

## ‘Oxford Jackson’

By ALASTAIR MARTIN

SIR Thomas Graham Jackson (1835-1924) was born in Hampstead, the son of a London solicitor. From the newly founded Brighton College he went as a scholar to Wadham College, Oxford. Here he spent much of his time rowing or painting water colours,<sup>1</sup> leaving in 1858 with more aquatic than academic honour. His III Class in Greats, however, did not disqualify him from applying for a Prize Fellowship in 1864, and obtaining it.

In 1858 Jackson became a pupil of the architect Sir Gilbert Scott. After an interview with him Scott wrote to Jackson's father that 'From what I saw of him I feel sure he would succeed (in Architecture) if he followed it with a single heart to it . . . I am of opinion that as a painter alone he would hardly expect actual eminence, but his artistic power if brought to bear upon Architecture would be likely to ensure it.'<sup>2</sup>

Several distinguished architects served their pupilage in Scott's office at 20 Spring Gardens. Amongst them were Street, Bodley, Scott's sons Gilbert and John, Fowler, Crossland, Somers Clark, Garner, J. J. Stevenson, Micklethwaite, and Jackson himself. Inspired by the activity, enthusiasm, and success of their master, and trained by the criticisms of the office staff, the pupils were bred to a combination of discipline and ardour. Scott influenced Jackson's convictions, and yet there is a gulf fixed between the work of master and pupil.

Jackson received from Scott the ideal of bringing Architecture and the Sister Arts closer together. The architect should know, practice, and unite these arts. He also inherited a fondness for picturesque effect on the roofline: for towers, lanterns, and elaborate weather vanes. And yet the greatest single effect of his pupilage was to surfeit Jackson's taste for strictly Gothic Revival work, and to foster a rebelliously eclectic outlook.

At a time when eclectic views were considered shamefully blind to the supreme moral and aesthetic virtues of the Middle Ages, it was fortunate that Jackson's Fellowship saved him from financial reliance on his architectural practice. The time left to him by his scanty and minor commissions, by his light College duties, and by his travel at home and abroad, he employed in comprehensive study and practice of the arts. In his work *Modern Gothic Architecture* published in 1873, Jackson advanced his tenets that the architect should unite architecture and the sister arts, and should be free to select and adapt elements of previous styles suitable to his purpose.

<sup>1</sup> Jackson was a pupil of Turner of Oxford, for whom see L. Herrmann, 'William Turner of Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961-2), 312-18.

<sup>2</sup> *Recollections of Thomas Graham Jackson*, edited by B. Jackson (1950), 53.

In 1871 Jackson carried out alterations to the Warden's Lodging at Wadham, and thus began his career at Oxford. In 1874 Christ Church determined to build a tower over the staircase leading to the Hall, and invited Sir Gilbert Scott, Bodley, Hussey, Champneys and Jackson to compete for the design. No tower was ever built, though Acland referred to Jackson's plan as 'the finest thing ever rejected<sup>3</sup>.' In 1876 Jackson was invited by the University to compete against Deane, Bodley, John Scott, and Champneys, for the design of the new Examination Schools. From his startlingly unexpected success in this competition flowed a stream of important commissions at Oxford. By the end of his career he had built for Lincoln, Brasenose, Trinity, Merton, Balliol, Corpus Christi, Hertford and Somerville Colleges; he had carried out alterations and additions for Wadham, Oriel and Christ Church; he had restored the Bodleian Library, St. Mary's Church, and All Saint's church; he had built the High School for Boys, the High School for Girls, the Acland Nursing Home, the Radcliffe Science Library, the University Cricket Pavilion, and the University Boathouse. Even this list does not include all his works at Oxford.

Such a success at Oxford attracted commissions from the Public Schools, and Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Rugby, Radley, Uppingham, Giggleswick and others followed Oxford's lead. Cambridge employed Jackson for the Sedgwick Museum, the Archaeological Museum, the Law Library, and the Physiological Laboratories. He carried out restorations at Winchester Cathedral, Bath Abbey, Longleat, Blenheim, and other important sites. Amongst the honours bestowed upon him were Honorary Degrees from Oxford and Cambridge, full membership of the Royal Academy (Oxford's first architect R.A. since Wren), the Gold Medal of the R.I.B.A., the Mastership of the Arts Workers' Guild, and a Baronetcy. His published works include *Modern Gothic Architecture*, *Architecture, Profession or Art* (jointly with Norman Shaw), *Byzantine and Romanesque Architecture*, *Gothic Architecture*, *The Renaissance of Roman Architecture*, *A History of Dalmatia* and the *Recollections*.

This outline of Jackson's career shows that it was his work at Oxford which procured his success. It was, and remains, a success dependent on the effect of his buildings at the very centre of Oxford; on the Schools, and on his work at Hertford, Trinity, and Brasenose.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, or the English Renaissance, influenced Jackson profoundly. Burleigh, Knole, Audley End, Kirby, Hardwicke and Haddon he knew and loved. Writing on the style of the Examination Schools he remarks that 'the carrying out of this great building was quite an education, and settled me in a style which I think has been rather my own. Jacobean work, as I have said, seemed to me eminently suitable to modern usage, more elastic than either Gothic or free Classic . . . It seemed to me that it was possible to refine English Renaissance by avoiding its eccentricities, retaining that Gothic feeling which gave it life and instead of imitating the gross ornamentation to which it was prone, looking rather for example to the lovely decorative work of the early or Bramantesque Renaissance in Italy. On this notion I have ever since to a great extent worked.'<sup>4</sup> If we add French Renaissance architecture to that of England and of Italy, we can

<sup>3</sup> *Idem.*, 127.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem.*, 141-2.

determine the extent to which Jackson adapted the ideas of his predecessors and the extent to which he added ideas of his own. Finally we may attempt to judge whether these buildings are awkward composites or confident and harmonious conceptions.

The influence of the French Renaissance may be seen most clearly at Hertford, where the Hall staircase is strongly reminiscent of that of Blois. At Trinity the dormer windows recall those of Chenonceaux, whilst the effect of the steep roof and tall chimneys is also strikingly Gallic. At Brasenose, as in Hertford and the Sheldonian, the design of the organ case owes something to that of the church of Saint-Etienne du Mont in Paris.<sup>5</sup> At the Schools, the tall arched chimneys, the carved putti in the Quadrangle, and the colour scheme of creamy stone (Clipsham) and blue-grey slate may also be noted as evidence of the influence of the French Renaissance on Jackson.

The Italian element in the use of semi-precious and coloured stone in interior work will be discussed below. For its effect on his exterior work, the particularly stressed horizontal divisions, with sharp projecting raincourses storey by storey, bands of exterior ornament, and balustrading, as at Brasenose, Hertford, the Schools and the High School for Boys<sup>6</sup> may all be noted.

Jackson also inherited the Italian feeling present in many Elizabethan and Jacobean houses, for example the use of classical orders and pediments for decoration, especially to stress window and doorway openings. From his familiarity with the more palatial houses of the period, such as Burleigh House, he developed a liking for a thrusting quality in architecture. For example we can see the outwards thrust of the staircase towers at Brasenose and at Trinity, the oriels on the High Street front of Brasenose, and the long projecting wings of the Schools. For upwards thrust there are the finials on the gable points, the tall chimneys, tall windows as in the Schools, weather vanes, the polygonal towers at Brasenose and Hertford, and the engaged clock tower at the Schools.

Moreover, Jackson learnt much from the Jacobean architecture of his old college. The slightly projecting gable on the Wadham garden front, in its angle, scale, and flanking ornament, probably suggested those of the Schools Quadrangle. The central columnar decoration, the Hall lantern, and the prominent and forward chimney placement also foreshadow those to be seen at the Schools. The Gate Tower, flanked by gables of considerable scale, is echoed in the Brasenose High Street front. The round arched mullioned windows of Wadham, and the mullioned and transomed windows of the period, inspired those of many Jackson buildings. Perhaps their structural strength, depth, and gentleness of outline were expressive of part of his conception of the Oxford spirit.

Jackson added some faults of his own to those of the Renaissance. The first of these was a tendency to overbuild. Wall thicknesses, foundations, beamwork, columns, arches over the window openings—all seem built in an over-cautious and provident manner. Whilst it is apparent that these buildings are highly durable and require very little structural maintenance, so great a margin of safety was per-

<sup>5</sup> Dated 1630 and built by Jean Buron.

<sup>6</sup> Now the Faculty of Social Studies building.

haps unnecessary and certainly costly in the building. Another instance of Jackson's tendency to over-provide may be seen in the scale of his college staircases, and even in such things as the number and size of drainpipes.

Though his introduction of the durable Clipsham stone, which harmonizes so well with Oxford stone, was inspired, and though the exterior colouring and use of materials at the Schools and at Trinity is very pleasing, at Brasenose he made errors in his choice of materials. The red tiled roof of the New Quadrangle and the copper roof on the tall tower in that Quadrangle clash with their surroundings. On the High Street front the stone is cut and laid rather like bricks and the effect is somewhat coarse compared to the fine ashlar dressings on most of the High Street facades. In providing so many projections and so much ornament on this frontage Jackson failed to allow for the effect of soot in the hollows.

In that same building, however, can be discerned two of the gifts which distinguished Jackson as an architect. The first of these was his ability to align and scale the features of a building in relation to the buildings which surround it. Jackson's first plan for the Brasenose High Street front included a gate tower crowned by a flying spire, but when poles were erected to indicate its alignment with All Saints and St. Mary's it was imperfect, and Jackson decided instead on the present front, which follows the example of Magdalen and All Souls. At Trinity Jackson's buildings are a confident transition from Kettel Hall to the Chapel. Though there are many gables on Jackson's building, as on the Jacobean building, the dormers are round arched, in preparation for the round arched windows of the Chapel, and the dominant roof line of the Jackson buildings assorts well with the unbroken line of the balustrade on the Chapel. Jackson's Gate block at Hertford, uniting two early 19th-century wings, deserves credit for complementing and at the same time animating these buildings. Though Jackson's first plans at Brasenose, Hertford, and Trinity involved the destruction of old works, his final compromises were very successful. The cottages at Trinity, the two blocks at Hertford, and the old Kitchen at Brasenose survive with charm, and are not spoilt by the juxtaposition of Jackson's work.

The second of Jackson's strong qualities which may be seen in the Brasenose High Street Front is his skill as a designer of ornamental sculpture. The ornament follows the structural features, the doors, windows, storey levels, and rain courses. Jackson was a friend and admirer of William Morris, and a fellow participant in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and that spirit pervades the deep carvings of animals in foliage—the compositions possessing intricacy, imagination, and vitality. Humour is also there, in the representation on the gargoyle course of the contemporary masons, and the reference to the activities of the college in the form of a leering rigger player, and a proud phoenix, emblem of the oldest Oxbridge Club, which still continues to meet in Brasenose. The Royal Arms over the Gateway, for the King's Hall and College of Brasenose, is particularly fine. Many other examples of beautiful sculpture and carving may be found in Jackson's works. He had learned how to carve and sculpt, and his exceptional skill as an artist meant that he made his designs clearly and fully understood by his carvers. One man, Maples, was Jackson's chief carver for twenty years, and thus the quality of the

carving is highly consistent. For exterior work at least, Jackson came as close as any of his contemporaries to happily uniting Architecture and Sculpture. We may doubt whether such a thing will ever be attempted again in Oxford, for the expense would immediately rule it out.

For interior work, Jackson's masterpiece was the Schools. They are, as John Betjeman has written, 'exceedingly well planned.'<sup>7</sup> The courtyard plan provides light to the Examination rooms, and quiet away from the High Street. Paths leading across to entrances in the courtyard provide ease of access from one wing to another. A corridor runs the length of the building, connecting the halls and staircases. The Viva Voce rooms are placed on the ground floor as frequent arrival and departure of candidates, if these were on the upper floor, would disturb candidates in the writing schools. Furthermore, light and air for the latter require a tall ceiling. Thus the dividing walls of the Viva Voce rooms support the huge floor spans of the writing schools, and the ceiling of the latter is carried to a lofty roof. The original ventilation system renewed spent air at the rate of one thousand cubic feet per second. The arrangement of the two great schools in an L and a T shape makes the task of the invigilator simpler, for there is in each room a point from which all the candidates may be seen.

In its decoration the Schools building is lavish and magnificent. They were, indeed, intended to serve also as reception and banqueting halls for the University. Even if this were not so, however, the role and importance of the building, in symbol and in use, calls for some splendour. Goldwin Smith's criticism that it was 'like chasing and gilding a treadmill',<sup>8</sup> is frankly inhumane. The Italian influence can be seen in the carved jambs and lintels on the Viva Voce rooms' doorways, in the coffered ceilings of the writing schools, and in the mosaic and inlay work in the Great Hall. The Great Staircase has an alabaster balustrade, with a coping of rare Africano marble from a quarry not rediscovered since the days of the Romans. The steps are easy, the turn is graceful, and the overall effect of this staircase is remarkably good. All the detail in the Schools is designed by Jackson: the joinery; the marble work; the plasterwork; the carvings; the ironwork; and the furniture. Though the sources for the designs were English, Italian, and French there is no feeling of disparity in this interior. It has harmony, individuality, and massive confidence.

At the Colleges, Jackson's interiors are less successful. The staircase system called for less ingenuity in planning, although at Hertford and Brasenose Jackson was presented with narrow and difficult sites, and managed well. But whereas the scale of the Schools supported aesthetic schemes and plans which were inspired by those of large scale buildings, the College Rooms and Lecture Rooms did not. Here the beamwork, panelling and doorways are on slightly too ponderous a scale. The room sizes, ceiling heights, and shapes are good, and non-uniform; the windows are generally beautiful; the fittings and furniture are well designed. And yet the rooms lack grace, for all their solidity and comfort.

<sup>7</sup> *An Oxford University Chest* (1938), 139.

<sup>8</sup> W. Gaunt, *Oxford* (1965), 133.



When Jackson's work is compared with contemporary or slightly earlier work in Oxford, some light is shed on its particular character. It lacks the strictly Gothic and ecclesiastic air of the work of Sir Gilbert Scott, Butterfield, and Street. It shows closer knowledge and greater respect for the architectural traditions and atmosphere of Oxford. Despite its borrowings from France and Italy, it has a native rather than a foreign flavour, unlike the works of Deane and Woodward, of Waterhouse, and of Butterfield. It is eclectic rather than purist, but as well considered, confident, and individual as the works of these contemporaries. Only the Oxford Museum can show carvings and sculpture to match or surpass those on Jackson's buildings, and it is doubtful whether any of his contemporaries at Oxford designed so much of the detail in their works with equal thoroughness and skill.

Like Jackson, Champneys was very much inspired by Renaissance architecture. The French influence may be seen in his Newnham buildings at Cambridge, which compare with Jackson's work at Trinity. The old Indian Institute building, next to Jackson's work at Hertford, is ponderously Jacobean but with a few Indian features. The proportioning of the buildings is like the work of Jackson, but not Jackson at his best. Similarly Champneys' work at Mansfield and at University Colleges lacks the vitality of Jackson's work at Trinity, Brasenose, and Hertford, and the comparison between the two architects is favourable to Jackson.

In its own day opinion on Jackson's work must have divided between those who considered it debased and those who considered it refreshingly eclectic, and a serious attempt to adapt to the times. Jackson was more of a rebel to his contemporaries than may easily be imagined. The Gothic Revival was still in full flood when Jackson started his broadly Renaissance style. He and Champneys undoubtedly influenced the course of Scholastic Architecture, at the time when Webb and Shaw were influencing private house architecture. His election as an R.A., the Gold Medal of the R.I.B.A., the Mastership of the Art Workers' Guild, his Honorary degrees from Oxbridge, and his Baronetcy, tell their own tale of Jackson's popularity amongst the artists and the Establishment of his day.

Those years of acclamation and bright reputation have been followed by comparative obscurity. Now that two of Jackson's best works, the Schools and the High School for Boys, have been cleaned and show to immense advantage, perhaps we shall see a revival of interest in and appreciation of an architect whose claims to praise are not small.