

# John Ruskin, Oxford and the Architectural Society, 1837 to 1840

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## SUMMARY

*John Ruskin – eminent art, architectural and social critic of the Victorian age – published his first major work, Modern Painters, as an anonymous 'Graduate of Oxford' in 1843. His early years at Oxford between 1837 and 1840 were significant not only for his reputation in scholarly circles but in shaping the ideas and themes that would be central to his writing and teaching. As a gentleman-commoner at Christ Church, he established a network of academic connections and friendships which lasted lifelong. Ruskin's natural interests in architecture, history and the visual arts were strengthened by his association with a group of like-minded students and scholars. Among their common concerns was the founding of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture in 1839 – the forerunner of the present Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society.*

In his personal accounts of his undergraduate years, Ruskin tended to understate the value of his experience at Oxford and yet it undoubtedly played a large part in his architectural education. This paper brings together evidence from his diaries, correspondence, essays and surviving drawings for Ruskin's first years at Oxford that shows just how significant the period was in the beginning of his 'real life's work'. It draws on the published *Proceedings* and unpublished papers of the Oxford Society and looks at Ruskin's connection with its activities. It explores other important contexts for Ruskin's experience of Oxford in the late 1830s: the changes occurring in the city itself at the start of the Victorian era, the treatment of its historic buildings, the influence of the Oxford Movement, the emergence of new architectural and historical scholarship. Looking forward to his major architectural works, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, it is possible to see that, embarking on university life in Oxford, Ruskin entered a rich cultural context which shaped profoundly his intellectual and imaginative response to the historic environment.

## RUSKIN AT OXFORD

John Ruskin's connection with Oxford begins at the very beginning of Victoria's reign in the late 1830s. His reputation as an art, architectural and social critic – the author of *Modern Painters* – is more commonly associated with his later connection with the university. As a collaborator in the design and building of the Oxford Museum and then as Slade Professor of Fine Art from 1870, founder of the Ruskin Drawing School, Ruskin returned to the Oxford of his youth as an established, if heterodox, critic of Victorian society and culture. This was the beginning of the period of his serious social and political writing; *Unto This Last* was published in 1860, the year that the Oxford Museum opened. But his earlier art and architectural works were underpinned by a different experience of Oxford. It was as an undergraduate there between 1837 and 1840 that John Ruskin's serious study of architecture and cultural history began. These early years formed a distinct chapter in his development as a writer and artist, as well as in his more formal education.

In literary terms, there were two significant achievements. In 1840, Ruskin was awarded the Newdigate Prize for his poem, the now little known and happily forgettable *Salsette and Elephantia*. For the 21-year-old John and his family this represented the acme of his university

career, with a recitation in the Sheldonian and encouraging words from the poet-laureate, William Wordsworth. With hindsight, however, a far more significant milestone was *The Poetry of Architecture*, which he described in his autobiography *Praeterita* as 'the beginning of my real life's work'. This was a series of essays written while he was at Oxford, and based on the observation and experiences of two summer tours which the Ruskin family took to Northern England and Scotland in 1837 and 1838. In this early prose, and the large number of his drawings that also survive from the period, one can trace the development of ideas about the interrelationship of architecture, environment and society that would form the foundation for his major works on architecture, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3).

This paper examines another aspect of the undergraduate years of the 'Graduate of Oxford'. It argues that Ruskin's experience at Oxford was particularly significant for the part that it played in the evolution of his notions of an architectural 'heritage' and, equally important, an awareness of the responsibility for stewardship of the built environment for future generations:

It is no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. *We have no right whatever to touch them.* They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generation of mankind who are to follow us.<sup>1</sup>

Passages like this, from 'The Lamp of Memory' in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, are usually claimed, with good reason, to have been written in response to the programmes of architectural restoration that Ruskin observed in France and Italy in the 1840s. Relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which his early architectural writing was also shaped by his years as an undergraduate and his first real contact with intellectual equals and academic study.<sup>2</sup> Oxford has readily been acknowledged as nourishing 'in him that passion for architecture which no single city in the United Kingdom is so richly dowered with the means of exciting and gratifying',<sup>3</sup> but other influences and friendships, considered in more detail below, were also undoubtedly significant. The particular focus for this study is the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture and the part that it played in Ruskin's developing awareness of architectural history and conservation. Embarking on university life in Oxford in the late 1830s, Ruskin entered a rich cultural context which played a profound part in shaping his understanding of, and sensitivity to, the historic character of architecture.

The history of Ruskin's undergraduate career at Oxford makes a relatively straightforward account. He was entered at Christ Church as a gentleman-commoner in 1836 and took up residence there in January 1837. Ruskin had his own rooms, at first in Peckwater Quad. It was apparently 'the regular course of a gentleman-commoner's residence to be promoted from Peckwater to Tom Quad, and turned out into the street for his last term' (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Ruskin had rooms in St. Aldate's for the last year. More unusual,

<sup>1</sup> *Works* 8.245 (all references to Ruskin's published works are from E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin* (39 vols., 1903-12); footnote references are given by volume and page number).

<sup>2</sup> G.W. Kitchin, *Ruskin in Oxford and Other Studies* (1904), 1-31; T. Hilton, *Ruskin: The Early Years* (1985), 41-63; R. Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford: The Art of Education* (1996). Ruskin's own account of these years formed chapters IX and X, 'Christ Church Choir' and 'Rosslyn Chapel', in *Praeterita*, vol. I, and chapter I, 'Of Age', in vol. II.

<sup>3</sup> G. Saintsbury, *Corrected Impressions* (New York, 1895), 198-218, in J.L. Bradley (ed.), *Ruskin: The Critical Heritage* (1984), 391.

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, 35.255n, *Praeterita*.



Fig. 1. Ruskin's rooms at Christ Church, Oxford, 1839 (reproduced by kind permission of the Ruskin Museum, Coniston).

however, was the fact that Ruskin's parents accompanied him to university. For the duration of his undergraduate study his mother, Margaret Ruskin, took lodgings in Oxford, at 90 High Street, in order to be near her son (Fig. 2). John James joined his family at weekends and the younger Ruskin also spent many evenings there and as much other free time as his studies allowed. They were an intense and closed family group and, although this must have set Ruskin apart from his fellow students, there is no evidence that he was embarrassed or unhappy with the arrangement. It was more important to the Ruskins that the pattern of family life was disrupted as little as possible. One of the consequences was that, although he made a few close friends among his fellow students and tutors, some of which would become lifelong friendships, Ruskin showed little inclination to become engaged in the communal aspects of undergraduate life. There were two specific exceptions. It seems he mixed socially at Lodor's, the meeting rooms of the exclusive Christ Church Society, which his mother referred to as his 'club'. He was elected a member in May 1837 through the influence of his friend, Henry Acland.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, with a group of the same Christ Church friends, he was drawn to join in the activities of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, newly founded in 1839.

The university's classical curriculum was not greatly to Ruskin's taste and was remote from his real interests at this stage in his life. In a letter to his former college tutor, Walter Lucas Brown, written a decade after his graduation, Ruskin was highly critical of the education he had received at Oxford.<sup>6</sup> Although he persevered with subjects which he found disagreeable he did not excel in his course work. Ill-health, partly induced by overwork, was a constant concern to his parents from 1839 onwards. There was also an added emotional strain: a hopeless infatuation with Adèle Domecq, the daughter of his father's late business partner, which ended with her marriage in March 1840 in France. Finally in the summer of 1840 Ruskin was compelled to terminate his studies altogether. 'I am grieved to say he has just had another attack indicating ruptured Blood Vessels,' his father wrote to a colleague, '& the Physicians have prescribed a total abandonment of study & to go to Italy for a few winter months'. Ruskin returned briefly to Oxford in May 1842 to take his degree but in reality the departure to Calais on 25 September 1840 marked the end of this phase of his undergraduate life. He wrote bitterly of this ending to Walter Brown in 1853: 'I left the University with broken health and lost hope ... I recovered my health by vomiting up – so to speak – that is to say totally forgetting – whatever I had learned by force all my life – more especially all my Greek history and Latin grammar'.<sup>7</sup> Ruskin always tended to speak slightly of his educational experience at Oxford, perhaps partly because it was something of a personal failure. He sat for a pass degree when he returned in 1842, though the award of an honorary double fourth degree in mathematics and classics was presumably intended by the university as recognition of his unfulfilled academic abilities.<sup>8</sup> Other aspects of Ruskin's university experience, however, were far from wasted in terms of his later work.

The Oxford to which John Ruskin went up as gentleman-commoner in 1837 was still essentially a medieval city. The Reverend W. Tuckwell in his *Reminiscences of Oxford* recalled that in the 1830s 'railroads and enclosures had not girdled Oxford proper with a coarse suburban fringe. On the three approaches to the town ... it was cut off, clear as a walled and gated Jericho from adjacent country'.<sup>9</sup> The railway did not arrive in Oxford until 1844, and

<sup>5</sup> V. Akin Burd (ed.), *The Ruskin Family Letters: The Correspondence of John James Ruskin, his Wife and their Son, John, 1801-1843* (1973), 478-9 (Margaret Ruskin to John James Ruskin, Thurs. 18 May 1837).

<sup>6</sup> A. Bradley, 'Ruskin at Oxford: Pupil and Master', *Studies in English Lit. 1500-1900*, 32 (1992), 747-64.

<sup>7</sup> *Works* 36.152.

<sup>8</sup> Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> W. Tuckwell, *Reminiscences of Oxford* (1900), 245.



Fig. 2. Ruskin's lodgings, 90 High Street, Oxford, 1837/8, reproduced from the Library Edition of *The Works of John Ruskin*, 35, Plate XI.

the major changes which most Victorian railway cities experienced – the historic ones most dramatically of all – did not begin to take effect until the 1860s. Oxford's population was expanding, from 12,000 in 1801 to 28,000 by 1851, but more slowly than in many industrialised cities elsewhere in Britain. Fiona MacCarthy in her biography of William Morris describes how, as an undergraduate in 1852, he was still able to enjoy a relatively unspoilt experience of the city's historic character and that there was still enough of old Oxford 'left intact for Morris to adopt it as the paradigm of a perfect medieval city'.<sup>10</sup>

For Ruskin, Oxford probably had a lesser impact initially. His visual imagination had already been fuelled by his family's tour of the continent in 1835, and he arrived as an undergraduate in 1837 with 'his head full of mountains and cathedrals'. He had seen and been enchanted by Rouen, another medieval city which Morris also came to cherish, and, by contrast with the Gothic splendour of France and Germany, Ruskin found the first sight of Christ Church dull and disappointing.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless if Ruskin's affection for Oxford was less idealised than Morris's, it was still deeply felt, and was expressed in a 'Turneresque view of the city encircled by spires and turrets, viewed across open meadow. This vision captured in 'the year in which I first saw Oxford and remember the look of its towers against the sunset as we drove down the hill at Iffley' was committed to paper in a dream-like watercolour of the city taken in 1838;<sup>12</sup> a vision that over thirty years later in 1872 Ruskin still cherished:

I will even venture to tell you my hope, though I shall be dead long before its possible fulfilment, that one day the English people will, indeed, so far recognize what education means as to surround this university with the loveliest park in England, twenty miles square; that they will forbid, in that environment, every unclean, mechanical and vulgar trade and manufacture, as any man would forbid them in his own garden; – and they will abolish every base and ugly building, and nest of vice and misery, as they would cast out a devil; – that the streams of the Isis and Cherwell will be kept pure and quiet among their fields and trees.<sup>13</sup>

In this typically prophetic piece from a lecture during his Slade Professorship, published in *The Eagle's Nest* (1872), Ruskin anticipated by a generation the far-sighted planning of city authorities which purchased forest, meadow and farmland around their boundaries to act as a buffer to suburban sprawl and as country park for their citizens. For Ruskin in his later life, however, the contrast was a symbolic one between the untidy suburban sprawl and industrialisation encroaching on the old city and his recollection of the streets in which he had learned to appreciate the historic character, as well as the picturesque possibilities, of architecture.

Drawing was one of the principal leisure activities that Ruskin allowed himself as recreation from undergraduate study. It was also, lifelong, a medium through which he analysed and exercised his visual imagination and documented his environment. His detailed pencil drawings of Oxford, like the one of Merton College made in 1838, recorded Oxford's narrow, cobbled streets and jumbled roof tops, towered over by magnificent medieval buildings (Fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> Ominously many of these, like St. Mary Magdalen, recorded in

<sup>10</sup> F. MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Times* (1994), 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Works* 35.190. A watercolour of 1842 ('Christ Church from St. Aldate's, Oxford', in a private collection) expresses the affection with which he came to regard it. Published for the first time in R. Hewison, I. Warrell and S. Wildman, *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites* (2000), cat.no.30.

<sup>12</sup> *Works* 35.622. The watercolour is in the collection of the Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster Univ.), no. 1421.

<sup>13</sup> *Works* 22.244. *The Eagle's Nest*.

<sup>14</sup> 'Merton College and Magpie Lane, Oxford', Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster Univ.), no. 967.



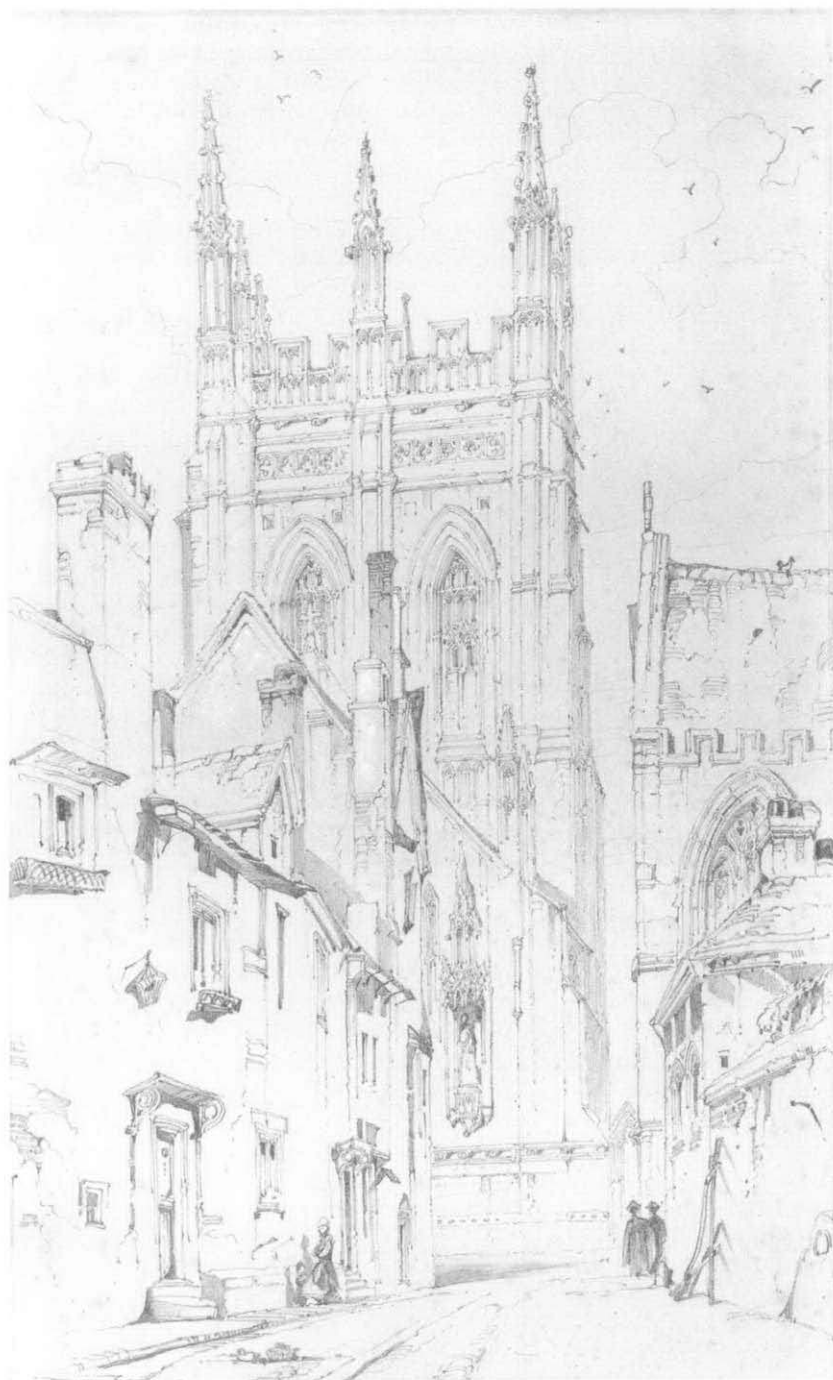


Fig. 3. Merton College and Magpie Lane, Oxford, 1838 (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University).  
Reproduced by kind permission of the Ruskin Foundation.

another drawing in Ruskin's first year in 1837, showed the signs of serious decay which already signalled the need for a major campaign of repairs: Ruskin meticulously detailed the crumbling parapet of the aisle roof held by temporary straps and ties (Fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> Oxford's mellow-coloured, limestone buildings had not yet seen the full vigour of renewal which necessity and Victorian enthusiasm for restoration would bring to bear on the city in a very short time, although some remodelling and re-facing of college buildings had already begun in the early decades of the century. By chance, Ruskin arrived to study in Oxford at a period in its building history when a programme of major repairs and rebuilding was just beginning. Also significant in architectural terms is the fact that the years between 1837 and 1843 were a watershed in Gothic revival architecture. It was a self-conscious transition and a subject of debate into which an undergraduate at Oxford with an architectural interest could not fail to have been drawn.

Ruskin's account of these first Oxford years superficially suggests that he had little time for such engagement and that his struggle with the classical curriculum, together with the large quantity of compulsory course reading, partly accounted for his having

no spare energy for the pursuit of such English history as the buildings of Oxford and its within-walk district ought to have provoked me, and pleaded with me, to know... If any of my tutors had only had the sense to stop off the books I did not like... and take two or three summer afternoon walks with me to Godstow and Abingdon, telling me what the places meant, I count that it would have saved me good seven years of strong life, spent in finding out for myself what I might have been told in a summer term.<sup>16</sup>

In his own estimation Ruskin felt that he had made little of his opportunity to know and appreciate the city. He did not anticipate the changes that would take place in it over the next thirty years and, like William Morris, he regretted 'not the least of losses the recognition that I didn't know in those days what a gain it was to be there'.<sup>17</sup> It is possible, however, to see beyond Ruskin's deprecation of the way that his undergraduate years were spent, and to gauge the degree to which his interest in architecture was enriched during that period, nourished by his circle of Oxford friends and colleagues.

#### 'THE MOULDERING COLUMNS OF PECKWATER'

The physical environment of Oxford itself, the quality of its architecture and the changes irreversibly altering its historic character, must have had an immediate effect on Ruskin's perception of the city. He took every opportunity to draw it. On being elected to Lodor's Club, Ruskin told his mother that the first advantage he would take of his new privileges would be 'to draw the Porch of St. Mary's which they have a very picturesque view of from the windows'.<sup>18</sup> One can appreciate from the drawings which he made in 1839 of his rooms in Tom Quad and of his mother's lodgings at 90 High Street (Figs. 1 and 2) that simply living in this rich historical setting had an appreciable effect especially in one so sensitive to visual impression. He was equally alive to the less picturesque aspect of neglected college buildings, remarking satirically in a letter to his father on the beauty of the day dawning, as he wrote from his desk, 'over the mouldering columns of Peckwater'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> 'St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford', Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster Univ.), no. 968.

<sup>16</sup> *Works* 35.610-11, *Praeterita*.

<sup>17</sup> MacCarthy, *Morris*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Burd, *Ruskin Family Letters*, 479 (Margaret Ruskin to John James Ruskin, 18 May 1837).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 439 (John Ruskin to John James Ruskin, Sun. 26 Feb. 1837).





Fig. 4. St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford, 1837 (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University). Reproduced by kind permission of the Ruskin Foundation.

'Mouldering' was a fair comment on the state of college architecture at the beginning of the Victorian era. Oxford was on the brink of a major rebuilding campaign. The university was expanding and the number of matriculations in 1840 began to approach the peak numbers that had been reached in the first half of the 17th century, with a corresponding demand for new accommodation.<sup>20</sup> During the period 1600 to 1660, there had been a boom in college building activity in Oxford. In the later 17th and early 18th centuries, many fine college buildings and institutions were added, some like Sir Christopher Wren's Tom Tower (1681-2) in the traditional Oxford 'allusory' Gothic style, others in an uncompromising early Palladian, like Dean Aldrich's Peckwater Quad (1705), whose 'mouldering columns' were referred to above and in which Ruskin had his first rooms. Architectural masterpieces of the 18th century included Hawksmoor's Clarendon Building and Gibbs's Radcliffe Camera and although there was more college building the number of students was steadily falling. By the early decades of the 19th century, however, enrolments began to rise again and reforms within the university coincided with a resumption in college building works after the Napoleonic Wars and some new building by the university, with the new University Press (1826-30).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless expectations of improved accommodation and university facilities continued to grow and by the 1840s it was becoming a critical issue.

Space and amenities for study were one aspect of the situation and another was a conservation problem with Oxford building stone, its inherent poor quality exacerbated by pollution from coal fires and the gasworks opened in 1819.<sup>22</sup> Most of the medieval college buildings and churches had been built with good quality, carefully selected, durable local limestones, such as Wheatley and Headington hardstones.<sup>23</sup> Later builders were not so selective and began the quarrying of less durable freestones:

Headington freestone, so coarse, so porous, so easily worked; the proximity of this stone to Oxford did not tempt the medieval builders, who wisely avoided it until Magdalen acquired the ownership of one of the quarries in the C15. But the C17 and C18 builders succumbed, and Headington freestone was used at Oxford far more extensively than any other; as a result millions of pounds have had to be expended in recent years on refacing university and college buildings.<sup>24</sup>

Alec Clifton-Taylor's observation in 1974 was as true for the early 19th century, when many buildings were already suffering from serious stone decay compounded by neglect. The new building work of the first decades of the 19th century was, then, concerned not only with improving college or university accommodation but with 'the first great refacing'. Large scale renewal of stonework took place at Lincoln College in 1824, Pembroke 1829-30, All Souls 1826-8, Exeter 1833-5 and Merton 1836-8.<sup>25</sup> This wave of restoration work, occasioned by the particular problems of stone decay which afflicted Oxford, was characteristic of many other historic cities, particularly those affected by industrialisation. John James Ruskin, on his business travels around the country, noted in Leeds in 1840, for example, 'Dr Hooks old

<sup>20</sup> P. Howell, 'Architecture and Townscape since 1800', in R.C. Whiting (ed.), *Oxford: Studies in the History of a University Town since 1800* (1993), 53-84.

<sup>21</sup> See G. Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide* (1998); J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974); W.F. Oakeshott (ed.), *Oxford Stone Restored: The Work of the Oxford Historic Buildings Fund 1957-1974* (1975).

<sup>22</sup> Tyack, *Oxford*, 194-8.

<sup>23</sup> W.J. Arkell, *Oxford Stone* (1947), 21-7.

<sup>24</sup> A. Clifton-Taylor, 'Building Materials', in Sherwood and Pevsner (1974), 408.

<sup>25</sup> Tyack, *Oxford*, 194-5.

& immense church new casing almost new building'.<sup>26</sup> In Oxford, however, the visual impact was perhaps greater than in many cities, partly because of the scale of renewal in a small and relatively unaltered historic centre, and also because it was judged necessary to reface in a more durable and visually distinctive stone, so that in the course of the 19th century the texture and characteristic appearance of Oxford's older buildings was gradually transformed. The effect was noted by many contemporary observers, of whom one of the best known was Nathaniel Hawthorne, commenting in his *English Notebooks* that 'the Oxford people are tired of this crumbly stone, and when repairs are necessary, they use a more durable material which does not well assort with the antiquity into which it is intruded'.<sup>27</sup>

Repair work was not confined to the outside of buildings, and was not always governed by necessity. The re-ordering of churches and recovery of earlier liturgical arrangements and architectural design were aspects of the historicism fostered by the Gothic revival, and appeared in the wake of the Tractarian Movement in Oxford from the mid-1830s.<sup>28</sup> Magdalen Chapel, restored by the architect Lewis N. Cottingham between 1829 and 1834, anticipated the 'restoration' of medieval church architecture which would become characteristic of the middle decades of the century. Cottingham's work, however, was an example of the best late Georgian Gothic revival practice; restrained but academic, based on an archaeological understanding of the building, largely replacing like-for-like, avoiding speculative restoration work and removing some of the excesses of his predecessor, James Wyatt.<sup>29</sup> Cottingham's additions included the stone organ screen, new stalls and restored reredos designed to 'accomplish an archaeologically correct revival of fifteenth century Gothic, reflecting the chapel's founding date of 1473'.<sup>30</sup> On a visit to Oxford in 1836, the historian Sir Francis Palgrave remarked with prescience on the recently completed work at the chapel:

In Oxford I think they have *too much* good taste. The restoration of Magdalen is perfect. It would be quite impossible to detect that the stalls and screens are modern otherwise than by their sharpness and freshness. But I regret the fine old woodcarving of the reign of Charles II and Queen Anne such as they have at Merton and which they wish to remove. – With these fittings up it is a College Chapel of the Church of England: and to bring back the days of Edward III and of Catholicism appears to me to be affectation – *repair* when and where is needed but never *restore*.<sup>31</sup>

Palgrave's words, in a letter to his father-in-law, anticipated concerns that would develop more widely later in reaction to the Oxford Movement and to ecclesiological enthusiasm for restoring churches to their 'best' period. They also, coincidentally, prefigure Ruskin's keen response to the sight of much less careful and ill-judged restoration work during his travels on the continent in the following decade: 'Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer'. 'The principle of modern times', he

<sup>26</sup> Burd, *Ruskin Family Letters*, 653 (John James Ruskin to Margaret Ruskin, 23 Feb. 1840).

<sup>27</sup> N. Hawthorne, *English Notebooks*, II (1856), 157.

<sup>28</sup> For the influence of John Henry Newman, for example, and his relation with the Oxford Society see P. Howell, 'Newman's Church at Littlemore', *Oxf. Art Jnl.* 6 (1983), 51-6.

<sup>29</sup> J. Myles, *L.N. Cottingham 1787-1847: Architect of the Gothic Revival* (1996), 83-9; Tyack, *Oxford*, 197-8.

<sup>30</sup> Myles, *Cottingham*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> R.H. Inglis Palgrave (ed.), 'Memoir of Sir Francis Palgrave', in *Collected Hist. Works of Sir Francis Palgrave, K.H.*, I: *Hist. of Normandy and Eng.* (1919), p. xxxv; quoted from a letter to Palgrave's father-in-law, the antiquary Charles Dawson Turner.

continued in *The Seven Lamps*, 'is to neglect buildings first, and restore them afterwards. Take proper care of your monuments and you will not need to restore them'.<sup>32</sup> Ruskin's awareness of these issues was less keen in his first years at Oxford than it would become later in the 1840s, but it is possible to identify, and gauge the effect of, some of the changes that he would actually have had an opportunity to observe during his undergraduate terms in 1837 to 1840 and on his periodic returns in 1842 and 1843 in 'days of more opening sight'.<sup>33</sup>

The 'great refacing' works would have been a striking sight, with hundreds of square metres of worn and friable medieval masonry renewed in starkly fresh-cut stonework. Extensive works of this kind were begun at a number of colleges from the 1820s onwards, and Ruskin was familiar with several of these programmes of renewal.<sup>34</sup> The Front Quadrangle of Merton College, for example, was refaced under the direction of Edward Blore between 1836 and 1838 in Bath stone. Ruskin was drawing the college chapel from the street in Magpie Lane in 1838 while the work of remaking the Merton Street frontage was just being completed out of view to the east (Fig. 3). The contrast of the white Bath stone with the darkened colour of the medieval masonry must have been dramatic. He commented on the practice again in *Modern Painters* (1846), this time in relation to the restoration of Hawksmoor's work for the Queen's College, already suffering serious stone decay after less than 150 years:

There is set in the deeper places of the heart such affection for the signs of age that the eye is delighted even by injuries which are the work of time ... there is hardly any building so ugly but that it may be made an agreeable object by such appearances. It would not be easy, for instance, to find a less pleasing piece of architecture than the portion of the front of Queen's College Oxford, which has just been restored; yet I believe that few persons could have looked with total indifference on the mouldering and shattered surface of the oolite limestone, previous to its restoration.<sup>35</sup>

Ruskin was already displaying, as well as a predilection for 'the work of time', his antipathy and unreasonable prejudice towards classically inspired architecture. The favourite subjects for his observation and drawing were the medieval buildings of the city. St. Mary Magdalen, north porch and aisle, drawn in 1837 (Fig. 4) was a typical subject and significant, too, as one of the first churches to be rebuilt to the emerging principles of new Gothic revival architectural practice. By the time Ruskin returned to take his degree in 1842, A.W.N. Pugin had published his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), George Gilbert Scott had begun his architectural career in Oxford and archaeological Gothic had truly arrived.

The north aisle of St. Mary Magdalen was rebuilt by Scott and Moffatt in 1842. Thereafter known as the Martyrs' Aisle, it was conceived as a single scheme with the new Martyrs' Memorial (1841-3) at the south end of St. Giles'. This monument exemplifies the architectural and religious concerns of the times. In architectural terms it was about innovative, self-consciously scholarly handling of medieval design which, it was to be understood, could only be founded correctly on archaeological study of the architecture of the Middle Ages. The architectural competition for the memorial, which was won by George Gilbert Scott, required that the design be based on the Eleanor Cross at Waltham, itself a

<sup>32</sup> Works 8.242-44, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

<sup>33</sup> Works 35.261.

<sup>34</sup> See Oakeshott, *Oxford Stone Restored*; B.R. Law, *Building Oxford's Heritage: Symm and Company from 1815* (1998).

<sup>35</sup> Works 3.204, *Modern Painters I* (3rd edn. 1846).

piece of religious and political propaganda by Edward I for the English Crown.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, the Martyrs' Memorial project did not spring out of Tractarian enthusiasm to recover the architectural heritage of the Catholic church, but was devised as a counter challenge to the Anglo-Catholicism of the Oxford Movement and commemorated the Maryan martyrs, Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley. It was a graphic illustration that, even in 1841, Protestant reaction against the strength of Anglo-Catholic influence in Oxford by no means included a repudiation of Gothic.<sup>37</sup>

The Martyrs' Memorial and the accompanying restoration project at St. Mary Magdalen were at the very outset of Scott's extraordinary career in Gothic architecture, ancient and modern, with what Pevsner has claimed as 'the first ecclesiastical design at Oxford to try to deceive us into accepting its 13th-century forms as genuine' and 'the earliest piece of archaeologically respectful Gothic at Oxford'. While this claim should be challenged, and Cottingham's work at Magdalen is more deserving of the latter, it is certainly right to recognise Scott's work as a milestone. The effect of his Memorial – a masterpiece of scholarly, Gothic design in what was judged to be the best Middle Pointed style of the late 13th century – in a prominent public position was considerably influential.

Ruskin spent most of June 1843 in Oxford. His father's diary records this visit and the £50 which he paid in October 'for John's Masters Degree'; his short stay in the city was a formality for this purpose. What it means is that we can assume with certainty that Ruskin would have seen St. Mary Magdalen, the picturesquely decayed, medieval building which he drew in 1837, in *ensemble* with the new Martyrs' Memorial and transformed into a stylistically correct, faithfully executed, crisp replica of its original form, or rather the form which Scott speculated that it might once have taken. While there need be little doubt that Ruskin observed this transformation, there is nothing to document his reaction. It is possible, however, to gauge the significance which others accorded at the time to these changes in the treatment of medieval buildings. What attitudes towards the past and its conservation did they signal, and was Ruskin engaged in, or at least aware of, the debate about such questions?

#### THE OXFORD SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING THE STUDY OF GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture (hereafter the Oxford Architectural Society) was founded in 1839. Accounts of its history have been written and its place in the history of the Gothic revival is recognised,<sup>38</sup> but its particular significance as a context for the evolution of Ruskin's thinking about architecture has never been examined closely. The Society was started informally by Charles Newton – one of Ruskin's closest college friends, later Keeper of Greek Art at the British Museum – in Christ Church in 1838; it was formally founded in the university the following year. Margaret Ruskin related her son's response to an early meeting in a letter to her husband:

<sup>36</sup> R. Allen Brown, H. M. Colvin and A. J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works: The Middle Ages*, I (1963), 485; N. Smith, 'George Gilbert Scott and the Martyrs' Memorial', *Jnl. of Warburg and Courtauld Inst.* XLII (1979), 195-205.

<sup>37</sup> Howell, 'Architecture and Townscape since 1800', 56; Tyack, *Oxford*, 210-12.

<sup>38</sup> W.A. Pantin, 'The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, 1839-1939', *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), 174-94; D. Prout, 'The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture' and 'The Oxford Architectural Society', 1839-1860', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989), 379-91.

Last night at eight he attended a meeting for the organisation of the Society to be called "the Oxford Society for promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture" he ran in before he went home to say "a very slow affair, they wanted somebody to rouse them, he felt very much inclined to do it himself, but as they were all Revds he thought he had better postpone for a few meetings".<sup>39</sup>

Ruskin was involved with the Society from its beginning and an active participant in its meetings and activities. They provided a rich opportunity for contact with the ideas of key figures in the field of historical and architectural scholarship of the time, and current debates about the value and interpretation of historical architecture. His inclination to 'rouse them' was cautiously postponed for another ten years.

The Oxford Architectural Society was founded a few months before the other, more influential, architectural society associated with the revival of interest in the study of ecclesiastical architecture in the wake of the Tractarian Movement, the Cambridge Camden Society, with its periodical the *Ecclesiologist*.<sup>40</sup> The two societies had close links and pursued the same interests and goals: the study of Gothic architecture and its application to the restoration and design of church buildings. Although they shared very close points of departure, some major differences soon developed. The Cambridge Camden Society declared its first purpose to be to promote 'the study of Ecclesiastical Architecture and Antiquities, and the restoration of mutilated Architectural remains'.<sup>41</sup> By 1845, the Camdensians' activities had grown more didactic and rigorously principled and they renamed themselves the Ecclesiological Society. Their object now was 'to promote the study of Christian Art and Antiquities...; the recognition of correct principles and taste in the erection of churches; and the restoration of ancient ecclesiastical remains'.<sup>42</sup> Some of the most extreme views on the question of restoration principles, privileging the symbolic and theoretical over archaeological and historical arguments, appeared in the pages of the Cambridge Camden Society's publications. The Oxford Architectural Society's aims were, and remained, more eclectic and scholarly and at first distanced from restoration projects:

Gothic Architecture is a subject which has of late years excited a considerable degree of public interest, and the labours of many eminent individuals have been directed to the recovery of its Principles. From the scarcity of records, existing monuments are the safest guides in this research: but as they are widely separated, the labour of examination and comparison is so great, that, without some more systematic plan of operation than has hitherto been adopted, we can scarcely expect that the task will be satisfactorily accomplished.

It has been suggested that this inconvenience may be best met by the formation of Local Associations, having for their principal aim the collecting of Drawings, and descriptions of the Edifices in their immediate neighbourhood, which would thus form so many sources, whence the enquirers into the Gothic Antiquities of any particular district might derive information. In furtherance of this object, "The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture" has been established.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Burd, *Ruskin Family Letters*, 583 (Margaret Ruskin to John James Ruskin, Sat.-Sun. 2-3 Feb. 1839).

<sup>40</sup> J.F. White, *The Cambridge Movement, the Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival* (1962), 36. The Cambridge Society had existed for longer than the Oxford one in an informal fashion, since 1837. It changed its name in 1845 to 'Ecclesiological late Cambridge Camden Society', and finally in 1852 to 'Ecclesiological Society'.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 225, from the *Report of the Cambridge Camden Soc.* (1842), 44-6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Appendix B, 228.

<sup>43</sup> *Proceedings OSPGA* (1840), 2.



There is a marked similarity between the Oxford Society's terms of reference and those which Ruskin proposed in 1854 to the Society of Antiquaries for the formation of an association of local agencies to record and report on the condition of historical monuments.<sup>44</sup> Indeed the Oxford Society had already provided a model for the creation of a number of local societies in the 1840s to pursue similar aims.<sup>45</sup> The Society's primary goal in 1838, however, was to compile systematically a corpus of architectural and archaeological information as a reference tool and to provide for 'the cultivation of correct Architectural Taste' in the building of new churches.

Ruskin was very much at home in this environment. He had a particular interest in historical architecture, enjoyed observing and drawing it, and was already a minor author in a periodical which was particularly concerned with promoting proper architectural taste, *The Architectural Magazine*. The Society's scientific approach, similar to that of geological fieldwork, was also familiar to him: the methodical collection, provenancing, ordering, and study of specimens on which theoretical study could be based. In its Rules, the Society's objects were 'to collect Books, Prints and Drawings; Models of the Forms of Arches, Vaults, &c; Casts of Mouldings, and Details; and such other Architectural Specimens as the Funds of the Society will admit.'<sup>46</sup> In a period when there were few accessible academic libraries or print collections, photographs were not available and travel was time-consuming and costly, such a collection was an important resource for research. The archetype for this kind of collection was L.N. Cottingham's Museum of Medieval Art at Waterloo Bridge Road in London: a unique collection of casts, models, works of art, furniture, sculpture and architectural fragments from the medieval period, built up over decades from the early 1820s out of a keen personal interest in Gothic architecture, for use in his architectural practice, and for scholarly study, education and practical training for architects.<sup>47</sup> This type of museum teaching collection provided Ruskin with a model for the educational collections which he later prescribed for museum 'schools', and for the teaching collections with which he endowed the Architectural Museum in Westminster, the Ruskin Drawing School in Oxford and the Guild of St. George's Collection at Sheffield.<sup>48</sup> Another important concept for Ruskin's later work also had its roots here in the documentary value which the Society attributed to original works of architecture; it was an historical principle which became a strong feature of the Oxford school. Perhaps most importantly of all, however, through the Society's publications and lectures, visits to study and record medieval churches in the Oxford area, and contact with its active members, Ruskin became familiar with the practice of architectural history and was drawn into the margins of architectural debate about restoration.

The Society ranged over the whole field of secular and ecclesiastical architecture and included some of the foremost architects, architectural historians and theorists of the day. Honorary members included the architects Lewis Cottingham, Anthony Salvin, Edward Blore and Benjamin Ferrey, and architectural history authorities such as Robert Willis, William Whewell and Thomas Rickman. Perhaps because of the breadth of interest and experience of its members, the Oxford Architectural Society also exercised much more

<sup>44</sup> Soc. of Antiq. Executive Comm. Minute Bk. 1, 9 Nov. 1854.

<sup>45</sup> Myles, *Cottingham*, 20-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Proceedings OSPGA* (1840) [no pagination].

<sup>47</sup> Myles, *Cottingham*, 28-35.

<sup>48</sup> M. Wheeler, *Ruskin's Museums and Galleries: the Treasury, the Storehouse, the School* (1994), 14.

caution on architectural restoration questions than the Cambridge Camdenians. Writing in 1872, the art historian Charles Eastlake observed with hindsight that:

the Oxford Society showed from the first a wise and discriminatory judgment on the question of 'restorations', which had the effect of tempering a policy that elsewhere might have sacrificed to considerations of style many a relic of past times deficient indeed in the highest qualities of architectural grace, but deserving on other grounds the interest and protection of posterity.<sup>49</sup>

Ruskin nowhere explicitly acknowledged the part that the Architectural Society played in developing his ideas on the duties of posterity to protect historical remains, but something of what the Society offered to him, practically and theoretically, can be deduced from a closer study of its activities. Ruskin particularly regretted the lack of practical skills offered by the university itself which 'having a youth cast into their hands for educational treatment ... never required of him a single exercise in map or section drawing, and never taught him either the tradition of a saint or the dynamics of a buttress', but he did acknowledge that something in this way was done for him 'by Mr. Parker, and the Architectural Society'.<sup>50</sup>

'Mr. Parker' was John Henry Parker, the Oxford bookseller, publisher, antiquary and author of works on Gothic architecture. He was perhaps best known at this time for his *Glossary of architectural terms* published in 1836.<sup>51</sup> His acquaintance with Ruskin continued in later life, in Oxford as Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, and in Rome where Parker spent his winters excavating parts of the ancient city. It was in 1839, however, that Ruskin met him, 'then first founding the Architectural Society' and counted him as one of the friends who sympathised with his historical interest and taught him 'more accurately the study of architecture'.<sup>52</sup>

John Henry Parker was the secretary of the Oxford Architectural Society from 1839 to 1845 and one of its mainstays for several decades. The Society's first enterprises included undertaking 'An Architectural Guide to the neighbourhood of Oxford, comprising an account of the Churches and other objects of interest'. Parker edited and published this between 1842 and 1846. From the first the Society also maintained a specialist architectural library for the use of its members. Parker appears to have acted as unofficial librarian until the Society leased a reading room on a permanent basis from the mid 1840s. In 1842 the *Proceedings* still noted that 'The Books are kept at Mr. Parker's in Broad Street and are accessible to Members at any time from nine in the morning to nine in the evening'.<sup>53</sup> It will be recalled that the university curriculum at this time did not include British history, and certainly not British architectural studies, so that reference works for these fields of research were simply not available except through the Architectural Society's own book collection and the collections in the Bodleian Library. Whether Ruskin availed himself of the Society's library as an undergraduate is uncertain, but it is a reasonable presumption, given his cordial relations with Parker and his particular interest. He certainly referred later to glancing 'at Pugin's Contrasts once in the Oxford architectural reading-room during an idle forenoon', and it is presumably the Society's reading room to which he referred.<sup>54</sup> Architectural works by the elder and the younger Pugin were held in the Society's library from the early years. Indeed, the lists of works held there, published annually in the

<sup>49</sup> C. Eastlake, *A History of the Gothic Revival* (1872), 203-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Works* 35.611-12, *Praeterita*.

<sup>51</sup> J.H. Parker, *A Glossary of Terms used in Grecian, Roman, Italian and Gothic Architecture* (1836).

<sup>52</sup> *Works* 35.611, *Praeterita*.

<sup>53</sup> *Proceedings* OSPSGA (1842) [no pagination].

<sup>54</sup> *Works* 5.428-49, *Modern Painters* III.

*Proceedings*, comprised a comprehensive bibliography of early and mid 19th-century architectural writers – Bloxam, Britton, Carter, Coney, Cottingham, Ferrey, Hope, Knight, Moller, Rickman, Whewell and Willis.

There was here a treasury of theoretical and comparative material for architectural study easily available to Ruskin, but the Architectural Society offered rather more than this. It was one of those powerful academic and social networks, combining antiquarian, historical, architectural and ecclesiastical interests.<sup>55</sup> Ruskin was not drawn by inclination into any particular social set at Oxford but the network of the Architectural Society was a close approximation to one. Dean Kitchin identified in his important Oxford friendships 'a cultivated group of scholars and students, Liddell, Acland, Newton, Osborne Gordon', whose 'point of connection, electric and inspiring, was the pencil, which they all used well'.<sup>56</sup> The common interest in drawing and draughtsmanship brought the whole group, with Newton in the lead, into active membership of the Society, and also gave it a firmly practical leaning.

In some respects, the Society was also rather an unconventional institution. Meetings were held in unlikely settings. At first they met in Wyatt's Room in the High, in a room usually used for fencing practice with which members, including Ruskin it seems, entertained themselves before hearing a paper; Ruskin's friends Newton and Gordon were keen fencers and Ruskin himself took lessons at this time. Later, meetings were held in a large loft-like room at the back of the Maiden's Head which could only be reached by going up a kind of ladder, making the entry of senior members of the university a matter for some sport.<sup>57</sup> It was rather unorthodox to find senior and junior members of the university meeting on common ground, and even rarer on an equal footing, at a time when senior members were often aloof and quite outside the sphere of undergraduates. The Society's honorary members from outside the university included some of the foremost architectural historians of the day, eminent scholars and public servants such as Sir Francis Palgrave, then deputy-keeper of Her Majesty's records. From within the university, Ruskin's acquaintances included Dr. William Buckland, the geologist and mineralogist, who was vice-president, and Henry Liddell, Ruskin's tutor and later dean of Christ Church, who was on the founding committee with Charles Newton. Ruskin was to continue his association with all these men and they formed a social network, beyond the activities of the Society, which sustained and extended his interest in historical architecture.

The Society's other strength was in its practical approach to its architectural objects. From the start its officers included a modeller, Thomas Grimsley, and a wood engraver, Orlando Jewitt, who was to provide illustrations for most of the principal architectural publications of the 1830s-60s.<sup>58</sup> The Society's rooms must have looked much like a provincial museum filled with drawings, brass rubbings, salvaged architectural details, casts and architectural models. One of the projects of the early years was to issue guidance for church architects modelled on local medieval churches recorded by the Society's members:

For each church a monograph was published with plans, elevations, sections, working drawings and specifications of materials and costs;... working drawings of ancient pews, fonts, pulpits, and so forth. It was precisely the discipline of all this minute study and description, giving a real, practical understanding of Gothic which was perhaps the best part of the Society's work.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> P. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886* (1986), 20.

<sup>56</sup> Kitchin, *Ruskin in Oxford*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Pantin, 'The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society', 176.

<sup>58</sup> H. Carter, *Orlando Jewitt, Wood Engraver* (1962); F. Broomhead, 'Orlando Jewitt: Wood Engraver to the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996).

<sup>59</sup> Pantin, 178 and Prout, 381-3 describe the project in detail.

Ruskin thus began his education in a very different school of architectural drawing at Oxford and an education of the eye in new visual qualities. He recalled in *Praeterita* a 'telling lesson' on his drawing technique from Charles Newton:

in the form of a request, that I would draw a Norman door for him, on which he was going to read a paper to the Architectural Society. When I got to work on it, he had to point out to me that my black dots and Proutesque breaks were no manner of use to him, and that I must be content to draw steady lines in their exact place and proportion. I fulfilled his directions with more difficulty than I had expected – and produced the first architectural drawing of any value I ever made in my life. If only I had gone on so! but the accuracy was irksome to me; – the result I thought cold and commonplace.<sup>60</sup>

The paper on which Charles Newton was working was one which he read to the Society's meeting on 29 October 1839, on the subject of 'Iffley Church, Oxford, shewing by a careful comparison of the Ornaments with other Buildings, and with the Drawings in Contemporary Manuscripts, that it must, in all probability, have been built by the Monks of Kenilworth in the reign of King Stephen'.<sup>61</sup> The drawing which Ruskin made on Newton's account may have been of the Norman west portal of St. Ebbe's church, Oxford. This building is of similar date and style to Iffley church and could have formed a key subject in a comparative local study, along with St. Peter-in-the-East. A pencil drawing of St. Ebbe's is in the Ruskin Foundation's collection (Ruskin Library, Lancaster) and, although it is not in Ruskin's customary style for the period, its meticulous treatment suggests that it may indeed be the uncharacteristically studied drawing to which he referred (Fig. 5).<sup>62</sup> Though there remains some doubt about the attribution, the drawing is of some archaeological interest in showing the details of the Romanesque doorway before it was re-set following the remodelling of St. Ebbe's by G.E. Street in 1862.

After his period at Oxford, Ruskin abandoned further attempts to develop a technique of accurate, architectural recording but during 1837 and 1838 he produced more drawings of individual architectural subjects, particularly medieval ecclesiastical buildings, than he had ever made before or was to make again for some years afterwards. The subjects were buildings in and around Oxford, and architecture observed at various places visited on the Ruskin family tours in the Midlands, North and Scotland. For the years 1839-40, a period of concentrated work for the Newdigate prize followed by his illness, there are few architectural or any other kind of drawings. When he returned to this work on the continental tours of 1840-1 and 1842 there was a different kind of stimulus and an interest less in architectural veracity than in visual effect:

I made notes on the effects of light... I knew absolutely nothing of architecture proper, had never drawn a section nor a leaf moulding; but liked, as Turner did to the end of his life, anything that was graceful and rich, whether Gothic or Renaissance; and drew with an acuteness of delight in the thing as it actually stood, which makes the sketch living and like, from corner to corner.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Works* 35, 611-12, *Praeterita*.

<sup>61</sup> *Proceedings OSPSGA*, Oct. 1839 [no pagination].

<sup>62</sup> Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster Univ.) no. 1475, on watermarked paper of 1820 which suggests that the attribution to Ruskin should be treated with caution.

<sup>63</sup> *Works* 35, 289-6, *Praeterita*.



Fig. 5. 'Antient doorway St. Ebbs. Ch. Oxon.', undated (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University). Reproduced by kind permission of the Ruskin Foundation.

#### 'SUCH AFFECTION FOR THE SIGNS OF AGE'

A growing interest in Turner's art and a need to communicate his appreciation of that unique genius began to dominate Ruskin's work in the period from 1842, culminating with the writing of *Modern Painters I* (1843). Even before his graduation in 1841, he had already embarked on a new line of investigation and study which led him away from architecture for a period. Oxford had, however, provided him with important and central experiences as a resource to draw on in the future. The academic and technical background for architectural and historical study, with its sustaining social network, was in place. The experience of living in the rich historic fabric of a medieval city during a time of rapid change was a formative one. It sensitised him to the profound effects, aesthetic and physical, of such change, and established a visual sensitivity to the historic environment which was to become even keener through his work for *Modern Painters I* and II.

Oxford also offered Ruskin a framework of guiding principles to govern the treatment of historic buildings that began to give shape to his own ideas about the protection of the historic environment. The Oxford school of thought on this subject was epitomised in a

paper given to the Oxford Architectural Society in June 1841 by Ruskin's respected tutor and lifelong friend, Henry Liddell.<sup>64</sup> Liddell's paper proposed some principles to be followed in the restoration of old buildings, especially churches, and warned of the dangers of affecting, out of academic pedantry, a uniformity of historical style in restoration. It is probably the earliest published statement to identify the pitfalls of conjectural restoration:

These remarks are intended merely as warnings against carrying restoration too far, and are not at all intended to apply to the removal of Italian altar pieces, and square sleeping boxes, or the numerous other incongruities with which our Churches have been disfigured since the period called 'the Renaissance', when all true taste seems to have departed from us.

In all cases it is necessary to distinguish between Additions and Insertions, which leave the original work entire, and which therefore it is only necessary to remove, in order to restore the building to its original form, and Substitutions, where the original work had been destroyed, and can only be restored by conjecture....

Many people, who, to avoid offence, may be called not pedants but purists, seeing a fine old church disfigured, as they would say, by alterations, would begin sweeping all such disfigurements clean away, and restoring the church just as it stood when built. But the alterations of old buildings are in great part their history, and however much you may restore, you cannot recover the original work; and so you may be removing what is of the highest possible interest, to make room for work, correct as a copy, but in itself of little or no value.<sup>65</sup>

Ruskin would not have heard this paper delivered (on 9 June 1841, according to his diary, he was at Lausanne admiring the effect of light on mountains) but as a life-member of the Oxford Architectural Society he would have received his copy of the Society's *Proceedings* in which the published version of Liddell's essay appeared. It expressed a personal point of view, formed by a particular sensibility which Ruskin would have recognised that he shared. Liddell's position embodied two important principles – the documentary value implicit in historic buildings and the primacy of authentic historic fabric – and he was not alone at Oxford in promoting 'conservative' architectural restoration. Edward Freeman, another energetic member of the Oxford Architectural Society from 1842, advanced the same principles of an irreplaceable value in original material and its intrinsic historical worth. His influential publication *Principles of Church Restoration* (1846) was well received in architectural circles, with expressions of warm admiration from Gilbert Scott, according to Freeman's biographer. However, it achieved much more influence through a review, 'Church Restoration', in *The Ecclesiologist*, which established the notion of 'conservative restoration' in the mid-century debate.<sup>66</sup> Freeman, Liddell, Palgrave and others were successors to a preservationist tradition of architectural study whose progenitors included Richard Gough, John Carter, Lewis Cottingham and John Milner in the 1790s and early 1800s.<sup>67</sup> Their

<sup>64</sup> H.L. Thompson, *Henry George Liddell* (1899), 27-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Proceedings OSPSGA* (June 1841), 18-19.

<sup>66</sup> *The Ecclesiologist*, 59 (1847), 161-8. For Freeman see W.R.W. Stephens, *The Life and Letters of Edward A. Freeman* (2 vols. 1895); J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (1981); J. Jokilehto, *A Hist. of Architectural Conservation* (1999).

<sup>67</sup> For Carter see G.L. Gomme (ed.), *Sacred and Medieval Architecture: A Classified Collection of the Chief Contents of 'The Gentleman's Magazine' from 1731-1868* (2 vols. 1890), and most recently J.M. Crook, *John Carter and the Mind of the Gothic Revival* (1995). For Gough, see J. Frew, 'Richard Gough, James Wyatt and Late 18th-Century Preservation', *Jnl. of Soc. of Archit. Historians*, 38 (1979), 366-74. John Milner's principal writings included *A Dissertation on the Modern Style of Altering Ancient Cathedrals as Exemplified in the Cathedral Church of Salisbury* (1798) and *A Treatise on the Ecclesiastical Architecture of England during the Middle Ages* (1811).



protests at the destructive alteration of cathedral architecture and other medieval building, a generation before Ruskin, were levelled at the poor quality of contemporary rebuilding and restoration work and the loss of irreplaceable historical detail in ancient fabric. By the late 1830s, therefore, there was a significant body of well-informed opinion, in antiquarian and scholarly circles at least, that irreversible damage and unnecessary destruction of important historic buildings were taking place in the cause of improvement, compounded by a lack of understanding of historical architecture. Nor was everyone persuaded that these losses could be mitigated simply by adopting a more scientific and scholarly approach to the Gothic style, or by the replication or substitution of historically correct details in the course of repairs. Alongside the newer understanding of stylistic typology, it began to be recognised that there were other, less tangible, values to be associated with the built heritage. 'However much you may restore you cannot recover the original work' was a theme which would emerge strongly in Ruskin's *Seven Lamps* and other architectural writing later in the century.

This point of view owed much to the architectural education which Ruskin had received at Oxford and also drew on broader-based traditions of valuing the particular qualities and significance of historic places. The combination of late Georgian consciousness of historical authenticity, Romantic meditation on the past and the picturesque mode of viewing were familiar territory to Ruskin. His own contribution would be distinguished from these established discourses, and those of the new architectural historians, by a foregrounding of moral authority, an imaginative sensibility that encompassed a symbolical as well as an historical and documentary value in historic places, and an inclusive understanding of buildings as part of cultural landscapes.

For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity. It is in their lasting witness against men, in their quiet contrast with the transitional character of things, in the strength which, through the lapse of seasons and times, and the decline and birth of dynasties, and the changing of the face of the earth, and of the limits of the sea, maintains its sculptured shapeliness for a time insuperable, connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations: it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture.<sup>68</sup>

It had been in 1839 that Ruskin had attended the inaugural meeting of the Oxford Architectural Society – 'a very slow affair, they wanted somebody to rouse them, he felt very much inclined to do it himself'. Ten years later, with the publication of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, he was to go about it in a fashion carefully calculated to stir up the architectural establishment.

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<sup>68</sup> Works 8. 233-34, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.