

The Sculpture over the Gatehouse at Merton College, Oxford, 1464–5

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SUMMARY

A 15th-century sculpture over Merton College gatehouse is shown to have been erected in 1464–5 during the wardenship of Henry Sever (warden 1455–71), known as a benefactor to the college; the subwarden's accounts confirm that it depicts St. John the Baptist, and that a lost sculpture formerly above depicted the Trinity. The whole was executed by the mason Robert Janyns and his son. Bosses within the gatehouse vault include mostly Yorkist symbols, though one features some apparently Lancastrian emblems and may have been placed there by Sever to celebrate Edward IV's marriage with Elizabeth Woodville. The initials TB refer probably to Thomas Bourchier, archbishop of Canterbury, or to Thomas Bekynton, bishop of Bath and Wells.

Visitors to Merton College, Oxford are at once confronted by a mysterious sculpture over its entrance (Fig. 1). Who put it there? What do its strange carvings symbolize? The gatehouse on whose north façade the sculpture is displayed began to be erected, it seems, in the time of Warden Rodbourne (1416–17). A royal licence exists for him to build a tower of stone and lime and to embattle and crenellate it. But the licence is dated 4 April 1418¹ by which time Rodbourne had ceased to be warden. Since the licence was granted to him by name it can reasonably be argued that at least the intention to build goes back to 1416–17.² The bursar's roll for 25 March to 30 July 1417³ tells us that a mason at Burford was paid 6s. 6d. for two weeks' work, that the existing gate and the room next to it were repaired, and that a great quantity of laths, pins, lath-nails, broad nails and stone nails was bought. But it does not specifically refer to the rebuilding of the gatehouse. Unfortunately there are no subwardens' rolls between 1416 and 1420. Those which do survive for 1420–22 offer no evidence on the gatehouse.⁴ The date of the licence has led some authorities, such as Henderson, to conclude that it was built in 1418.⁵ It may have been operational by then, but its vault and ornamentation were certainly incomplete. But when was the new gatehouse finished? Some visual evidence survives of how it looked in the 16th and 17th centuries.

From the 16th come the pictures made by Agas and Bereblock.⁶ The former is too schematic to help, but that by Bereblock, though also schematic, shows at the top of the gatehouse a figure in a niche. A statue of the Virgin is a possibility, especially in view of the

¹ M[erton] C[ollege] R[ecord] 178.

² A.B. Emden, *B[iographical] R[egister] of the members of the U[niversity of] O[xford] to 1500*, iii (Oxford, 1957), 1582–3.

³ MCR 3742.

⁴ MCR 3979–3980.

⁵ B. Henderson, *Merton College* (1899), pp. 56, 259.

⁶ *Old Plans of Oxford* by Agas, Hollar and Loggan (O.H.S. xxxviii, 1899), plate II.

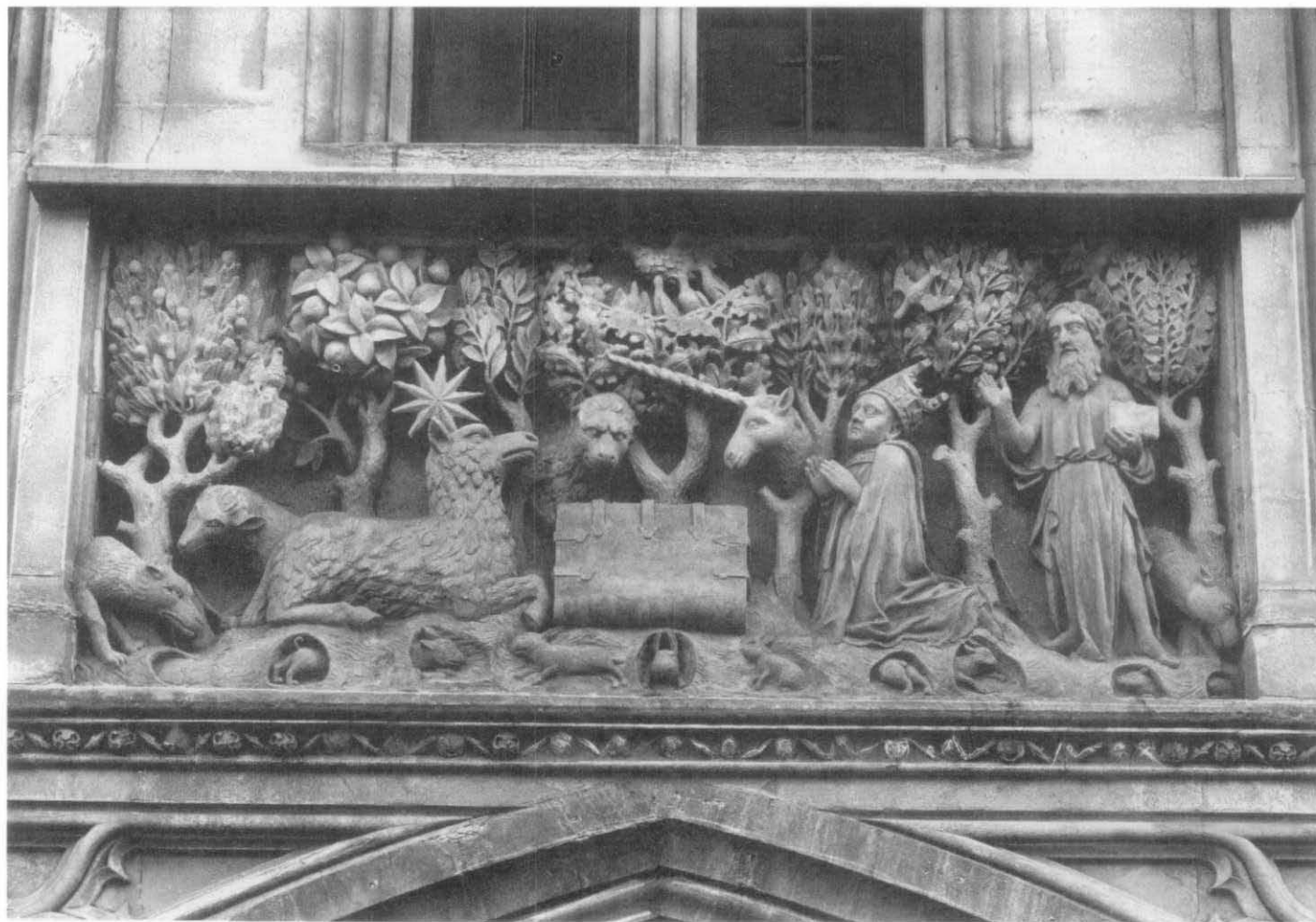


Fig. 1. Sculpture over Merton College gatehouse.

dedication of the college, but as the foundation statutes remind us, the college was founded also in honour of the Trinity and St. John the Baptist. From the early 17th century comes the evidence of a view of the college on the monument of Sir Henry Savile (1621). This shows that there was a small sculpture at the upper part of the gatehouse⁷ but it is not clear that it shows a representation of the Virgin; the Trinity is also a possibility, and unfortunately by the time that David Loggan's *Oxonia Illustrata* was published in 1675⁸ the small sculpture had vanished. Beneath it the Savile Monument shows that there were two windows, one above the other. On either side of the lower window were two statues, one of Edward I (on the east)⁹ and one of Walter de Merton, as bishop of Rochester (on the west). Below each statue was a corbel¹⁰ and on each side of the gate itself two further corbels. That on the east supported a shield displaying the arms of John Chedworth, bishop of Lincoln (1451–71), a former college member and ordinary of the diocese, in which Oxford then lay;¹¹ that on the west showed those of Henry Sever, warden of the college 1455–71,¹² and himself, as will be seen, a donor towards the cost of the new ornamentation. Inclusion of the arms of Chedworth and Sever strongly suggests that the completion of the façade took place during the years of Sever's wardenship. It is recorded on his brass in the chapel that he had been 'as a second founder and principal benefactor of the college'; other buildings attributed to him include part of the warden's house on the east side of Front Quadrangle, a private chapel on the west side of the same building and the upper storey of the tower of the church of St. Cross, Holywell.¹³

Below the uppermost of the two windows and between the statues of the king and the bishop was until 1838 what Henderson describes as 'an ornamental and curious antique sculpture with elaborate cresting'.¹⁴ A recent account of it runs as follows: 'This very interesting work, somewhat restored, summarises symbolically the major doctrines of the New Testament. On the right is St. John the Baptist, carrying a book, the harbinger of Christ. The life of Christ is variously represented: his incarnation and exaltation (the unicorn); his sacrifice (the Lamb of God and the pelican in its piety feeding its young from its breast); his Resurrection (the lion); the Holy Spirit (the dove); the sun of righteousness. In the centre is the Book of Seven Seals, described in the Book of Revelation and symbolic of the Day of Judgement. Above are three birds, two of which at least resemble an eagle, the symbol of St. John the Evangelist, the putative author of the Book of Revelation. The seven trees in the background each represent a different species. John Pointer, chaplain, in his description of the carving in 1749 thought that they were a reference to Palm Sunday, but more specific symbolism can be identified. From the left, the foliage and fruit seem to portray the pomegranate (eternal life) or apple (tree of knowledge); the orange (fecundity); the ash (tree of the universe), box or hornbeam; the oak (fidelity); the beech (tree of nuts signifying the church) or sallow (medieval substitute for palm); the walnut (its shell standing for Christ's human flesh covering his divine nature) or myrtle; the poplar (humanity). In the foreground, conies, which are being hunted by hounds, may represent the checking of waywardness or just be delightful decoration. Attendant upon these mysteries is the kneeling

⁷ A.J. Bott, *Merton College, Oxford. A Short History of the Buildings* (1993), frontispiece.

⁸ D. Loggan, *Oxonia Illustrata* (Oxford, 1975), plate IV.

⁹ Bott, *op. cit.* note 7, p. 6.

¹⁰ Beneath the king were the royal arms of England and France as adopted by Henry IV, while beneath the bishop were his personal arms 'two chevrons per pale, over all a cross crosslet fitchée'.

¹¹ *BRUO*, i. 401–2; 'azure, a chevron between three wolves' (goats' or cocks') heads erased or' (W.K. Riland Bedford, *The Blazon of Episcopacy* (Oxford, 1897), p. 72).

¹² *BRUO*, iii. 1672–3; 'a fess nebule between three annulets' (A.J. Bott, *Mons. in Merton College Chapel* (1964), p. 62).

¹³ *BRUO*, iii. 1672–3.

¹⁴ Henderson, *Merton College*, p. 251.

figure of the Founder, the Bishop of Rochester.¹⁵ The sculpture was 'defaced in Oliver's reign' and in September 1682 'it was repaired and new oyled over in white colours' as well as the statues which had also suffered.¹⁶

But when had it been put up? And who made it? Anthony Wood in the 17th century referred on one occasion to 'that elegant effigies of St. John Προδρόμου preaching in the wilderness cut in stone'.¹⁷ But on another he states that it is 'supposed to be a reliqu of the old Collegiate Church of St. John the Baptist, Merton'.¹⁸ This suggestion was picked up in 1749 by John Pointer, sometime chaplain of Merton, who said more categorically in his *Oxonienensis Academia* it 'is a reliqu of the Church dedicated to that Saint (John the Baptist) which was built upon, or near the same Ground where Merton Chapel now stands . . .'.¹⁹ There is no evidence for this, and indeed the style of the sculpture is clearly 15th-century and not 12th or 13th. The account by the Royal Historical Commission states that the 'central panel' of the gatehouse was inserted by Richard Fitzjames (warden 1488-1507) and reset at the Restoration.²⁰ But for the alleged insertion by Fitzjames there is no evidence. Fitzjames was indeed a generous benefactor of the college in the 15th and early 16th centuries and completed the warden's house, but the 'central panel' of the gatehouse, as Chedworth's and Sever's arms clearly suggest, should be earlier. A valuable reference by E.A. Gee in his 'Oxford masons, 1370-1530'²¹ states that in 1463/1464 Robert Janyns, master mason, and his son 'fitted the St John the Baptist carving above the gate of Merton College and also made a carving of the Trinity and other things'. For this statement precise evidence can now be given. It comes from the roll of Thomas Bloxham, subwarden, for the two years 1463/1464 and 1 August 1464-14 April 1465. (Bloxham was a medical fellow of the college between c. 1447 and 1473.)²² A translation of the key section of the roll for 1 August 1464-14 April 1465 reads:

For the making of the great gate of the college. Firstly [he] accounts for liveries to the masons for making the said gate beneath the canopy £3 10s. and 56s. 8d. for making the canopy and to two masons working on the stone of St. John for seven weeks 46s. 8d. and 6s. for the stone and 2s. for the carriage from Taynton to Abingdon. And 2s. 4d. for a regard for the son of Master Robert. And 2s. 8d. to Master Robert for his labour concerning the positioning of that stone and of the Trinity about that same work. Total £9 6s. 4d.²³

¹⁵ Cf. Bott, *op. cit.* note 7, p. 8, and see below, note 19. We have been much helped in these identifications by Sandra Raphael and A.F. Mitchell.

¹⁶ *Wood's Life and Times*, ed. A. Clark, iii (O.H.S. xxvi, 1894), 27. The heads of the Founder and perhaps that of St. John the Baptist may have been restored.

¹⁷ *Wood's City of Oxford*, ed. A. Clark, i (O.H.S. xv, 1889), 174-5.

¹⁸ Appendix to A. Wood, *History and Antiquities of the Colleges and Halls in the University of Oxford*, ed. J. Gutch (Oxford, 1790), p. 221.

¹⁹ J. Pointer, *Oxonienensis Academia* (1749), pp. 15-16; Pointer's account contains some discrepancies. 'In which Stonework, you find the Baptist (our Saviour's Fore-runner) in the Habit of a Monk; and our Saviour himself coming after him, with the Dove over his Head, in the Shape of which the Holy Ghost descended on him at his Baptism. There is likewise the *Agnus Dei* and Sun of Righteousness, with the New Testament in his Hand bringing a new Revelation to the World. Also the Serpent condemn'd to creep on the Ground, whose Head 'twas prophesied our Saviour should break. Likewise the Unicorn, whose Horn was an Emblem of our Saviour's Exaltation. You may observe likewise the Palm-trees, with Branches broken off to strow on the Ground, in his Procession to Jerusalem. And over all the Pelican feeding her young ones with her own Blood, an emblem of our Saviour's dying for Mankind'.

²⁰ *Historical Monuments Commission (City of Oxford)* (1939), p. 77.

²¹ *Archaeological Journal*, cix (1953), p. 79.

²² *BRUO*, i, 204-5; cf. E.M. Getz, 'The faculty of medicine before 1500', in *Late Medieval Oxford*, ed. J.I. Catto and T.A.R. Evans (*History of the University of Oxford*, ii (1992), p. 396).

²³ For the Latin text see Appendix.

At the bottom of the roll are recorded the gifts of Warden Sever,²⁴ six named master fellows,²⁵ Mr. John Smyth, clerk,²⁶ John Aston and his wife and a donation from four unnamed priests.

Thus it can be shown that the sculpture dates not, as Mr. Gee thought, from 1463/1464 but from the second period of the subwarden's office, 1 August 1464–14 April 1465. It was made of Taynton stone and the work on it took seven weeks. It looks as if four men were involved in its completion. Special responsibility attached to the son of Robert Janyns, while his father evidently had general oversight and supervised the hoisting of the stone up into its position in the upper part of the gatehouse. The fact that the carriage of the stone cost 2s. suggests that it almost certainly travelled by cart, for the Eton accounts show²⁷ that 'in 1456–7 several masons were paid 2s. per cart-load for carrying the stone by road from the quarry at Taynton to Culham (on the Thames below Oxford) a distance of twenty miles as the crow flies. A further 2s. was paid for the carriage of the stone by road from Culham to Henley. Thence bargemen conveyed this stone to Eton, being paid 12d. per doliate'. It seems that the Merton piece of Taynton stone was taken to Abingdon by cart to be worked there. Some references connect the Janyns family with Abingdon.²⁸ Moreover Master Robert had been the master mason for the building of Merton Tower in 1450–1.²⁹ The notice of him in Bloxham's roll is the last sight we have of this great craftsman. The fact that the stone is specifically allotted to St. John disposes of any idea of another identification.³⁰

There remains the problem of the reference in the roll to Janyns' work on the Trinity. It is worth noting that c. 1480–3 the vault of the Divinity School was being completed and that it shows a boss depicting the Trinity which has been described thus: 'The Father as an old man crowned and holding a globe, the son wearing a crown of thorns and showing wounded hands, the spirit in the form of a dove with wings outspread'.³¹ If the sculpture in the upper part of the gatehouse was of the Trinity rather than of the Virgin it may have taken a similar form.

Inside the gatehouse is a vault with six corbels and seventeen bosses. Nine of the bosses run across the centre of the vault from north to south, six of them showing the badges of Edward IV and his father, namely the rose and the fetterlock or padlock. Of the bosses on the two cross pieces seven show the rose and one the sun in splendour – another badge of Edward IV. Two more of the central bosses and those the largest depict St. John the Baptist and the Virgin and Child, with a globe in its hand; on either side of the Virgin and Child are the flourished initials 'T' and 'B' (Fig. 2, left). The most likely candidate thus indicated is Thomas Bourchier, archbishop of Canterbury (1454–86), since he was visitor of the college. He crowned Edward IV as king in 1461 (28 June) and, subsequently, Elizabeth Woodville as queen on 26 May 1465. Another possibility is Thomas Bekynton, bishop of Bath and Wells

²⁴ For Sever, see now Catto and Evans, *History of the University of Oxford*, ii, pp. 772, 782.

²⁵ George Hargill, Thomas Danet, Thomas Ster' and Henry Sutton (cf. *BRUO*, ii, 870; i, 540–1, iii, 1773–4, 1819–20); Henry Bryan and John Arnold (ibid. i, 290; 47).

²⁶ *BRUO*, iii, 1716. John Aston was Warden Sever's almoner in 1468–9 (MCR 4004).

²⁷ Cf. D. Knoop and C.P. Jones, 'The Building of Eton College, 1442–1460. A study of the History of Operative Masonry', *Trans. Quatuor Coronati Lodge*, 46 (1993), p. 85. We owe this reference to the kindness of Mr. R.B. Peberdy.

²⁸ On 8 November 1391 a John Janyns was witness to a deed of Abingdon Abbey (*Two Cartularies of Abingdon Abbey*, ed. G. Lambrick and C. Slade (O.H.S. n.s. xxxii, 1990), p. 453). Robert Janyns' servant was paid 4d. for coming from Abingdon to Oxford (*Oxford City Documents*, ed. J.E. Thorold Rogers (O.H.S. xviii, 1891), p. 327). Robert Chevynton, the master mason of All Souls College, was probably mason of Abingdon Abbey 'and it is logical to suppose that his warden, Janyns, may have worked there also' (Gee, op. cit. note 21, p. 72).

²⁹ *Oxford City Documents*, pp. 314–37.

³⁰ For Pointer's misidentification of Christ see above, note 19.

³¹ H. Edith Legge, *The Divinity School, Oxford, a Guide for Visitors* (Oxford, 1923), p. 9 and plate 32.



Fig. 2. Bosses inside Merton College gatehouse.

(1443–65), for though he had been at New College and had died on 14 January 1465 the executors of his will (proved on 31 January) had entered into negotiations with two other colleges of which Bekynton had not been a member, one of which was Merton.³² Warden Sever was an old acquaintance of Bekynton: both had belonged to the *familia* of Henry VI, Bekynton had been consecrated bishop in Eton College Chapel when Sever had been Eton's first provost, and on 1 April 1468 Sever and his fellows made an agreement with the dean and chapter of Wells promising to perform exequies and a requiem mass in Bekynton's memory either on the anniversary of St. Felix in pincis (14 January), when Bekynton had died, or on the following day (the feast of St. Maurus).³³ The eminent position of the boss and the hard fact of the granting of lands at Puxton (Somerset) worth 40s. a year also make identification of the initials with Bekynton an alternative possibility. The date of the vault is likely to have been the same as that of the façade, though it could be a little later. If the Bekynton identification were accepted it would have to be later than 12 November 1464, the date of the bishop's will. The Yorkist symbols mean of course that it must be before 1485.

Special interest attaches to the sixth of the central bosses (from north to south) (Fig. 2, right). This has been described in the *Historical Monuments Commission* volume as a goat's head and sickle.³⁴ Beneath the goat's head on the left can be seen the stock of a tree erased or ragged staff. The prominent position of the boss suggests that it signifies an important personality. But is the animal a goat? It has curled serrated horns, and if it could be an antelope another possibility suggests itself. Edward IV had secretly married Elizabeth Woodville on 1 May 1464, and her marriage had been publicly acknowledged at Michaelmas of that year.³⁵ The queen's family belonged to the Lancastrian faction. The antelope had been a badge of Henry IV (and a chained antelope of both Henry V and VI)³⁶ while the stock of a tree erased had been borne as a badge of Edward III (for Woodstock) and by his three successors as king.³⁷ Sever, as an old Lancastrian, could have taken advantage of the Woodville marriage to place a Lancastrian emblem beside the three emblems of York. The antelope in heraldry can be shown either proper or as a monster with straight serrated horns, so that the Merton boss (which has distinctly curled horns) is perhaps intended as 'proper'. A Woodville link is not as far-fetched as may at first sight appear, since two of the Woodville brothers were entertained in Merton in 1468.³⁸ The sickle is the badge of the Hungerfords, who were also of the Lancastrian

³² The other college, Lincoln, already had links with the diocese of Bath and Wells. Bekynton's executors made an agreement with its rector, John Tristope, on 12 November 1465, whereby the college agreed to recognise the bishop's obit and received £200 with which it bought lands and paid for a new rector's lodgings south of Lincoln Hall. For Bekynton see *BRUO*, i. 157–8. For the will cf. *Somerset Medieval Wills (1383–1590)*, ed. F.W. Weaver (*Somerset Record Soc.* xvi (1901), pp. 202–7), A.G. Judd, *Thomas Bekynton, bishop of Bath and Wells, 1443–1465* (1961), pp. 164–7, 188–90, and V.H. Green, *The Commonwealth of Lincoln College, 1427–1977* (Oxford, 1979), p. 33. Of course the subwarden's initials were also 'T' 'B', but it seems unlikely that the sculpted initials are his.

³³ MCR 1230. To record Bekynton on a boss in the gatehouse would have been peculiarly appropriate as he had himself built two of the gatehouses at Wells, the Bishop's Eye and Penniless Porch. His executors were all members of the chapter at Wells, Hugh Sugar, the chancellor, John Pope, canon, and Michael Swan, provost.

³⁴ *Historical Monuments Commission (City of Oxford)*, p. 77.

³⁵ C. Ross, *Edward IV* (1974), pp. 85, 91.

³⁶ *Boutell's Heraldry* (1966), p. 209.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ On 23 June 1468 the college paid 12s. on spices 'pro fratribus regine' (MCR 3784). Which of the queen's brothers is referred to is unclear; probably not Anthony, Lord Scales, since he was in France in June 1468 for the marriage of Margaret of York on 3 July to Charles of Burgundy. The most likely must be Lionel Woodville, who was already a canon of Lincoln. He was a future Oxford graduate, chancellor of the university and bishop of Salisbury. Born about 1453, he would have been about fifteen at the time. He was to be ordained acolyte and deacon at Osney Abbey on 18 April 1473 and 4 April 1477 respectively (*BRUO*, iii. 2083–4).

faction. The executors of Lord Hungerford had contributed to the building of Merton Tower in 1450-1.

The final chapter in the history of the gatehouse belongs to the 19th century. On 1 February 1838 the Governing Body of the college resolved 'to refront with Bath stone the tower and gateway . . . according to an estimate furnished (by Mr. Plowman) and the plans and drawings of Mr. Blower (Edward Blore, the architect)'.³⁹ In the process the canopies over the statues of the king and the bishop were given a decorated rather than a perpendicular appearance; the central much ornamented window was introduced; and the coats of arms of the college and of Warden Bullock Marsham (warden 1826-1880) were placed at the upper part of the façade.⁴⁰ The 'History of St. John the Baptist' was lowered from the upper part of the façade to its present position over the gate for all to see.

APPENDIX (Merton College Record 4000)

Compotus Thome Bloxham vicecustodis de administracione sue a festo Sancti Petri quod dicitur ad vincula anno regni regis Edwardi quarti [tercio *crossed out*] quarti usque ad festum anno eiusdem regis quarto ac per unum annum [1 August 1463-1 August 1464]. . . .

Compotus Thome Bloxham vicecustodis de administracione sue a festo Sancti Petri quod dicitur ad vincula anno regni regis Edwardi quarti [tercio *crossed out*] quarti usque ad festum Pasche proximo sequentis [1 August 1464-14 April 1465]. . . .

Compotus Thome Bloxham pro ffactura magne porte collegii. In primis computat liberat' lathomis pro ffactura dicte porte sub tabernaculo iii li' x s. Et lvi s. viii d. pro ffactura tabernaculi. Et duobus lathomis operantium circa lapidem Sancti Johannis per septem septimanas xlv s. viii d. Et vi s. pro lapide illo. Et ii s. pro cariagio illius lapidis a Taynton ad Abyndon. Et iis. iiiii d. pro regard' filio Magistri Roberti. et ii s. viii d. magistro Roberto pro laboribus suis circa posicionem illius lapidis et trinitatis et aliis operariis circa idem opus.

Summa ix li' vi s. iiiii d.

Vicecustos computat recepta. In primis a domino custode xiii s. iiiii d.

a magistro Hardegyl' vis. viii d.

a magistro Danet iii s. iiiii d.

a magistro Ster' iii s. iiiii d.

a magistro Sutton iii s. iiiii d.

a magistro Bryan xx d.

a magistro Arnolde xx d.

a quattuor presbiteris viii s.

a Johanni Smyth, clerico xxx d.

Et a Johanni Aston et uxor eius ii s. iiiii d.

The Society is grateful to Merton College, Oxford, for a grant towards publication of this paper.

³⁹ Register I.5, p. 148.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bott, *Short History of the Buildings*, pp. 6, 14.