thomas's on 30 November 1866, aged 77.⁴⁶

Pigot's *Directory of Oxfordshire* for 1830 shows that the charity school was still in being and that Maltby was its master: 'Comb's Charity School, St. Thomas's – James Maltby, master.'⁴⁷ In 1839, a boys' school was built next to John Combes's House by public subscription, as the plaque on the building (Fig. 8) indicates. *Gardner's Directory* for 1852 has the following entry: '*St Thomas's Schools* [note the plural]. The boys school at which about 50 attend is a plain building, erected in 1839, near the church gates. Mr. James Maltby is master.'⁴⁸ The teaching of the charity boys was moved to the boys' school when it opened,⁴⁹ which would have given Maltby's extensive family more room to live in John Combes's House. What is not known is whether the ten charity-school children were taught apart from the children at the boys' school, or whether the schools became one. The same uncertainty occurs in the evidence for the career of the next schoolmaster.

George Whitaker (Fig. 9) was appointed headmaster of St Thomas's Boys' School in 1865.⁵⁰ The tabulated and somewhat confusing results of a government inquiry of 1867–8 provide the main evidence for the situation. The charity school was still listed as 'Coombs' School' and the inquiry stated that a house for the schoolmaster was provided, and that there were ten boys being taught.⁵¹ Whitaker had been one of the first students at Culham Training College,⁵² and the inquiry

³⁹ St Thomas Baptismal Register, 21 Apr. 1780, 11 June 1782, 21 Aug. 1785.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 June 1816, baptism of James Arthur, son of James and Sarah, lists him as parish clerk of St Thomas, living in Ox Street.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27 May 1821, baptism of Henry, son of James and Sarah, lists him as parish clerk, living at 'School house'.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16 May 1824, baptism of Edwin, son of James and Sarah. Here John Combes's House is referred to as Church Corner, and James as schoolmaster.

⁴³ St Thomas Baptismal Register, 10 Mar. 1811, 4 Oct. 1812, 9 Oct. 1814, 30 June 1816, 30 Aug. 1818, 27 May 1821, 16 May 1824, 2 Oct. 1825, 9 Aug. 1827, 17 Jan. 1830, 10 May 1834.

⁴⁴ St Thomas Baptismal Register, c.1841–1954, 25 Mar. 1849, 10 Nov. 1850, 13 Mar. 1853, 8 Oct. 1854, 9 Aug. 1857, 24 July 1859, 13 Apr. 1862. Agnes Eliza, their second child, does not feature in the register and probably died unbaptized (see n. 45 below).

⁴⁵ St Thomas Burial Register, 31 Oct. 1825, John, aged 1 month; 2 Dec. 1849, Agnes Eliza, aged 3 weeks; Oxford St Thomas Burial Register 1851–1937, 4 Apr. 1856, Andrew William aged 1; 14 Sept. 1857, Augustine, aged 7; 17 Jan. 1864, Caroline, aged 2.

⁴⁶ St Thomas Burial Register, 1851–1937, 30 Nov. 1866.

⁴⁷ *Pigot's Directory of Oxfordshire*, 1830, p. 652, col. a.

⁴⁸ *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Oxford*, printed and published by Robert Gardner (Peterborough, 1852), p. 317.

⁴⁹ Parish Chest, Canon John Lucas, Vicar of St Thomas's, Letters to a Successor no. 3, Parish Magazine, May 1960: 'It seems that these boys were for some considerable time taught to read and write in John Coombe's House itself. Then in the year 1839 the adjoining hall (now known as the Galilee Room) was built and from then on the ten boys received their education there.'

⁵⁰ Thomas W. Squires, *In West Oxford: Historical Notes and Pictures concerning the Parish of S. Thomas the Martyr, Oxford* (Oxford, 1928), p. 51.

⁵¹ Tabular Digest of Returns, Schools Inquiry Commission, vol. 12, HC 28 (1867–8) (hereafter Schools Inquiry Commission), p. 308.

⁵² Squires, *In West Oxford*, p. 51.

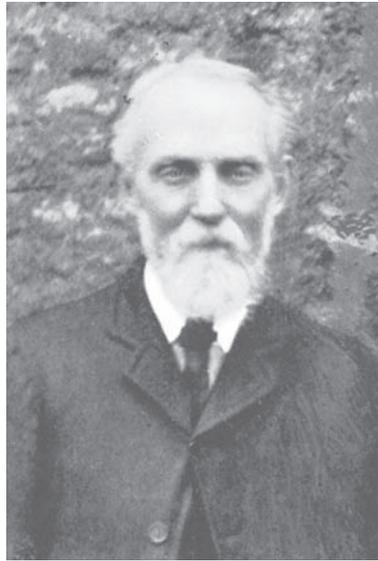


Fig. 9. George Whitaker, 1908. Detail from a group photo by Gillman & Co, reproduced in Squires, *In West Oxford*, opposite p. 51. (By kind permission of Oxfordshire Studies.)

accordingly listed one teacher as being either 'a graduate or certificated'.⁵³ But it also provided the information that there were four teachers at the school, of whom three were pupil teachers. This would surely have been excessive for ten poor boys, the occupation of whose parents is given as 'labourers chiefly', and would have been more likely to refer to the boys' school. Moreover, two of the pupils were recorded as learning 'mensuration or bookkeeping',⁵⁴ more advanced studies than the reading, writing, and arithmetic specified by John Combes, but quite suitable for the boys' school. The confusion in the inquiry between the two schools suggests that they had been amalgamated. Whitaker certainly lived in the house provided for the charity school, as suggested by the inquiry. *Webster's Oxford Directory* for 1872 describes him as 'schoolmaster and parish clerk', living at 1 Church Street, St Thomas,⁵⁵ which was then the address of John Combes's House. Like Maltby, he had a large family, although not quite so large. He had only one wife, but they had nine children.⁵⁶ George continued as schoolmaster until 1894, and as parish clerk until his death in 1910.⁵⁷ The parish register records his burial, at the age of 67, on 24 April.⁵⁸ His wife, Emily, continued to live in the schoolhouse, and *Kelly's Directory* for 1911–12 accordingly lists her as the occupant.⁵⁹ She died in 1921 and was buried at St Thomas's on 21 April, aged 77, her address being given as 'Coombe House, St Thomas'.⁶⁰ The house appears to have been rented to her after her husband's death. Three letters from the Board of Education to the vicar, Bartle Hack, dated 10 January 1912, 20 December 1915, and 20 June 1919, authorize the cost of repairs to be met out of the rent of the house.⁶¹ The three bills from Cousins, referred to earlier, and all dating after George's death, support this. The first, dated 4 December 1912, is addressed to Mr George Whitaker for work done in January and March of that year, nearly two years after his death. The

⁵³ Schools Inquiry Commission, p. 308.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Webster's Oxford Directory* (Oxford, 1872), p. 18.

⁵⁶ Oxford St Thomas Baptismal Register, c.1841–1954, 24 July 1870, 2 Jan. 1872, 28 Dec. 1873, 9 May 1875, 29 Nov. 1876, 10 Feb. 1878, 13 Apr. 1879, 7 Dec. 1881, 9 Sept. 1883.

⁵⁷ Squires, *In West Oxford*, p. 51.

⁵⁸ Oxford St Thomas Burial Register, c.1841–1954, 24 Apr. 1910.

⁵⁹ *Kelly's Oxford Directory, 1911–12* (London, 1912), p. 224, col. b.

⁶⁰ Oxford St Thomas Burial Register, 21 Apr. 1921.

⁶¹ Parish Chest.

other two both refer to repairs at ‘Mr’ rather than ‘Mrs’ Whitaker’s house,⁶² perhaps showing the respect in which his memory was held by the community.

The history of the school and its masters raises the question of how the schoolmaster supported himself and his family. The terms of the charity had suggested that he would be paid from the ‘rents issues and profitts’ from the house, and John Combes, as an experienced London landlord, would have thought in such terms. There is, however, no record of any lodgers or tenants at the house. Clearly living was a struggle for the eighteenth-century masters, as evidenced by the annual payment by Christ Church. Neither of the known eighteenth-century masters was able to supplement his income by acting as parish clerk. One of the nineteenth-century masters, however, was to take paying pupils in addition to the ten charity boys. By the year 1822, by which time James Maltby was probably schoolmaster, the use of the house was estimated to be worth between £8 and £10 a year, and the master was already taking paying pupils – the number is not recorded – in addition to the ten boys who were taught free under the terms of the charity.⁶³ By 1833 the total number of boys was forty, of whom thirty were paid for by their parents.⁶⁴

The history of both the boys’ school and Combes’s School ended in the early twentieth century. On 21 and 23 January 1901 Thomas Birley, the incumbent of St Thomas’s, wrote to Christ Church that there was no permanent boys’ school in the parish, the old one, that is the 1839 building, having been condemned nine years earlier, presumably by the School Board. The parochial hall given by one of his predecessors, Thomas Chamberlain, was being used as a temporary school. He begged Christ Church to give the parish a site for a new school which would educate boys, girls, and infants.⁶⁵ Christ Church did indeed grant a site in Osney Lane. An appeal for £5,000 was launched in 1902 for the building of the combined set of schools, and a handwritten note added to the Christ Church copy states that the 1902 Education Act (which replaced school boards by county councils and county borough councils, later Local Education Authorities) in no way affected the building of the schools, which still had to be accomplished by voluntary effort.⁶⁶

The opening of St Thomas’s School in 1904 by the Bishop of Oxford ended the need for John Combes’s charity school. The charity, however, remained in being, and both the Charity Commissioners and the Board of Education were involved in the future of the house. The Board of Education issued an order on 9 May 1922 giving the Trustees of ‘John Combe’s Foundation’ authority to sell the house for £240, provided that the purchase money was invested in securities allowed by Parliament for the investment of trust funds.⁶⁷ By a conveyance dated 22 December 1922 the trustees – namely, the vicar, Bartle Hack, the churchwardens, and the overseers of the poor – sold the building to three people, Nial Diarmid, the Duke of Argyll, a London barrister, Edward William Hansell, and John Douglas Peel, an Oxford solicitor, for £240,⁶⁸ little more than it had originally cost to build. The condemned boys’ school building was sold to the same people a year later for £110.⁶⁹ In both cases the purchasers were acting as trustees for the Sisters of the Community of St Thomas the Martyr,⁷⁰ an order which had been founded in 1850 by Thomas

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Sixth Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring Concerning Charities, HC 12 (1822), ix, p. 451.

⁶⁴ Abstract of Education Returns, 1833, in *Accounts and Papers*, HC 62, p. 752.

⁶⁵ MS Christ Church Estates 78, fols 369, 371.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 376.

⁶⁷ Parish Chest.

⁶⁸ Conveyance dated 22 Dec. 1922. We are grateful to Margot Charlton, churchwarden of St Thomas the Martyr, for supplying us with a copy of this document and that referred to in n. 69 below.

⁶⁹ Conveyance dated 21 Dec. 1923.

⁷⁰ Archive of the Community of St Thomas the Martyr (now housed in the Archives of the Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage). Among a bundle of papers concerning the sale of the boys’ school in 1923 is a Draft Declaration of Trust by the Most Noble the Duke of Argyll and others, which states ‘... whereas the Trustees are the present Trustees of the Sisterhood of St Thomas the Martyr in Oxford ...’, suggesting that they were trustees in 1922. Another, undated document in the archive regulating the appointment of trustees says, ‘There shall be not less than three Trustees according to the custom of the Society.’

Chamberlain.⁷¹ The convent, Osney House, was at the end of Church Street, next to the boys' school.

How did this affect the trust set up by John Combes? The proceeds of the sale and other funds, amounting to £333 1s. 3d., were sent to the Charity Commissioners, who invested £327 5s. 10d. of it in 5 per cent government war stock,⁷² the dividends being paid to the trust's account at Barclay's Bank in the High Street.⁷³ The Board of Education then drew up a scheme regulating the purposes for which the trust fund might be used. It was to assist boys resident in the parish with educational costs, such as fees, travelling expenses or maintenance allowances, and in addition to promote 'the education, including social and physical training of boys of the poorer classes in the said Ancient Parish'. It was not to be used to help with elementary education.⁷⁴ Receipts, cheques, and correspondence, starting in the 1920s and ending in 1943, indicate that frequent grants were made to Charles Floriday, headmaster, the majority 'for the benefit of the Scholars of St Thomas Schools'.⁷⁵ The letters ask for anything from contributions to sports days to the provision of a Christmas tree or the installation of a wireless set.⁷⁶ The trust also paid school fees for boys at other schools,⁷⁷ and bought clothes, shoes, and books.⁷⁸ A letter from the vicar, Trevor Jalland, of 7 May 1936 illustrates a poignant, and probably typical, case:

Kenneth Stevens is at Magdalen College School, and owing to Mr Stevens recent illness they have been ahving [*sic*] a fairly hard time. Mrs Stevens tells me that she has had some expense over Kenneth's School, in the way of clothing. It seems that a sum of £3 would cover what she has had to spend and would be a very material help.⁷⁹

The terms of the charity had obviously changed greatly since it started in 1702, but the underlying aim of helping to educate poor boys of the parish was still the same.

When the Community of St Thomas bought the schoolhouse it was referred to as 'The Gate House',⁸⁰ showing that it was no longer used as a school. It seems likely that it was let. *Kelly's Directory* from 1925 to 1929 records a Mrs Dunstan living there.⁸¹ The Sisters' log book has an entry for 26 August 1927 which reads, 'Gate House let to Mr Hunt',⁸² but 'Hunt, Herbt. Jas, M.A. (tutor in French, St Edmund Hall)' features as a resident only in 1930.⁸³ From about 1932 until 1956 Mrs Freeborn lived there.⁸⁴ She was manager of St Thomas's School, and said to have been very formidable.⁸⁵

After over a century, on 25 March 1958, the convent was closed,⁸⁶ and the Sisters left Oxford for

⁷¹ Parish Chest. Handwritten copy of Instrument of Foundation, Feast of St Agatha (5 Feb.) 1850.

⁷² Parish Chest, letter of 7 Apr. 1923 from Andrew Walsh and Bartram, Solicitors, of 116 St Aldate's to Mr Squires. This appears to be Thomas W. Squires, author of *In West Oxford*, cf. n. 50 above.

⁷³ Parish Chest, note added to extract from Reports of Commissioners for Inquiring Concerning Charities in England and Wales: cf. n. 32 above.

⁷⁴ Parish Chest, Scheme made by the Board of Education under the Charitable Trusts Acts, 1853 to 1894, in the Matter of Combe's Foundation: Application of Income.

⁷⁵ Parish Chest. Many of the receipts, for between £1 and £2.10s., use this phrase.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* See, e.g., letters from Charles Floriday to Mr Bates of 25 June 1929, 29 June 1932, 4 July 1938 (sports days), 8 Dec. 1932 (Christmas tree); receipt of 11 Dec. 1928 for £9 towards expenses of installation of a wireless set and Christmas tree expenses.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* The schools were Southfield School and the City of Oxford Municipal School for Boys.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* Receipts from Reed & Sons, Tailors and Outfitters, for clothes and shoes, and B. H. Blackwell for books.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Conveyance of 22 Dec. 1922, p. 2.

⁸¹ *Kelly's Directory of Oxford* (London, 1925), p. 60, col. b; *ibid.* (1929), p. 70, col. b.

⁸² Archive of the Community of St Thomas, Log Book, 1911–34 (unpaginated).

⁸³ *Kelly's Directory of Oxford* (London, 1930), p. 85, col. b.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* (1932), p. 88, col. a; *ibid.* (1943), p. 104, col. c; *ibid.* (1956), p. 240, col. b. She appears first as Mrs A. C. R. Freeborn, presumably the initials of her late husband, and later as Mrs M. E. Freeborn.

⁸⁵ Conversation with Audrey Bates, 1 Sept. 2007.

⁸⁶ Parish Chest, Minutes of Meetings of the Parochial Church Council, 17 March 1958, p. 53.

St Mary's Wantage, to which they had become affiliated in 1935.⁸⁷ The minutes of the Parochial Church Council meeting of 17 March 1958 record the acceptance of the gift from the Sisters of John Combes's House and the Galilee Room, the former boys' school, with an income of £100 a year. Both were described as being 'not in a particularly good state of repair'.⁸⁸ By a document dated 7 August 1959 John Combes's House, the Parish Room (the Galilee Room), and the garden behind them were formally separated from the convent land and buildings, and a new charity, known as the Parish Room Charity, established.⁸⁹ This was vested in the Charity Commissioners, but was to be managed by two sets of trustees – the Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance as custodian trustees and the Parochial Church Council of St Thomas the Martyr as managing trustees. The buildings could be used as a 'church hall, mission room, parish room, class room, meeting room or lecture room' or for the 'religious and other charitable work of the Church of England' in the parish. The income from the charity was to be used for the maintenance and upkeep of the land and the buildings.⁹⁰ In fact, the rent from the house was used to supplement parish income. The Parochial Church Council decided in 1958 that the schoolhouse should become a 'tied' house and should be let to the organist, Mrs Olive Wynn Cuthbert, at a rent of £80 a year, which would be put towards church funds.⁹¹ When she retired from being organist, in the early 1980s, she continued to live in the house, but the rent was increased to a more realistic amount.⁹² From 1992, by which time Mrs Wynn Cuthbert had died, the house was let to students, with half the rent contributing to parish expenses and the other half being set aside for maintenance of the house and the Galilee Room.⁹³ The house continued to be let to students until July 2007.

John Combes's House seems to have been used in the way the founder mainly intended, at least until 1839, even if it was not let until 1910. The terms of the charity, too, seem to have been honoured to the extent that ten poor boys were taught as long as the school was in being, although there were paying pupils as well. When the school was closed and the schoolhouse sold, the charity continued, and its aim of helping to educate poor boys resident in the parish was maintained. The schoolmaster was also the parish clerk in the nineteenth century, although there is no evidence that either William Cox or James King held this office in the eighteenth century.

The most tantalizing question is whether there were ever any 'rents issues and profitts' from the schoolhouse, as Combes had intended. In the eighteenth century the schoolmaster obviously found it difficult to make ends meet, and was himself the subject of charitable donations, so it seems unlikely. In the early nineteenth century the solution was to take paying pupils, before the teaching was transferred to the boys' school next door. Whether the charity-school children were taught separately from the paying pupils and later the pupils at the boys' school is another unresolved question.

Despite the varied uses of the house – as school, as home to a large family, as convent guest house, and as student letting accommodation, remarkably few alterations have been made to it. Some necessary repairs were carried out during the second decade of the twentieth century, as shown by the receipts in the parish chest. In 1967 the parish borrowed money to re-roof the house with Stonesfield slates,⁹⁴ and in the early 1970s the windows were repaired, one each year so long as finances allowed, and the north gable was rebuilt.⁹⁵ The pediment of the original front door

⁸⁷ Archive of the Community of St Thomas, 'Regulations for an affiliation between the Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage, and the Community of St Thomas the Martyr, Dec. 24 1935'.

⁸⁸ Minutes of Meeting of the Parochial Church Council, 17 March 1958, p. 53.

⁸⁹ Charity Commission Scheme including appointment of Trustees and vesting in official Trustee of Charity Lands, 7 Aug. 1959, cl. 2. We are grateful to John Hanks for supplying us with a copy of this document.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, cl. 8–13.

⁹¹ Minutes of Meeting of the Parochial Church Council, 17 March 1958, p. 53.

⁹² Letter to Diana Wood from the Revd R. M. Sweeney, 22 Aug. 2007.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Minutes of Meeting of the Parochial Church Council, 20 Feb. 1967, p. 119.

⁹⁵ Minutes of Meeting of the Parochial Church Council, 2 Nov. 1971, p. 169. Letter from the Revd R. M. Sweeney.

was restored in the early 1990s by Symm & Co.⁹⁶ Yet despite all these necessary renovations no significant structural alterations were made. The hope is that its character as an early eighteenth-century schoolhouse will be carefully preserved for future generations, and that it will once more become home to a family, though perhaps not as large as those it housed in the nineteenth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank members of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record (Heather Horner, Michael and Rosemary Howden, and David Hughes) for their assistance in recording the structure, John Ashdown for suggestions on dates and room uses, Stephanie Jenkins for providing invaluable information on John Combes and some of the schoolmasters, Margot Charlton and Anne Dutton, churchwardens of St Thomas the Martyr, for supplying copies of documents, for permission to survey the building and to consult documents in the parish chest. Thanks are also due to the Revd R. M. Sweeney, former vicar of St Thomas the Martyr, Judith Curthoys, Archivist of Christ Church, Oxford, Stephen Rench of Oxfordshire Studies, Sister Deirdre Michael, Archivist of the Convent of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage, and to Audrey Bates, John Hanks, Josephine de Goris, Adrienne Rosen, and Elizabeth Woolley.

The Society would like to express its gratitude to the Greening Lamborn Trust for a grant towards the publication of this article.

⁹⁶ Ibid.



Published in Oxoniensia 2007, (c) Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society. Plate 1. John Combes's House from the north-west. (Photograph by David Clark.) [Clark and Wood, p. 19.]

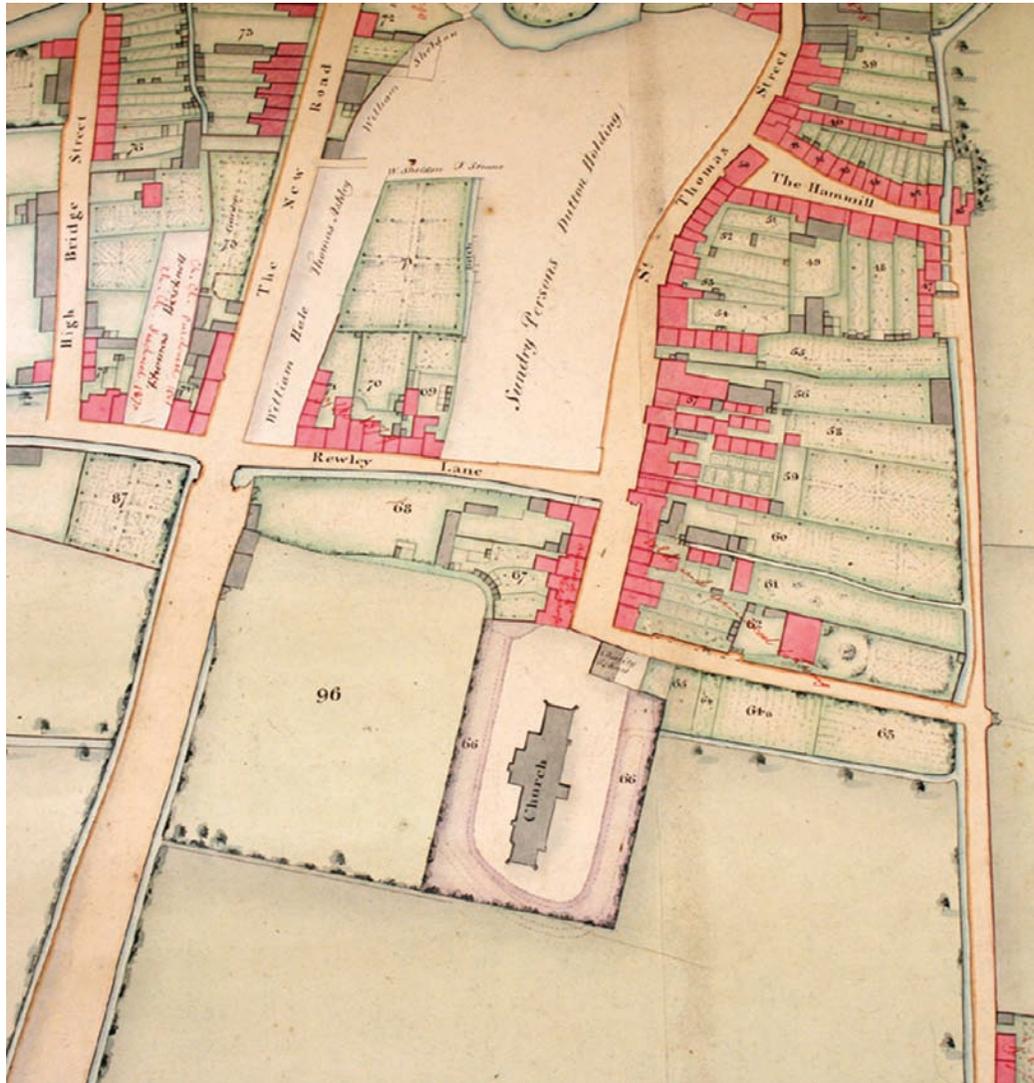


Plate 2. Extract from 'Plan of Estates in the University, City and Suburbs of Oxford, Belonging to Christ Church Oxford', surveyed and drawn by Benjamin Badcock, 1829. MS Christ Church Maps 21.
(By kind permission of the Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford.) [Clark and Wood, p. 19.]



Plate 3. South elevation of the house. (*Photograph by David Clark.*)
[Clark and Wood, p. 22.]



Plate 4. West ground-floor room. (*Photograph by David Clark.*)
[Clark and Wood, p. 22.]