

The Founders of the Oxford Architectural Society

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Architectural Society, a progenitor of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society (OAHS), was founded in 1839 by a group of university men and Oxford citizens. Their aim was to spread knowledge of 'correct' Gothic architecture among men who were, or soon would be, clergymen. It was the first society of its kind, shortly followed by the Cambridge Camden Society, and especially in its first twenty years had an incalculable influence on church building and restoration not only in Britain but also in the colonies. Less polemical than the Cambridge society, it weathered religious controversies more easily.

The founders of the Oxford Architectural Society were a group of Oxford University members and other local men who came together to establish a society for the study and promotion of Gothic architecture, and especially of Gothic church architecture. Founded in February 1839, the Society (officially known until 1848 as the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture) was the earliest of its kind in the country.¹ The Society's formation came at a time of widespread interest in medieval antiquities, and when the movement towards a more Catholic theology and worship – a movement closely associated with Oxford – was well under way. On 22 April 1831, for example, Revd Richard Hurrell Froude of Oriel College had read a paper to the Oxford Ashmolean Society on 'Church Architecture' in which he had referred to the 'Gothic, or rather Catholic, style'. Froude's paper had been illustrated with sketches taken largely from local buildings, including St Giles's Church, Oxford, where Froude had spent three days 'taking measurements, tracings, mouldings and sketches'.²

Prior to the Society's formation, a prospectus had been drawn up by Manuel Johnson, astronomer and the university's Radcliffe Observer, and was taken by John Henry Parker, the Oxford bookseller and publisher, to Revd Dr James Ingram, President of Trinity College and a distinguished antiquarian, presumably for his approval.³ The Society's first meeting was held on 1 February 1839 at Wyatt's Rooms on the High Street. On this occasion a motion was proposed by the Trinity historian Revd William John Copeland, and seconded by Revd Isaac Williams, also of Trinity College and a close friend of Copeland, 'that in pursuance of a Prospectus already issued, a Society be formed for promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, and be called "The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture"'.⁴

¹ Three articles have previously been published in *Oxoniensia* on the Society's history: W.A. Pantin, 'The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, 1839–1939', 4 (1939), pp. 174–94; S.L. Ollard, 'The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society and the Oxford Movement', 5 (1940), pp. 146–60; D. Prout, "'The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture'" and "'The Oxford Architectural Society'" 1839–60', 54 (1989), pp. 379–91. This one repeats some of their material, but has a different focus and takes account of recent scholarship. The Society's papers are in the Bodleian Library: Bodl. MS Dep. c. 591; 593; d. 510–11; 538–9; 587; 589–90. The early records, both MS and printed, are not always clear and systematic. For correspondence, see R.E. Poole, 'Catalogue of the Correspondence of the OAHS, 1835–1900' (Bodl. MS Dep. d. 538), which makes it unnecessary to give precise references.

² T. Mozley, *Reminiscences, Chiefly of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London, 1882), vol. 1, p. 216.

³ Prout, 'The Oxford Society', p. 380 writes that the prospectus 'appears to be lost', but a statement which must be based on it can be found in the Bodleian Library copy of the first OAS *Proceedings* under the title 'The Rules and Proceedings of the Oxford Society for promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, MDCCCXXXIX'.

⁴ Pantin, 'The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society', p. 175.

Writing in 1860, Revd Thomas William Weare, of Christ Church, indicated an alternative origin, claiming that the ‘original Architectural Society “for promoting the study of Gothic architecture” commenced in Christ Church in 1838 – in the University soon after – with my friend C.T. Newton, the eminent archaeologist.’⁵ Nothing more is known of this Christ Church episode, though T.W. Weare and Charles Newton were among the Society’s earliest members, with Weare serving on the committee and Newton reading a paper on Iffley church at a meeting on 29 October 1839. On 4 June 1873 Matthew Holbeche Bloxam of Rugby wrote to J.P. Earwaker, recalling that Parker, Thomas Combe and himself ‘were some thirty-five years ago the original Projectors of the Society’.⁶ Bloxam, brother of Revd John Rouse Bloxam of Magdalen, was a lawyer and antiquarian, and author of *The Principles of Gothic Architecture Elucidated by Question and Answer* (1829, much reprinted).

The Society’s original prospectus referred to the recent interest in Gothic architecture and the need for ‘a systematic plan’ to form local associations that would collect drawings and descriptions of buildings in their neighbourhood. ‘The number of Churches now rising fast in every part of the Country, renders it of the highest importance to provide for the cultivation of correct Architectural Taste.’ Oxford was considered a suitable centre because so many of its residents were, or would soon become, clergymen, and because the city and its surrounding area ‘abound in specimens of every period of the Art’. The rules laid down that the Society should collect books, prints, drawings, models, and ‘other architectural Specimens’; that meetings should be held for the reading of papers; and that a selection of these should be published. New members, including honorary members, were required to be proposed and seconded by existing members and approved by a majority of the Society.

Dr Martin Routh, President of Magdalen College, was elected the Society’s first president, while Dr James Ingram of Trinity, Dr Joseph Loscombe Richards, Rector of Exeter College, and Dr William Buckland, geologist and canon of Christ Church, became vice-presidents; Dr Frederick Plumtre, Master of University College, was elected a vice-president at a later meeting. The secretaries were John Henry Parker and the publisher Thomas Combe, who took the minutes. John Parsons of the city’s Old Bank served as treasurer, Thomas Grimsley was ‘modeller’,⁷ and the artist Orlando Jewitt (who also undertook independent work for Parker and Combe) was ‘engraver’.⁸

The Society’s committee numbered sixteen and, alongside Weare, included the future Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, Richard Church, Henry Liddell, future Dean of Christ Church, and James Bowling Mozley, younger brother of Thomas Mozley. Among its thirteen original honorary members were the archivist Sir Francis Palgrave, the writer on heraldry and stained glass manufacturer Thomas Willement, the Cambridge scholars William Whewell and Robert Willis, the architects Edward Blore, Benjamin Ferrey, Anthony Salvin, and Richard C. Hussey, and the architectural publisher William Twopeny. Ordinary members included John Rouse Bloxam of Magdalen College, Charles Marriott of Oriel College, William Patrick Palmer, and Sir Thomas Phillipps.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 174–5.

⁶ Ollard, ‘The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society’, p. 152.

⁷ Grimsley was an Oxford terracotta manufacturer. His ‘modelling’ for the OAS must have consisted in making casts of medieval antiquities. The committee proposed on 14 February 1839 that ‘£20 be expended in casts’, and on 4 June Grimsley was paid £14 12s. ‘for casts’. On 7 April 1846 the well-known London sculptor John Thomas wrote to E.A. Freeman that he was happy to undertake ‘modelling’ for the Society, and a year later Freeman received a bill from ‘Thomas the sculptor employed at Dorchester’. When the lease of the Music Room expired, it was proposed that the casts should go to the Ashmolean after the natural history specimens had moved to the new Museum, but in 1869 the casts were still ‘in the garrets of the Clarendon’, apart from ‘the Beauchamp tomb’, which was in the ‘Taylor Galleries’ (presumably the Randolph Galleries, now the Ashmolean Museum). Some new casts were to go in the Ashmolean basement.

⁸ For Jewitt see Harry Carter, *Orlando Jewitt* (London, 1962); Frank Broomhead, *The Book Illustrations of Orlando Jewitt* (Pinner, 1995); idem, ‘Orlando Jewitt: Wood Engraver to the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture’, *Oxoniensia*, 61 (1996), pp. 369–78.

The attendance of John Ruskin, who was then at Christ Church, reveals that at least one undergraduate was present at the first meeting. On 2 February, the day after the meeting, Ruskin's mother wrote to her husband, conveying their son's opinion that the occasion had been 'a very slow affair, they wanted somebody to rouse them, he felt very much inclined to do it himself, but as they are all Revds he thought he had better postpone for a few meetings'.⁹ Notwithstanding Ruskin's doubts, the fact that students were able to socialize with senior university figures and distinguished honorary members was a remarkable characteristic of the Oxford Architectural Society. Another undergraduate member from 1842 was the Trinity student and future historian Edward Augustus Freeman, who succeeded John Henry Parker as secretary in 1845 and subsequently became one of the Society's most influential figures.¹⁰

The Society's first lecture, on the 'Domestic Architecture of the Middle Ages, from Notes Furnished by William Twopeny, Esq.', was delivered by Edward Thomas Bigge on 12 March 1839, and thereafter papers (initially mostly studies of particular churches) were presented weekly during the university term, usually in a room at the back of the Maidenhead tavern in Turl Street, and between 1845 and 1860 at the Music Room in Holywell Street. By 1840 the Society's membership had risen to seventy-six, with a further eight honorary members. The annual report for the following year noted that its patrons included William Howley, archbishop of Canterbury, and Richard Bagot, bishop of Oxford, as well as four peers, three archdeacons, and an MP.

As well as being Fellows of Trinity College, two of the Society's founding members, Isaac Williams and William Copeland, were also committed Tractarians, members of a group of Oxford churchmen – centred on Hurrell Froude, John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, and John Keble – who sought to promote the Anglican Church's Catholic inheritance. Both men served as curate to Newman, their close friend, at Littlemore, to the south of Oxford (Williams in 1832 and Copeland in 1840). It was fortunate for the Society that both were comparatively mild and well-liked Tractarians.¹¹ The Society's secretaries, both laymen and not members of the University, were also deeply involved with the Oxford Movement. John Henry Parker had taken over the family bookshop in Oxford in 1832 and became an important publisher of Tractarian books in that decade. His career as an architectural publisher had begun in 1836 with *A Glossary of Terms used in Grecian, Roman, Italian and Gothic Architecture*, of which five editions appeared by 1850. Thomas Combe had moved from Leicester to Oxford in 1824 to work in Parker's uncle's bookshop. In 1838 he became Superintendent of the Learned Side of Oxford University Press. He too had close Tractarian connections and, along with his sister, took in lodgers who included Parker, Newman, Pusey, and Hurrell Froude.¹²

Williams and Copeland later put their architectural interests to practical use. In 1839 Williams built a church at his birthplace, Llangorwen, in Ceredigion, while Copeland, who became rector of Farnham, Essex, in 1849, built a new church there in 1858–9. Each used a member of the Oxford Architectural Society as his architect: at Llangorwen Henry Jones Underwood (1804–52), architect of the church built by Newman at Littlemore on which this was based, and at Farnham Joseph Clarke. In 1840 the Society published a set of working drawings for Underwood's church at Littlemore.¹³ This began a broadening of the Society's interests from an initial focus on antiquarianism to an increasingly significant role as a source of advice and expertise on contemporary church design

⁹ V.A. Burd (ed.), *The Ruskin Family Letters: the Correspondence of John James Ruskin, his Wife, and their Son, John*, 2 vols. (Ithaca and London, 1973), p. 583. See also G. Chitty, 'John Ruskin, Oxford and the Architectural Society, 1837–40', *Oxoniensia*, 65 (2000), pp. 111–31.

¹⁰ C. Dade-Robertson, 'Edward Augustus Freeman and the University Societies', *Oxoniensia*, 71 (2006), pp. 151–73.

¹¹ 'The quiet but deep earnestness of Mr Isaac Williams and Mr Copeland...could not fail to make an impression on all who were brought into contact with them' (W.R.W. Stephens, *The Life and Letters of Edward A. Freeman* (London, 1893), p. 44).

¹² On Combe, see A.C. Hughes, 'Life, Achievements and Influence of Thomas Combe of Oxford (1796–1872)', Oxford Brookes University Ph.D. thesis, 1996.

¹³ Peter Howell, 'Newman's Church at Littlemore', *The Oxford Art Journal*, 6 (1983), pp. 51–6.

in keeping with Gothic ideals. In response, members of the Oxford Architectural Society (the name used informally from 1844) received frequent requests for guidance from clergymen and architects alike, both in Britain and the colonies.¹⁴

A project not explicitly in the name of the Society, but clearly related to it, was the formation on 28 May 1839 at Christ Church of a group of twenty young members of the University who each promised to contribute £20 a year for five years to a fund for the building of a church ‘in some part of England where it shall be judged most desirable’. Six of the seven whose names are known were members of the Oxford Architectural Society. One was Isaac Williams, who in 1842 became curate to Revd Thomas Keble (father of John) at Bisley, Gloucestershire. He recommended that the church be built at Bussage, in that parish. St Michael’s was erected in 1844–6, its architect being James Park Harrison (1816/7–1901), also a member of the Society, and designer of John Keble’s church at Hursley, Hampshire. Williams tried, without success, to persuade William Copeland to become perpetual curate at Bussage.¹⁵

Not all members of the Oxford Architectural Society were associated with the Tractarian movement. Of the sixteen original committee members, for example, five – Revd Edward Bigge, Revd Dr Philip Bliss, Revd Andrew Edwards, Revd Edward Hawkins, and Revd T.W. Weare – were not. Soon after the Society’s formation the question arose of whether members should belong to the Church of England. At the first committee meeting, on 14 February 1839, it was agreed that Thomas Rickman’s *An Attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture from the Conquest to the Reformation* (1817) should be ordered for the library, and on 13 March Rickman, a Quaker, was elected an honorary member.

J.H. Newman’s diary for 18 May 1839 notes a ‘meeting of Architectural Committee about Mr Rickman’,¹⁶ presumably prompted by concerns about his faith. Curiously the meeting is not recorded in the minute book; nor was Newman a member of the Oxford Architectural Society, let alone on its committee, though he did attend meetings (presumably as a guest), and appreciated it as the ‘only neutral ground in Oxford’ where Tractarians and their opponents could meet. Newman’s name appears in the printed list of members in May 1839, but in June he pointed out to Parker that this was an error – perhaps on account of his having presented two books to the Society on 3 May. According to Thomas Mozley, Newman ‘never went into architecture’.¹⁷ Whatever doubts members may have had over Rickman’s membership, in 1842 (following the architect’s death) the Society purchased his entire collection of architectural drawings.¹⁸

Nonetheless, some clearly remained concerned that membership could be extended to non-Anglicans. On 30 September 1839 Newman told James Bowling Mozley that his pupil, the supporter of Tractarianism and future banker Robert Williams, had told Parker that he would not present ‘Cologne Cathedral’ (perhaps the reproductions of the original drawings referred to

¹⁴ Already in 1839 designs were requested from Madras, for southern India, and similar requests came from New Zealand, Bermuda, Guyana, Canada and Australia. In 1841 casts from Iffley church were supplied to the Bishop of New Zealand for his cathedral, and in 1856 B.W. Hinton asked for ‘recasts’ of Norman and Early English casts to take to Sydney.

¹⁵ M.D. Lambert, *St Michael and All Angels, Bussage, 1846–1986* (1986).

¹⁶ G. Tracey (ed.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 7 (Oxford, 1990), p. 77. ‘Rickman’s *Architecture*’ was first in the list of ‘books to be ordered’ minuted at the committee meeting on 14 February 1839. This was ‘the first systematic treatise on Gothic architecture in England’ (Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, 4th edn. (London, 2008), p. 863), and was much reprinted.

¹⁷ Mozley, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, p. 216. The two books were John Carter’s *Specimens of the Ancient Sculpture and Painting now remaining in England*, and the *Essay on Gothic Architecture* by J.H. Hopkins, D.D., Bishop of Vermont. The first is not in the catalogue of the Society’s library, the second not on its shelves.

¹⁸ The drawings were bought by 27 April 1842. A list was printed in the Society’s *Proceedings*. They are now in the Bodleian Library (Bodl. MS Dep. b 140).

by Thomas Mozley in his *Reminiscences*) unless the Society passed a rule that only churchmen could be members.¹⁹

An even more serious problem for the Society concerned its participation with converts to Roman Catholicism. One of the Society's principal projects, undertaken between 1845 and 1858, was the restoration of Dorchester Abbey. In 1846 Revd William Basil Jones – then at Trinity College and a friend of E.A. Freeman – proposed that the part of the Dorchester sub-committee's report relating to the employment of A.W.N. Pugin 'should be omitted'. It is not clear how Pugin (who had converted to Catholicism in 1835) was employed, though his diary records a visit to the Abbey in 1842, and in 1845 he gave advice about the glass in the sedilia.²⁰ Newman's conversion on 8 October 1845 also prompted several members to ask whether converts should be allowed to remain in the Society.

On 4 March 1846 the committee heard that Edward Walford of Balliol had written to suggest the erasure of the names of members who had left the Church of England;²¹ the secretaries were to reply that the committee had no power to expel such members. On 23 October Revd C.P. Chretien proposed that membership should be restricted to those in communion with the Church of England, 'the rule to be retrospective only', but it was agreed that the committee could not recommend the proposal to the Society.²² The matter was left undecided in Oxford, though the equivalent society in Cambridge, the Cambridge Camden Society (founded three months after the Oxford Architectural Society), did rule that all members must belong to the Church of England.²³

In 1840 it was proposed that members of both the Oxford and Cambridge societies could attend one another's meetings and purchase their respective publications. There were, however, important differences between the two societies. From 1841 the Cambridge society published a journal, *The Ecclesiologist*, which promoted its more circumscribed and prescriptive understanding of acceptable Gothic church architecture, while the Oxford society carefully avoided too close an association with a study identified with Tractarianism, choosing to retain a more general focus on archaeology and, during the 1850s, a growing interest in secular, domestic architecture.

Unlike the Cambridge Camden Society, the publishing activities of the Oxford Architectural Society proved entirely uncontroversial. Abstracts of papers were published in the Society's *Proceedings* (until 1900) and, in addition to the working drawings of Littlemore church (1840), the Society published several further sets of illustrations of medieval churches, along with working drawings of church furniture and a book on Dorchester Abbey, all of which were published – and from 1845 paid for – by J.H. Parker. The Society's most enterprising publication was its *Guide to the Architectural Antiquities in the Neighbourhood of Oxford*, agreed at the general meeting on 10 May 1839, and published in parts from 1842 and in complete form in 1846.

¹⁹ For what Newman told J.B. Mozley, see his brother's *Reminiscences*, 1, p. 32. The reference cannot be to Sulpice Boisserée's folio *Histoire et description de la Cathédrale de Cologne* (Paris, 1823), as this was reported as 'ordered' on 11 March 1839, and was in the library by 1840, though it is no longer in the catalogue (the Bodleian has two copies). In the same letter, Newman predicted 'a sharp tussle' over Williams's proposal, and went on, 'I cannot deny that Parker has shown himself a considerable – you shall say what in this business. The introduction of Rickman was all his cleverness.'

²⁰ For the diary reference (1 June, 'At Oxford and Dorchester, dined with Mr Bloxam'), see A. Wedgwood (ed.), *A.W.N. Pugin and the Pugin Family* (London, 1985), p. 52. Pugin's letter to S.P. Rooke about the sedilia is published in M. Belcher (ed.), *The Collected Letters of A.W.N. Pugin*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 2001–), vol. 2, p. 486. Rooke refers to it in a letter to W.T. Parkins of 26 December 1845.

²¹ Walford himself was ordained in 1847, converted to Roman Catholicism in 1853, returned to the Church of England in 1860, and finally became RC again in 1871: J. Foster (ed.), *Alumni Oxonienses, 1715–1886*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1887–8), vol. 4, p. 1482.

²² In 1847 Charles Cox resigned from the OAS on becoming RC. The matter arose again in 1850–2.

²³ Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 47 refers to the fact that on 11 March 1852 Benjamin Webb, Secretary of the Cambridge Camden Society, wrote to the OAS that all members of the CCS must belong to the Church of England (apart from one or two honorary members who were RC, 'not being Englishmen'), and that the CCS removed the names of 'seceders'.

At its heyday in the mid 1840s, the Oxford Architectural Society comprised about 350 members (half that of the Cambridge society at this time), though the following decade saw both a broadening of the Society's focus and a decline in its membership. This was considered to be largely due to the foundation of so many local societies with similar aims. G.G. Scott had no doubt about what had been achieved, writing on 2 September 1860, that

the bane of art in this country is that it has been so little studied by the highly educated classes who should be its patrons. So far as ecclesiastical architecture is concerned this has been obviated in a remarkable degree during the last twenty years through the influence of the architectural societies in our universities.

By 1860 the lease on the Holywell Music Room had expired and, lacking funds, the Oxford Architectural Society was refounded in that year as the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society. Eight years later the Cambridge society (from 1845 based in London as the Ecclesiological Society) came to an end. By contrast, the reformed Oxford Architectural Society continues to the present (from 1972 as the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society), publishing a full-scale journal, *Oxoniensia* (since 1936), and offering lectures on the archaeology, architecture, and history of Oxford and Oxfordshire.

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