

# Wolsey's Bell-Tower

By MARTIN BIDDLE

## SUMMARY

*Wolsey made preparations to remove the bells of St. Frideswide's to a temporary bell-frame in the cloister and to demolish the steeple, but his fall in 1529 halted the works. The steeple was not demolished and there is no evidence that the bells were moved. The temporary (perhaps abortive) bell-frame was erected beside Wolsey's new and still incomplete tower at the E. end of the hall. Intended to be the great bell-tower of Cardinal College, as the Victorians always believed, the construction of this tower at the S.E. angle of the quad would have brought all the principal elements of Wolsey's new college (except the kitchen) into a single integrated complex.*

The primary evidence for the progress of the works by which Wolsey undertook the construction of Cardinal College between 1525 and his fall in 1529 is contained in a series of building accounts now preserved in Oxford and London. In one form or another these accounts cover the whole period of building, from 16 January 1525 to 24 October 1529, with the exception of some part of 1528.<sup>1</sup> The accounts are supplemented by a number of letters and other documents giving instructions, making grants of materials, or describing the progress of the works.<sup>2</sup>

It is only in the last period of the accounts, from 1 November 1528 to 24 October 1529, that items occur which seem to be directly relevant to the fate of the bells of St. Frideswide's. The accounts for this period survive in two versions. The first is a copy made by Twyne 'Out of the Journall or booke of the Expences of all the buildinges of Christchurch Coll: Oxon: which I had of Mr Pore of Blechinton'.<sup>3</sup> Hearne copied Twyne,<sup>4</sup> Gutch printed Hearne,<sup>5</sup> and *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII* reprinted extracts from Gutch.<sup>6</sup> None of them reproduced the totals of the fortnightly 'pays' copied by Twyne.<sup>7</sup> But it is these totals which show that the 'booke' seen by Twyne covered the

<sup>1</sup> The accounts formed the basis of Mr. Michael MacLagan's valuable discussion of the building of the college in *V.C.H. Oxon.* iii, 228-31. The only original account still in Oxford (Corpus Christi College, MS.565) was examined in detail by J.G. Milne and John H. Harvey, 'The Building of Cardinal College, Oxford', *Oxonienis*, viii/ix (1943-4), 137-53. See also John H. Harvey, 'The Building Works and Architects of Cardinal Wolsey', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd ser. viii (1943), 50-9, esp. pp. 53-5, 58-9. The Cardinal College accounts still require a detailed analysis, which I hope to publish in due course.

<sup>2</sup> See *Letters and Papers Henry VIII* 4.i, No. 1499 (26); 4.ii, Nos. 2734, 3334, 4074, 4135; 4.iii, No. 5951; 5, Nos. 185, 577. The full texts of some of these and of other relevant documents are given in W. Douglas Caröe, 'Tom Tower', *Christ Church, Oxford* (1923), 95-106 (Appendix A); see also Harvey, 'Building Works', 58-9.

<sup>3</sup> Bodl. MS. Twyne 21, pp. 350-7.

<sup>4</sup> Bodl. MS. Tanner 338, ff. 313-14 (formerly pp. 422-4).

<sup>5</sup> John Gutch, *Collectanea Curiosa* (2 vols., Oxford, 1781), i, pp. vii, 204-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters and Papers Henry VIII*, 4.iii, No. 6748 (8).

<sup>7</sup> Bodl. MS. Twyne 21, p. 354.

same period as the second version of the accounts for this period now preserved in the Public Record Office.<sup>8</sup>

Four entries in the accounts for this final period of the works, 1528–9, require detailed scrutiny.

- i. 'Item to James Flemminge, etc. for makinge scaffolds for the takinge downe of the old stepull 3s. 4d.'<sup>9</sup>
- ii. 'Item for 2 crowes for the carpenters to take downe the bells with, ponderinge 17 lb. – 2s. 1½d.'<sup>10</sup>

These entries show that the 'old stepull' was scaffolded prior to its intended demolition and that as part of these preparations the carpenters were provided with two specially-made crowbars, presumably so as to dismantle the wooden bell-frame in order 'to take downe the bells'. Most recent commentators have assumed, doubtless correctly, that these entries refer to Wolsey's intention to take down the steeple of the Priory church. Since the steeple survives, the scaffolds, although already prepared as the payment shows, can never have been used, their purpose thwarted by Wolsey's fall in October 1529. The bells were perhaps taken down, but there is no direct evidence to this effect, and it is not impossible that they remained undisturbed in the old steeple until 1545. It has usually been assumed that they were removed, partly to explain the amount of carpenter's work required in 1545 to prepare the steeple to receive the bells of Oseney, including Tom,<sup>11</sup> partly to explain the buttressed foundation in the cloister (above, pp. 67–72) as a temporary belfry intended to take the bells from the steeple. These arguments are to some extent circular. The work undertaken in 1545 may have been needed simply to adapt or rebuild the bell-frame in the steeple to accommodate the Oseney bells alongside some or all of the bells of St. Frideswide's. And the 'temporary belfry', if such it was, may have been as abortive as the scaffolds of the steeple.

- iii. 'Item to Will: Hobbs and Rich: Cooper for bringinge in of the bell frame in their drinkinge time iid.'<sup>12</sup>

This entry shows that a bell-frame, not stated to be new but probably so, was brought in, i.e. presumably onto the site, under some press of urgency during the time of this account. 'In their drinking time' is a common phrase in Tudor building accounts. Such overtime was usually rewarded by an extra payment, which is how the 2d. should be regarded here. Another example in these accounts is the 12d. paid to the masons working on the tower at the E. end of the hall, 'in rewarde for their diligence in applienge of their labour . . . on Saturday after their houre accustomed to leave worke'.<sup>13</sup> Entry iii should probably be taken at face-value as referring to a new bell-frame, cut and fitted ('framed') elsewhere, taken down, and brought onto the site for erection in its intended place. It does not seem possible that it can refer to the movement of the bell-frame from the old steeple.

<sup>8</sup> P.R.O., SP1/55, pp. 221–38; abstracted in *Letters and Papers Henry VIII*, 4.iii, No. 6023. This sequence of copying and the relationship of the MS. copied by Twyne to that in the P.R.O. was established by Michael MacLagan, *V.C.H. Oxon.* iii, 230, note 25.

<sup>9</sup> Bodl. MS. Twyne 21, p. 351.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 352.

<sup>11</sup> Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. b.16, *passim*; cf. *V.C.H. Oxon.* iii, 231.

<sup>12</sup> Bodl. MS. Twyne 21, p. 351.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 353.

- iv. 'Paide to Tho: Hewister for carriage of earth and rubbell from the fayre gate and the newe stepull . . . clvi loads at a peny the load, by computation 13s.'<sup>14</sup>

This entry provides a number of problems. The 'fayre gate' is presumably Tom Gate, but since 'the great tower over the gate' was already by December 1526 'as high erect' as the completed lodgings to either side,<sup>15</sup> the earth and rubble carted from it in 1528-9 cannot have been from its construction, but must rather have been carried away from a dump nearby. This assumes that the equation of the 'fayre gate' with Tom Gate is valid, but this is not necessarily so. The 'new stepull' seems clear enough, but tells nothing of its location and character. What is the meaning of 'stepull' here? Entry i, discussed above, might seem to suggest that the word could mean to the compiler of these accounts just what it means today, the spire of St. Frideswide's. But could it also mean a relatively low, tower-like, buttressed belfry, for that is what it has got to mean if the 'new stepull' is to be taken as a reference to the belfry for which the foundation in the cloister seems to have been intended? The early uses quoted in *O.E.D.* show that the primary meaning of 'steeple' is a tall tower, often containing bells, or such a tower together with a spire or other superstructure; by the mid-16th century and perhaps the late 15th, it could mean a spire, or, as a text of 1578 puts it, a 'poynted steeple'. Entry i may well therefore refer not just to the spire, but also to the tower of St. Frideswide's, and this explains why the bells were also to be taken down, for the bell-chamber is in the tower, below the spire. But the idea of height, loftiness, is always contained in 'steeple' and it must therefore be a real question whether the 'new stepull' of Entry iv can ever have been applied to the relatively low structure set on the foundation in the cloister, especially at a moment when the masons were working overtime on the tower at the E. end of the hall. Measuring c. 55 by c. 60 feet in plan this tower, for such is the word used,<sup>16</sup> can never have been intended to be less than 100 feet in height, and would have dwarfed a temporary bell-tower immediately to the E. (Fig. 33).<sup>17</sup> Is it possible that the 'new stepull' refers not to a temporary structure such as that in the cloister but rather to a new permanent bell-tower for Wolsey's new foundation? Daphne Hart's conjectural drawing of Cardinal College in Howard Colvin's *Unbuilt Oxford* omits a bell-tower, but Wolsey must have intended one, if only to complete his college as King's College, Cambridge, should have been completed by the building of a great bell-tower to house the bells presented by Henry VI.<sup>18</sup> It is most unlikely, on the evidence of other Tudor buildings, that the great gate, now Tom Gate, was originally intended to take the bells. This leaves only two possibilities, the tower E. of the hall, or another tower, possibly detached, as at King's, whose site is now lost. For the integrity of Wolsey's plan, the tower E. of the hall provides an obvious solution. Although its immense size in plan may be an objection, it was a problem which G.F. Bodley overcame in 1876-9, when he raised it into a bell-tower on the assumption that this was the place Wolsey had intended.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 350.

<sup>15</sup> *Letters and Papers Henry VIII*, 4.ii, No. 2734.

<sup>16</sup> Bodl. MS. Twyne 21, p. 353, reads 'towre', not 'Town' as printed by Gutch, p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> For the suggested reconstruction of the temporary bell-tower, suggesting a maximum height of some 45 to 55 ft., see above, pp. 68-71 and Fig. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford* (1983), Fig. 7; for King's see below, n. 22.

<sup>19</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* iii, 233; *R.C.H.M. Oxford*, 33. For the appearance of the tower at the E. end of the hall as it was in 1566 (and presumably more-or-less as it was left at the finish of Wolsey's works in 1529), see John Bearblock's original drawing in Thomas Neele's verse dialogue composed for Queen Elizabeth's visit to Oxford that year, now Bodleian, MS. Bodl. 13, f. 5<sup>v</sup>, reproduced here as Fig. 86 by kind permission of the

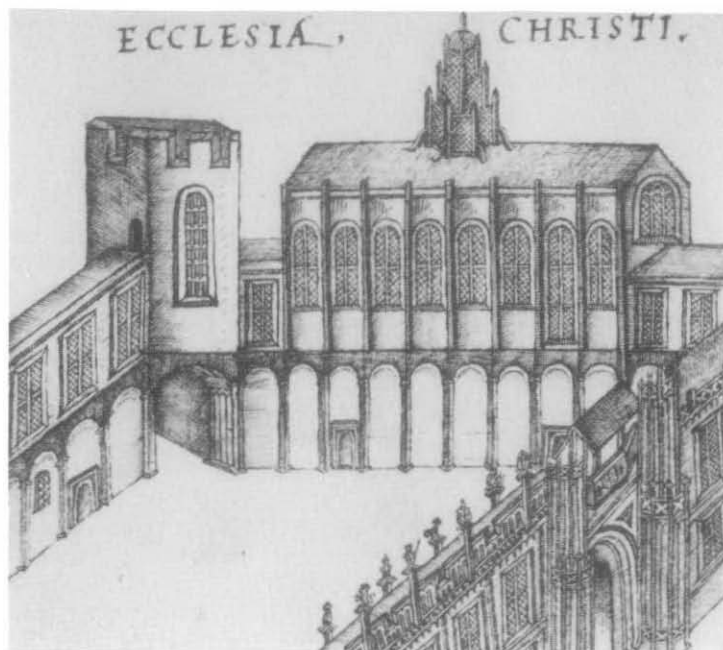


Fig. 86. Christ Church in 1566, looking S.E. and showing the tower at the E. end of the hall on which work was being hurried on in 1529: see pp. 207–8 note 19. (Bodl. MS Bodley 13 f.5<sup>v</sup>, reproduced by permission of the Curators of the Bodleian Library.)

The siting of a temporary bell-frame in the cloister immediately beside the tower E. of the hall is perhaps an additional point in favour of this tower as the site of Wolsey's 'new stepull': nobody moves bells further than is necessary, as the sites of bell furnaces within many an excavated church now show.

The 'new stepull' may of course have been on some adjacent site, but the foundations in the cloister can never have been intended to take the permanent bell-tower of Wolsey's new college, overshadowed as any bell-frame here must always have been by Wolsey's new tower at the E. end of the hall. Economy of argument, and the integrity of Wolsey's plan, should perhaps bring attention back to 'Bodley's Tower', as the place intended for the bells of Cardinal College.

In summary, the evidence of the building accounts seems to be as follows:

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Bodleian Library. Bearblock's drawings were engraved by Hearne in 1713, re-issued by Whittlesey in 1728, and photolithographed by Guggenheim in 1882. They were reproduced again for *Queen Elizabeth's Oxford, 1566* (The Bodleian Library Calendar for 1983) with a useful introduction, and are conveniently available as Bodleian Library Filmstrips 338.1 and 338.2. The Bearblock drawing of Christ Church is also reproduced by W.G. Hiscock, *A Christ Church Miscellany* (1946), 199, where Chapter XX, 'The Buildings' (pp. 198–218) provides a particularly clear and appropriately illustrated account of the building history of Christ Church: Bodley's works are described on pp. 204–5. Another view of the tower E. of the hall, from the opposite direction, is given in the painting of Christ Church from the S.E. which appears in the background of Sampson Strong's posthumous portrait of Wolsey, painted in 1610–11 (Fig. 87). The tower is battlemented, as in Bearblock, and appears to be lower, but a close comparison shows that in both views the bases of the embrasures are approximately level with the hall parapet.

1. Wolsey scaffolded the spire and tower of St. Frideswide's and prepared to take down the bells, intending to demolish the whole (Entries i and ii).
2. Wolsey's fall halted the demolitions (as it did the works) in October 1529. The spire and tower were not taken down and there is no evidence that the bells were actually removed.
3. A new bell-frame was brought onto the site in some haste during 1528-9, probably to take the bells to be removed from St. Frideswide's. Without knowing when the bell-frame arrived during the year, we cannot be certain whether it had been erected before the works were halted in October 1529, but it seems likely that it was and that the foundation in the cloister was intended for it (Entry iii). But there is no evidence that the bells were ever transferred to this new frame,<sup>20</sup> and nothing to show that they were ever removed from the tower of St. Frideswide's. The bell-frame in the cloister may well have stood, complete, or more-or-less so, for sixteen years from 1529 to 1545, until demolished in the works of 1545-6 which saw the great tower and spire of St. Frideswide finally preserved and restored for the housing of the bells of Frideswide and Osney.
4. A good deal of earth and rubble was taken away from the college some time during the year, apparently from two places, from a dump near the 'fayre gate' and from 'the new stepull'. It seems possible that 'the new stepull' refers to a new permanent bell-tower, rather than to a temporary structure. The most obvious site for this steeple is the tower at the E. end of the hall, 'Bodley's Tower', and the proximity of the site of a temporary bell-frame in the cloister supports this view. The haste with which the works were being pushed on in 1528-9, not least the works of the chapel (especially its roof) and of the tower E. of the hall, suggests that works for a permanent bell-tower would also have been in progress. The use of the word 'stepull' to describe what is also called a 'tower' in the accounts may be a reflection of changing names as the works developed, or may simply reflect a still unfixed terminology (cf. 'fayre gate'). The descriptions used by different compilers of the account, or presenters of the bills which were finally incorporated within it, may also have varied. The simplest and most probable solution is to believe that Wolsey intended the massive and otherwise unexplained tower at the E. end of the hall to be the great bell-tower of his college (Fig. 86).

Something further needs to be said on this last point, which represents a return to a Victorian interpretation which has been out of favour in recent years. The older view was well put by the *Oxford Journal* of 21 October 1876 in describing the work involved in the completion of the supposed belfry:<sup>21</sup>

The difficulty arises from the great width of the basement line of work left by Wolsey. To build a tower in proper proportion to this basement line would mar the effect of the present Cathedral tower, which, probably, in the original design was to have been removed. Under the circumstances, therefore, a suitable tower will be constructed over the belfry in fair proportion to the surrounding buildings, and without destroying the old basement lines.

<sup>20</sup> In 1530 a series of payments for 'The costs of the bell tower' were included as a separate heading in a book of receipts and expenses for the fifth year of Cardinal College: *Letters and Papers Henry VIII*, 4.iii, No. 6788. There is no indication whether these payments refer to the tower over the crossing of St. Frideswide's or to a temporary bell-frame in the cloister.

<sup>21</sup> I am most grateful to Mavis Batey for kindly providing the text of this quotation.

The purpose of the tower defined by this immense lower stage is nowhere explained in sources contemporary with its construction: it is simply 'the tower at the east end of the hall.' The Victorians, who knew the structure before Bodley's works, seem to have had no doubt that it was intended to be a bell-tower. In taking this view they were apparently influenced by the scale of the existing work and all that this implied for its intended form. More recent views, influenced by the developing study of collegiate buildings usually conceived on less magnificent lines, and by the recognition and study of the contemporary design for a detached campanile at King's College, Cambridge,<sup>22</sup> have veered away from this interpretation. The idea has thus emerged that Wolsey's tower E. of the hall may have been intended for a muniment room and audit chamber (as suggested below by Mavis Batey and Catherine Cole, pp. 211-12), while his probable intention to provide a bell-tower would have been reflected in the construction of a detached campanile beside his new chapel on the N. side of the quad, perhaps (like Wolsey's tower of 1492-c.1509 at Magdalen) on the street-frontage of St. Aldate's.

Lavish as was Wolsey's endowment of his college, it seems unlikely that so large a tower as that E. of the hall would have been needed solely to provide access to the hall and to accommodate archives and audits, although these latter functions might easily have been contained within a tower designed to serve several purposes. There are other difficulties. The idea of a detached campanile is not supported by contemporary written evidence (the 'newe stepull' of 1528-9 need not carry this implication in default of other evidence) or actual remains. At King's the remote site of the original campanile may have been a particular solution to the peculiarly difficult sub-soil conditions in that part of Cambridge, where it would have been wise to keep so heavy a structure at some distance from the chapel, and distinct from it in both foundations and standing walls if differential settlement was to be avoided.<sup>23</sup> A detached campanile may even be an anachronism in the 1520s. The integration of all the elements within a single complex seems more likely at this time in a completely new building, not least when the scale and comprehensiveness of Wolsey's intentions are taken into account.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> H.M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works*, i (1963), 271-2, Fig. 29, Pl. 20. In fact, as Howard Colvin shows, Henry VI's intention in his so-called 'will' of 1448 was for the building of a tower attached to the W. side of a cemetery cloister, itself lying detached from and to the W. of the chapel. Henry's intended plan for Eton was very similar, although there the tower, also detached from the chapel, would have lain directly N. of the nave (ibid. 285, Fig. 31). Neither of these plans was in fact carried out, at least as regards the towers, and are unlikely therefore to have influenced Wolsey's ideas for his college. Had they done so they might have inclined him towards the integration of his tower in a claustral layout. What actually happened at King's was the construction of a temporary bell-tower detached from the chapel and about 70 ft. to the W., as fully discussed above, pp. 69-70, and illustrated in Fig. 32. This temporary tower might well have been known to Wolsey and his advisors and have influenced the construction of the temporary bell-tower at Cardinal College, but it seems most unlikely to have been an influence on Wolsey's plans for a permanent structure.

<sup>23</sup> P.V. Addyman and M. Biddle, 'Medieval Cambridge: Recent Finds and Excavations', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, lviii (1965), 74-137, esp. pp. 100-3. It seems unlikely, however, that these considerations would also apply to Eton.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Howard Colvin for reading the typescript of this article, but responsibility for errors is of course my own. As he suggests, the next stage is to undertake a detailed study of the standing fabric of the tower.