

'The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture' and 'The Oxford Architectural Society', 1839–1860*

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SUMMARY

This year the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society has celebrated its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. The Society was founded in 1839 as the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, was renamed the Oxford Architectural Society in 1848 and in 1860 was virtually refounded under its present name. This essay looks at the first twenty-one years of the Society's life. The Society was founded with almost purely antiquarian aims, but gradually its role expanded and it came to encourage actively the use of the archaeologically correct Gothic Revival style in modern church architecture. It was most active in the 1840s, publishing model designs and offering advice. By 1850 this role was in decline, partly because of the success of the Gothic Revival in ecclesiastical architecture. Idealists, however, had never seen the Gothic Revival as exclusively limited to ecclesiastical architecture, and in the 1850s the Oxford Society turned its attention to domestic buildings. The near-collapse of the Society in 1860 was indicative of the failure of the Gothic Revival to become the dominant influence in domestic architecture that it had been in ecclesiastical architecture.

'Architecture is, then – the Camden Society sort of thing; pots of holy water, altars, pixes, piscinae, stained glass; old manuscripts; bishops; rubbings of brasses, ecclesiastical needlework; images scarcely decent, pictures horribly worse, gorgons, hydras and chimeras dire; madonnas, crosses; queer illegible kinds of printing; freemasonry; curious locks, keys and hinges; and – all sorts of funny old things; isn't it? O dear no. No, no, not at all; that's not Architecture, that's Archaeology, mon cher, the science of Rubbish. That is, in general, the C.C.S. version of it' (Robert Kerr, *The Newleaf Discourses*, 1849).

The Diocesan architectural societies were highly unpopular with the young men of 1850. They were accused of all manner of architectural crimes, not least of which was that from their archaeological investigations they declared the architectural rules for the future. The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture was the first of the Diocesan architectural societies, although it was never as well-known as the Cambridge Camden (later Ecclesiological) Society. In the 1840s it promoted archaeo-

* For detailed studies of the personalities associated with the Society, its ecclesiastical principles and the links between the Society and Oxford Movement, see W.A. Pantin, *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), 174–194, and S.L. Ollard, *Oxoniensia* v (1940), 146–160. There is also an interesting article in *Architectura* (Berlin), xv (1985), 33ff, which suggests that under the influence of E.A. Freeman the O.A.S. subscribed to the 'development theory' of architectural history, breaking the Camdenists' dictatorial addiction to Puginian gothicism. The MSS records of the O.A.H.S. are in the Bodleian Library; 'Dep. d' and 'Dep. c' abbreviations refer to these records. *Proceedings* refers to the *Proceedings of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society*.

logically correct ecclesiastical architecture, but in the crisis years of the 1850s, it turned its attention to domestic architecture and the promotion of a truly 'national' style. In this the Society showed a profound understanding of Pugin's architectural ideas.

The 'Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture' was founded on 1 February 1839 and was from the very beginning a highly respectable society supported by the academic elite of Oxford. The original prospectus was drawn up by Mr. Manuel Johnson (the Radcliffe Observer) and was delivered by J.H. Parker to the Rev. J. Ingram, President of Trinity. This prospectus appears to be lost, but the objectives of the Society were stated at its founding meeting and, in view of its activities over the next twenty years, these were surprisingly modest:

The object of this Society [shall] be to collect Books, Prints and Drawings; models of the forms of arches, vaults etc.; casts of mouldings and details; and such other architectural Specimens as the funds of the Society will admit . . . the attention of the Society [shall] be also directed towards sepulchral monuments of the Middle Ages . . . [and] Historical notices of Founders, Architects, dates of erection and the like [shall] be collected.¹

The original aims of the Society, therefore, were antiquarian, and although it recognised that 'Gothic Architecture is a subject which has of late years excited a considerable degree of public interest', the Society merely saw itself as one among many 'Local Associations, having for their principal aim the collection of Drawings, and descriptions of the Edifices in their immediate neighbourhood, which would thus form so many sources, whence the inquiries into the Gothic Antiquities of any particular district might derive information.'²

The foundation of the Society, then, is indicative of an increasing public interest in architectural matters in the 1830s. W.H. Leeds, the architectural writer and great advocate of the popularisation of architectural knowledge, therefore greeted the new Society with open arms. He looked at the state of public education in architecture and said that 'Readily it may be admitted that, taken as a body, the public are very ill-informed in architecture, and that so far from being competent judges, they are scarcely able to discriminate between talent and no talent. Yet their being ignorant at present is no reason wherefore they should continue to be so.' Then, turning to the Oxford Society, he saw it as one instrument in the battle to overcome public ignorance: 'As a beginning towards a better state of things than what now exists with regard to architecture - to one wherein a greater relish for the art, together with more correct views will prevail, - the recent establishment of a lay Architectural Society at Oxford may be considered as a good augury. . .'³ This, however, hardly prepares us for the role in which the Society established itself as an arbiter in ecclesiastical taste.

The Society had a perfectly normal constitution with Members, Honorary Members, a governing Committee and the usual Officers. By May 1840 there were already 76 Members and eight Honorary Members,⁴ who included the architects Thomas Rickman, Anthony Salvin and Edward Blore.⁵ This figure, however, did not increase as rapidly as the membership of the Cambridge Camden Society, which was founded in the wake of

¹ Dep. d. 510, 1 Feb. 1839.

² *Proceedings*, i (1839), Preface.

³ W.H. Leeds, *The Travellers' Club House* by Sir Charles Barry (1839), vii and 5.

⁴ Dep. c. 593, MS List 1840-46.

⁵ Dep. d. 510; elected at an Ordinary Meeting 13 March 1840.

the Oxford Society, but which by 1846 had about 700 members, while the Oxford Society had only half as many.

The Society was only fully active during term-time and was almost totally inactive during the Long Vacation, but during term papers were regularly delivered by Members and guest speakers. The first lecture, on 'Stained Glass' by Edward Bigge, was given on 10 May 1839, and for the 1839-40 Session ten papers were read. Seven of these were studies of particular Churches or other ecclesiastical buildings and three were rather more general: 'The Principles and Theory of Gothic Architecture', 'Some Ecclesiastical Notes from Domesday Book' and 'The Contrast between Grecian and Gothic Architecture'. At the same time the committee was busy building up its library and casts collection from purchases and gifts. In its Annual Report, in June 1840, therefore, the committee felt able to congratulate itself: 'It is to be hoped that the revived attention to our Churches shewn by the formation of this Society, and the ready cordial manner in which the example has been followed by the Sister University, are a proof of the revival not only of good taste, but also of true piety, shewing itself in a reverence for sacred things.'⁶

Gradually, however, from these rather introspective activities the Society began to look outwards. From its earliest days demands had been made on the Society by clergymen who needed advice about Church building and restoration. The first recorded request of this nature was in 1839, when a letter arrived from Madras 'to ask from the Society, as a gift, chaste and correct designs, plans and models of Churches of the Gothic Order'.⁷ There are then three surviving letters with requests for advice on the details and design of churches in 1840.⁸ These ask for advice on the best way to treat deal pews when oak could not be afforded, advice on the repair of a chancel, and for plans of Great Hasely church 'with a view of affording hints for the restoration of Cubington Church'.

The last of these requests must have followed the Society's publication of *Some Remarks Upon the Church of Great Hasely, Oxfordshire*. This was one of two publications made by the Society in 1840 which were of quite different natures and are indicative of the Society's changing attitude towards its role in the church-building world. The Great Hasely publication was a conventional and purely antiquarian work based on a lecture given to the Society in 1839. It was well illustrated, but was clearly not intended to provide a model for church builders. Requests such as that from Cubington church must, however, have prompted the Society to make the first of a new kind of publication, which, like *Great Hasely*, was brought out in 1840. This was a set of working drawings of Littlemore church near Cowley. The drawings gave plan, elevations and details of the church, in fact little more than a chapel, which was a monument to ecclesiastical principles and was designed by an architect-member of the Oxford Society, H.J. Underwood. At a cost of about £800, this was a great example to put before clergymen who wanted to build in a 'correct' Gothic style, but who were having difficulty raising funds. The design also had the advantage that it could be used as the chancel for a larger church to be built in the future, although at Littlemore it in fact became the nave and a tiny chancel was later added. Sets of working drawings such as this, for sale at only 5s. a set, immediately made the Society much more useful to church builders. This marks the

⁶ *Proceedings*, 30 June 1840.

⁷ Dep. d. 538, letter 20.

⁸ *Ibid.* letters 35, 37 and 38.

coming of age of the Society, when it realised that its role could be more important than that of the rather passive antiquarian. It marks a realisation that church design could not be left in the hands of architects and an ill-informed clergy alone. It is also notable that it precedes any comparable publications by the Cambridge Camden Society.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Littlemore was followed by the publication of further sets of drawings. Some of these were examples of medieval churches in styles approved by the Society, others, like Littlemore, were models of the modern Gothic revival. In 1842 the 12th- and 13th-century church of St. Giles in Oxford was chosen for publication, and in 1844 the innovation was introduced of including estimates for the modern construction of the churches illustrated. The first two churches offered with estimates were the cheapest. The tiny 14th-century chapel of St. Bartholomew, between Oxford and Cowley, was published in 1844 with an estimate for reconstruction of only £228 11s. 2d. Wilcote church, another very small chapel, was also illustrated in 1844 and a detailed estimate for reconstruction was given, coming to a total of £364 10s. 1d. The nature of ecclesiological criticism was very clearly shown with Wilcote church, and the estimate included more 'correct' alternatives to the original such as adding a bellcot, enlarging the chancel arch, and enlarging the E. window. These were illustrated in the drawings using Humphrey Repton's 'before and after' technique. As the commentary said: 'The east window is obviously too small, and is not recommended for imitation . . . [and] It has not been thought necessary to give an elevation of the north side, as it contains portions of an earlier building, and it would be better in practice to copy the south side.' 1844 also saw the publication of a much grander church, St. John the Baptist at Shottesbroke (Berks.), which was drawn by William Butterfield and which had been described by Rickman as 'a miniature Cathedral'. No estimates were given for this, but with its cruciform plan and tall spire it could be said to represent the architectural ambitions of the Society.

In 1845 Littlemore church was reprinted, in 1849 the 14th-century church at Strixton (Northants.), with an estimate of £751 5s. 2d., was illustrated; and this year also saw the publication of H.J. Underwood's three cemetery chapels of the Holy Sepulchre, St. Mary at Oseney and the Holy Cross. These were in the Norman, Early English and Decorated styles respectively, and were estimated at a cost of £498 each. They were the first three chapels in the country to be built under the 1846 Act of Parliament enabling parishes to unite for the purpose of obtaining additional churchyard ground, so the Oxford Society was providing models for other prospective chapel-builders. In 1850 the large and expensive new church by W. Caveler at Warmington (Northants.) was illustrated, and was described as 'a model for similar works in the present day'. In 1850 also the 15th-century church of Minster Lovell was illustrated with an estimate of £1,627 10s.

The inclusion of specifications and estimates with the working drawings made obvious the purpose of the publications as models for actual construction, and this put the reviewer of the Society's publications in *Weale's Quarterly Papers on Architecture* on his guard. Looking at the sets of working drawings, he said: 'The first is a design for a decorated church, with specification etc. We scarcely know how to treat this. It appears to us very like an attempt to publish a sort of 'Every Man his own Architectural Physician', a commonplace form whereby churches may be prescribed, and compounded, and forced down patients' throats without the aid of an architect'.⁹ More

⁹ *Weale's Quarterly Papers on Architecture* (1844-5), Part VII, Arch. VI, 'Review, Publications of the Oxford Architectural Society'. The anonymous author sounds very much like George Wightwick; see below note 33.

widely, the *Architect, Engineer and Surveyor* was worried about the influence of diocesan architectural societies in general: 'That these societies are established for the purpose of inducing clergymen to become the architects of their own churches, is evident from the numerous works already undertaken by them, and the offers of assistance made to those who doubt their own skill'.¹⁰ It was with complaints like this in mind that the Society published the following justification of its inclusion of estimates with the working drawings of Minster Lovell church in 1850:

'The object of the Society in publishing drawings of this description has been misunderstood in some instances. They have been supposed to wish to dispense with the employment of architects. This is very far from being the intention; they are quite aware of the value of an architect's services, and that if he does his duty to his employers he commonly saves more than he costs them. On the contrary the publication of such drawings is calculated much rather to be beneficial to the profession than injurious to it, and they are generally welcomed by the intelligent part of the profession even more cordially than by any other class. If the eyes of the clergy had generally been familiar with such detailed drawings of our ancient churches, it would have been impossible for the hideous distortions which have been erected, under the name of Gothic Churches, to have ever been built'.

The Society, therefore, was aiming to put good examples of ecclesiastical architecture, ancient and modern, before the clergy. These were intended to set a standard, rather than replace the role of an architect, but the Colonies were an exception to this because 'architects are frequently not to be had, and working drawings of churches very difficult to be obtained. In such cases perhaps a publication of this description offers the best substitute. . .'.¹¹

In addition to these illustrations of complete churches, the Society published a series of sheets of working drawings for church furniture. These were started in 1842,¹² and in all eighteen sets of details were published. These included five examples of pews, several sheets of oak stall ends drawn by J. Plowman, two examples of fonts, three pulpits, a reredos, and two sheets of specimens of Gothic tracery taken from the Society's collection of Rickman drawings.¹³ These sheets were published in response to frequent requests for 'correct' details from clergymen wishing to refit their churches. They also once more show the publishing initiative of the Oxford Society, preceding the Camden Society's comparable publication, the *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica: First Series* (1844-7), by two years. This initiative must be seen as largely inspired by J.H. Parker, the publisher and architectural writer, who was the first secretary of the Society and who played an active and important role in it throughout his life and despite frequent sojourns abroad because of illness. He published all the Society's works, in 1845 taking on the burden of production costs,¹⁴ and in 1847 giving the Society a great financial boost by buying the copyright to all its publications for the sum of £500.¹⁵

The Society's publications could be posted off around the country to deal with most of the demands made of it, but sometimes greater efforts were needed, especially when dealing with requests from the Colonies. It was also in response to these that the Society

¹⁰ *Architect, Engineer and Surveyor*, iv (1843), 26. Quoted Barrington Kaye, 'The Architectural Profession in Britain' (1960), 7.

¹¹ *Introduction to the drawings of Minster Lovell Church* (drawn by John Prichard, published by J.H. Parker, 1850).

¹² Dep. d. 510, 11 June and 5 Nov. 1842.

¹³ These sheets and the publications listed above can be found pasted into two large scrap-books in the O.A.H.S. Library in the Ashmolean Museum.

¹⁴ Dep. d. 518, 10 Jan. 1845.

¹⁵ Ibid. 10 Feb. 1847.

was most generous. We have records of requests for aid from India, New Zealand, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Toronto, Boston and Geneva, and it has already been noted that the Society had the Colonies particularly in mind when publishing its sets of working drawings. In 1845 a set of the Society's illustrations were sent to the Bishop of Toronto in response to his request for designs for a church,¹⁶ but the Society not infrequently put itself to more trouble than this. In 1841 it agreed to pay up to £40 of the architect's charges for the design of a cathedral for Newfoundland,¹⁷ and in 1844 it paid £20 for Mr. Cranston's design for a wooden church, a copy of which was sent to the Bishop of Newfoundland.¹⁸ Here they can be seen consciously attempting to adapt to local conditions in Newfoundland, where stone was not easily available, and this was followed in 1845 by a request from the Bishop of Newfoundland for a design for a church in Bermuda. This time he undertook to defray any expense.

The advice of the Society, however, was not always accepted. In 1843, it received a request from Mr. Pigott to supply a design for a church in Colabah to commemorate those who fell in India and Afghanistan. The Oxford architect and almost architectural consultant to the Society, J.M. Derick, was commissioned to design the church and was paid £20 for his trouble. The Oxford Society and, after some delay, the Camden Society, which had also been asked to supply a design, approved Derick's design, and it was forwarded to the Bishop of Bombay.¹⁹ The Bishop, however, turned down this Decorated church because it was too expensive and because, despite its attempts at adaptation, it was regarded as unsuitable for the climate. One of the Society's Honorary Members, Anthony Salvin, was therefore asked to design a church in the Early English style. This he did, and the design was sent to Bombay, but this also was turned down and in the end a local architect was chosen to design the church.²⁰ Nevertheless, the Afghan memorial church has been described as the first ecclesiologically correct church to be built in India, so the designs sent out may have had some influence.²¹

The Society was not always as sympathetic as this to requests for help in England. In 1847 the Committee received a request for a design for a Chapel from a Staffordshire clergyman, but 'It was agreed to answer his application by recommending him to obtain the design from a local architect, and if he pleases to submit it afterwards to the society that they would be happy to offer any suggestions or criticisms which they might deem advisable'.²² Nevertheless, the advice that the Society did give, and the respected position of its members within the clerical hierarchy, soon made it surprisingly influential. The tone of letters from the clergy was normally highly deferential. The Rev. James Blomfield wrote enquiring about the rules of ecclesiology: 'my difficulty is to know whether the doorway of the Porch may be Gothic whereas the Doorway of the Church itself is Norman'.²³ The committee for restoring a church in Breconshire put a more important decision in the hands of the Society. They stated their request quite plainly: 'Will you merely give us your opinion whether we ought, or are justified if we build a new tower, in altering the body of the church'.²⁴ The Society advised the

¹⁶ Ibid. 15 Nov. 1845.

¹⁷ Dep. d. 538, 1841 letter 55.

¹⁸ Dep. d. 510, 29 May 1844.

¹⁹ Dep. d. 538, 1843 letter 166.

²⁰ Ibid. 1845 letter 262.

²¹ Gavin Stamp, quoted in Jan Morris and Simon Winchester, *Stones of Empire* (1983), 189.

²² Dep. d. 519, 7 Dec. 1847.

²³ Dep. d. 538, 1843 letter 283.

²⁴ Ibid. 1846 letter 310.

committee against destroying the old tower. The sentiment of the majority of ecclesiologically minded clergymen was expressed by the Rector of Daglingworth church, near Cirencester, when, having outlined his plans for removing galleries and enlarging the church, he concluded 'I should be truly sorry to do anything which should make the church less valuable in the eyes of antiquarians'.²⁵ In total there are 76 requests for advice or help with church building, restoration or refitting remaining in the archive of letters to the Society between 1839 and 1860. Sixty-five of these were made in the first ten years of the Society's existence, and after 1860 the flow of requests dries up almost completely.

The influence of the Society should not only be judged by quantity, however, and its opinion was sometimes sought by leading architects. In 1842 Benjamin Ferrey, an Honorary Member of the Society, asked for the Society's opinion on his design for a church at Bodwin. The Committee approved the design, but suggested that the addition of clerestory windows would be an improvement.²⁶ In the same year George Gilbert Scott asked for the Society's opinion on his alterations to St. Mary's, Stafford. A special meeting was summoned to consider the designs and, while generally approving them, it would have preferred the S. transept to be in a later style of Early English, and made the common-sense suggestion that there should not be an Early English porch against a Perpendicular part of the building.²⁷ This was in fact an arbitration between two parties in Stafford, in which the Camden Society was also asked to give its opinion, and the Oxford Society concluded saying that 'The committee beg to state that as a general rule they would decline entering as arbiters into discussions between architects and their employers'. This, however, did not prevent the Society from offering criticism. In 1843, S.S. Teulon sent in designs for two rectory houses that he was building,²⁸ and in 1844, G.G. Scott informed them rather tentatively of his restoration of 'a little church at Clifton Hampden near Abingdon . . . which you will, I fear, not altogether like, as it is not a strict restoration, indeed we hardly had anything left to restore – it is rather a refoundation (keeping in the main to the old plan), and viewing it as such we have put the monument of the gentleman from whose bequest for funds proceeded in the place of the Founder's tomb, rightly or wrongly, I do not know . . .'.²⁹ Respect for the Society was such that a Rector from North Wales, F.B. Guy, submitted two designs for his new church, one by Salvin and one by Butterfield, to the scrutiny of the committee, asking which one he should choose.³⁰ Unfortunately, the Society's response to both this and Scott's letter are not recorded. Similarly, in 1851, the Vicar of St. Mary's, Warwick asked for the Society's opinion on the design by the architects F. and H. Francis for the restoration and alteration of the church.

The importance of all these examples lies in the fact that here we have a society almost entirely consisting of non-architects which set itself up as an arbiter of taste in ecclesiastical architecture. Its approval was sought, not only by clergymen patrons, but also by the architects themselves. This provides an extraordinarily explicit and institutionalised example of the influence over the details of architectural style which non-architects could achieve.

²⁵ Ibid. 1847 letter 349.

²⁶ Dep. d. 510, 26 Feb 1842.

²⁷ Ibid., 28 and 31 May 1842.

²⁸ Dep. d. 538, 1843 letter 135.

²⁹ Ibid. 1844 letter 205.

³⁰ Dep. d. 519, 3 Feb 1849.

We have seen that W.H. Leeds welcomed the foundation of the Society in 1839, but as the strength of the Oxford Society and other diocesan societies gathered, they met with opposition. In 1845 there were twelve architect-members of the Oxford Society, but their support for the society could be seen as professional opportunism, rather than as support based on principle. Certainly, the four local architects who joined the Society (J.M. Derick, J.P. Harrison, J. Plowman and H.J. Underwood) could hope for rich pickings from their association with the University through the Society, and Derick, Harrison and Underwood were used as draughtsmen for the Society's sets of working drawings.³¹ The Society was also supported by architects who had been invited to become Honorary Members,³² but George Wightwick, in a series of articles in *Weale's Quarterly Papers on Architecture*, perhaps expresses the frustration some architects felt at the efforts of diocesan architectural societies in general.³³ Wightwick reserves his wrath for the Cambridge Camden Society, but descending to generalisations he says:

we feel it a duty, at least on the score of professional chivalry, to break a lance with that grand high church champion, who, bearing on his shield the words 'DIOCESAN ARCHITECTURAL SOCIETY', assumes to himself the absolute right of critical dictation as it regards the general form and the component details of the English Christian temple.

He notes that these societies started at Oxford and then complains that they have misled the public: 'a public hitherto ignorant of architecture in any variety whatever, is now crammed to suffocation with a spurious knowledge of it in one variety alone'.³⁴ This may just be sour grapes, since Wightwick was rapidly losing his place as 'the leading architect of the western counties'³⁵ because of his low church opposition to ecclesiology, but his comments gain significance when we find them published by John Weale. His comments, moreover, are echoed by an editorial in the *Architect, Engineer and Surveyor* (1843): 'The influence of the church architectural societies, as now conducted, is most prejudicial to the profession, for their object is to establish a higher authority in architecture than the profession itself. The principles upon which they are formed are false, for they assume that a mode or a style is incapable of improvement, and that none other can be brought into comparison with it. . .'.³⁶

It was a sign of the strength of ecclesiology that Wightwick was forced into retirement in 1851, and the influence of the Oxford Society was undoubtedly at its height between 1840 and 1850. In the Advertisement to the Second Edition of the *Memoir of Great Hasely Church* (1848), it was claimed that:

The Oxford Architectural Society, from a small beginning, has expanded into one of the most numerous and influential bodies in the country; and from the example first exhibited at Oxford in 1838, it may be truly said, an impulse was given to the study of ecclesiastical architecture, which has since led to the foundation of many societies, with similar or kindred objects, which at present exist

³¹ Derick did the drawings for Stanton Harcourt church, 1845; Harrison did those for St. Giles church, 1842; and Underwood's Littlemore church and his three cemetery chapels were used as models for working drawings.

³² In 1839 the Society immediately recruited Edward Blore, Benjamin Ferrey, R.C. Hussey (of Birmingham), Thomas Rickman, Anthony Salvin, and the architectural publisher William Twopeny.

³³ *Weale's Quarterly Papers on Architecture* (1844-5), ii.3 ('On the Present Condition and Prospects of Architecture in England'), iii.6 ('Modern English Gothic Architecture'), continued iv.7.

³⁴ *Ibid.* ii.3, Arch. I, 1.

³⁵ Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* (1978), 889.

³⁶ *Architect, Engineer and Surveyor*, iv (1843), 231, quoted in Barrington Kaye op. cit. note 10.

throughout the country; and all of which . . . may now be considered to be in union, as corresponding bodies, with each other, and with the large and central Society established in the metropolis, the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

Hereafter, however, its influence declined. Meeting in 1855, the Committee reported that 'Applications for assistance and advice have not been so frequently received as before; but this is not to be viewed altogether with regret, arising as it undoubtedly does from the great increase in the number of local diocesan societies of similar character, which naturally tend to contract the sphere of our operations.'³⁷ This message was repeated in 1857 and 1858, when the Committee said simply that 'It must not be expected that we should have the same amount of work to do *now* as we had in our earlier days.'³⁸

Nevertheless, the Society was not resigned to a life of inactivity. In 1848 the name of the Society had been changed from 'The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture' to the 'Oxford Architectural Society'³⁹ and it was also carried on the motion of the President that no specification be made of the objects of the Society. This, however, was by no means a sign of diminishing enthusiasm for the Gothic style; rather, it was the Society's constitutional recognition of its already-broadened horizons, including active participation on the wider architectural scene, rather than merely exercising a passive influence by promoting the study of Gothic architecture.

One sign of this was the wider-ranging subject matter of papers read to the Society. In the 1839-40 Session, as has been noted, seven of the ten papers given were specifically accounts of particular local churches. By the 1849-50 Session, however, there were no papers on particular churches. Instead, the Reading architect J. Billing spoke on 'Parsonage Houses'; the architectural historian E.A. Freeman spoke on the 'Constructive system of the Entablature and of the Arch'; and other papers were given on 'Screens of Churches', 'The Early Pointed style of Architecture', 'The Construction and Use of Chancels', 'Fonts', 'The Anglo Saxon Bishoprics' and 'The Practicability of Lighting Churches with Gas'.⁴⁰

This broadening interest in architectural matters is also seen in the Society's participation in contemporary debate. In 1855, the Rev. J.L. Petit came to speak on 'Originality of Design in Architecture'. The Proceedings reported his belief

That the present attempt to revive the Gothic style did not seem favourable to the development of the full powers of the architect. Our admiration of a modern Gothic building is much akin to that which we bestow on a successful copy . . . Our knowledge of Gothic architecture, and even our success in dealing with it, does not prevent it from being, as it were, a dead language. . .

In its Report, however, a statement was made that the Committee 'cannot agree in Mr. Petit's opinion, that Italian, as a living style, is superior to Gothic; and, while acknowledging that there is much to learn from the works of the Renaissance, retain their belief in the essential superiority of Gothic for all purposes'.⁴¹

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Society made a defiant stand over the question of the style for the New Government Offices. In 1857, the Society petitioned

³⁷ *Proceedings*, AGM 1855.

³⁸ *Proceedings*, AGM 1858.

³⁹ Dep. d. 519, 2 June 1848.

⁴⁰ *Proceedings*, 1849-50.

⁴¹ *Proceedings*, 1854-5.

the Crown in favour of a Gothic style for the new buildings,⁴² and in 1859 Lord John Manners was congratulated for his (temporary) victory in the matter. J.H. Parker wrote in his capacity as President and concluded:

the superiority of this style for churches is now universally admitted and it is clear . . . that it was not at all confined originally to churches, but was applied equally to all kinds of buildings, which were quite as well adapted to the wants of the inhabitants as any modern buildings are. Recent experience has also shewn that architects who understand this style can adapt it equally to any modern purposes as is proved by the New Oxford Museum, and the new buildings at Exeter College which are neither dark, nor gloomy, nor inconvenient . . . While it has the advantage of being more picturesque, more elegant and more distinctly the English National Style than any other. . .⁴³

It is this extension of the competence of the Oxford Society into non-ecclesiastical architecture which is particularly interesting. It was no longer a clerical body leading the clergy, but was attempting to transfer its influence to secular matters where resistance to the Gothic style was naturally greatest. This line was consistently pursued by the Society throughout the 1850s, and is a sign of their recognition that the dominance of ecclesiology in the early days of the Gothic Revival might hinder its overall success. This represents a profound insight into the nature of the Gothic Revival, overcoming the natural prejudice towards ecclesiastical architecture caused by the accessibility and easy applicability of ecclesiastical precedents. It also represents a deeper understanding of Pugin's ideas, acknowledging his offer of inspiration for domestic buildings: 'The peasant's hut, the yeoman's cottage, the farmer's house, the baronial hall, each may be perfect of its kind; the student should visit village and town, hamlet and city'.⁴⁴ It was Pugin's neglected ideas on domestic architecture that the Society developed in the 1850s.

The decade opened with the Rev. Dr. Harington's Presidential Address of 1851. He sought to emphasise the broader architectural nature of the Society, avoiding its previously exclusive stress on ecclesiology:

The question, then, which I wish to propose for your consideration is, whether the end of our institution would not be more fully accomplished if our attention were less exclusively devoted to that one branch of our subject . . . I . . . venture to suggest the expansion of . . . enquiries beyond the range of ecclesiastical architecture into fields which cannot be altogether disregarded if we wish to preserve our distinctive character as an Architectural Society.

Harington's worry was that the Gothic revival had been too exclusively successful in the field of church building, leaving domestic architecture behind. The Gothic could only retrieve its position as a truly national style if its use spread to all building types, and a first step in this direction would be to encourage research into Gothic-style domestic buildings. He praised 'the recent publication of Mr Hudson Turner', which was devoted to medieval domestic architecture, then went on to voice his hopes for what such study might achieve:

[we] might expect to obtain a series of dissertations, which would be listened to with interest among ourselves, and be calculated to supply what every body must feel is a great desideratum, viz, the true principles upon which domestic buildings should be designed: for it may with truth be said that many

⁴² Dep. d. 520, 18 and 27 May 1857.

⁴³ Dep. d. 538, 1859 letter 478.

⁴⁴ A.W.N. Pugin, *An Apology* (1843), 20-1.

of our attempts to give a mediaeval character to modern domestic building result in nothing but an inharmonious and inconsistent combination or application of fragments taken merely at random from ecclesiastical edifices.⁴⁵

It was perhaps under such prompting that in 1851 J.H. Parker had taken over from R.C. Hussey (Hon. Member of O.A.S.) as editor of T. Hudson Turner's *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England from the Conquest to the End of the Thirteenth Century*.⁴⁶ This was published by Parker in 1851; after Turner's death in 1852, Parker completed the work with three volumes on domestic architecture from the reign of Edward I to the time of Henry VIII (published 1853–9). It is notable that in this labour, which used the 'few scattered materials' left by Turner, Parker was aided by three Honorary Members of the Oxford Society, William Twopeny, Edward Blore and Richard C. Hussey.⁴⁷

The awareness in Oxford at this time of the lack of knowledge of medieval domestic architecture is further highlighted by G.E. Street's address to the Society in February 1853. Street joined the Society in 1849, and became honorary architect to the diocese of Oxford in 1850.⁴⁸ He was a fairly active member of the Society, on occasion delivering lectures and serving two terms of two years on the executive committee. His attendance necessarily dwindled when he moved to London in 1855, but in 1862 he became a life member of the Society. His 1853 lecture to the Society (he also gave at least one other, in the 1854–5 Session) was entitled 'On the Revival of the Ancient Style of Domestic Architecture'⁴⁹ and stressed the failure of architects to adapt the Gothic style to modern domestic use. This, however, was understandable:

Unquestionably our revival of ecclesiastical architecture has been by far more uniformly successful than that of domestic but this seems to require little explanation. It is the result simply of the fact, that men are more generally interested in the one than in the other. And I believe, that by the time we have interested the world in the revival of domestic architecture, we shall find that we know how to build houses very much better than we do now.

The major problem hindering public interest in revived domestic work was ignorance. The public possessed a distorted image of the nature of Gothic domestic architecture:

Now we all know the modern idea of a Gothic house, the great feature of which it seems ought always to be that it should have as many gables as possible in the smallest given space. . . . But this is certainly contrary to old canons . . . [and] it is so notorious that the world in general imagined the Third Pointed to be the only style allowable for domestic work, that it is very necessary to take every opportunity of diligently combating the idea.

The means of combating these misconceptions was to publish research on earlier domestic architecture, 'for really, with the exception of some of the buildings in that most delightful of all English cities, – Wells⁵⁰ – I hardly know where one is to look for any published examples of the [earlier] style.' This was exactly the gap, however, which Turner and Parker's work aimed to fill. Street referred his audience to the already-published first volume of this work, and all of the 16 buildings he mentions in his

⁴⁵ *Proceedings*, Presidential Address 1851.

⁴⁶ T. Hudson Turner and J.H. Parker, *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England*, ii (1853), preface.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* loc. cit.

⁴⁸ *Dictionary of National Biography*, lv, 42–5.

⁴⁹ *Ecclesiologist*, n.s. xiv (1859), 70–80.

⁵⁰ The Vicar's Close is illustrated in A.C. and A.W.N. Pugin, *Examples of Gothic Architecture*, iii (1838).

address as particularly rewarding for study were included in the completed work. Only five of these were illustrated, but this is to be expected in a work which was more a history and gazetteer than a book of architectural examples. Turner and Parker told the architect where existing medieval domestic work was to be found, and although the four volumes are copiously illustrated, it was then up to the architect to go and study the remains in detail. They thus encouraged the architect to make England his classroom, and in this way were pursuing Puginian ideals.

The importance of the study of medieval domestic architecture was reiterated by the Committee in 1855: 'The one great object of our society is to promote the study of Gothic architecture – Church architecture, certainly, in the first place, but Domestic Gothic architecture also'.⁵¹ This was rewarded in the 1856–7 Session with a paper from J.T. Jeffcock on 'Gothic Architecture, A National Style' which 'could be employed for buildings, civil and religious, public and private, large and small', and a paper from the architect Charles Buckeridge on 'The Universal Applicability of Gothic Architecture'. He stressed the importance in domestic buildings of developing the design truthfully out of the plan, rather than designing the elevation first (thus showing his Puginian faith), and concluded that 'To every building, no matter what, he would apply *unflinchingly* our Gothic architecture of the nineteenth century, and guarantee that there should be no lack of light, or any other of those inconveniences, real or imaginary, which Gothic architecture has been charged with producing'.

The crusade continued in 1859 with papers on 'Proper Decoration and Furnishing of Gothic Dwelling Houses', 'Ancient Metal-work applied to Domestic Purposes', and 'Plans of Castles and Houses during the Middle Ages'. Finally, there was James Parker (the son of J.H. Parker) on 'The Study of English Domestic Architecture'. His call was for the continued development of the National Style and the rejection of foreign innovations. Then, however, he turned to look at the world of fashionable architecture and came across the inevitable conflict between the idealistic world of the Oxford Architectural Society Puginists and the cut and thrust of competition within the architectural profession, just entering a new phase with the introduction of Ruskinian ideas:

Popularity may be gained for the moment by the architect who brings over new designs, as some speculator who imports some novelty, but . . . English art will never be advanced one jot by the swamping of all national beauty in the gaudy display and meretricious colours of some Venetian beauty, and no architect's name will be honoured by posterity who, despising his own country's treasures . . . goes to a foreign market and comes back laden with tinsel, and dazzles for a moment the eyes of the admiring and flattering crowd around him.⁵²

The Oxford Society looked set to champion a style based on Old English precedents against the excesses of mid-Victorian eclecticism which were leading to the discrediting of the Gothic Revival. The call of the Society throughout the 1850s had been to look at ancient English domestic architecture in order to find non-ecclesiastical precedents for non-ecclesiastical buildings. The Gothic Revival could not survive if ecclesiastical ornament was simply applied to domestic buildings because this transgressed Pugin's principle of Propriety. Similarly, it could not survive if foreign Gothic precedents were imported because then it would no longer be a national style. James Parker summarised the attitude of these diehard Puginists. He

referred to the mistake which many made in supposing Gothic to be an ecclesiastical and not a national style; as if, during the Middle Ages, there were two styles, one for churches and another for

⁵¹ *Proceedings*, 1855.

⁵² *Proceedings*, 9 Feb. 1859.

houses. . . He insisted on the necessity of careful study of old examples to understand the perfection of the Gothic as applied to our manor-houses and castles, — not simply as regards form and detail, but also plan and purpose, and especially in connection with the history of our country. . .

All that was needed was study, and the precedents would be there for modern imitation. It might almost be expected that the Society would start producing sets of measured drawings of Cotswold manor-houses to be imitated as suburban villas. This, however, was not to be. The leading lights of the Society saw clearly that the Gothic revival was faltering, but among the membership enthusiasm had drained away. For a society whose membership was largely clerical, the promotion of Gothic domestic architecture lacked the important ingredient of religious enthusiasm from which the ecclesiastical Gothic revival had gained so much. The Society no longer had the resources of its early years, and in 1860 it found itself in financial difficulty.

Since 1846 the Society's growing library and collections of casts, drawings and engravings had been prestigiously (if inappropriately) housed in the Holywell Music Room. In 1860, however, the lease came to an end and, having done the necessary repairs, the Society found itself not only without a home, but in the red. After much heart-searching, it was decided that the Society could only survive if it broadened its horizons still further. The results were the renaming of the Society as the 'Oxford Architectural and Historical Society', and a change in the objects and status of the society which was tantamount to a refoundation. The Society fell back on the security of *Academia* and became almost exclusively concerned with the history of architecture and with antiquarian and archaeological matters. It did some important work in preservation, its great victories being North Leigh Roman villa (1871), Hatford church (1873), Carfax tower (1896) and St. Bartholomew's chapel (1896), but apart from this it became an introverted academic society of little importance to architectural history. The promise of a new life as the champion of domestic Gothic never fulfilled itself.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the continuity between the ecclesiastical Gothic Revival and the vernacular domestic revival which can be traced through the Society. The link between the Puginist ecclesiologists and the Old English revivalists is definitely there, and is probably stronger than that between the Puginists and the eclectic Gothicists of the mid-Victorian period.

It is not, perhaps, going too far to suggest that G.E. Street was influenced by this and passed his enthusiasm for domestic architecture on to Philip Webb, who was his chief draughtsman between 1852 and 1859, and who is on the membership list of the Society for 1856. Certainly, the revolution in English domestic architecture which Webb and R.N. Shaw (another of Street's assistants) helped to bring about was based on the study of English domestic work which Pugin had recommended, but which had been ignored by the early Gothic revivalists. During the 1850s, the Oxford Society was one body which had renewed Pugin's call for the detailed study of English domestic architecture which bore fruit in the domestic revival of the 1860s and '70s.