

# Richard Blechinden: the first Provost of Worcester College, Oxford

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## SUMMARY

*In 1714 the moribund Gloucester Hall was awarded a benefaction of £10,000 left to an unspecified Oxford College by the Worcestershire baronet, Sir Thomas Cookes, and was refounded as Worcester College. The last Principal of Gloucester Hall, Richard Blechinden, a former Fellow and Vice-President of St. John's College, became the first Provost of the new foundation. He is virtually an unknown figure, his posthumous reputation having been greatly damaged by a disparaging comment about his convivial habits made by the antiquarian Thomas Hearne in his diary entry for 28 April 1711. In fact, however, Blechinden was probably a man of considerable importance and attainments. He was a dependant of the influential Harcourt family, and a close friend of George Clarke, Fellow of All Souls, M.P. for Oxford University and sometime Secretary at War, who eventually left a large part of his fortune to Worcester. There is also evidence that Blechinden was a conscientious Rector of two parishes and a more than adequate scholar. This article attempts to bring together the information about Blechinden that can still be retrieved, and to give some account of his life and career.*

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## INTRODUCTION

‘Of successive Provosts of the College, Dr. Blechynden is a name and not even a memory’.<sup>1</sup> With these dismissive words, the authors of the History of the College, published in 1900, pass rapidly on from the first Provost to his successors. Although another 85 years of oblivion have gone by, perhaps it is not quite too late to attempt to save from total obscurity Dr. Richard Blechinden (so he usually spelled his name) who, as last Principal of Gloucester Hall and first Provost of Worcester, played a leading role in the College's new foundation and early years.

<sup>1</sup> C.H. Daniel & W.R. Barker, *Worcester College* (1900), 182.



Plate 1. Richard Blechinden, by Thomas Gibson (Thomas Photos, Oxford, original at Worcester College).

The quest naturally starts with a further look at the 1900 History. Its discouraging disclaimer of any knowledge of Blechinden is followed by two equally uninformative sentences, disposing, in quick succession, of the careers of the next three Provosts; and the short chapter dealing with the whole of the 18th and 19th centuries opens with the surprising statement that 'With the record of the foundation of Worcester College the picturesque and striking episodes of its history come to an end'.<sup>2</sup> The choice of this throwaway line to launch an account of two centuries of the College's existence is indeed remarkable; even more so is the opinion of one of the co-authors, Mr. W.R. Barker, in his preface, that 'in recent years the College has been fortunate in possessing no history'.<sup>3</sup> This is reminiscent of Gibbon's celebrated summary of the reign of Antoninus Pius as being 'marked by the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history'. Gibbon could permit himself the occasional jest, but Barker, one feels, had little time for such things. Not content with careering through the centuries, leaving Provosts unhonoured and unsung, he shows signs of a similarly cavalier attitude towards the worthies of the older foundation, Gloucester Hall. After conceding that a few of their names are 'still in the mouths of men', he adds 'others there were, who were great in their day but are now only remembered by those who love to dig among the dust'.<sup>4</sup> With so reluctant a historian, we are surprised, as Dr. Johnson might have said, not so much that the College History should be well done, but that it should be done at all. The reason for this apparent distaste for the subject and its minutiae may, however, lie, at least partly, in the hazards of joint authorship, and perhaps in the personality of Barker's co-author, C.H.O. Daniel, Provost from 1903-1919. Daniel was responsible for the post-Gloucester Hall part of the work, but, according to Barker, was unable to complete it because of an accident 'which prevented him from devoting himself to [it] for many weeks'.<sup>5</sup> Barker, under pressure, as he says he was (even in the late 19th century) from printers' deadlines, was left to do the best he could to finish the text with the use of Daniel's notes. Hence the rather cursory style of parts of the History; its neglect of the College's first Provost should, therefore, in no sense be taken to imply any kind of historical judgement that he was a person of no consequence.

If Blechinden was unlucky in his treatment at the hands of the official historian, he had already suffered an almost fatal blow to his reputation from the contemporary antiquarian Thomas Hearne, sub-Librarian at the Bodleian. In his diary for 28 April 1711, Hearne says, in his robust way:

Dr. Blechinden . . . Chaplain to the Lord Keeper (Sir Simon Harcourt) is made Prebendary of Gloucester worth 100 lbs. per annum. . . . This man good for nothing but drinking and keeping jolly company.<sup>6</sup>

Such remarks tend to stick, and this one has practically served as Blechinden's biography and epitaph. Although the College History cautiously says 'We may doubt whether Doctor Richard Blechinden was the sot represented by Hearne',<sup>7</sup> the authors do not seem to have been particularly concerned to look further. And indeed Hearne's words were repeated, and, if anything, underlined by C.H. Wilkinson 25 years later in his *Worcester College Library*.<sup>8</sup> The late Dame Lucy Sutherland, writing in 1979,

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. ix.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, ed. C.E. Doble, III (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xiii), 155.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel & Barker, op. cit. note 1, 185-6.

<sup>8</sup> C.H. Wilkinson, *Worcester College Library*, *Proceedings of Oxford Bibliographical Society*, i (1927), 272.

considered, however, that Blechinden 'has been under-estimated by the College historians.'<sup>9</sup> Although the available evidence is fragmentary, it seems worth trying to remedy the silence of Barker, and also to reconsider the strictures of Hearne.

#### EARLY LIFE

In the first place, it is clear that Blechinden had had a not undistinguished career before coming to either Gloucester Hall or Worcester College. He was born in 1667 or 1668, the son of Thomas Blechinden of Dulwich, 'gentleman'. After 5 years at the Merchant Taylors' School, then in the City of London, he matriculated at St. John's College, Oxford, in 1685 as a Sir Thomas White scholar.<sup>10</sup> Two younger brothers, John and Samuel, followed him to St. John's, but little more is known about them. 'Our' Richard Blechinden became College Greek Lecturer in 1693, Doctor of Civil Law in 1696 and Library Keeper in 1699. He was three times Vice-President of St. John's, and was appointed to the College livings of Codford St. Mary, Wilts. and Kingston Bagpuize, Berks. in 1703.<sup>11</sup> He was a Tory, and a dependant and protégé of Simon Harcourt (later 1st Viscount Harcourt) who himself was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal in 1710 and Lord Chancellor in 1713. Blechinden became Harcourt's chaplain, and, in 1711, Harcourt asked St. John's for leave of absence for him 'in immediate attendance upon the Great Seal'.<sup>12</sup> Blechinden was clearly an ambitious man, and in the fashion of the times sought preferment and advancement through attachment to a powerful family. By this means, he might have achieved high position in either the Church or the University: in the end, he appears to have settled for something of both.

He first turned his attention towards Church appointments, beginning with the chaplaincy; in 1710 he was made Canon of Rochester, through Harcourt's influence, and in the following year obtained the Gloucester prebend noticed by Hearne.<sup>13</sup> His subsequent aspirations to similar positions did not escape the keen and sardonic eye of Dr. William Stratford, a Canon of Christ Church, who refers frequently to Blechinden in his almost daily letters to his own patron, Edward Harley (later 2nd Earl of Oxford). On 19 June 1711, Stratford writes

The great living of St. Mary's in Reading is void, it is worth above 300 l. per annum in the Keeper's gift. It was pressed upon Blechinden; he declined it, having too much the spirit of a gentleman to deal in anything but dignities. Afterward, he offered to keep it till the President [sc. of St. John's] was translated to a Bishopric in Ireland, that he might resign it then to Archer, on condition that he [sc. Archer] should make over his interest in the College to him for it. This was the first plan, but I hear that there is some alteration in it now, and that Blechinden absolutely declines it, but I know not to whom it will be disposed.<sup>14</sup>

A week later he adds:

Mr. Rowney [M.P. for the City of Oxford] put his Lordship [sc. Harcourt] in mind that he had promised me before him, that when his servant Blechinden was provided for, I was to have the refusal of what was in the gift of the Seal.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> L. Sutherland, 'The Foundation of Worcester College, Oxford', *Oxonienia*, xlv (1979), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Another Richard Blechinden, possibly an uncle, preceded him at Merchant Taylors' and St. John's, and became a Fellow of that College and Canon of Peterborough. He died in 1697.

<sup>11</sup> W.C. Costin, *The History of St. John's Coll. Oxford 1598-1860* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. n.s. xii) 155; Joseph Foster: *Alumni Oxonienses 1500-1714* (Oxford, 1891).

<sup>12</sup> Costin, op. cit. note 11, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; *Hearne's Collections* III (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xiii) 155.

<sup>14</sup> Hist. MSS. Comm. 29, *Portland MSS.*, VII, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 34.

Whether due provision for Blechinden was to be ecclesiastical or lay was perhaps immaterial; but it was not many weeks before an interesting possibility arose in the University. In August 1711, the death occurred of Dr. Benjamin Woodroffe, the eccentric Principal of Gloucester Hall, chiefly remembered for his efforts to turn the Hall into a College for the education of Greek youths. Woodroffe had also been actively trying, though without much success, to secure for the Hall the benefaction which the Worcestershire baronet, Sir Thomas Cookes, had proposed to bestow upon an unspecified Oxford college. With Woodroffe's death, Harcourt had the opportunity, eventually, both to reward Blechinden for services to the Harcourt interest in Oxford, and also to throw his weight into the protracted struggle for the Cookes bequest which led to the foundation of Worcester College.

Blechinden was soon on the alert, though perhaps not entirely sure at first what advantage he might gain from Woodroffe's death. Stratford writes, on 14 August 1711:

We have a strong report here that Woodroffe is dead . . . I find my acquaintance, Dr. Blechinden, is very eager upon the scent. He was to enquire news of me. I was abroad. He left a note to desire intelligence, if I had any. Woodroffe's living in London [St. Bartholomew's the Great] is in the gift of the Seals. It is one of the smallest in compass and greatest in revenue of any within the walls. By houses lately fallen in, which are not yet leased out, it may be made, as it is said, worth 400 l. per annum. Blechinden has no design on this for himself; this is too mechanical a part of our profession for so fine a gentleman to deal with, but he certainly aims to get some very good prebend, Windsor I believe if he can, in exchange for it, and to make such a composition for this as he would have done for Reading.<sup>16</sup>

Stratford continues, a few days later:

But to return to my cell, as humble as it is, two great men were pleased to take their breakfast in it this morning, Mr. Harcourt and Dr. Blechinden. We had a little mundane conversation.<sup>17</sup>

One subject of this conversation may well have been the exercise of the patronage enjoyed by Harcourt as Lord Keeper. He evidently intended to give something to Blechinden as soon as possible. On 23 September Stratford writes:

His Lordship will now make his chaplain easy; the prebendary of Gloucester whose prebend his Lordship had disposed of last spring [sc. to Blechinden] is now dead. There is a living in this county in the gift of the Seals, near 300 l. per annum, void by the same man's death; I hear his Lordship's chaplain is in some doubt whether he shall accept that too, because if he does he must quit his fellowship and his college living.<sup>18</sup>

The doubt did not last long: in fact, the next day Stratford continues, not without a trace of satisfaction:

Dr. Blechinden reckoned it seems too fast upon a new parsonage; the prebend of Gloucester now dead is not the prebend who has the good living in this County which is in the gift of the Seals.<sup>19</sup>

However, another possibility soon emerged. Although Hearne wrote on 27 August 1711,

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 43-4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 61.

There is not the least tittle who will be made principall of Gloucester Hall in wch. there is hardly one Scholar at present<sup>20</sup>

moves to fill the post were soon afoot. The appointment was in the gift of the Chancellor of the University, the Duke of Ormonde, who at first offered it to Dr. Hudson, Bodley's Librarian. Hudson might have turned out to be a successor in the Woodroffe tradition, for he is now remembered mainly for his attempts to deprive Hearne of his posts at the Bodleian, and for his rejection from that Library of a copy of Milton's poems which had been presented by the author in 1647.<sup>21</sup> However, Hudson preferred to take the principalship of St. Mary Hall, which became vacant in 1712, and the way was therefore open for Harcourt to manoeuvre Blechinden into the headship of Gloucester Hall. At the same time, he issued, as Lord Keeper, decrees which effectively steered the Cookes trustees away from the intention they had formed of allocating the Cookes bequest to Magdalen Hall, and which, in the end, secured it for Gloucester Hall, soon to become Worcester College.<sup>22</sup> On 29 November 1712, Stratford writes: 'Blechinden is actually Principal of Gloucester Hall, he had notice of it last night. This is to secure him to be head when that hall is made a college. He will never resign his principality, but in favour of himself, to be sure. I own this to be very dexterous in Lord Keeper.'<sup>23</sup>

Changing his tune slightly, he continues, a fortnight later:

Blechinden's being made Principal of Gloucester Hall has quite spoiled the credit of the Lord Keeper's decree. His Lordship disowns his having had any hand in making Blechinden Principal, but nobody will believe.<sup>24</sup>

So Blechinden, at the age of 45, achieved a position of power in the University and became one of those to whom the Tories could look for support in that important political centre. In addition, he had acquired lucrative Church appointments; to these was added, in 1714, the Harcourt family living of Nuneham Courtenay,<sup>25</sup> which, like the Rectory of Kingston Bagpuize, he was to hold for the rest of his life.

#### PRINCIPAL OF GLOUCESTER HALL AND PROVOST OF WORCESTER

Appointments to Oxford Headships in the unsettled early years of the 18th century were inevitably the subject of manipulation by one political party or the other, and, just as inevitably, attracted satirical comment. It is tempting to see a reference to Blechinden in the speech prepared for the 'Terrae Filius', the licensed buffoon of the University Public Act ceremony – a speech that he would have delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre on 13 July 1713 'had not his mouth been stopped by the Vice-Chancellor'.<sup>26</sup> After castigating almost every Head of House in a scurrilous vein that, not surprisingly, led to suppression, he says

Of B---n, D[elau]n, Br[ickende]n etc., I have not time to say anything at present; but of those some other opportunity.

<sup>20</sup> *Hearne's Collections* III (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xiii), 215.

<sup>21</sup> *D.N.B.* (John Hudson 1662–1719).

<sup>22</sup> Sutherland, *Foundation of Worcester College*, 72–4.

<sup>23</sup> *Portland MSS.* VII, 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> Costin, *History of St. John's Coll.*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> *Terrae Filius*, 1713: G.A. Oxon. 80, 59(1), p. 14.

Whether the blanks in the first of these names might perhaps be filled in to read 'Blechinden', is merely a guess; nor shall we ever know how the same satirist viewed Blechinden's appointment in terms of his 'Recept to make an Head of an House',<sup>27</sup> of which, he says, there are two sorts. Blechinden hardly fits the first category:

Recipe an Old Heavy Country Parson, extract all remains of common sense and common honesty, and then put in Gravity, Formality, Hypocrisy and Pretended Conscience, of each a large Quantity. Add of Stupidity q. suff. Fiat compositio simplex. Give him the Degree of Doctor of Divinity, and then . . . S. Caput Mortuum. N.B. The use of this sort is to vote and act as the others bid them.<sup>28</sup>

Hearne's defamatory opinion of Blechinden is more in line with the alternative:

To make one of the other kind, instead of a Country Parson, take a Plotting, Intriguing, Rakish, Drinking, Whoring Fellow of a College. Distil him down to a Rigid Disciplinarian; then prepare him after the foregoing manner. But add to the composition, of Pride, Ambition, Knavery, Envy, Malice and Revenge, of each a large handful. N.B. Take care you stop him up close, lest when you have made him he expels you for making him.<sup>29</sup>

But whatever the circumstances of Blechinden's appointment to Gloucester Hall, he seems to have possessed qualities which neither part of the 'Recept' allows for. As Principal he was able, as a Head of House, to take part and vote in the long series of meetings held, mainly in the 'apodyterium', to consider the settling of the Cookes benefaction, and the arrangements for setting Worcester College on its feet. Although we can do no more than speculate about Blechinden's part in these proceedings, he missed very few of the 20 meetings of the Cookes trustees held between January 1712 and November 1713.<sup>30</sup> As Dame Lucy Sutherland says: 'he proved a very successful ally of those working for Gloucester Hall, and most of the spade-work necessary to translate the court's intentions for Worcester College into practical terms fell on him.'<sup>31</sup>

He seems to have taken the lead in drafting the College statutes, after a version inherited from Dr. Woodroffe, and a set derived from Magdalen Hall, had both been rejected by the trustees.<sup>32</sup> In this work he appears to have drawn upon the St. John's precedent; and it is also likely that his familiarity with that College would have been of great value in the prolonged negotiations to secure the agreement of St. John's to alienate the Gloucester Hall site, of which it had long held the freehold.<sup>33</sup> This was secured for Worcester College in 1713 on payment of £200, plus a quit rent of 20s. a year.<sup>34</sup>

The first Provost could hardly avoid becoming deeply involved in the finances of the new foundation. Mrs. Margaret Alcorn of St. Giles' parish appointed Blechinden as executor of her will, in which she left some £1500 to the College.<sup>35</sup> A copy of the will, extending to four foolscap pages carefully written in Blechinden's hand, exists in the College archives;<sup>36</sup> and a bill of his lawyer, Appleby's, costs beginning at Michaelmas

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

<sup>28</sup> S = (?)Sequitur.

<sup>29</sup> Terrae Filius, 1713, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/9).

<sup>31</sup> Sutherland, *Foundation of Worcester College*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/9; 1/3/2).

<sup>33</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/11).

<sup>34</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/13).

<sup>35</sup> The legacy was later reduced, after litigation, to less than £800.

<sup>36</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/6/3); *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii), 64.



1717, only a few months after Margaret Alcorne's death, shows that Blechinden had already by then done a considerable amount of work in administering the estate.<sup>37</sup> But his main preoccupation was with the Cookes bequest. This amounted, in 1713, to £16,000,<sup>38</sup> and was initially invested in tallies on the malt duty, and later in South Sea stock.<sup>39</sup> However, Blechinden was not spared the worries that are apt to beset a trustee of investments, and in March, 1716, he received from Appleby the disturbing inside information that

My Lord [sc. Harcourt] says that Parliament is about to reduce all interest on the funds, and fears that you will too soon have occasion to repent you did not follow his advice of purchasing before this time.<sup>40</sup>

In these early years, Harcourt appears to have acted as financial adviser to the College. On 22 October 1722, Stratford wrote to Harley:

Some new stock jobbing is going forward. The Viscount sent to Blechinden to procure the consent of his College for putting their whole fortune, 14,000 l., into the South Sea. Accordingly consent under the College seal is gone up for laying of it out in stock. I suppose a rise is expected and designed upon submission of the two millions, & conclusion of the congress of Cambray.<sup>41</sup>

One has the impression that, although Blechinden was a responsible and conscientious steward of the College finances, this was not a subject that greatly interested him, and that he was prepared to follow the advice of experts. There is, for example, a letter to him from Appleby, dated 2 January 1723,<sup>42</sup> explaining in almost excessive detail how to set out a bill of costs for expenditure incurred at the College and on journeys to Worcestershire to elect scholars. And in March of the same year, Appleby openly criticizes the Provost for incurring unnecessary expense by too freely allowing leaves of absence:

The bearer, Mr. William Lindsey, is the person the Reg[istrar] has appointed to bring down the Peticon to be signed by the absent fellows and scholars . . . I have taken ten Gwyneas out of this Quarter to defray the expenses of the messenger . . . I must submit it intirely to your Wisdom & Justice how & in what proportions this ten Gwyneas, if that will defray the whole charge, shall be apportioned . . . & were I a fellow of your Colledge who had been indulged with six months absence on my own affairs, and on my return Intituled to receive half a year's salary for not attending in my colledge one day, and by my absence this necessary charge happened, which might have been prevented had I been in colledge, I should think myself greatly indulged if I paid one third part of it . . .<sup>43</sup>

In settling the expenses of the Cookes estate, Blechinden was likewise disposed to adopt a relaxed attitude: a letter of March 1713 which appears to have been written by a solicitor representing the Cookes family says

the Bishops' Solicitor [sc. of Oxford and Worcester] debates every item with me, but Dr. Blechinden's solicitor is more moderate, from whom I have fairer quarter than from either of the

<sup>37</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/4).

<sup>38</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/2).

<sup>39</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/15; B1/3/13).

<sup>40</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/15).

<sup>41</sup> *Portland MSS.* VII, 338.

<sup>42</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/19).

<sup>43</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/2/2).



other two, and if I guess aright hee is inclinable to allow even what I have charged, were itt not for the partys who are at watch over him. . . . Dr. Blechinden's solicitor was so fair as to propose 500 l.<sup>44</sup>

Some indications of Blechinden's attention to general College business can be found among the few records of the 18th century that remain in the archives. Admissions of scholars and commoners (among them, Harcourt's nephew, Philip, Gentleman Commoner, 1717), choice of College 'officers' at the annual Audit, and leaves of absence are meticulously recorded in Blechinden's own hand for most of the years of his Provostship.<sup>45</sup> Judged against the standard of another 18th-century Provost, Sheffield, who in the 18 years of his Provostship made only one entry in the College register – his own presentation to a College living – and none at all in the Admissions Book, Blechinden must be considered a model of precision and punctilio. For example, after two years in office he anxiously recorded, on a loose paper, a minor delay in observance of the statutes, and slipped it between the pages of the Register, as if equally uncertain whether to conceal it or to enter it formally:

In 1716 the officers were not chosen till December the 14th, there not being a majority of the Electors at home, which was a great fault and not to be brought into example.

There is no trace of any further lapse: on the contrary, Blechinden was careful to preserve an attested copy of his oath of allegiance to the House of Hanover, painstakingly transcribed in his own hand, and similar copies of the oaths taken by the other College officers, and even those of the College Butler, Cook, Porter and Barber.<sup>46</sup> A printed copy of the 39 Articles bears on its reverse side a memorandum in Blechinden's writing:

August 17th, 1714. Dr. Blechinden Provost of Worcester College in Oxon, did subscribe unto the nine and thirty articles of Religion and declared his unfeigned assent and consent unto and approbation of the said articles, and of the common prayer book, in the form of words prescribed by an Act for the uniformity of public prayer, in the presence of us.

The signatures of the Fellows were added. Similar copies attest Blechinden's declarations of conformity made at Kingston Bagpuize and Nuneham Courtenay; again the memoranda are written by him, though the witnesses' signatures are in somewhat unlettered hands, and in one instance a mark stands for a signature.<sup>47</sup> Other entries by Blechinden in the Register state that the College statutes, letters patent etc. were 'put into the Great Chest as the Statutes direct' on a certain date, and that stock receipts were similarly bestowed; there is also a blank form of words, in Blechinden's writing, for induction into a living, presumably for use when a College living fell vacant.

All these are indications of a careful, rather bureaucratic, temperament, almost in the mould of Pepys. But Blechinden was clearly something of a stickler in other aspects of his duties as well. On 28 May 1719, he made the following entry in the College Register: 'Mr. Provost declared Mr. Joseph Pens fellowship void, from not being in orders according to statute'. This laconic statement probably conceals a well-prepared but controversial move. Joseph Penn, a graduate of Wadham, was one of the original Fellows of Worcester appointed in the summer of 1714.<sup>48</sup> It is impossible now to

<sup>44</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/1/3).

<sup>45</sup> Worcester Coll. Admissions Book & Register (18th century).

<sup>46</sup> Worcester Coll. Register.

<sup>47</sup> Worcester Coll. Lower Library T.D. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Worcester Coll. Admissions Book.

discover the underlying reason for his removal. He duly appealed to the Visitor, the Bishop of Oxford, mentioning that two other Fellows were dispensed from taking orders. The Bishop's reply – to the Provost – formally rejecting Penn's appeal, observes that he 'unfortunately labours under such an impediment in his speech that he is incapable of Holy Orders',<sup>49</sup> and adds that the two dispensed Fellows 'apply themselves to the Study of Law and Physick', thus keeping within the statute. Penn's speech defect, together with his lay status, had presumably been evident from the start of his 5 years' tenure of his Fellowship; and he served as Dean in 1716. One cannot but wonder if his place was not desired for Thomas Chettle, a scholar, who was elected Fellow three days after Penn's eviction, and whose brother later bequeathed a substantial sum to the College. But this is mere speculation; on the other hand, one can well imagine that Blechinden would have had little difficulty in pressing his view of the matter on the Bishop, moving, as he did, in circles which included the great, or nearly great, in the Church and University. Dr. Shippen, Principal of Brasenose, writes to Dr. Charlett, Master of University College, on 3 February 1720:

On Tuesday last I dined with the good Bishop of Durham, with Drs. Delaune, Baron, Blechingdon, Mr. Cartwright and above 30 more gentlemen and Clergy. His Lordship was very cheerful and well pleased with his company, eat and drank plentyfully and looks as well or better than last year. We had a chine of an ox of 180 pounds weight roasted and brought in on the shoulders of four men. Much venison and good meat of all sorts.<sup>51</sup>

Such feasting would have been by no means unusual in the 18th century, as Parson Woodforde, in his humbler circumstances, has shown us; and Blechinden was no doubt in his element in this company. One can assume that undergraduates, too, had plenty of opportunity to eat, drink and be merry, but Blechinden evidently dealt severely with other forms of licence. On 15 December 1720, he records in the Register

Whereas William Leay Scholar of the House and Bachelor of Arts has been more than once rebuk'd in Private by the Provost, and once in Publick before the Society for very great Disorders, he is now for ever expell'd the College for receiving a Married Woman all Night in his Chamber and in his Bed.

Although it would not be safe to say that this was a unique incident in the history of the College, certainly it is the only such misdemeanour to have been personally recorded by a Provost in the College Register. Blechinden was clearly anxious to be seen to have acted firmly and properly; one can perhaps see the Doctor of Civil Law speaking in the careful blocking of possible points of appeal to the Visitors: the mention of due warnings, the clear indication, for the avoidance of doubt, of the woman's marital status, of the duration of her stay, and its precise location.

#### BLECHINDEN AND THE HEARNE CASE

In these early years, Blechinden was already prominent in University as well as College affairs. In 1718 he was drawn into a dispute between Hearne and the University authorities. He probably gained nothing but embarrassment from his involvement;

<sup>49</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/6/2).

<sup>50</sup> Worcester Coll. Register.

<sup>51</sup> Bodl. MS. Ballard 21, f. 132.

certainly he received no thanks from Hearne. The offence for which Hearne faced prosecution in the Vice-Chancellor's Court was his projected publication of two books – Camden's *Elizabetha* and William of Newborough's *History* – which contained comments by Hearne politically offensive to the University authorities. The rights and wrongs of this case need not concern us here;<sup>52</sup> it is, however, worth recalling that Hearne was one of the most bitter and obdurate controversialists that Oxford has ever known. In his voluminous diaries he seldom says a good word of anyone who was not, like himself, a determined non-juror and Jacobite. To mention only those prominent in Worcester's history: his castigation of Blechinden has already been noted; George Clarke, Worcester's second great benefactor, is 'a pitiful, proud sneaker . . . I heard one say the same to-day, that he believed Dr. Clarke of All Souls was my enemy and that he buzz'd Things about in London. I was of the same opinion before. . .',<sup>53</sup> and Harcourt 'was most certainly a very great Lawyer, tho' governed by Interest, so that he changed his Principles often'.<sup>54</sup>

However, Hearne was now in serious trouble; and he turned for help to Richard Mead, an influential London physician, who had recently 'recovered' the princess of Wales 'when other physitisians had certainly killed her, had their Prescriptions been followed'.<sup>55</sup> Mead wrote to Hearne:

Blomesbury Square, Apr. 24, 1718; Worthy Sr. – I recd. yours on Tuesday Even., and my brother another yesterday. We have bin considering whatever we can to serve you. He will write you his Opinion himself. As to writing to the Vice-Chancellour, I not being acquainted with him, we have agreed that I should make application to him by the means of Dr. Blechinden. I have, therefore, wrote to the Dr. by this Post, and desired him, in my name, to intercede with the Vice-Chancellour on your behalfe. I have urged whatever I could, and if I have any interest, hope for good Success. My Ld. Harcourt, at my Brother's desire and mine, has applied in your Favour already. . . .<sup>56</sup>

Mead's brother, Samuel, whom Hearne describes as 'a very great Common-Lawyer', wrote on the same day, cautiously refraining from expressing a definite opinion on whether or not Hearne could be obliged to give evidence on oath in the Vice-Chancellor's Court (which Hearne strenuously objected to); he adds the prudent advice:

Upon the whole, it seems best to me, not to enter into Disputes, but to gett out of the Embroil in the best manner you can. In order to this, tho' I could not apprehend it proper that my Brother shou'd directly write to the Vice-Chancellor, to whom he is a meer Stranger, yet he will write this Evening to the Provost of Worcester College, to desire him to speak to the Vice-Chancellor in his Name. . . .<sup>57</sup>

Mead's letter to Blechinden, dated 24 April 1718, still survives, as does a further letter, of 9 May, which shows that Blechinden lost no time in applying to the Vice-Chancellor on Hearne's behalf.<sup>58</sup>

Hearne himself, in his diaries, speaks of a meeting with Blechinden on 3 May, and also says that Blechinden was with the Vice-Chancellor in Court when the latter sat as Judge and Hearne appeared before him. On 3 May, he refers explicitly to Blechinden's advice:

<sup>52</sup> *D.N.B.* (Thomas Hearne); *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii) passim.

<sup>53</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii) 359; VII (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xlviii) 341.

<sup>54</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VIII (Oxf. Hist. Soc. l.) 334.

<sup>55</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii) 120.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 359.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 360.

<sup>58</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/3; B1/1/16). Text of Richard Mead's two letters at Appendix A.

He seemed to be of opinion that I was not at all required by the Assessor to answer upon Oath to Interrogatories. The Vice-Chancellor I suppose had so insinuated. But I told him to the contrary. The Doctor said he wished that I had been permitted to read in Court the Declaration and Submission that I offer'd to read yesterday. Upon which I shewed it him. . . .<sup>59</sup>

It is noteworthy that the advice from Blechinden was distinctly clearer than that of the celebrated lawyer, Samuel Mead.

Eventually the case against Hearne was dropped, after a form of retraction on his part. It seems a reasonable supposition that the intervention of Blechinden, and perhaps even more that of Lord Harcourt, played an important part in this; but later Hearne seems to have regretted making any kind of apology. Writing on 26 August he says:

a very worthy friend insinuated that Dr. Blechinden, Provost of Worcester College is not my Friend, wch. I believe to be true from what he said to me when I waited upon him on May 3rd, namely that he wd. have me submit and beg pardon for the crimes charged, wch. I told him I wd. not do unless an Injury was proved.<sup>60</sup>

It seems likely that Hearne, always quick to use his vituperative gifts, had by this time worked up a feeling of resentment against those who had advised him during his difficulties with the University. Stratford describes him as 'so proud and stubborn that he will recant nothing . . . no one will resent anything that is done to him'. He adds: 'That which gives me the greatest aversion to him is his remarkable ingratitude to the best friends he ever had'.<sup>61</sup> Among these was Blechinden, whose advice and skilled advocacy, echoed in Richard Mead's letter, were clearly valued and respected by all except the twisted and obsessive Hearne.

#### COLLEGE AFFAIRS

The Cookes bequest, though it was the vital first step in Worcester College's history, was in fact a barely sufficient basis for the College's foundation and continuing success. The initial investment yielded £754 a year,<sup>62</sup> of which just over £500 had to be earmarked for the stipends of Provost, Fellows and Scholars, and other officers of the College, such as the Porter and Butler. This was by no means the total of the College's running costs, and heavy expenditure was also necessary to render habitable the old Gloucester Hall buildings, which had sunk to a truly dilapidated state by the time of Loggan's 1675 drawing, and had since then been only partly repaired, in Woodroffe's time. The College was indeed fortunate in finding so soon a further benefactor in George Clarke – politician, virtuoso, and Fellow of All Souls – who eventually did so much for the College that the loving-cup which he bequeathed is justly inscribed to him as *collegio munificentissimus benefactor tantum non fundator* – 'almost the founder of the College'.

Clarke appears to have taken an interest in the College from the first: a letter of 2 February 1713, from Edward Dupper, who was to become Worcester's first Steward, gives advice to Blechinden on petitioning the Chancellor, the Duke of Ormonde, about the appointment of four of the first six fellows.<sup>63</sup> Dupper seems strangely distrustful of Blechinden's drafting powers (which in fact were considerable) and says:

<sup>59</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii) 362.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 388.

<sup>61</sup> *Portland MSS.* VII, 234.

<sup>62</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/13).

<sup>63</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/8).

I have prepared a petition from you to his Grace, wch. I take to be more formal than that you left with Mr. Clark. If you are of the same opinion, I think you ought to sign it, and by the next post send it to Mr. Clark, and make him to deliver it to his Grace and obtain his consent thereto if you think his Grace can forgive your not presenting it. . .

Clarke, an excellent amateur architect, took a prominent part, with the help of Hawksmoor, in the 18th-century rebuilding of the College, and his benefaction was largely applied to that purpose. A letter addressed to him at All Souls, dated January 1725, almost certainly from Hawksmoor, in London, says

I would likewise propose to begin the building at Wr. [Worcester] this Spring, since there will be money ready for it, and as the Provost and I think the world will expect it after eleven years, and perhaps censure us for neglect.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, there are indications that building work of some kind on the Gloucester Hall site had already begun: Hearne refers to excavations and demolition in 1713, and, in a reference to the Cookes benefaction, dated 1714, says of Gloucester Hall

a Chapell and Buildings are now erecting, and the Patent is passed for making it a College, and many of the old Buildings are pulling down.<sup>65</sup>

This is corroborated by a letter from Edward Harley to his father, the Earl of Oxford, headed 'Christ Church, July 15, 1714':

We came safe here last night. I hear the Lord Chancellor comes to lay the first stone of the new college before he returns to London. Blechinton told the Vice-Chancellor the reason why he [Lord Harcourt?] would have all the despatch made in the making of statutes of the new college, was because he did not know how long he might have the seals.<sup>66</sup>

However, it is unlikely that rebuilding began on any scale for some years, and probably little was done until the Alcorne bequest became available. Hearne wrote on 5 April 1720:

They have begun at Worcester College to pull down the old Refectory or Hall (wch. was a noble, fine Room), in order to build a new one. The said old Refectory 33 feet or 11 yards broad and 63 feet or 21 yards long; but the new one (contrived by Dr. George Clarke and done by the Provost's, but not the Fellows' Consent) is to be but about half as long as the old one was broad.<sup>67</sup>

One may note, in passing, Hearne's typical exaggeration in suggesting that a minuscule refectory, only about 16 and a half feet long, was planned; in fact the College Hall is some 60 feet in length.

Clarke bound himself to repay, from his estate, £1000 advanced by Roger Bouchier, the Vice-Provost, for the building of the library<sup>68</sup> – so that at least part of his eventual benefaction was, in effect, available before his death, and other, larger, sums for building came to the College in his will. Harcourt, too, gave practical help, and according to Stratford, writing in October, 1721,

<sup>64</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/2/4).

<sup>65</sup> *Hearne's Collections* IV (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xxxiv) 350.

<sup>66</sup> *Portland MSS.* V, 472.

<sup>67</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VII (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xlviii) 112.

<sup>68</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/5/1).

The Viscount Harcourt has got 600 l. of the King, and 300 l., some say 400 l., of the Prince towards building Worcester College. I think this is an instance of power as well as favour. He has been made easy, you may guess which way.<sup>69</sup>

Blechinden's close relationship with Harcourt was of immense importance to the new College, and his equally close links with George Clarke also go back to the College's early years, if not further. In March 1722/3 Stratford wrote:

No one doubts, I believe, of Blechinden's friendship to G.C. yet he differs from the Vice-Chancellor heartily in the University cause, and has been used brutally upon their account by his old friend the President of St. John's.<sup>70</sup>

It seems that the Vice-Chancellor, Shippen of BNC (later to be Clarke's executor) wished to become Curator of the Sheldonian Theatre on the death of Sir Christopher Wren, but was voted down by Convocation (with the help, apparently, of Blechinden, but not George Clarke). One cannot be at all sure of the merits of so ancient a disagreement, but it is at least clear that Blechinden, placeman though he was, felt quite capable of taking independent action. On the other hand, according to Hearne, he declined the office of Pro-Vice-Chancellor in 1718 so as not to stand in the way of Clarke's friend Charlett, Master of University College.<sup>71</sup>

In Worcester's early years, a notable test of Blechinden's independence arose in a dispute with the heir of Sir Thomas Cookes. The College archives contain a very small amount of Blechinden's correspondence apart from the financial letters already mentioned. The surviving letters are mainly ones received by him, but there is one copy of a letter of his own composing.<sup>72</sup> It is unsigned, but is clearly written by him: this could be assumed from the internal evidence of its contents; moreover, the handwriting is plainly that in which Blechinden wrote his will, a receipt for his first quarter's salary, and other entries in the Bursar's account books for 1714 and the succeeding years. The letter is undated, but was probably written in 1715, soon after the College was founded. It is to the heir of the founder, Sir Thomas Cookes. We cannot be certain who this heir was, for Sir Thomas had no children; but it may possibly have been the David Cookes who, at a later date, broke open the Baronet's tomb at Tardebigg, and used hooks and tongs to fish out diamond rings and a gold chain and locket which had been buried with him.<sup>73</sup> In 1715 the heir had apparently complained to the Provost that his nominees had not been elected to scholarships and that elections had taken place without his knowledge – charges which Blechinden summarily rejects:

Sir, We are sorry that in the very beginnings of our College we shd. lye under the displeasure of our Founder's heir, or need one word to justifie or excuse ourselves to him. We know nothing we have done or forbore doing, that shd. justly give you offence. . .

You complain, Sir, that you were not acquainted with our statutes and with our intention of electing Scholars. Surely, Sir, 'tis not the usage of colleges to communicate their statutes but when by statute they are required, and if we could have thought it would have been at all agreeable to you to have known the time of our election, you would surely have known it in the first place; but since you were pleased to expect it, we are displeased with ourselves for neglecting it and humbly ask pardon of you.

<sup>69</sup> *Portland MSS.* VII, 305.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 349.

<sup>71</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii), 393.

<sup>72</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/1).

<sup>73</sup> T. Nash, *Collections for the History of Worcestershire* (London 1781), II, 408.



In relation to the two young gentlemen you are pleased to commend, we cannot help telling you they are utterly incapable, we cannot take them without breach of statutes, and we dare not take them without risk to debar the election . . . If you shall please to reconsider . . . with quiet and impartial judgment instead of blaming, you will commend us; for it can never be unpleasant to the Founder's Heir that the Founder's laws are strictly observed; and tho' you are pleased to give us a hard word as if our foundation were noxious and the rules of it execrable, yet we must take leave to say that notwithstanding our foundation is young and our society very small, yet we esteem ourselves as firm in our establishment and as safe in the profession of it as any the oldest and largest Colleges in Oxford, and we are very unwilling to believe that you can think it or wish it otherwise.

As to the neglect you are pleased to charge upon me in not answering a letter I had the honour to receive from you, I can most truly say I never had a line from you but I made haste to acknowledge it with the utmost respect, and I must needs complain of the expression you used that I judged you contemptible, which would be a sure way to make myself so . . . That we cannot yield to your commands gives us trouble, that we cannot receive these young men related to our Founder and commended by his Heir is as painful to us as it can be to them, but our Statutes are our rules . . .

This is the letter of a man sure of himself, sure of his ground, and accustomed to authority. The confident, forthright style is impressive, as is the firmness of the rebuff to the founder's heir, the measured rejection of his criticisms, and, above all, the evident pride in the College of which the writer had so recently become head.

#### RECTORIES

Blechinden's life was by no means bounded by the College, or even by the University. Although the prebend at Gloucester and the canonry at Rochester are likely to have been sinecures, there is ample evidence that he devoted considerable time and attention to his livings at Kingston Bagpuize and Nuneham Courtenay, which he held for 33 and 22 years respectively, and also to his duties as Chaplain to Lord Harcourt. The Nuneham parish register entries from 1715 to 1727 are carefully written by him, and signed 'Ri. Blechinden, Rector'.<sup>74</sup> One, in particular, that stands out reads: 'Sarah Eaton was buried May the 19th 1715'. She was the wife of Byrom Eaton, Principal of Gloucester Hall from 1662–1692, and himself Rector of Nuneham Courtenay until his death in 1703. His daughter, also called Sarah, was to leave the College a large bequest on her death, in 1739.

There are passages in Hearne recounting two Sunday excursions to Nuneham Courtenay to hear Blechinden preach:

Dec. 23 Mon. 1717

Yesterday to Nuneham Courtenay . . . just as Sermon began. Dr. Blechinden, Head of Worcester College and Rector of this Parish preached upon the Omnipresence of God. It was a good practical sermon and delivered well. The Dr. took occasion to wish that he could see all his Parish at Church together and at the Holy Sacrament. But the Dr. must not expect this, since he is seldom at the place himself, coming thither only (as it were) for pleasure.<sup>75</sup>

Feb. 16 Sun. 1717/18

This morning . . . to Newnham Courtenay where we heard Dr. Blechinden preach a good, plain, practical, Country Sermon.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Oxon. County Record Office (MSS. D.D. Par. Nuneham Courtenay, a.1).

<sup>75</sup> *Hearne's Collections* VI (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xliii), 122.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 141.





Plate 2. Kingston Bagpuize Rectory, designed by George Clarke for Dr. Blechinden: photograph, H.M. Colvin, Esq.

Hearne was a great walker, who covered immense distances, but we can assume that even he would not have gone to Nuncham from Oxford on two winter Sundays so closely following one another if he and his friends did not expect a Sermon worth hearing; and it seems the Provost's style met their expectations. Some evidence of a felicitous turn of phrase exists in a draft of an epitaph, written in Blechinden's hand, which is preserved in the College archives.<sup>77</sup> It is to the Rev. William Lowth, six years older than Blechinden, his senior at Merchant Taylors' and St. John's College, and later a Prebendary of Winchester and Rector of Buriton, Hants.<sup>78</sup>

Near the outside of this wall Lieth the body of Mr. William Lowth Late Rector of this Parish  
Who died May 17, 1732 And being dead yet desires to speak To his beloved Parishioners And  
earnestly to exhort them Constantly to attend upon the worship of God Frequently to receive the  
Holy Sacrament And diligently to observe the good instruction Given them in this place To  
breed up children in the fear of God And to follow peace wth. all men and holiness Without  
which no man shall see the Lord. God give us all a happy meeting At the resurrection of the Just.

One can assume that Blechinden had been asked to compose the epitaph for Lowth's tomb, and the final version can be seen in Buriton church. Slight changes, not all for the better, have been made from Blechinden's draft. For example, the word 'yet' in the 5th line is omitted, thus obscuring the allusion to the line in Hebrews, 11: 'He being dead

<sup>77</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/12).

<sup>78</sup> Foster: *Alumni Oxonienses*.

yet speaketh'; and Blechinden's use of 'the Lord', 3 lines from the end has been altered to 'God', thus producing the awkward repetition '... no man shall see God. God give ...' which Blechinden avoided.

Kingston Bagpuize provides other examples of Blechinden's useful formal or lapidary style. In the front of the Parish Register he wrote: 'Mr. Tipping gave a silver cup and Dr. Blechinden a Silver Patten for the uses of the Holy Table at Kingston Bagpuize. And indeed the gift of both should be imputed to the charitable Mr. Tipping to whose pious example my slender offering is owing'. On a fine silver flagon, which 'Dr. Blechinden gave likewise', he had engraved:

This Flagon, with the Patten Sacred to the uses of the Holy Table Richard Blechinden Rector of Kingston Bagpuize Offers to God in Humble Duty And Presents them to the Parish With Dear Affection, 1728, Making this Prayer to Thee O Crucified Saviour That in Eating thy Body & drinking the Blood Wee may receive the full remission of our Sins Amen and Amen.

Mr. Tipping's chalice is inscribed in Latin as follows – and one may safely assume that Blechinden was the author –

*Sacros in Usus Parochiae de Kingston Com. Berks. D.D. Barthol. Tipping de Civ. Oxon. Armig. A.D. 1728*  
*Bibite ex hoc omnes.*

The Kingston register, like that at Nuneham, was carefully kept by Blechinden himself, the entries in this case running from 1703 to 1735. There are two entries of special interest. Inside the back cover is a note, in Blechinden's hand, which states that 'The house in the close was built by Dr. Blechinden, Rector, 1723'. This refers to the Rectory, which was designed by George Clarke for his friend Blechinden;<sup>79</sup> Clarke's original sketch is still in Worcester College Library, and the handsome Rectory still stands, some half a mile from the church, and separated from it by Kingston House and Park, through which Blechinden no doubt walked on his way to and from his services. The church too was apparently rebuilt in 1727 during Blechinden's time, but was pulled down and replaced in 1799 by the present building.<sup>80</sup>

The second entry of note simply says: 'Mrs. Mary Blechinden was buried April the 11th 1733'. This refers to Blechinden's unmarried sister, Mary, no indication of marital status being intended by the appellation 'Mrs.' Mary was the eldest of three sisters, and it seems likely that she acted as housekeeper both at the Rectory and at the College for Blechinden, who never married. A volume which once belonged to her, inscribed 'Mary Blechinden – Her Booke' is in the College Library. It contains *The Queen's Closet Opened* – a book of remedies or 'Physical and Chirurgical Receipts' – and *The Compleat Cook*, dated 1655; its well-thumbed condition suggests very frequent use.

In his mid-fifties, Blechinden suffered a sudden attack of illness, from which the book of 'physical receipts' can have provided only moderate relief. Stratford writes, on 24 August 1723: 'I hear Dr. Blechinden has had an apoplectic fit, it is doubted whether he can recover, but if he should he must be in a condition in which life can be little desirable'.<sup>81</sup> It was not Stratford's way to express sympathy; instead, he remarks on the likely loss of a source of political gossip: 'The chief canal of the Viscount's [sc. Harcourt's] intelligence in our parts is stopped, I suppose'. But Blechinden made a

<sup>79</sup> H.M. Colvin, *Catalogue of Architectural Drawings in the Library of Worcester College*, plates 117–118.

<sup>80</sup> N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, Berkshire*, 160.

<sup>81</sup> *Portland MSS.* VII, 365.

recovery, and probably a fairly complete one. Although references to his poor health became rather frequent during the ensuing years, by 1724 he was certainly active again when his patron, Viscount Harcourt, married for the third time at the age of 66. His bride was Elizabeth, widow of Sir John Walter, Bt., of Sarsden, Oxon. Stratford employed his full battery of spite and sarcasm, tinged with some ribaldry, in writing to Harley the day after the wedding:<sup>82</sup>

Yesterday the Viscount was to conclude his famous marriage. It was deferred to yesterday, to save Michaelmas rents. Never was known such an extravagant change from a penurious wretch, who has all his life before sponged upon others, to a profuse prodigal, and for the sake of a woman nearer 50 than 40, whom he can feel indeed but has not been able to see for these ten years past. 1,200 l. per annum rent charge added to the 800 l. per annum from her former husband. Great presents of jewels and plate, country house and Cavendish Square house. The last to be richly furnished with damasks and velvets brought on purpose from Genoa. And it is said the lady will show him what it is to live. I look upon this as a plain crack in his head, and the beginning of the fall of his understanding, if of nothing else.

In another letter, Stratford remarks that, four days before his previous wife's death, the Viscount

had a consult of physicians, and pressed them to tell him sincerely their opinion, for that it was of great importance to his affairs to know it. They told him they believed she could not live three days, upon that he called his coachman, and ordered him to have the coach ready next morning, and drove him directly to Lady Walters at Sarsden, and was there at the time of his Lady's death.<sup>83</sup>

Before hurrying from London to be with his future bride, the Viscount made careful plans for the prospective funeral of Lady Harcourt, an event of great pomp and circumstance which Blechinden was to attend. The Harcourt papers contain a remarkable document setting out the arrangements in 22 numbered paragraphs:<sup>84</sup>

First, If my Lady dyes on or before Wednesday next, her funeral shall be at Stanton Harcourt on Tuesday the 23rd of this Instant June; if my Lady dyes after Wednesday next, her funeral shall be on that day sen'night on which she shall happen to dye.

Among other necessities, there are to be

shammy gloves, scarves and hatbands for six Bearers and for Dr. Blechinden and Mr. Parsons the Minister, and least any other person may be there, bring a few more shammy gloves and hatbands.

There follow directions for taking the 'Corps' to Nettlebed, 33 miles, the day before the funeral, and next day to Stanton Harcourt, another 18 miles,

where they must be by four of the clock in the afternoon, there being a ferry<sup>85</sup> to cross over a mile before they come to the church, which will take up the Hearse and all the Coaches about half an hour's time.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 384.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 379.

<sup>84</sup> Harcourt Papers ii, 126.

<sup>85</sup> Bablock Hythe.

Lady Harcourt was buried at Stanton Harcourt on 23 June 1724, and the Viscount's marriage to Lady Walters was celebrated the following October, with Blechinden doubtless in attendance. Stratford, still eager for gossip, wrote a fortnight later:

Our worthy friend the Viscount, I hear begins already to be weary of the change of his housekeeping, and is come again to the usual diet of loins and legs of pork. But fondness continues yet, and the old fellow kisses so heartily that the smack is heard three rooms off. Blechindon preached there last Sunday, the rogues here say that his text was out of Genesis 18th chap. 11th v.<sup>86</sup>

It is, perhaps, highly improbable that Blechinden chose so impudent a text: it runs 'Abraham and Sarah were old and stricken in age. And it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women'. However, his character and reputation were probably such that his name could plausibly be introduced into Stratford's jest at Harcourt's expense. And in Worcester College Library, there is a well-thumbed pamphlet by Blechinden's friend, the London physician Richard Mead, entitled 'Barrenness Strictly Enquired Into'. This was published in 1720 'for the sake of those Persons who have Great Estates and no Heirs of their Bodies to enjoy 'em'. One cannot say for certain that Blechinden was familiar with this treatise, but it is perhaps more than coincidence that Mead makes use of the same quotation from Genesis in the course of his argument.

#### LATER YEARS AT WORCESTER

It seems that during the later part of his life, Blechinden spent much time at Kingston Bagpuize. Despite the references in Hearne to sermons at Nuneham, one has the impression that Kingston, with its comfortable rectory, was more to Blechinden's liking; indeed, after Harcourt's death, in 1727, he perhaps had less reason to go to Nuneham Courtenay, though he retained the living for the rest of his life. Until 1725, at least, he arranged for one of the Worcester dons to take some of the work at Nuneham off his shoulders. Hearne writes on 4 July 1725:

Yesterday about 12 o'clock, died, of a Fever Mr. Thomas Clymer, M.A. and Fellow of Worcester College . . . where he was respected by Dr. Blechinden, the Provost, who made him his Curate, at Newnham Courtney.<sup>87</sup>

He adds, in his usual rather malicious way:

This Mr. Clymer was mightily addicted to Women, and was much in their company, tho' he was generally sly on those occasions, and some stories go about of him, wch. are believed to be too true.

Given Hearne's poor opinion of Blechinden, he doubtless thought there was little to choose between the Provost and the curate he 'respected'. Clymer was buried at St. Thomas's church, now near Oxford Station, 'being carried thither from Worcester College' and one can guess that both the Provost, and Hearne, who records the event, attended the funeral.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> *Portland MSS.* VII, 386.

<sup>87</sup> Hearne's Collections VIII (Oxf. Hist. Soc. I) 390.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 391.

By this time Worcester was firmly established as a College, and Blechinden, tiring of University politics and in indifferent health, turned more and more to country life and the company of his friends: in particular George Clarke, whose interest in the College grew in proportion to his exasperation with the political disputes at All Souls, the College of which he was a Fellow for 56 years. On 16 January 1726, he wrote to Blechinden a letter from which it seems that both men were beginning to feel their age, though Clarke was still prepared to get up in the small hours of a winter's morning to travel to London and the Court, finding time to sit down and write a letter first.

Oxon. Monday 16th Jan. 1726

It is now between 5 and 6 in the Morning, and I am got ready to attend Sir John Stonehouse and young Thom. to Uxbridge this evening, in order to attend his Maty. at Westminster tomorrow morning: it grieves me, my Dear Provost, to leave this place without taking my leave of you; but your illness, and the ill ways have kept us asunder: I hope in time that both will be mended. Had you been in Oxon. I should have left a Duplicate of my Will wth. you, wch. if wee see one another no more, you will find in my Scrutore in my Study; there are some requests I have made to you in it, wch., I am sure, you will performe. This Will is the same that it was; I have wrote over one copie of another and sent it to London, where I shall probably execute it, as soon as I have transcribed a Duplicate, wch. I am willing to sign at the same time, to prevent accidents as much as wee may. You will like it, I think, better than what is in my Scrutore – Pray God give you health and send us a good meeting here; but if that is not his pleasure, I hope we shall meet in a better place. I am, my dear Provost, allways most faithfully . . . Geo. Clarke.<sup>89</sup>

Two years later, both men were in better spirits, and able to joke about the health of Blechinden's livestock at Kingston Bagpuize rather than dwell on their own troubles. Clarke writes on 22 February 1728:

I have yours, my Dear Provost, from Bagpuz, and congratulate the health of your sheep, as I condole wth. you for your mare's distress, wch. you have sent me in two Languages: I wish you could signify her recovery in either of the two, it would be much a wellcome piece of News.<sup>90</sup>

Clarke was active on the College's behalf in London, and did his best to give financial advice and help with the administration of the College's trust funds, which by now had been increased by further bequests.

I spent some hours yesterday in your Service, and jolted over a great deal of very ill pavement, to gett the Order for your money, wch. Mr. Appleby has just brought me, in a note of Mr. Hoare's for five hundred [and] sixty seven pounds, nineteen shillings, out of wch. I payd Mr. Appleby's bill of seventeen pounds; so that there remains to you 550 li. 19s. 0d., wch. I hope you will tell me how you'll dispose off: if you can gett money at Oxon., and will draw upon me for that same or any part of it, your bills shall be honoured. I inclose Mr. Appleby's acct. wth. his receipt, and the letter I had from him yesterday, wch. will convince you that [it] is reasonable to gett your money invested in Land, as soon as you can, that you may not be under such difficulties in coming at the interest of it; and, besides, Ld. Chancellor has decided that he will never order you any more, because your Principall ought to be Layd out in land. Mr. Appleby is very desirous of being discharged of his Trust, of Lady Holford's Estate: he says the accounts are settled, and approved by Christ Church and the Charter House, under their Seal, and that he shall want yr. College's and Pembroke's, wch. he hopes you will give him, especially since you two will have your whole money, and interest from Michaelmas last was a twelve month, whereas the other Parties concerned are contented to accept of three fourth parts of what was bequeathed them. I mentioned that money wch. was devised for building yr. Chapell, wch., I understood, at the time the Act pass'd, would come in, by a delay of payment of the other legacies; but he says the Estate

<sup>89</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/2/1).

<sup>90</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/2/2).

fell so short that the money is not to be had: he talk'd something of 4000 li. wch. was, I think, to come in and answer some uses, and if upon residuing up the bottoms anything could be got for you, you might depend upon his care – But all this is chance. I find that either you must do, as other people do, in sealing this discharge, or a Bill in Chancery must be brought, to unravell these accounts, in order to the settling them, and discharging him. I promised to tell you as well as I could, what he said, and desir'd, and perhaps upon consideration you will find it advisable to doe as your neighbours doe; for Law is troublesome, and expensive.

I am, Yrs. &c., G.C.

Despite Clarke's suave and agreeable style, there are several indications in this letter that he was not happy with Blechinden's handling of financial matters, and felt that the Provost needed firm guidance and advice. For Blechinden the days of unquestioningly following Harcourt and his South Sea ventures were over; and it may be that, after his stroke in 1723, he felt less able to take decisions in the increasingly complex area of the College's finances and the associated splendid building schemes which depended upon George Clarke's eventual bequests. There are signs, too, that relations with the College's solicitor, Appleby, in Chancery Lane were not always easy, and that Appleby resented Clarke's virtual take-over of the College's finances. We can suspect, also, that Blechinden began to hand over some responsibility for business matters to the Vice-Provost, Roger Bouchier, his one remaining colleague from Gloucester Hall days.

Writing to Blechinden from London in March 1733/4, Bouchier evokes the atmosphere of the lawyer's office in an almost Dickensian vein, and shows that the process of following Clarke's financial advice was long-drawn-out.

I have waited on Dr. Clarke with your just Acknowledgements. I plainly perceive all his favours are pledges for [the] Future.

How hugely different is Applebee, whom the more I know the worse I like! On 16th I trac'd him out in the Court of Chancery, but he was not pleased I should become conscious of his extorting extravagant fees for doing nothing that day. If we succeed in this transfer of Dividends into our great Patron's hands we may the less regret this waste after so many other. But I trust our eyes are open'd; and we shall choose to deal with tenants and not with lawyers.

I am surprised he now so little insists on the College Seal when he put me upon it so eagerly before. Some works love Darkness and cannot bear the light. . . . He talks confusedly about your letter of Attorney to receive the dividends as also your Receipt to be pasted in the General Accomptant's Book, but he would not permit me to forward the affair. There is something, he knows not what, to be done first.

To conclude, his promises were express to finish all before Lady Day: he has now worked himself in, and will find employment till May next.

I will urge the Affair; 'tis some comfort as well as honor to Act under the Direction and Authority of Dr. Clarke.<sup>91</sup>

As light relief he adds, in a postscript presumably calculated to amuse Blechinden:

On Sat. about 10 in the morning the Prince of Orange in his bravery of a bridegroom and the Princess Amelia in a plain suit took a turn or two in the Mall. Some uxorious persons say He left his Bride in Bed too early that morning.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Worcester Coll. Lower Library, Clarke Papers, YC 20.

<sup>92</sup> This postscript may be compared with Hervey's rather unkind comment on the royal bride (Princess Amelia's elder sister, the Princess Royal): that she was 'marred a great deal with the small pox', and that 'the faults of her person were that of being very ill-made, and a great propensity to fat' (Hervey, *Memoirs of the Reign of George II* (London, 1884, i, 240).



Three months later, the solicitor's delaying tactics were by no means exhausted, as this letter, also sent from London by Bouchier to Blechinden shows:

June 12. I have been in daily expectation of sending you the issue of our Affair: the Account this opportunity conveys is: Mr. Applebee is Absent, your letter of Attorney is unknown to his Clerk, and our good patron leaves the Town frustrate of his Expectations to oblige us.

It is not in your Power to Quicken a Sort of Men Tardy by their Forms, more so by their Corrupt Practices. It is our Interest to Escape as we can and Learn by our Sufferings to avoid future Depredations.

I have much Compassion at your Pains of the Gout: Give me leave to add, I have Joy also for the Gracious Purposes that attend them. This we receive from the Spirit of Christianity! And you are not unacquainted with it.<sup>93</sup>

#### YEARS OF DECLINE

Whether, or not, Blechinden shared the Vice-Provost's joy at the 'Gracious Purposes' to which his painful gout was attributed must remain uncertain. In general, however, he did not omit to take the best medical advice to which he had access. In 1732, he consulted Dr. George Cheyne, a Scottish physician practising in London – a noted *bon vivant* and socialite, who after at one time attaining a weight of 32 stone switched dramatically to vegetarianism and the pursuit of moderation.<sup>94</sup> Cheyne wrote to Blechinden on 27th May:

Reverend Sir,

I give you here my best advice in your Case which I have long studied and felt in the most eminent degrees. I heartily wish it may succeed, both for your sake and from a principle of Humanity.

I begin with your sleep, the want of which is the hardest part of your sufferings. . . . You will never so certainly nor so safely secure that as by the Day Labourer's opiate *Recipe Caballum*. Dear Sir, ride, walk, thresh, do anything that will urge on the circulation and perspiration, the slowness of which is the cause of your want of sleep. The first is best, but any kind will do if the Dose be sufficient, in a Chaise, by a Dumb-bell, or even a Jig. For your stomach and spirits, take the Burgundy twice a day, an Hour or two before Dinner and Supper – supper, I said, but the less the better, with nothing living in it. The Schola Salernitana is infallible: *ut sit somnus levis, sit tibi coena brevis*.

The true *Sylphium* pills taken at night will help both your sleep and spirits if they will sit on your stomach, and have not that repulsive faculty which puffs away the ladies. If you take it in a tincture – 30 or 40 drops in a glass of white wine after Dinner – it will be lighter and less offensive. But exercise will dispell the perfume.

*Drink Pyrmont or Spa water* with a little French claret for your Common Drink, the less the better, for it is an infallible aphorism that it is not good eating and drinking that gives good health and good spirits. Only good health gives good spirits, and a good appetite is the sign only of good Health.

Once or twice a week or oftener, as they do, or you want them, *take three of the Nervous opening pills*. You will allwaies sleep better and be lightsome next day when you take them, they require neither Regimen, Dyet nor Housekeeping. You may ride post, or preach when you take them. I assure you they are better than *Dryden's stewed prunes* for composition – *Experto Crede*.

I should advise you to dine on light, young, white foods only, but I have some doubt whether the advice will go down. With a man of taste, insipidity is but a weak recommendation. But the pallat has no influences on the laws of nature. If age be a vergeing to a Second Childhood, the Dyet specific for the last I am sure is not improper for the First, at least if they would secure the rejuvenescence and Gayety of the Last. But *si populus vult decipi* etc.

<sup>93</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/3/7).

<sup>94</sup> D.N.B. (George Cheyne 1671–1743).



However, *quisquis erit color vitae*, I am with Great Truth, Reverend Sir, your real friend and most humble Servant,

Geo. Cheyne<sup>95</sup>

Cheyne appends two prescriptions, which are perhaps worth quoting:-

*The Burgundy*: Take of the Cortex finely powdered six Drams; Cassamunar, Calamus Aromaticus, Winteran's Bark, each two Drams. Orange peel half an ounce, Cardamus the lesser and Cochineal, each half a Dram. Infuse a week in a Chimney Corner in 5 half pints of white wine, strain and pass thro' Cape paper; of this four spoonfulls at eleven and five.

*The Nervous Opening Pills*: Take of the Gummy pills – and of the pills *de aloe lota* [of washed aloe] of each two Drams; with a few Drops of oil of Cinnamon make Middling pills; of these three going to bed every 2nd or 3rd night, washing them down with any liquid.

The advice and prescriptions strongly suggest that Blechinden's ill-health at this time had much to do with over-eating, and perhaps also the 'dull and deep potations' of which Gibbon accused the eighteenth-century fellows of Magdalen. There is more than an echo of this in a letter written by Clarke in London to Blechinden on 16 January 1734:

When I came hither last night I found the Parlt. adjourned to this day senight. Had I known this, Mr. Provost, when I was at Oxford I had been there still and shd. have stayed till the latter end of next week, for nothing will be done till Monday senight but prescribing Mr. Onslow the Speaker and swearing the Members. I thank you good Mr. Provost for the best chine that ever was tasted. Your friends eat of it and wished for your Company and drank yr. health. I was told today that L. Harcourt may be a Ld. of the Bedchamber if he will. I am sorry to hear your Library windows have suffered so much by the late winds. Don't you intend to have shelves for books between the windows? Francklin says he has no orders about them.<sup>96</sup>

A week later Clarke wrote again; Blechinden, unwell and missing his sister's company and housing-keeping, had retreated to Kingston Bagpuize, only to find that all was not well with his rectory; meanwhile, the Vice-Provost continued to look after the details of the building of the new Library at Worcester.

Mr. Provost. 23rd Jan.

I saw Kitty and her husband this morning. She enquired after your health, as she did by letter, before I left Oxon. & gave you her service. I told her you complained of ill-health and lived by yourself at Bagpuz. Her answer was that you used to be whimsicall. I am sorry you have any occasion to make reflections on the Owner & builders of your house and that yr. trees have suffered by the late high winds; but yr. Calamity is not particular. . . . Mr. Francklyn's son told me the shelves were up on the East side and ends of yr. Library but that none were ordered between the windows. I told him I thought it was designed to have some there and bid him speak to Mr. Bourchier. Shd. not the doors that are to stand before the books be wyred? I did not understand that any directions were given for the doing it.<sup>97</sup>

As for the 'wyres', they were put in; and indeed are still there in the form of a grille in front of the shelves in the Lower Library. The Kitty referred to is Lady Catherine Hyde, second daughter of the Earl of Clarendon, who, since 1720, had been Duchess of Queensberry. She was one of the most famous women of her day, noted equally for her beauty, her wit and her eccentricity, and was a friend of Gay, Pope, Swift, Congreve, Pitt

<sup>95</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/2).

<sup>96</sup> Worcester College, MS 289 (1, 2).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

and Walpole – as well as, evidently, of Clarke and Blechinden. She was described by Hervey as ‘proverbially beautiful’ and at the top of the polite and fashionable world. In a life full of incident, one of the most notorious events was her banishment from Court for canvassing support for Gay’s ‘Polly’, the banned sequel to the Beggars’ Opera. Verses entitled *Upon Lady Kitty Hyde’s first appearance at the Play* were carefully copied by Clarke into his Commonplace Book, which is preserved in Worcester College Library.<sup>98</sup>

It is clear, from Kitty Queensberry’s solicitude, that Blechinden was at least on the fringes of the highest ranks of society, through his friendship with Clarke and also through his earlier association with Harcourt. In the only other letter from Clarke to Blechinden which can be traced,<sup>99</sup> Clarke goes out of his way to add in a postscript ‘Kitty has often asked after you’. One can imagine that Blechinden is likely to have received the Duchess’s famous, if unusual, hospitality, either at her town house or at Amesbury in Wiltshire; though as it is said<sup>100</sup> that she never gave meat suppers, but that her guests sometimes had to be content with half an apple puff and a little wine and water, Blechinden and Clarke, with their appetite for ‘chine’, would have had to content themselves with the pleasures of the company rather than the table.

This final letter of Clarke’s is headed ‘London 8th May 1735’, eighteen months before the end of Clarke’s life as well as Blechinden’s – for both men died in October 1736. In it one can read some of the sadness of old age, though both, apparently, still had an ear for society gossip:

I give you many thanks for your kind letter, wch. brought me the best wishes that it is possible to receive from anybody, and they were the more wellcome, because I have great reason to believe they are sincere: I hope you will doe me the same justice when I assure you, that I wish you all manner of happiness in this world and that wch. is to come – You hear, I suppose that Lord Harcourt<sup>101</sup> is to marry a Lady wth. a fortune of about seventy thousand pounds: ’tis said that all things are agreed. You say nothing, in your Letter, of your own State of health, wch. your friends would have been glad to be informed off. I am allways Mr. Provost’s most obedient G.C.

#### THE LEGACY OF BLECHINDEN

In the last years of his life, Blechinden allowed the College to continue under the momentum which he, and Clarke, had given it. More and more he felt disinclined to stir from his rectory; and indeed Gower, his successor, in a letter to his mother complaining of the expense of assuming the Provostship, mentions the sorry state in which he found the furniture in the Lodgings which he took over from Blechinden: ‘The Goods which I have taken, which are very few and in very indifferent order amount to almost Forty Pounds, such as they are must serve till I can afford better. . .’<sup>102</sup> Gower also mentions ‘small arrears due from [the Provost] for serving his church’ – presumably this means

<sup>98</sup> Clarke attributes the verses to ‘Mr. Harcourt’, that is, to Blechinden’s patron who later became 1st Viscount Harcourt; and it seems likely that this must be correct, as C.H. Wilkinson concluded in his *Worcester College Library* (though the authorship was at one time ascribed to Mathew Prior under the title *The Female Phaethon*). The verses are quoted in Appendix B: the ‘Lady Jenny’ referred to in them is Kitty’s elder sister Jane, subsequently Countess of Essex.

<sup>99</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (C/2/3).

<sup>100</sup> D.N.B. (s.v. Douglas, Charles, 3rd Duke of Queensberry 1698–1778).

<sup>101</sup> Simon, 1st Earl Harcourt, grandson of Viscount Harcourt, Blechinden’s patron, married on 16th Oct. 1735, Rebecca, only daughter and heiress of Charles Samborne Le Bas, of Pipewell Abbey, Northants. (D.N.B.).

<sup>102</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/5).

that Blechinden had ceased to go to Nuneham Courtenay, and that his 'practical country sermons' were heard there no more.

There is a distinctly uncomplimentary reference to the Worcester of these years in the speech of the *Terrae Filius* 'as it was to have been spoken at the Publick Act in the Theatre in Oxford, 1733':

Worcester would deserve my Commendation, had it one good Quality to recommend it, but they are all so confounded Stupid, from the P[rovost] to the Kitchen Scullion, that it may be said of them, as it was in good King Alfred's days, There could not be found a Priest between the Humber and the Thames that could read the Service in Latin; There can't be found one in Worcester who can easily read it in English, much less in Latin. Your Servant, Gentlemen of Worcester; I think I have said a great deal in your Praise, since you follow the Example of the Primitive Fathers, who (before the Confusion of Languages at Babel) spake but one Tongue over the face of the whole Earth.<sup>103</sup>

This is perhaps a little severe on the ailing Provost and on the educational standard of the Fellows and undergraduates. A letter from a former pupil to the Provost, dated 30 September 1732, must have been set aside by Blechinden as worthy of retention. It is from Thomas Ringer, a scholar of the College and incumbent of Wymondley in Hertfordshire. He looks back with affection on both the College and the Provost, to whom he announces the birth of a son:

Honoured Sir,

I cannot forget the continued favours you shewed me when I lived at Worcester College, and others confer'd since; but to Remember you, as I do, in my Devotions is all the Gratitude I can boast of. The rest degenerates into mere Impertinence and makes me trouble you as I do now. And yet I verily believe you will still excuse me.

I hope, Sir, you enjoy better Health than when I was at Oxford last; my Wife joins with me in Duty to you. On Wednesday last it pleased God to give me a Son. . . .

Upon the Birth of the Child a Gentleman in the Neighbourhood, Prebendary of St. Paul's, sent me the following Epigram. I am exceedingly obliged to him for his friendly Disposition to me and Complaisant Wit, but dare not acquit his judgement in lavishing it on me. I hope however it will divert you a little. It is as follows

Gaudia felicem circumdant multa Parentem  
Per multos crescant, Apprecor, illa dies;  
Scilicet in cunis dormit Ringerulus; O si  
Iam possit facies Matris & esse Patris.

My humble service attends the Society and expresly your kinsman, & I am, Honoured Sir, Your most Obliged and Obedient Servant, Thomas Ringer.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps this letter shows an excessive lack of self-confidence on the writer's part after an education at Worcester College; but on the other hand it is surely not the sort of letter that would have been sent to a man lacking all sensibility, and 'good for nothing but drinking and jolly company'. Certainly Blechinden himself could write more than ordinarily well, in both English and Latin, and in his Will,<sup>105</sup> which bears every sign of being his own composition, he left a final example of his style:

I, Richard Blechinden, Provost of Worcester College in Oxford, do on this second day of January, 1732/3 make this my last will in these plain and few words - After what I shall owe is most honestly pay'd the poor things I shall leave behind me wtsoever or wheresoever they are, I

<sup>103</sup> *Terrae Filius*, 1733: G.A. Oxon 80 61(3); Gough Oxford 59(3), p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/20).

<sup>105</sup> Oxford University Archives, Chancellor's Court Wills, Vol. BE-BU, Hyp./B/22.

give them one and all entirely to my eldest sister Mary, except what may be otherwise disposed of in this paper, And if it shall please God she should dye before me, I give the same in as full manner between my two other sisters or the Survivors of them, and if it can be that they both should dye before me, I give the same to be divided equally between my youngest sister Wightwick's children.

I give to my brother Sam. ten pounds and to each of my two younger sisters the like sum, I give those who need it most in the parish of Bagpuiz five pounds and to the poor of Newnham the like sum. I give to the widow Clerke, mother to my late servant Richard Clerke, five pounds, I give to Ann Prickett my former servant forty shillings, And I give to William Langford and Mary Gold my present servants five pounds to each if they abide with me till my death. And now with his good leave, I do appoint my good friend Mr. Gower of this College to be my Executor, and in return for this last good office I give to him my poor parcell of books: and I beg he would deliver the box directed to Thomas Rowney Esq. as it is, unopened.

And I beg my dear friend Dr. Clark of All Souls Coll. that he would accept my poor little vessel of gold in token of an indelible gratitude and respect. And so I declare this to be my last and only will, written by my own hand and subsigned with my name and seal.

Later in the same year, his sister Mary having died, he added a codicil:

I, Richard Blechinden, desiring to make some addition to my Will, do make this codicil as part and parcel of it, by which I give to my brother Samuel Blechinden one hundred pounds more, with whatever rings I may have. And I give to my good friend and executor the Reverend Mr. Gower my best pair of silver candlesticks, my double guinea with ten guineas more. I give to my servants Will. Langford and Mary Gold to each five pounds more and to An Pricket three pounds more. This I write with my own hand and sign with my seal this sixteenth day of November – one thousand seven hundred and thirty three.

This will in fact contains a valuable clue to Blechinden's literary taste and scholastic attainments. It has always been known that his successor, Provost Gower, left an extensive and important library to the College, and it is a fair supposition that it would have included at least some of the 'poor parcell of books' inherited by him from Blechinden. Many hundreds of books in the College Library are inscribed 'W. Gower', and it seems that it was his habit to write his name on the title-page of practically every book he owned. Nearly two hundred of Gower's books are, however, also marked, either with the initials 'R.B.', or, in some cases, with the full signature 'Ri. Blechinden'. These must be the remnants of Blechinden's library. They include, as might be expected, a large number of religious works, sermons, etc.; a Hebrew grammar annotated by Blechinden in Latin; and copies of Latin and Greek classical texts and commentaries. There is also a large and perhaps important collection of the writings of the early Christian fathers, and a number of almanacs, in one of which<sup>106</sup> Blechinden wrote, against their birthdays, the names of some 20 of his contemporaries at St. John's. The end-papers of some of the books are annotated with domestic memoranda, such as the price of hay, corn, and ale; and an edition of the Bible contains, at the end, a list of fruit-trees, 'True Apricock, Black Damascene, etc.', perhaps relating to plans for his orchard at Kingston Bagpuize. Apart from this, there are numerous French and Italian books, many with notes showing that Blechinden had more than a little knowledge of these languages. For example, in one of the two copies of Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*, the words 'l'attenzione'<sup>107</sup> have been altered, in Blechinden's hand to 'la tenzone', which at least shows that he read the text carefully and knew Italian well enough to insert a

<sup>106</sup> Worcester Coll. Lib. (GG 7.19).

<sup>107</sup> G. Guarini, *Il Pastor Fido*, Act II, sc. 1.

correction. Incidentally, Handel's Opera *Il Pastor Fido*, based on Guarini's play, was first produced on 22 December 1712, at the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, and it is tempting to wonder whether Blechinden could possibly have attended one of the performances.

His literary interests were certainly catholic. There is further evidence of them in a copy of Swift's 1716 verses<sup>108</sup> in imitation of an Epistle of Horace,<sup>109</sup> which Blechinden made with his own hand, perhaps in the company of George Clarke – for they were found with the Clarke papers from Littlecote.<sup>110</sup> No one without a feeling for the English language would surely have troubled to make so careful a copy of Swift's polished and amusing verses, extending to 138 lines. Blechinden's views on the importance of books and the library may perhaps be guessed at from the oath written in his hand (and presumably of his own composition) for users of the Library:

I, A-B – do faithfully promise and swear that when I am in the Library I will behave my self there quietly and studiously, that I will take speciall care not to hurt the books in using 'em, that to the best of my memory I will allways place 'em in the same order I find 'em, and that I will ne're take any one there, without permission from the Librarian and subscribing my name to such book or books as I've leave to take out, that the College may know from whom to demand 'em.

So help me God.<sup>111</sup>

His own last wishes were simple and homespun, but not without elegance:

My desire is that I may be buried in as simple a manner as the meanest man in the parish. That my coffin be quite plain and uncovered. That none be asked to attend me, but if any are so kind, that cakes be given to 'em as the usage of this place is, and that six of my good neighbours who shall bear me to the grave have each of them 5s. for their pains.<sup>112</sup>

It seems all too probable that Blechinden met a sad and lonely end in his Rectory, where he died on 8 October 1736, at the age of 68; and doubtless his instructions were carried out. But so humble were his last wishes that no trace of his grave can be found in the little churchyard by the great house at Kingston Bagpuize, though the register records his burial there on 9 October. At Worcester College, the only memorial of Blechinden is the portrait which still looks down on his successors in the entrance hall of the Lodgings. This, and the fragmentary information gathered in these pages, are all we have to form a picture of the first Provost.

#### BLECHINDEN AND 18th-CENTURY OXFORD

To begin with the portrait: it was painted in 1728, when Blechinden had reached the age of 60, by Thomas Gibson, a leading portrait painter and follower of Kneller, and was given to the College by George Clarke. Blechinden is depicted as having a somewhat severe, unsmiling expression, with plump, pink, well-nourished cheeks, and a long distinguished 'Roman' nose. This is certainly not the face of a drunken good-for-nothing. Put into modern dress, and without the wig, the face could be that of someone

<sup>108</sup> Swift, *Poems*, ed. H. Williams, i, 170.

<sup>109</sup> Horace, *Epistles*, i, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Worcester Coll. Lib.: Clarke Papers from Littlecote, Fv 2,3.

<sup>111</sup> Worcester Coll. Lib. (G5.5).

<sup>112</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/1/17).

doing well in the City: perhaps a wealthy merchant banker. Soames Forsyth, or one of his prosperous relatives, might well have been so portrayed.

It is almost an accepted part of Oxford lore that the 18th century was a time of sloth, dissipation and idleness in the University, when, according to Gibbon, the inhabitants of at least one common-room spent their lives in supine enjoyment of the gifts of the founder. But in fact such a picture more accurately fits the late 17th century – the age of the Restoration, as depicted by Anthony Wood. In the 18th century scholarship was by no means dead at Oxford, but, at the uneasy outset of the Hanoverian dynasty, the University was in confusion and uncertainty because of its importance to both Church and State; and many prominent Oxonians simply did not know which way to turn. A.D. Godley has said, in his *Oxford in the 18th Century*, that the Civil War continued in Oxford almost as long as there was a Jacobite cause to fight for; Oxford was 'the Jacobite capital, the very Mecca of Toryism',<sup>113</sup> yet soon after Worcester College was founded, the Stuarts were in full retreat and the Tories out of office for a generation.

On the day that Queen Anne died, the most powerful Tories in the land – Ormonde, Bolingbroke, Atterbury, Bathurst, Wyndham and Harcourt – met in Harcourt's London house in Cavendish Square to decide their policy.<sup>114</sup> There was some talk of sending for James III from France, but, in the end, prudence prevailed. Harcourt was even recommended to write to Hanover, 'not merely as a single person, but in some measure as the head of an interest'. This policy of calculated accommodation with the new order earned Harcourt from Pope the description 'trimming Harcourt', and Blechinden, as Harcourt's placeman, no doubt had to do his share of trimming too. But it would be equally possible to maintain that he was a prudent and level-headed man who saw it as his duty to preserve the stability of the University and its newest College during particularly difficult times.

In 1715 there were serious disturbances in Oxford, which led, incidentally, to the passing of the Riot Act,<sup>115</sup> and, more directly, to the despatch of a detachment of dragoons to keep the city safe for the government and monarchy. Hearne wrote, on 28 May:

This being the Duke of Brunswick, commonly called George's birthday, some of the bells were jangled in Oxford by the care of the whiggish fanatical crew; but it was little taken notice of (unless by way of ridicule) by honest people who are for King James iii.<sup>116</sup>

In the same year, the Pretender invaded from Scotland.

Blechinden was, therefore, trying to set the College on its feet at a time of great national and local upheaval, and even perhaps personal danger. At the same time, as a Tory, he had to keep his head above water during the prolonged Whig supremacy. In all this he received solid support, both financial and personal, from George Clarke, whose decision to transfer the bulk of his wealth to Worcester, rather than to All Souls or his original college, Brasenose, would hardly have occurred if the Provost of Worcester had not been a life-long friend of compatible temperament and character.

On the practical level, Blechinden was clearly a careful College administrator – though perhaps not a skilled financier, for he was content to rely on others in this field.

<sup>113</sup> A.D. Godley, *Oxford in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), 212, 225.

<sup>114</sup> A.S. Foord, *His Majesty's Opposition 1714-1830*, 44-5.

<sup>115</sup> G.R. Ward, *Georgian Oxford*, 56.

<sup>116</sup> *Hearne's Collections* V (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xlii), 61.



And he by no means neglected his two flocks, at Nuneham Courtney and Kingston Bagpuize. He cultivated and made himself agreeable to important and influential people; but who can say that this is not a necessary occupation for a head of a House? On the other hand, there are signs that he was considerate and helpful towards those in trouble and the 'lower orders'; perhaps unusually so for his time. The simplicity of his last wishes is in character with this. To judge from the examples we have, his English style was distinguished, and his Latin at least adequate. His library shows scholarly inclinations, and the rough notes he made on the history of Gloucester College,<sup>117</sup> though hardly decipherable, demonstrate a real interest in the College's first beginnings and development. He might, perhaps, be open to some criticism for his acceptance of Church appointments in plurality, or for principles akin to those of the Vicar of Bray, but this should be judged by the standards of the age; nor are the indications of high living at all out of the ordinary.

It would be hard indeed if Blechinden were to be stigmatised for ever by the casual defamation of a gossip-writer such as Hearne. Although the evidence to set the record straight is scanty, there is enough for the claim to be made, with some confidence, that for its first Provost Worcester had a competent, though perhaps rather worldly, man; and one who in his 22 years of office successfully established an important new college. He should be remembered as the man who made it fit to rank, in his own words, with 'any the oldest and largest colleges in Oxford'.

#### APPENDIX A: TWO LETTERS OF RICHARD MEAD TO BLECHINDEN

##### I. Richard Mead to Richard Blechinden, 24 April 1718.

Bloomsbury Sq. April 24, 1718 –

Rev'd Sir

I rec'd a letter t'other day from Mr. Tho. Hearne, in which he tells me he believes it would be of some service to him in the prosecution now depending against him, if I would write to the Vice-Chancellor on his behalf. I can't deny anything to Mr. Hearne but not having the honour to be acquainted with Mr. Vice-Chancellor dare not trouble him with a Letter and therefore choose rather to presume upon your goodself and make my application to him by your means; I beg of you, Sir, if you think it proper to make intercession with him in my name in this poor Man's favour, and most humbly represent to him that tho' he has been indiscreet yet I hope he has not deserved to be quite undone. My Bros. and I have encouraged Mr. Hearne for his uphill labours, and I am persuaded you are of the same mind that he ought not to be lost to the publick. My Lord Harcourt has been so kind as to apply strenuously in this cause, and I am sure a great many hearty friends to the University do most earnestly wish to see Mr. Hearne out of his troubles. I am very sensible that I have no merit of my own to plead; all that I can say is that I have most heartily on all occasions done my utmost to serve the young Gentlemen of our profession who came from the University hither. I shall always take pleasure to do so and it will be the greatest Incouragement in the world to me if the Vice-Chancellor who has an established character for goodness will give me leave to make this application and if you will forgive this trouble from – Revd. Sir, Yr. most obliged most humble Servant – Richard Mead.

##### II. Richard Mead to Richard Blechinden, 8 May 1718

Bloomsbury, May 8, 1718: Revd. Sir – I return you most hearty thanks for executing the trouble I gave you on Mr. Hearne's account, and for your favour to him. I am extremely obliged

<sup>117</sup> Worcester Coll. Archives (B1/2/1).



to Mr. Vice-Chancellor for the respect he has been pleased to express to me, and beg you will be so kind to make my 'most humble acknowledgments to him for it. I do assure you, Sir, that as I shall always be glad to serve the University as farr as I am capable, so I think I have as much regard to the Honour of that as to my friendship to Mr. Hearne, in the concern I take in this affair. However it ends, his friends I hope will take care that he shall not be lost to the publick, and I could wish Oxford might always have the benefit of his usefull labours. I agree with you, Sir, that the matter is now gone so farr that it cannot easily be accommodated; he meant, as I understand, to make a declaration that he intended no affront to any Member of the University, and that if he had sayd anything incautiously he was sorry for it, and submitted to the Censure of the Court; how farr such a general submission can avail I am not a judge; as to the Articles, what you observe must be true, that a censure can't be either inflicted or remitted till they are either proved or owned; but I have trespassed too much upon your goodness, which I shall ever think it an honour to express my sense of, and to be, with the utmost respect, Revd. Sir - Yr. most obedient and most humble Servt. - R. Mead.

# APPENDIX B: VERSES UPON LADY KITTY HYDE'S FIRST APPEARANCE AT THE PLAY

(copied by George Clarke into his commonplace book)<sup>118</sup>

Thus Kitty beautiful and young  
And wild as colt untam'd  
Bespake the fair from whom she sprung  
With little rage inflam'd.

Inflam'd with rage at sad restraint  
Which wise Mama ordains  
And sorely griev'd to play the Saint  
While humbler beauty reigns.

'Must I thumb holy things, confin'd  
With Abigails forsaken?  
Kitty's for something else design'd  
Or I am much mistaken.

Must Lady Jenny frisk about  
In visits with her Cousens?  
At masques and balls make such a route  
And bring home hearts of dozens?

What has she better, pray, than I?  
What hidden charms to boast?  
That all mankind for her should dye  
Whilst I am scarce a Toast.

Dearest Mamma, for once let mee  
Unchained my fortune try;  
I'll have my Earle as well as shee  
Or know the reason why;

I'll soon with Jenny's pride quit score,  
Make all her lovers fall.  
They'll grieve I was not loose before,  
Shee, I was loos'd at all.'

<sup>118</sup> Worcester Coll. Lib.: Clarke papers from Littlecote.

The mother's fondness soon gave way,  
 Kitty, at heart's desire,  
 Obtained her chariot for a day,  
 And sett the World on fire.

Mr. Harcourt

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