

# The Great Staircase Tower at Christ Church

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## SUMMARY

*The Christ Church Hall staircase, one of Oxford's finest pieces of architecture, was built in four stages over a period of 350 years. Cardinal Wolsey fell from power before the tower above it was completed, and his intentions for its use are uncertain. The Victorians, who commissioned G.F. Bodley to build the tower over the staircase, were convinced the Founder had intended it as a bell-tower. The base and fenestration of the building are Wolsey's; the beautiful fan-vaulting, the work of William Smith, was added c.1638; and the layout of the staircase was altered by James Wyatt in 1801 at the same time as he was building the great staircase at Fonthill.*

When Cardinal Wolsey fell from power in October 1529, three sides of his magnificent new Oxford College were already almost complete with the exception of the S.E. corner where 'the new steeple' (as his workmen called the tower), which was at once to provide covered access to the old cloisters and a handsome entrance to the Hall, was unhappily far from finished. Christ Church has not the advantage of King's in Cambridge where specific instructions were left in the Founder's will for the completion of his College. What would have been the final form of Wolsey's 'Cardinal College' with its superb chapel on the N. range of the quadrangle, and what the final disposal of the surviving monastic buildings, has led to much speculation. The tower, which remained as an unroofed shell for over a hundred years, was clearly thought by Wolsey to be an essential part of the College, as just before his disgrace the masons were paid overtime to try and complete it before the winter.<sup>1</sup>

The entrance arches and fenestration were in place, but without, as yet, any internal structure within the tower. The design of the windows, shorter by one light on the S. side, suggests that a stone staircase might have been built against this wall mounting to a landing and a second short flight of steps, with a gallery leading through the Tudor entrance door to the large ante-Hall which, at Christ Church, took the place of the usual screens passage. New College and Magdalen both have upstairs halls which are reached by a stairway leading straight up from the quadrangles in a very functional way. King's College and Eton were planned with stair-turrets leading to upstairs halls, libraries and chambers; Eton having seven such turrets or towers in the main quadrant. The Cardinal would certainly not have intended the whole space to be given up to the grand ceremonial approach to Christ Church Hall that Wyatt finally made. It is possible that Wolsey, following earlier precedents in Oxford and Cambridge, intended the upper

<sup>1</sup> *Collectanea Curiosa*, ed. J. Gutch, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1781), 207. For full transcripts of the accounts cf. above, pp. 206-7.

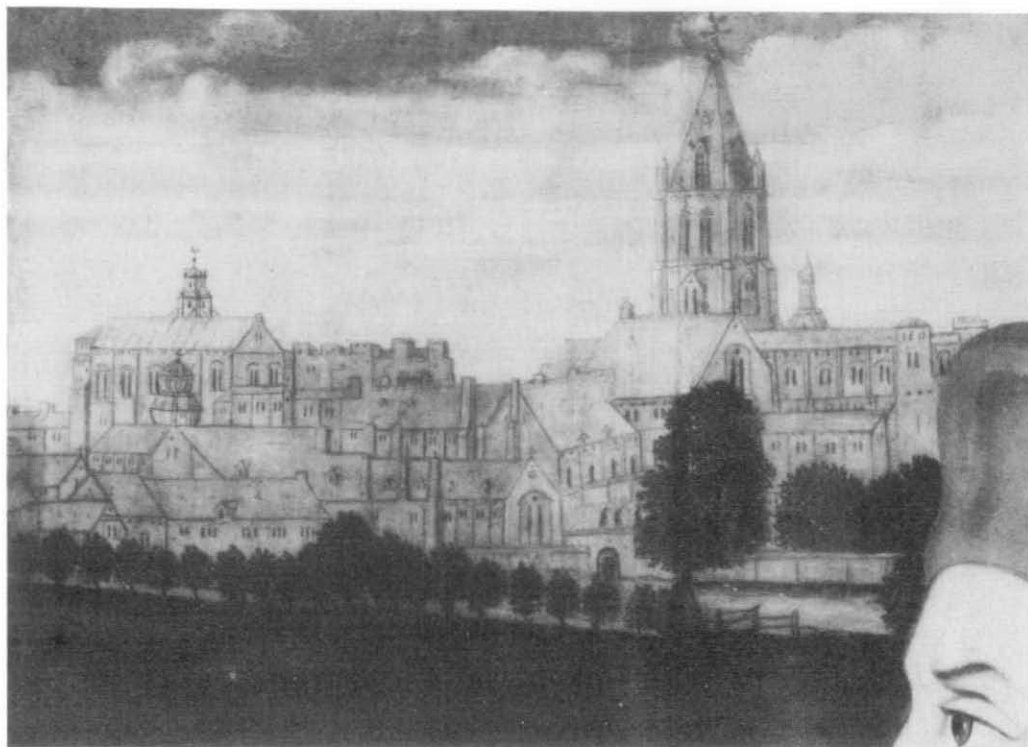


Fig. 87. Enlarged detail from portrait of Cardinal Wolsey by Sampson Strong (c.1610) showing his college in the background. The staircase tower, seen level with the hall, may have been reduced at this time.

floors of the tower for his muniment room and audit chamber.<sup>2</sup> The turret stair in the S.E. corner of the tower would have provided entirely private access.

After the Cardinal's disgrace, and in spite of his piteous entreaties, his 'poor college in Oxford' went through a critical period. Wolsey had intended to provide a foundation of 167 persons, but only the Dean and a small number of the proposed Canons, the necessary staff of the Priory church then being used as a temporary chapel, were, as yet, in residence. Nevertheless, these persons and the servants to support them had to be provided for, and this provision was grudgingly afforded by the King who had it in mind at first to destroy the Cardinal's college in its entirety. From this course he was dissuaded, and after more than two years of financial anxiety and stringency, Henry consented to reprieve the college and to refound it under the title of 'King Henry VIII's College' with limited funds and no provision for undergraduates. So matters continued until 1545, when the college was again surrendered; and in 1546 it was refounded on a smaller scale, a little over half the number intended by Wolsey. St. Frideswide's having been made a cathedral when the See was moved from Osney to Oxford in 1545, the new foundation became both a cathedral chapter and an academic college.

<sup>2</sup> The earlier muniment and treasury towers generally had stone floors to guard against fire. The unusual size of the staircase tower would have made this difficult unless internal supporting walls were provided. This was the solution arrived at in 1646-8 when the black and white paved floor illustrated by Rowlandson was inserted.

The new Christ Church was lavishly endowed by the King, and could expect a yearly grant of £2,200 with an immediate grant towards necessary building repairs; but all the money was earmarked for the Dean and canons and for maintaining the cathedral. There was no surplus for new building, which largely accounts for the lack of major building activity during the rest of the century.<sup>3</sup> The two main projects undertaken were the extension of the college's boundary wall (paid for by Dr. Tresham) and, in 1578-82, the substitution in stone of the wooden wall erected by Wolsey's masons at the W. end of the truncated Priory church, and the construction of the fine W. window shown in Loggan's engraving.<sup>4</sup> The most noticeable gap in the college's requirements was a proper staircase to the upstairs Hall, the only approach being the stone staircase which led from the kitchens to the ante-Hall, for this had already been constructed by Wolsey's masons. Since funds were perpetually low, no attempt was made to remedy this utilitarian but adequate state of affairs.

It must have been these kitchen stairs that gave way in 1566 under the press of the crowd surging up to see Queen Elizabeth and the court watching plays in the Hall. The Queen sent her surgeon and the Vice-Chancellor to cope with the accident, in which three people were crushed to death while the play went on. The Queen herself did not, of course, go up the back stairs from the kitchen: special arrangements had been made for her to get up into the Hall. The College, according to Wolsey's statutes, had been designed for the reception of the monarch and his eldest son and entourage, and it was first used in this way for Elizabeth's visit in 1566. The whole of the E. range was intended as royal apartments and there were no canons' lodgings there until the 17th century. The royal apartments consisted of several separate chambers which could be thrown together by opening folding doors 'after the manner of Palaces'.<sup>5</sup> These rooms on the upper storey probably opened onto a long gallery on the western side, terminating on the S. by the wall of the staircase tower.

It is not clear whether any direct connection was intended with the Hall from the royal apartments, which were probably planned to be entirely self-contained with their own kitchen, reception chambers and eating rooms. Entertaining the monarch with plays in the Hall would not have been envisaged by Wolsey. This became an essential part of later royal visitations, the blueprint for which was made in Cambridge in 1564 when arrangements for orations, disputations and college plays were laid down for the Queen. The play chosen for Queen Elizabeth by Christ Church was Palamon and Arcyte, with magnificent stage scenery and a royal box on the stage.

The accounts of 1566 show how the college solved the problem of getting the Queen from her upstairs apartments into the Hall when there was no staircase. An opening (which is still visible) was made in the wall at the end of the eastern range and several carpenters worked for eight days to erect an aerial walkway to the Hall, similar to the carpenters' work galleries so popular in Tudor gardens. Women were paid for decorating the wooden supports with garlands and ivy.<sup>6</sup> There was no mention of how the Queen got into the Hall on her return visit in 1592 (beyond the Vice-Chancellor making provision that nobody else should kill themselves on the public stairs), so that

<sup>3</sup> Jane E.A. Dawson, 'The Foundation of Christ Church, Oxford and Trinity College, Cambridge in 1546', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, lvii (1984), 208, and *History of Oxford University*, ed. James McConica, (1986) iii, Chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup> Christ Church Archives, Disbursement Books, 4 Qr 1581-82: xii.b.24f and 1 Qr 1582-83: xii.b.25 f 15v, under Reparations intrinsically.

<sup>5</sup> C. Plummer, *Elizabethan Oxford* (O.H.S. viii, 1887), 123, 177.

<sup>6</sup> W.G. Hiscock, *A Christ Church Miscellany* (1946), 167.

the gallery, which is described as narrow and of fine workmanship, might have been more permanent than the usual external carpenters' gallery structure<sup>7</sup> and have been left in position for the next grand occasion. When the Dean moved into the Deanery in the extended N. end of the E. range, and a canon into the S. end, there must have been considerable alterations in the former royal apartments and the tower door was therefore probably blocked early in the 17th century. Thomas Ravis, who was Dean from 1596–1605, was almost certainly responsible for the new Deanery, and he also tried to make improvements to the hall access by putting up a sloping roof or 'pentie' to cover the entrance and a few years later, in 1609, new lead was laid 'upon two arches over the hall stairs', presumably over this sloping roof over the back stairs entrance to the hall.<sup>8</sup>

It was Brian Duppa, however, who became Dean in 1629, who was to make the real improvements to the Hall staircase. A one-time Fellow of All Souls, the new Dean stood well with Laud and was greatly favoured in royal circles. When Laud became Chancellor of Oxford he was much concerned by the slovenly and neglected condition of many of the chapels, and vigorous efforts were made by the colleges to rectify this abuse. George Garrod, visiting Oxford in 1636, remarked upon the success with which Laud's wishes were carried out.<sup>9</sup> In Christ Church the new Dean and his canons were faced with a peculiarly difficult situation. The cathedral was cold, draughty and dilapidated, with the pavement so uneven that worshippers tripped on the stone. For help Duppa and his enthusiastic Treasurer, Samuel Fell, turned to Inigo Jones's master-mason, Nicholas Stone, whose influence and popularity were then strong in Oxford and the neighbourhood. Stone employed his own skilled craftsmen and some of the regular college workforce to repair the cathedral and make it more suitable for a college chapel. Victorian critics derided as monstrosities the great gates which he devised to shut off the draughty W. end of the cathedral from the Dean and Canons at their daily services, but his efforts brought about a considerable improvement, according to the fashion of the times.<sup>10</sup>

After the work in the cathedral Duppa and Fell set about making improvements in accommodation by undertaking the necessary completion of Peckwater Quadrangle and the virtual rebuilding of the lodgings in Canterbury Quadrangle. The Great Quadrangle, however, still lay desolate, almost as Wolsey's masons had left it, with piles of stones and rubble littering the ground; cattle straying in from the unfenced northern end were often to be seen grazing in what the Cardinal had planned as the grandest show-place in Oxford. The festivities celebrating King Charles's visit in 1636 were conducted without any improvement in the state of the Great Quadrangle or access to the Hall, where he was entertained with the usual plays. This was a shameful contrast to what the King had seen at St. John's where the impressive Canterbury Quadrangle had just been completed by Laud's munificence.

At that time Christ Church, led by the poet William Cartwright, was called 'a nest of singing birds', and it is from these men that we learn much of the hopes and frustrations of the college during Duppa's term of office.<sup>11</sup> They were of course aware that improvements to College buildings, unlike those of the cathedral, could only be paid for by benefactions. The work in Peckwater and Canterbury quadrangles had been

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 207.

<sup>9</sup> A.J. Taylor, 'The Royal Visit of Oxford in 1636', *Oxoniensia*, i (1936), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Christ Church Archives, Disbursements 1631–2 (in Receipt book 1631); Walpole Society Publications, vii, 92; A. Wood, *History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, (ed. Gutch), iii, 462.

<sup>11</sup> R.C. Goffin, *Life and Poems by William Cartwright 1611–1643* (1918).

paid for entirely by members of the college, but to provide further funds for the Great Quadrangle the poet feared 'a god must needs be sent'. It was bad luck that the nation had been subscribing for the restoration of St. Paul's and in 1634 Cartwright appealed, in *The Imperfections of Christ Church*,<sup>12</sup> for help for the College:

Two sacred Things were thought (by judging souls)  
Beyond the Kingdoms Pow'r, Christchurch and Pauls,  
Till, by a light from heaven shewn, the one  
Did gain his second Renovation.  
And some good Star ere long, we do not fear,  
Will guide the Wise to offer some gifts here . . .  
And if no succour come the Time's not far  
When Twill be thought no College, but a Quar.

The College got its succour in the form of the young Paul Bayning, 2nd Viscount Sudbury, the grandson of a prosperous ship owner, who was one of the founders of the East India Company. When he was 13 his father died possessed of a very large real estate and personal estate of £153,000. Paul was placed under the guardianship of his maternal grandfather, the Earl of Dorset, whose Chaplain Duppa had once been and through whose offices he had been appointed Dean of Christ Church. Paul Bayning was only at Christ Church from 1632-3, but this was the time when Duppa and the College Treasurer, Samuel Fell, were launching the appeal for the restoration programme. In 1638 a list of Benefactors was issued (now lost); Bayning's name would certainly have figured on it, as according to the eulogies<sup>13</sup> written at his death by the Christ Church poets he had already given rich gifts to the library and a considerable sum to the rebuilding of Canterbury and Peckwater quadrangles. Bayning died in 1638 after a journey abroad and, according to Canon Strode, there had already been 'rich legacies in foreign lands assigned'. Another Christ Church poet, Thomas Norgate, applauded his desire to complete Wolsey's intended buildings in his dying legacies as well as in his lifetime:

For though no Founder of the place, yet must  
We say, thou rays'dst our Buildings out o' the Dust.  
Thou didst bequeath 'em their Nativitie;  
And they doe Glory their New-Birth from Thee.

The new birth would have been the completion of Wolsey's Great Quadrangle, including the N. range, and the cloisters of which elements already existed. Of this plan the staircase tower would form an integral part, being the continuation of the passageway from the quadrangle to the cathedral, and, because the need for an adequate staircase to the Hall was so pressing, it was natural that the work should start here. Cartwright had spoken of 'towers that thunder do provoke', and it was the roofless E. tower that Wood recalled as a child living in Merton Street. A noble fan vault was accordingly erected above the new staircase which was to be a climax for the intended vaulted cloister.

There is some ambiguity about the date at which this fan vault was actually built. Anthony Wood (*History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, p. 456) says 'that fair porch

<sup>12</sup> MS text, B.L. MS Add. 22602, f.26 b; Bodl. MS Rawl 696, select passages.

<sup>13</sup> A pamphlet, published in 1638, entitled *Death repeald by a thankful memorial sent from Christ Church in Oxford celebrating Paule, 1st lord viscount Bayning*.

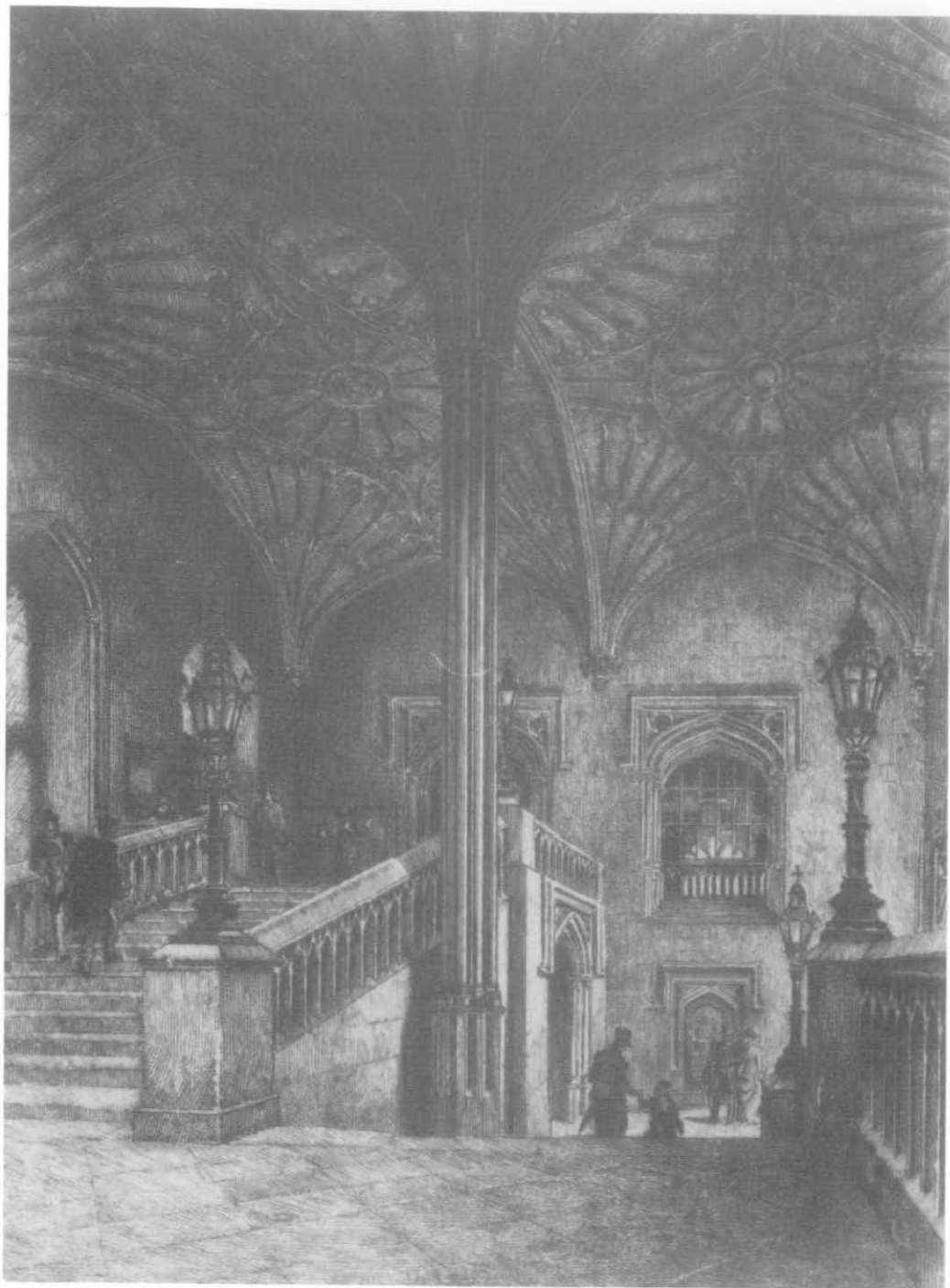


Fig. 88. William Smith's fan-vault of c.1638. Engraving by T. Malton shortly after Wyatt's alterations to the staircase.



or avenue leading up to it [i.e. the Hall] all most curiously vaulted and supported by one pillar only was built about the year 1630'. Elsewhere (*City of Oxford*, i, p. 192) Wood later states that 'Dr Fell built the arch to depend as it is now', and again 'then for the place where we go up into the Hall which was open on the top and a confused way of building and scarcely any steps, he [Fell] made it with the help of one Smith an artificer of London, who made the arch to depend as it is now'. Other writers have adopted this as a statement that the arch was built when Fell became Dean and have dated it as c.1640.

The confusion probably arose because Wood observed Fell's signature in the accounts and assumed that he was signing as Dean, which he became in 1638, rather than as Treasurer, which he had been since 1611. Fell was certainly behind all the building work, and as early as 1634 the Provost of Queen's highly commended him for his skill and contrivance in building, adding that the Dean of Christ Church would not have known how to proceed but for him.<sup>14</sup> George Garrod makes no mention of a new staircase in Christ Church when he visited Oxford in 1636, and the most likely date for the Staircase is 1636–1638.<sup>15</sup> Duppa was Chancellor of Salisbury and very familiar with the graceful central pillar of the chapter-house, which may have suggested to him the 'exquisite arch' supporting the fan-vaulted ceiling. He was also at that time tutor to the young Prince of Wales, and the presence of the Prince of Wales's feathers on the carving is another indication of his connection with the work.

In 1637 Nicholas Stone was once more concerned with Oxford, for he is credited with the design of St. Mary's porch being erected in that year. His advice was doubtless sought by Christ Church on the choice of a mason to carry out their great new project. Wood mentions 'one Smith' as the builder of the fan vault, probably quoting a reference in the Christ Church account books to 'Smith, an artificer of London'. This information is meagre, but there are good reasons for identifying the artificer as William Smith, who was Warden of the Masons' Company in 1640, an office held by Stone himself in 1633 and 1634.<sup>16</sup> Since both men were active on the livery of their guild and must have known each other well, both as people and as craftsmen, it is likely that Stone recommended William Smith to the College, judging him capable of carrying out their work.<sup>17</sup>

There is another very good reason why Christ Church would have made this choice. The Baynings' London home and place of business was in the parish of St. Olave's Hart Street, and in this church they were married, buried and had their children baptised. To this church William Smith also belonged and was commemorated by a tablet on the wall of the S. transept, which recorded his death in 1646 and his standing as a citizen and freemason of London.<sup>18</sup> The Smith tablet was destroyed in the Blitz but the prominent Bayning monument survives. When Laud was Bishop of London, and urging the rehabilitation of London churches, St. Olave's was restored in 1632, and there may have been the same benefactor-craftsman relationship between Bayning and Smith as at Christ Church. To any member of the Bayning family dealing with Paul's last wishes

<sup>14</sup> *The Diary of Thomas Crosfield*, ed. F.S. Boas (1935), 13 Dec. 1634.

<sup>15</sup> Hiscock op.cit. note 6, 201, n.3, says that Wood stated (*Hist. & Ant.* ii, 447) that Fell's work began about the year 1638; but the College accounts (missing until 1640) show that work on the canons' houses began only in 1641. This seems to show that the first part of the building programme was the work on the tower. Payments recorded in the accounts would only be made after the work was finished.

<sup>16</sup> Masons' Co., Warden's Account Book 1620–1706 (MS 5303/1).

<sup>17</sup> Other Smiths have been suggested, but Robert Smith who worked at St. John's died in 1635, and the two John Smiths who worked respectively at Cambridge and on the King's works were pre-eminently carvers and not masons capable of carrying out the Ch. Ch. work.

<sup>18</sup> William Smith married in 1612. His first son William was born in 1619 and his second son Robert in 1620 (*Harlean Soc. Publications: Register Section*, xlvii).

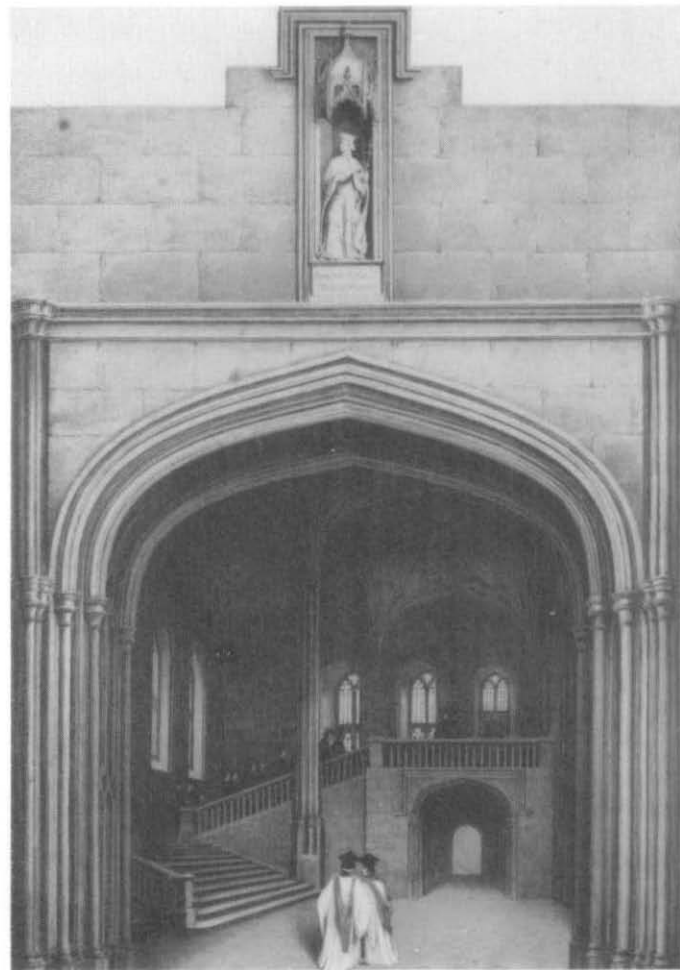
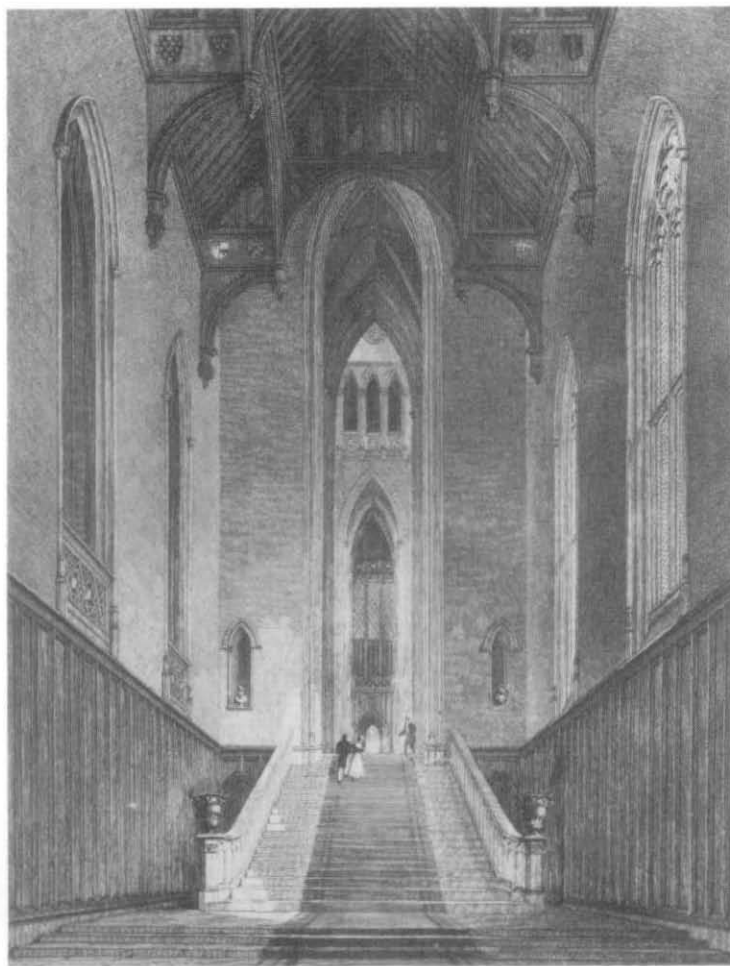


Fig. 89. *Left:* Interior of the Great Western Hall from John Rutter, *An Illustrated History and Description of Fonthill Abbey* (1823). *Right:* The Christ Church Great Staircase and the succession of gothic arches depicted by C.L. Rundt, painter to the King of Prussia, in his *Views of the Most Picturesque Colleges in the University of Oxford* (1845).



concerning his College, the choice of a mason with such close connections with their church would surely recommend itself. Paul Bayning's young widow married, only a year after his death, the 5th Earl of Pembroke, whose family had both preceded and succeeded Laud as Chancellors of Oxford.

The erection of a large stone vault as late as 1638 has often been regarded as anachronistic: though other, smaller, stone vaults were being built in college gateways and over the porch at St Mary's at this time, London taste had moved towards the use of plaster rather than stone, and it was a plaster vault which was chosen for the nearly contemporary roof of the Convocation House. Duppa, however, was carrying out Wolsey's plans and would, therefore have to use stone.<sup>19</sup> Recently the walls of the Staircase have been cleaned revealing some interesting marks, which the college mason, Mr. Tony Walker, felt were at just the right height to indicate the platform put up by Smith to work on the fan vault.

When Christ Church became King Charles I's headquarters in the Civil War Parliament met in the Hall and the King received foreign ambassadors there. With the elegant staircase approach now completed, Wolsey's vision of a College which 'excelled not only all colleges of students but also palaces of princes' was beginning to take shape. No further work was undertaken in the Commonwealth, however; the cloister was abandoned, and the timber acquired for the new canonries to complete the N. range of the quadrangle was used for firewood by the Puritans. No written description of the staircase built underneath Smith's fan vault has survived, but it is later illustrated in one of Rowlandson's drawings.<sup>20</sup> This shows a typical wooden staircase of the period rising to a low first-floor level where a new floor paved with the then fashionable black-and-white paving-stones had been constructed to cover the greater part of the surface of the tower, with the exception, as we learn from Williams's plan of 1733, of the passageway into the cloister.<sup>21</sup> To accommodate this floor, three of the windows on the E. face of the tower had been shortened by one light. In 1654 Evelyn described an 'ample hall as one goes up the stairs', and Rowlandson shows it being used as a private dining room.

The staircase was transformed by James Wyatt at the beginning of the 19th century. Malton's print showing the completed work (Fig. 88) is dated February 1802 and it is most likely that the major part of the renovation was undertaken in the Long Vacation of 1801. Wyatt had already worked on Canterbury Quadrangle, fitting out the Old Library rooms, at the Deanery and in the Hall itself before he received the Staircase commission. His son Benjamin was up at Christ Church in 1795, giving him every opportunity to study the College architecture in detail. He was also working on William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey, his most daringly picturesque Gothic fantasy, at the same time. His Christ Church work was merely Gothic fancy-dress by comparison, but the two commissions inspired each other. From Christ Church Wyatt took the hammerbeam roof and fan vaulting to heart in his designs for Fonthill (Fig. 89, left). At both places, in his customary way, he revelled in opening vistas. At Christ Church the wainscoting at the W. end of the Hall<sup>22</sup> had been removed to achieve this and, as seen from Tom Quadrangle, there is a succession of gothic arches leading down to the darkness of the lower kitchen stairway (Fig. 89, right). The entrance to the Hall was changed, the 'ample room' as seen on Rowlandson was sacrificed in order to give the grand sweep up the

<sup>19</sup> The detail of the fan vault was criticized in the *Archaeological Journal*, lxxviii (1911), 18, but to support this large span on a single pillar is surely something of a *tour de force*.

<sup>20</sup> *Rowlandson's Oxford* by Gibbs (Arthur Hamilton, 1911): Dr Syntax dines in Christ Church.

<sup>21</sup> William Williams, *Oxonia Depicta* (1735-7).

<sup>22</sup> Ch. Ch. MS Estates, 144, 27.

stairs, and the arches on the windows were raised to give a feeling of additional height as in the Fonthill great staircase.

Wyatt used Taynton stone, and the places where the 17th-century stairs were filled in are clearly visible as being more yellowish than the rest of the Headington stone. Pugin and other Goths greatly admired Wyatt's work on the Hall staircase, which they felt was the right complement to William Smith's survival Gothic, hailing it as a great challenge to work under the last spontaneous manifestation of its art. The staircase tower now combines original Wolsey Gothic (the marks of the masons he used at Whitehall can still be seen on the external spiral staircase),<sup>23</sup> Smith's Laudian Gothic, Wyatt's picturesque Gothic and Bodley's Victorian Gothic. When Gilbert Scott surveyed the cathedral in 1869 and found that the bells were too heavy for the spire he recommended that they should be removed to a new tower above the staircase.<sup>24</sup> The College felt that they were actually piously carrying out the Founder's intentions when Bodley built 'Wolsey's belfry', but it is clear now that Dean Liddell had not even as much information about Wolsey's overall plans as we now have.<sup>25</sup> Lewis Carroll was probably nearer the truth when, in *The Vision of the Three T's*, the Founder returned to view the Victorian restoration of his College and collapsed moaning into Mercury, his betasselled cardinal's hat left floating on the water.

<sup>23</sup> R.H.C. Davis, 'Mason's Marks', *O.A. & H.S. Reports* No. 84 (1938), 83.

<sup>24</sup> Ch. Ch. Archives. MS Estates 143, 231: Private Report of George Gilbert Scott on the Cathedral of Christ Church, Oxford.

<sup>25</sup> The term tower (*turris*) and steeple are interchangeable in the Ch. Ch. building accounts, but the Victorians must have taken the reference to the 'new steeple' (i.e. the Staircase tower) as indicating a belfry. The most likely place for Wolsey's bell-tower would have been beside his new chapel as had been proposed for King's College, Cambridge. [But cf. Martin Biddle's different conclusions above, pp. 205-10.]