

Oxford Town Hall: Planning, Building and Financing the Oxford Municipal Buildings of 1897

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SUMMARY

Designed by Henry Hare, a young London architect who was to become one of the most successful of his generation in the field of public buildings, the Oxford Municipal Buildings were opened with grand ceremony on 12 May 1897, some 25 years after the city had first considered the question of new facilities. In that time estimates for design and construction had risen from a few thousand pounds, to £50,000 at competition stage, and then were finally revealed at completion as well over £90,000. This paper investigates that progression, explains why it took so long for Oxford to receive its new civic buildings, looks at the various decision-making stages, discovers how such an expensive work was funded, and discusses the main supporters and opponents of the project. The driving force behind the project is identified as Alderman Robert Buckell, aided throughout by Alderman Walter Gray. The early account takes place against a background of major political change in Oxford local government as county borough status was attained and Oxford corporation gained its independence from the university. Allowed once more to assume the reins of power that it had lost so many centuries before, the outward, and almost instantaneous, manifestation of this power was embodied in the new Municipal Buildings – Oxford Town Hall.

THE BACKGROUND

The story of Oxford Municipal Buildings – today's Town Hall – revolves around two very influential figures in late 19th-century Oxford: in particular, the Liberal Robert Buckell, but also the Conservative Walter Gray. Despite political differences, it was their alliance that helped to overcome the obstacles and ensure that Oxford city got its new and impressive symbol of civic pride in 1897.

Walter Gray was a powerful and ambitious member of the Conservative party in Oxford local politics. Mayor four times between 1888 and 1901, his career began as a station master at Waddington in Lincolnshire where his efficiency and energy so impressed Colonel Shaw-Stewart, Fellow and future bursar of the newly established Keble College, that he was offered the job of steward at Keble and came to Oxford in 1870. His shrewd business sense and financial acumen led him into the world of investment and speculative building, most notably in connection with the development of North Oxford, and he left Keble eventually to become an auctioneer and surveyor but mainly a property developer.¹ His election as a Conservative councillor to the Liberal dominated city council in 1881 was at the beginning of a revival of Conservative fortunes in Oxford and it was Walter Gray's investigation that led to allegations of corruption in the Oxford Building and Investment Company, a company directed by several leading Liberals and involved both in large building projects in Oxford and in investing the savings of many townfolk. The company's eventual collapse, with Gray's appointment as liquidator, helped to discredit the Liberals and put the Conservatives in control of the council in 1887.²

¹ T. Hinchcliffe, *North Oxford* (1992), 61-3.

² C. Fenby, *The Other Oxford* (1970), 62.

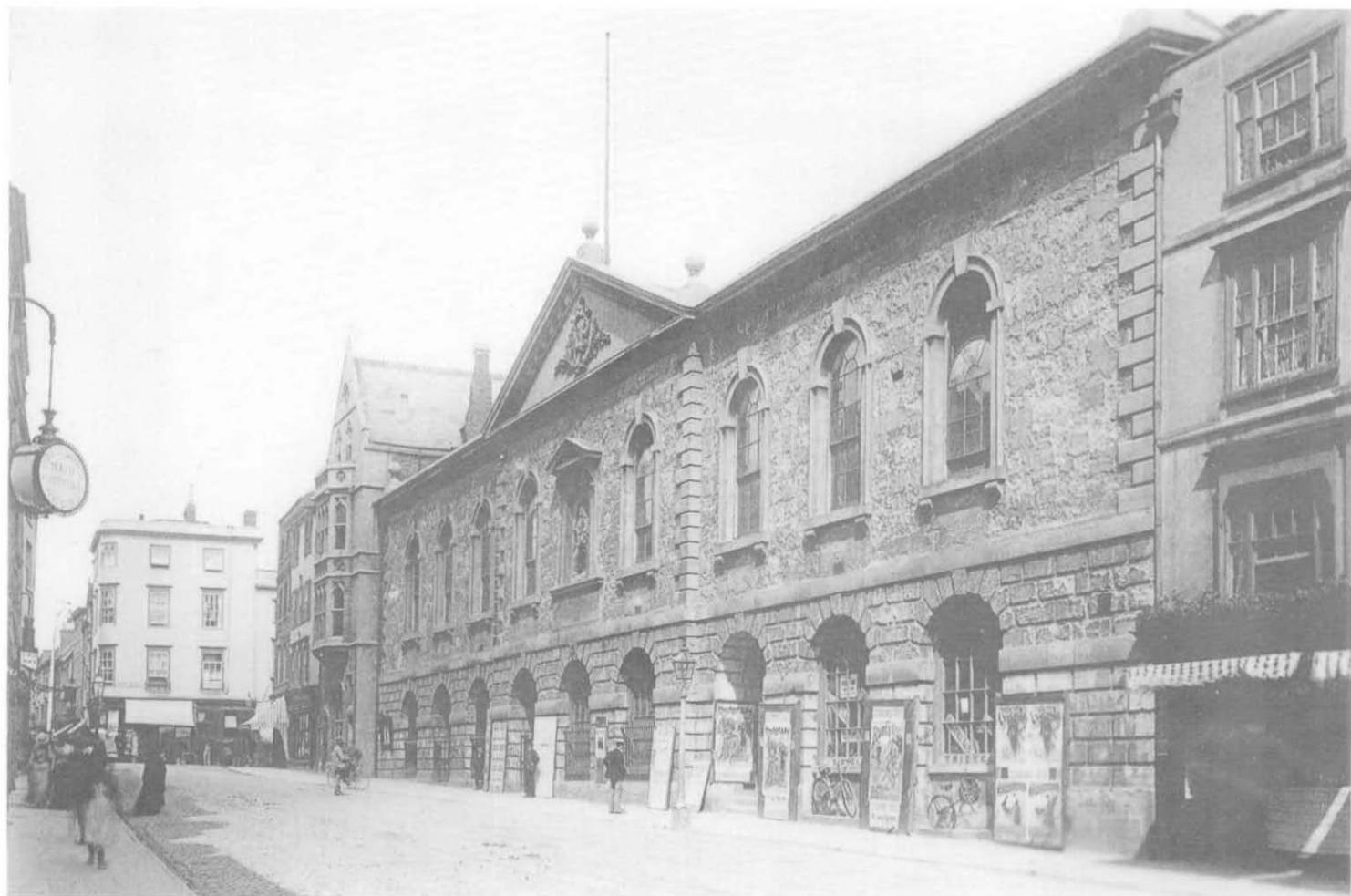


Fig. 1. The 18th-century Oxford Town Hall from St. Aldate's, c. 1893, with the town clerk's offices at the left-hand end of the building (Oxfordshire Photographic Archive, Oxfordshire County Council).

The important part Walter Gray played in bringing down the Oxford Building and Investment Company is significant in the history of the Oxford Municipal Buildings, as it was responsible for his rapid rise to prominence and fame in Oxford. It also caused him to cross swords during this period with the Liberal Robert Buckell who allegedly wrote three anonymous letters to the Liberal biased *Oxford Chronicle* making disparaging remarks about Gray's appointment as liquidator and his role in the scandal.³ Buckell, originally a coal merchant but later an estate agent and auctioneer, was, in a sense, Gray's equivalent in the Liberal party. Both represented the newer breed of local politician, lower middle-class and extremely ambitious. Like Gray, Buckell was to become leader of his party and was mayor of Oxford five times between 1885 and 1918. Both men were eventually knighted.

Rather than challenge Buckell over the somewhat libellous letters, Gray, having put pressure on the newspaper editor to name the anonymous contributor, shrewdly sought out Buckell and deliberately got to know him. Despite their political differences, they soon formed an alliance which was to last for nearly 40 years during which in effect they ran Oxford between them.⁴ It was this alliance that was to ensure the building of the new Municipal Buildings.

Discussions for new buildings had begun in 1873 when an Oxford architect, Henry Tollitt, drew up plans to meet the needs of the Post Office for greatly expanded facilities within the Town Hall.⁵ This all came to nothing as negotiations with the Postmaster General's Office failed in March 1874 and the Post Office decided to build independent premises on the opposite side of the street, which were opened in 1880. As well as losing a considerable amount of revenue from the Post Office, another problem the corporation faced in the 1870s was insufficient space on the site for new building as leases on site properties had several years to run. The site at that time contained a group of several buildings around a courtyard, with a classical town hall (Fig. 1; Fig. 6) running N.-S. along St. Aldate's Street (as it was then known) designed by Isaac Ware in 1751 to replace an earlier 14th-century guildhall. It had been funded partly by the county justices, as it contained two courtrooms, and partly by public donations. After the county courts moved to the new county hall in the 1840s, the building was refurbished with the open corn market on the ground floor enclosed to provide a post office and office space. In 1854 a further part of the ground floor was enclosed to form a public library, and a town clerk's office was added in the mid 19th century at the N. end. The chief constable's house occupied the E. side of the courtyard, along with a corn exchange designed 1861-3 by Samuel Lipscomb Seckham, who had been responsible for the laying out of Park Town in North Oxford. Along the S. side of the courtyard was Nixon's Free Grammar School, established in 1659 for the sons of city freemen but enduring fluctuating fortunes during the 18th and 19th centuries.⁶

Proposals for rebuilding Ware's Town Hall having been shelved in the 1870s, nothing significant occurred until the mid 1880s by which time criticism of the facilities provided by the assortment of city buildings was widespread. Newspaper correspondence in 1884 referred to the public library as 'sadly behind the day', the books themselves 'a pitiable collection of old volumes' and the lending library section in a 'lamentable state of neglect and decay'.⁷ A report by the City Building Improvement Committee in 1886 went further, calling

³ Ibid. 68.

⁴ Ibid. 69.

⁵ Oxford City Archives (hereafter OCA), P.3.6, minute book of the Post Office and City Buildings Committee 1873-4.

⁶ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 444.

⁷ *Oxford Times* (hereafter OT), 14 June 1884.

the library and public reading room 'unhealthy, mean in arrangement and a disgrace to an enlightened and progressive city', the courtroom and accompanying offices were 'very defective', and the Town Hall itself 'ill-shaped and not convenient'.⁸ By this time, some of the problems with building space on the site were being solved as the corporation had purchased a block of property adjoining the Town Hall to the S., leases on other adjoining properties were either due to expire or had done so, and Nixon's School had finally closed in 1885. The Improvement Committee report urged the corporation to consider either enlarging and adapting the Town Hall or alternatively erecting a new set of purpose-made buildings.

Over the following five years there were many discussions in council, reported in the newspapers, on the advantages and disadvantages of embarking on a building project, throughout which Buckell and Gray presented a united front of support. In October 1887, a committee reported in favour of new buildings rather than enlarging the current ones, and it was suggested that an inspection of municipal buildings in other cities should be undertaken to see how other corporations had solved the problem of providing sufficient office space to accommodate the growing number of administrative departments now needed in municipal life. Again, no further action was taken until the purchase of the Savings Bank premises to the N. of the Town Hall in May 1889 re-opened the matter. In September 1889 a small group of councillors representing the New City Buildings Committee and including Gray, then mayor, and the city surveyor, E.G. Bruton, set out to tour Nottingham, Wakefield, Bolton and Manchester.⁹ What they saw caused Gray to tell the next council meeting that Oxford's municipal buildings were 'an utter disgrace' and that Nottingham was 'the most advanced place in England with regard to municipal government'.¹⁰ A report prepared by the city surveyor was presented to the council in October of that year, describing the buildings visited and extracting from them an outline of what was desired at Oxford. But at this stage, there was very little more the present council could do as municipal elections were upon them, along with wide-reaching changes within Oxford local government. The report was allowed to 'lie on the table' for the attention of the new council.

Despite having been in existence since the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, Oxford's municipal corporation before 1889 lacked real power. This was largely due to the existence of a powerful university and the city corporation's own less than glorious past. By the mid 18th century, Oxford corporation had become debt-ridden, riven by political faction and scandal, and unequal to the task of meeting the needs of a local government which would provide services through the levying of rates. The important position of the university within the city meant that it took a major role on the Paving Commission which had been set up in 1771 by an Act of Parliament, the Oxford Improvement Act, as a statutory body to administer city life and improve urban amenities. The corporation was represented on this body, also containing 250 local residents of note. Administrative demands became more complex during the 19th century and the Local Board of Health replaced the Paving Commission in 1865. This statutory body was the real manager of the city, rather than the city council, with responsibility for the majority of public services: highways, lighting, gas, tramways, fire brigade, and even the public library.¹¹ The budget for the Local Board of

⁸ OCA, P.6.12, report.

⁹ OT, 15 May 1897.

¹⁰ *Oxford Chronicle* (hereafter *OC*), 28 September 1889, p. 7.

¹¹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 227.

Health, for example, was approximately three times that of the city council.¹²

By the 1880s, however, the rise of substantial middle-class citizens, and men with power and ambition such as Buckell and Gray, were challenging the status quo.¹³ The university and the corporation, after long and difficult negotiations, agreed in 1883 to seek county borough status for Oxford and, after boundary extensions and an agreement on the proportion of university dons on the council (exactly one fifth), Oxford was made a county borough in November 1889. The old diarchy of town and gown in local politics ended in November 1889, although it was to last much longer in parliamentary politics. The council's new status brought the assumption of 'powers, property and obligations of the Local Board', and committees such as the police and the market committees had now to report directly to the council.¹⁴ Correspondingly, there was now a legitimate need for an enlarged and more efficient administrative base for the council, and attention focused on the municipal elections of the same month.

One of the important election campaign issues during the autumn of 1889 was the question of new city buildings. Party members standing for election in the four city wards placed advertisements in the local press stating their priorities if elected. The Liberals' mandate supported new city buildings and better library facilities, whilst Conservatives candidates either only went as far as advocating a new public library or campaigned against any building in order to spare the 'Ratepayers' pocket.¹⁵ An independent candidate for the West Ward stated bluntly that 'had the Town Council been as free from party politics as the Local Board we should by this time have had Municipal Buildings worthy of our city and a good Public Library without costing the ratepayers a penny'.

Reluctance on the part of the Oxford Conservatives to support new city buildings was well known, despite Walter Gray's support for the project. At the time of the councillors' fact-finding mission to northern city buildings, the *Oxford Times*, the Conservative mouthpiece, had reminded its readers that the Conservative party, although admitting the necessity of new city buildings, was 'determined not to sanction any scheme which would unduly burden the ratepayers'.¹⁶ The ratepayers made their own decision, however, and on 1 November 1889, the over-confident Conservative party, who were subsequently much criticised for not actively seeking re-election by going out and canvassing, were swept aside by the jubilant Liberals. The *Oxford Chronicle* made much of the 'crushing and complete' victory of the Liberals, of 'two years of Tory plotting and mismanagement,' commenting that Toryism tended to equal imperialism, whilst local affairs were sidelined.¹⁷

Buckell wasted no time in bringing forward the subject of the new buildings to a meeting of the council in December 1889, with Gray's full support.¹⁸ Despite a new spirit of cooperation, fostered by the Liberals' offer to share municipal honours with the Conservatives in the interests of making the corporation non-political, there was still opposition to rebuilding. Further reports were commissioned and it was not until June 1891, following reports from the Property and Estates Committee, that the decision was finally taken to abandon any thought of adapting the existing buildings and to expend a sum of not

¹² A. Howe, 'Intellect and Civic Responsibility: dons and citizens in 19th-century Oxford', in R.C. Whiting (ed.), *Oxford: Studies in the History of a University Town since 1800* (1993), 33.

¹³ *Ibid.* 34.

¹⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 241.

¹⁵ *OC*, 5 and 12 October 1889.

¹⁶ *OT*, 28 September 1889.

¹⁷ *OC*, 9 November 1889.

¹⁸ Pictorial supplement to *Oxford Chronicle*, 15 May 1897 (hereafter *OCPS*).

more than £600 on a design competition.¹⁹ In July 1891 an advertisement ran for two weeks in the national architectural press: *The Builder*, *The Architect*, *The British Architect* and *The Building News*. Architects were requested to submit designs by 31 October 1891 for a two-stage competition for new municipal buildings in Oxford.²⁰ Almost 20 years after Henry Tollitt's designs, the scheme was under way again.

DESIGNING THE NEW MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS

Oxford was one of a minority of cities to adopt a two-stage design competition for their new buildings, which required an initial submission of sketch designs only. These could be prepared by the architect at minimum cost, and quickly judged by the client. A specified number of designs would then be chosen, and full plans prepared for a final decision. The importance of choosing the right architect and design must have been keenly felt by the Oxford corporation for, as the *Builder* was to point out two years later, Oxford was considered 'one of the most architecturally beautiful cities in the world' and the new buildings needed to be 'an architectural addition'.²¹

The competition for Oxford's new municipal buildings attracted much attention. Some 390 applications were made for the site plan and the set of instructions. A two-page schedule of the accommodation required was provided with the instructions, including a town hall and concert room, council chamber, public gallery, mayor's parlour, assembly room, committee room, robing room, office space for the rate collector, the city engineers (some five offices), medical officer and inspector of nuisances (two each), waterworks, a sessions court and suite of rooms for jury, barristers, solicitors, prisoners, etc., kitchens, offices for the police headquarters which included five cells, separate kitchens, dormitories for 16 constables and married quarters, porter's accommodation, yet more kitchens, sculleries, cloakrooms, lavatories and service areas, plus a public library. The entire cost of the building 'including all special features and the necessary permanent fittings' was not to exceed £50,000.²² Style and choice of materials were left to the competitors but it was stipulated that the building should be faced with good quality stone and it was revealed that the corporation was considering the use of electric lighting, still quite a novelty. Given the cramped site, where two sides were hemmed in by other buildings, the task facing the competitors was a formidable one.

It is notable that a tower was not amongst the requirements. Towers, and their clocks, were very much part of town hall architecture, mostly built for show as a focal point, a visible landmark from all over the town and an expression of the authority and dignity of its corporation.²³ It may have been that the corporation, surrounded by the spires and domes of ancient Oxford, considered another tower hardly worth the extra expense.

The town clerk's offices, dating from the mid 19th century, were virtually the only part of the existing buildings to be retained, and a plan of the town clerk's offices including the St. Aldate's Street elevation (Fig. 2) was attached to the document. As this had to be incorporated into the front facade of the new building, it had a strong influence on the

¹⁹ OCA, C.5.5, Oxford City Council minute book 1889-92.

²⁰ OCA, D.9.1. Some confusion surrounds the closing date but 31 Oct. appears to comply with other dates given.

²¹ *Builder*, 25 June 1892, p. 491.

²² OCA, D.9.1.

²³ C. Cunningham, *Victorian and Edwardian Town Halls* (1981), 163-76.

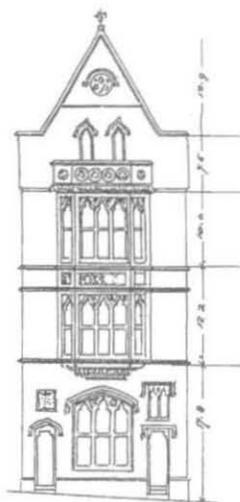


Fig. 2. Town clerk's offices, St. Aldate's Street elevation, 1891 (OCA, D.9.1, reproduced by kind permission of Oxford City Council).

overall design. Internally, the council chamber and mayor's parlour were required to be in this area of the new building so as to be within easy reach of the town clerk's office.²⁴

By the closing date for the first stage, a very respectable 137 entries had been received.²⁵ From these sketch designs, the corporation and their appointed assessor would choose not more than six designs to go forward to the second stage. A generous premium of £100 was to be awarded to each architect selected to go forward to the second competition.²⁶

Soon after the closing date the General Purposes Committee of the council and the competition assessor, followed subsequently by the remainder of the council, were invited to view the designs at the Settling Room, Gloucester Green,²⁷ the room where bargains at the cattle market were finalised.²⁸ The competition assessor was to have been E.G. Bruton, the city surveyor, but illness forced his withdrawal in October, and T.E. Collcutt, a London-based architect of some note, was appointed on the advice of the Royal Institute of British Architects for the same fee of £105.²⁹ Collcutt, an Oxford-born man, had worked for a time in the office of G.E. Street, the famous church architect, and in 1877 had won the competition to design Wakefield Town Hall, a 'free Tudor style leaning towards Early French Renaissance'.³⁰

Collcutt's report at the end of November reflects the difficulty competitors faced in trying to comply with instructions that he felt were 'too extensive', with the result that nearly all of the submitted plans were 'wanting in convenience of arrangement, sufficiency of light and in dignity in the entrance hall and corridors'. Furthermore, most of the designs had been

²⁴ *Builder*, 25 June 1892, p. 492.

²⁵ OCA, C.5.6, 55.

²⁶ OCA, D.9.1.

²⁷ OCA, C.5.6, 55.

²⁸ C. and E. Hibbert, *The Encyclopaedia of Oxford* (1988), 154.

²⁹ OCA, C.5.6, 54.

³⁰ A.S. Gray, *Edwardian Architecture* (1985), 144.

considerably over budget, some costing as much as £80,000, and he considered it 'desirable to avoid expensive features' as great care would be required in the use of materials and economical arrangement of the plans to achieve the desired £50,000.³¹

Reductions to the accommodation provided in the court section and elsewhere were consequently made in an attempt to remain within the budget. Five architects, commended by the assessor, were then invited to prepare full plans for the final competition. The assessor's report on these went forward to the General Purposes Committee on 4 May 1892. Collcutt confessed to disappointment that the final designs had not fulfilled the promise of the original sketches and that none of them had satisfactorily solved the problem of lighting, which he had to admit might have been a defect of the site. However, design number 5 seemed generally to show a more convenient arrangement, better lighting in the corridors and the 'best architectural treatment', although he considered none of the designs 'would equal in architectural merit those erected in Oxford in recent years'.³² Competitor number 5 was Henry Thomas Hare of London.

The committee, disturbed that no design had been found for which an unreserved recommendation could be made, was nevertheless assured that it was unlikely that Hare's plan could be bettered, especially once a few modifications were made. Acceptance was, therefore, recommended to the council at a meeting on 29 June 1892. It was to be a stormy meeting lasting over four hours with Alderman Buckell passionately urging acceptance of Hare's plan and brushing confidently over the finances involved.³³ The opposition, both Conservatives and university councillors, attempted to resurrect provision for a public library only and then demanded that the ratepayers should be consulted via a general meeting. Voting, however, on these two amendments saw Buckell victorious, with the Liberals receiving the support of two notable Conservatives, Alderman Gray and Councillor Thomas Lucas.³⁴ Hare's plans were adopted.

HENRY HARE AND HIS DESIGN

Henry Hare was a young man of 30 at the beginning of a very distinguished career when he won the Oxford competition. Born in Scarborough, he had originally trained in a local practice before going to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, in the atelier of P.-R.-L. Ginain in 1881. He returned to London to work in the offices of Z. King and R.H. Hill between 1882 and 1890 where 'he was an assistant by day and worked on competition schemes at night', winning the Ashpittel Prize in 1886. He began his own practice in 1891.³⁵

Hare won the competition for Stafford's County Offices almost simultaneously with gaining the first premium at Oxford, and both designs reflect the 'mixed Renaissance' style which was a prevailing influence of the period. Architects of the time were searching for a national style, expressive of an era of prosperity and growth, both in terms of an expanding population and in commercial, banking, retail and industrial development, but also as the nation saw itself in the wider world through its trade with other countries and its empire. Elizabethan and Jacobean styles of architecture helped capture the atmosphere the architects sought to evoke and provided a source which could be adapted for a new 'Free

³¹ OCA, C.5.6, 55-6.

³² *Ibid.* 57.

³³ OCPS.

³⁴ OCA, C.5.6, 57.

³⁵ *Builder*, 21 January 1921, p. 93.

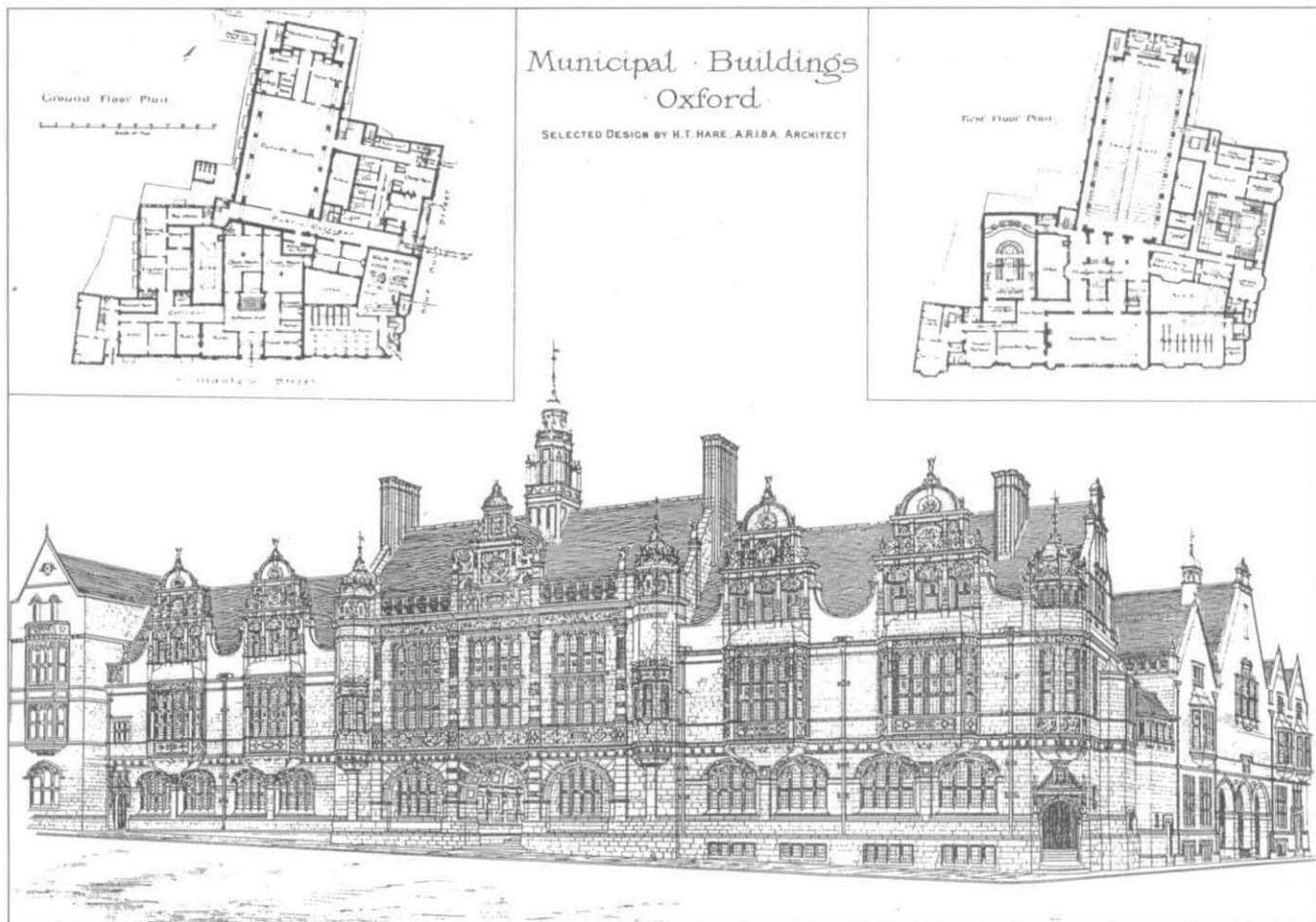


Fig. 3. Proposed Municipal Buildings, Oxford, Henry T. Hare (*Building News*, 8 July 1892, reproduced by kind permission of National Monuments Record).

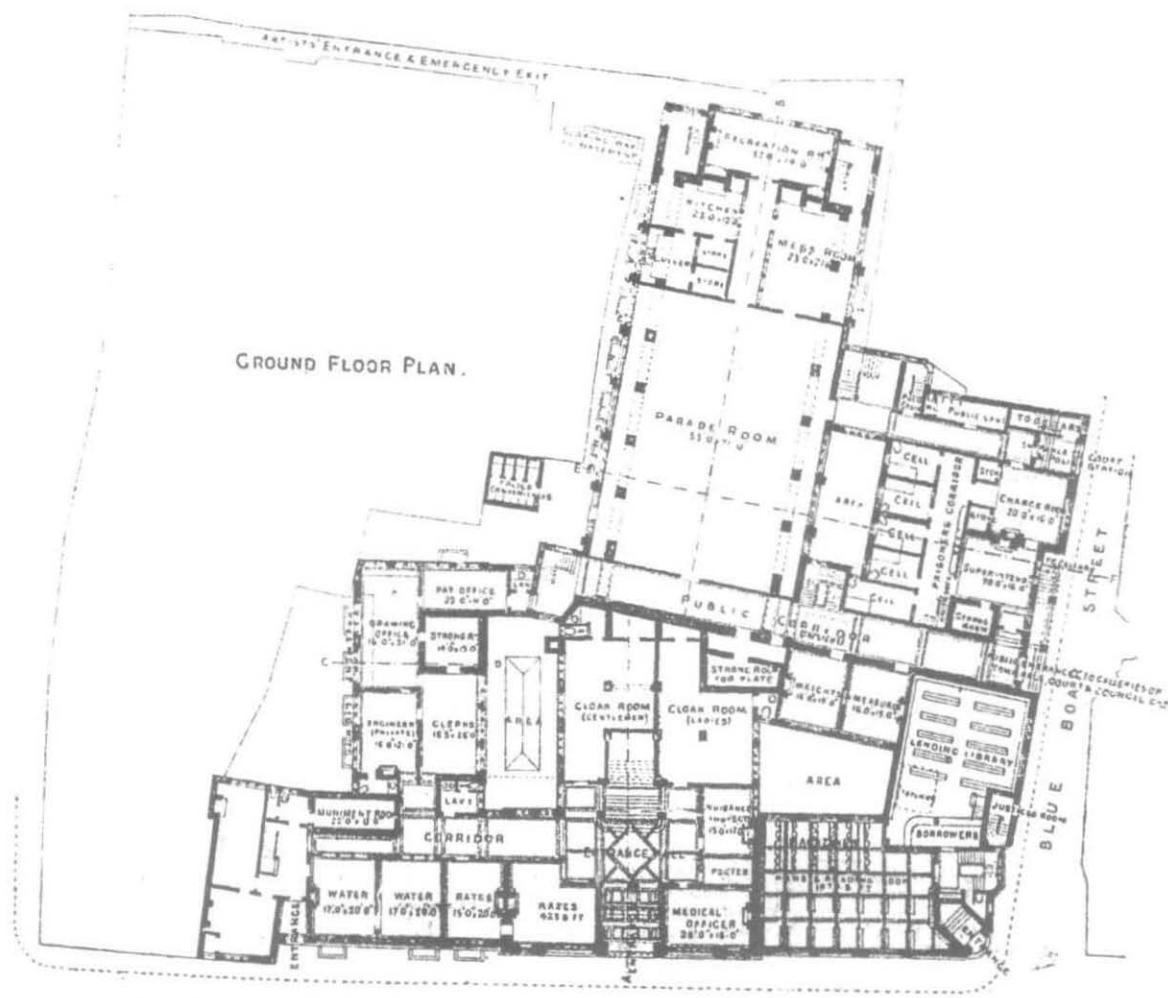


Fig. 4. Ground floor plan of new Municipal Buildings, Henry T. Hare (*The Builder*, 9 July 1892, reproduced by kind permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford).

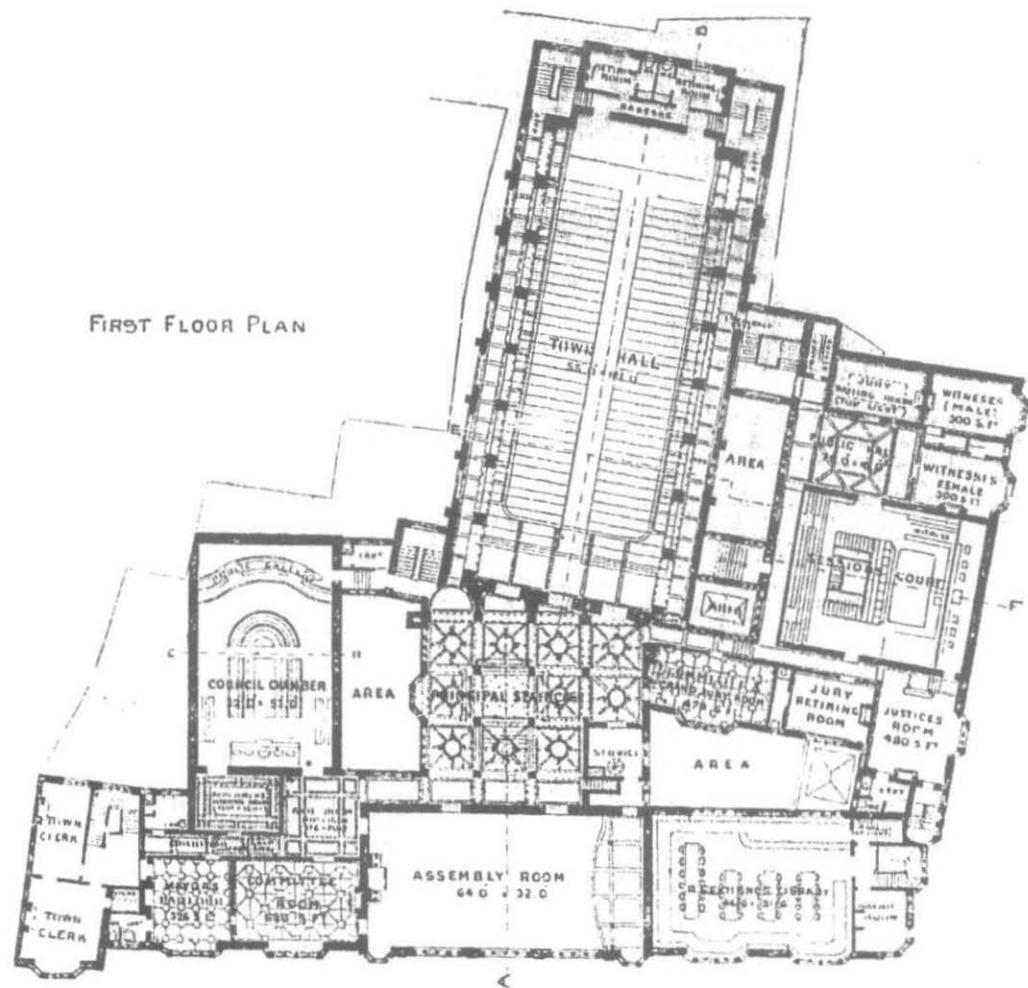


Fig. 5. First floor plan of new Municipal Buildings, Henry T. Hare (*The Builder*, 9 July 1892, reproduced by kind permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford).

Style'. Public buildings, in particular, were quick to adopt the free Renaissance theme after the 1870s, as in Colclutt's town hall for Wakefield.

In Oxford, T.G. Jackson had been using a free Jacobean style since the 1870s in a variety of college and university buildings, such as the Examination Schools (1876-82). Hare's design (Fig. 3) for the new municipal buildings followed in Jackson's footsteps, but its richly detailed front facade produced an 'unashamedly showy' building of a different kind to the imposing style of the Examination Schools.³⁶ The facade of the building is symmetrical, apart from the SW. corner which housed the library. The town clerk's office has been blended in by repeating the ground floor window along the front of the new building, by the use of oriel windows on the new facade in a similar, if more highly decorated style, and by echoing the string courses. Although the new buildings' gables are Jacobean and highly ornate, the plainer gable of the town clerk's office is repeated in the styling used for the much quieter Blue Boar Street elevation. This more sober elevation reflects the fact that Hare placed the courts and police headquarters on this side of the building but, despite its lack of decoration, the gables, three large archways, wrought iron gateways and small architectural details enliven the W. end of Blue Boar Street. The bold, almost ostentatious, St. Aldate's Street elevation, was designed to demonstrate the importance of the city and its corporation, conveying grandeur and authority. The use of such traditional styling, albeit freely adapted, lent the building an air of historical continuity and perhaps a reminder that the city was older than the university, despite its new status.

The main entrance to the building is placed centrally on the St. Aldate's front, leading into a large entrance hall. Hare's plan grouped all the municipal offices at the N. end of the building on the ground floor (Fig. 4), which thus made them 'directly accessible to the public without any unnecessary corridors or waste of space.'³⁷ The main staircase rises from the entrance hall to an arcaded upper hall. On the N. side, through a doorway that enables this section to be shut off from the public, lie the mayor's parlour, committee room and council chamber. The Town Hall, or Great Hall, leads off from the upper hall covering the site of the old Corn Exchange (Fig. 5) and Hare's genius in managing this difficult site is shown in the manner in which he arranged for the hall to be almost invisibly angled away from the main building by varying the width of the bays at the entrance of the hall. The courtrooms also lead off the upper hall, to the S., with the police station under, and the assembly room runs over the front entrance. The library was arranged on two floors with a separate entrance at the corner of the building, the news and reading room and the lending library on the ground floor and the reference library above. The *Builder* commented that the arrangement of accommodation on the 'difficult and confined site' was 'a triumph of planning' and 'one of the best [plans] we have ever seen in a competition'.³⁸

THE BUILDING PROCESS

On 22 June 1891 a special committee had been appointed to deal with the question of new city buildings, consisting of Alderman Buckell, then mayor, Aldermen Gray, Hughes and Jenkin, the Provost of Queen's, Councillors Ansell, R. Bacon, Butler, Daniel, Downing, Gamlen, Grubb, Hall, Kingerlee and J.H. Salter.³⁹ Alderman Buckell was elected chairman, a title he was to retain throughout the life of the New Municipal Buildings Committee, as it

³⁶ J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Oxfordshire* (1974), 302.

³⁷ *OC*, 21 January 1893.

³⁸ *Builder*, 25 June 1892, p. 493.

³⁹ *OCPS*.

came to be known. The committee dealt with all aspects of the building process, reporting to the city council through the Finance Committee and the General Purposes Committee.

On 5 October 1892 the council officially confirmed Hare's appointment as architect and also appointed George Fleetwood as quantity surveyor in preparation for obtaining tenders for the construction works.⁴⁰ That the ratepayers approved of the intended new buildings seems to have been confirmed by the fact that at the annual municipal elections in November no 'alteration whatever in the parties' occurred.⁴¹ The next step was to ensure that the funds for financing the building were put in place, an aspect of the project that had been much debated.

In 1883, when Alderman Galpin had resurrected the idea of altering the Town Hall, the sum of £20,000 was widely considered sufficient.⁴² By September 1889, after his visit north, Walter Gray had estimated the cost of new 'splendid' municipal buildings at Oxford in the region of £60,000⁴³ and this amount seems to have been generally accepted, despite some opposition, mostly from Conservative ranks.

At the special meeting of the council on 11 June 1891, the Finance Committee reported on the financial position of the corporation in connection with the proposed new buildings. The Oxford Corporation Act of 1890 had been part of the process of reorganising city finances in the late 19th century, making sanitation, highways, lighting and the maintenance of the Town Hall the concern of the general district fund, whilst the borough fund took care of the waterworks, markets, police, and city properties. Self-supporting at that time, the borough fund was able to pay a surplus into the general district fund, which received the majority of its income from the rates.⁴⁴ At the special meeting, it was reported that with a consolidation of corporation loans and the issue of stock, together with an increased rental from the borough fund, it was anticipated that £2,000 per annum would be available immediately to expend on new municipal buildings, increasing annually. This sum was estimated as sufficient to repay a loan of £50,000 over 50 or 60 years, including interest. However, referring to the financial statement, Alderman Buckell pointed out that by certain arrangements of finances, including the consolidation of the corporation debt, approximately £3,000 per annum would be saved, permitting a loan of £70,000 which would cost £2,721 a year over 50 years.⁴⁵ The proposed cost of the new buildings was well within the corporation's reach, 'without cost to the citizens of a single penny'.⁴⁶

The corporation was committed to a variety of improvements around the city initiated by the Corporation Bill of 1890, including the redevelopment of Carfax, for which repayments of £1,084 per annum needed to be made.⁴⁷ Buckell cleverly argued that as these were public improvements, the public should pay for them, and a rate of one penny in the pound should be levied, leaving the £3,000 to be used for the new buildings. Alderman Wilson for the university, seconded by Councillor R. Bacon, proposed that a decision was deferred until the general district rate was estimated for the following year but as few were keen on another delay this proposal was withdrawn and the decision to proceed, expending £600 on the design competition, was carried forward, with only Bacon dissenting.

⁴⁰ OCA, C.5.6, 117.

⁴¹ OCPS.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ OT, 28 September 1889.

⁴⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 242.

⁴⁵ OCA, C.5.5, 346.

⁴⁶ OT, 15 May 1897.

⁴⁷ OCA, C.5.5, 346.

Although the principle of building had been accepted, concerns over the financing of the project surfaced again at the meeting of 29 June 1892 when the council were asked to adopt the General Purposes Committee's recommendation of Hare's design. On this occasion Buckell said that if they added £10,000 for fittings and the like to the assessor's estimate of £50,000, they could borrow £60,000 over 60 years at a cost of £2,300 per annum. The anticipated net income from the new buildings would be in the region of £1,300 but as £570 revenue would be lost with the old buildings, the corporation would have to find a sum of £1,570 for 60 years. This, Buckell considered, could be met from the borough fund without incurring any addition to the rates. He was supported by the city accountant, Sheriff Carver, who boldly declared that if, that day, they decided to spend a certain sum then 'the outlay could be rigidly curtailed within that amount', a pronouncement that was greeted with a degree of derision.⁴⁸

In November 1892, the Municipal Building Committee received from the architect a set of plans, amended slightly to improve lighting, together with an estimate of the building costs which Hare calculated would be £65,901, including the interior fittings. Based on these calculations, and following the unanimous decision of the council in December, an application was sent to the Local Government Board requesting leave to raise a sum not exceeding £70,000 for the buildings under section 120 of the Oxford Corporation Act of 1890.⁴⁹ Corporations were able to issue stock to raise money and from about 1860 it had been possible to apply to borrow government money for specific purposes such as town hall building and urban improvements. On these occasions Local Government Board inspectors were sent to the towns concerned to hold public enquiries into the applications.

Oxford's public enquiry was scheduled for March 1893. At the beginning of that year, advertisements for the tenders for the building works were inserted in local newspapers and the trade building journals. Twelve tenders, ranging from £51,663 to over £71,000, were received by the closing date of 7 February 1893 from firms all over England, with only one from Oxford. The lowest tender, from Mr. John S. Chappell of Pimlico, was recommended for acceptance by the Buildings Committee with the deduction of £283 for an unnecessary Cornish granite plinth to the front elevation. None of the tenders had allowed for fittings or commissions and by the time these additions were made to Chappell's tender the cost had risen to £65,883, very close to Hare's earlier estimation. The new figure included an estimated £5,000 for the installation of heating and electric lights and carving works, £4,300 for internal fittings to the main rooms and electric light fittings, and £5,203 for fees to the architect and the surveyor, payment to a clerk of works, and competition fees.⁵⁰

The council met in early March 1893 and accepted Mr. Chappell's tender but not before a stormy debate after which the committee's recommendation was carried by 32 votes to 10. There was much disquiet amongst the Conservatives at such a large expenditure. Alderman Underhill expressed the opinion that it would be a miracle if 'so large and extensive a work could be carried out exactly for the sum put down on paper' and the cost would be at least £80,000 before it was finished. It was still far from clear how the loan was to be afforded, especially as Underhill pointed out that less than £850 had been estimated to be available from the borough fund to put against the £3,000 that would be required as repayment of the loan. He felt that Oxford was not wealthy enough for such expenditure, especially as 'trades were languishing and things were not at all healthy with the colleges or the city'.⁵¹ In

⁴⁸ *OT*, 15 May 1897.

⁴⁹ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 1, minutes of Municipal Buildings Committee 1892-1900.

⁵⁰ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 11.

⁵¹ *OC*, 4 March 1893.

fact, the evidence is that by the late 19th century some trades were doing rather well, shops and services in particular benefiting from the university's expansion and the growth of middle-class suburbs such as North Oxford which, of course, in turn aided the building industry.⁵²

Alderman Buckell handled all the criticism with his usual style and when the Conservative Councillor Morrell moved that they ought to pause for a month to allow detailed financial statements to be prepared and circulated, which would show exactly how much the proposal was to cost and how it was to be met, Buckell's eloquent and impassioned response ensured that the proposition was decisively defeated. Chappell's tender was accepted, subject to the receipt of the Local Government Board loan.

On 28 March 1893 Mr. S.J. Smith, a civil engineer from the Local Government Board, held an enquiry into the application in the city's Council Chamber.⁵³ The assets and liabilities of the corporation were investigated and the town clerk gave compelling reasons as to the need for a new building.⁵⁴ When the ratepayers were invited to raise any issues of concern, none were forthcoming. The inspector appeared doubtful that Hare's plans could be achieved for the sum requested but he approved a loan of £70,000, assuming a normal repayment period of 30 years.⁵⁵ As Oxford's calculations were based on 60 years, a deputation was quickly sent to the president of the Local Government Board and the period was extended to 50 years. The consent document was signed on 27 April 1893.⁵⁶ Thereafter, in each yearly issue of Oxford Corporation redeemable stock, which by the fifth issue in 1897 totalled £450,000, an amount was included for the new municipal buildings, being £10,000 in 1897.⁵⁷ Street improvements, provision of cemeteries and sanitation works were all financed by this method. Stock was offered for public tender through the London and County Banking Company at a minimum price of £105 per £100 of stock, bearing dividends and was to be redeemable at par in 1951. The loan secured, even if the source of repayment was still slightly hazy, the work could now commence.

The contract between the 'Mayor, Aldermen and Citizens of Oxford' and John Thomas Chappell was signed in the architect's presence on 5 May 1893.⁵⁸ By then a clerk of works had been appointed; Richard Evans of Leicester Road, Uppingham, who had often worked with T.G. Jackson, was employed at a salary of £4 4s. per week.⁵⁹

On 15 May 1893 demolition of the old Town Hall and buildings began (Fig. 6).⁶⁰ The university provided accommodation for meetings of the council and committees in the Examination Schools for the duration of the building process, subject to the requirements of the university at examination times, and the first meeting of the council took place there on 5 June 1893.⁶¹ A secure basement cellar for the storage of city muniments was provided, whilst the city quarter sessions and petty sessions court were given a temporary home in one of the assizes courts in County Hall.⁶² The old library closed on 25 March 1893 and in May the lending library section moved initially into the Settling Room at Gloucester Green.

⁵² *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 215-16.

⁵³ *OCPS*.

⁵⁴ *OT*, 1 April 1893.

⁵⁵ *OT, OCPS*, 15 May 1897.

⁵⁶ *OCA*, P7.5.

⁵⁷ *OC*, 8 May 1897.

⁵⁸ *OCA*, P7.5.

⁵⁹ *OCPS*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 10.

⁶² *OC*, 4 Feb. 1893.

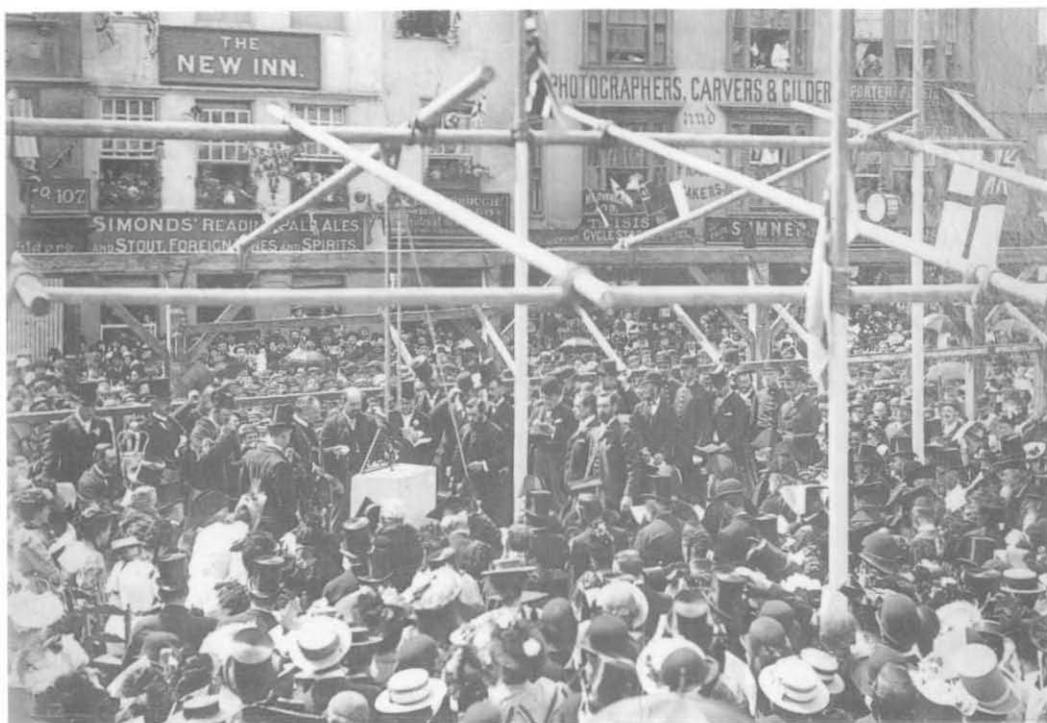


Fig. 7. Laying the foundation stone, 6 July 1893 (Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. d 503, f. 83).

The foundation stone for the new buildings was laid with great ceremony on 6 July 1893, the date chosen as it was the wedding day of HRH The Duke of York and Princess Victoria Mary of Teck.⁶⁴ Huge crowds gathered in Oxford to see the mayor, Thomas Lucas, perform the ceremony with a silver trowel presented by the architect (Fig. 7).⁶⁵ The foundation stone, a piece of Clipsham weighing half a ton, was laid at the angle of St. Aldate's Street and Blue Boar Street, about 5 ft. from the pavement, bearing the names of the mayor, the architect and the builder. Inserted in the cavity of the stone were copies of three local papers,⁶⁶ the municipal year book, a programme of the proceedings and 'coins minted in that year from the sovereign downwards'. A service of prayers followed with an address by the Venerable Archdeacon Palmer, and 4,000 schoolchildren from local elementary schools sang hymns. Afterwards luncheon for almost 200 guests, including university members and citizens, was held at the Randolph Hotel, in addition to festivities on Port Meadow, entertainment for East Oxford schoolchildren, and lavish city illuminations in the evening provided by 'private enterprise'.⁶⁷

On 9 October of that year, whispered rumours that all was not well with the contractor were confirmed when 'considerable sensation' was occasioned by the stoppage of all work on

⁶⁴ OCA, FF.3.6, 20.

⁶⁵ OCPS.

⁶⁶ Presumably the *Oxford Chronicle*, *Oxford Times*, and *Jackson's Oxford Journal*.

⁶⁷ OCPS.

site.⁶⁸ The following day the Buildings Committee met with the architect and it was resolved to put into practice section 18 of the contract in which notice was served on the contractor and his guarantors, requiring work to recommence in six days. As the worst was feared, Hare was also instructed to find out whether Messrs. Parnells of Rugby and Messrs. Willcocks of Wolverhampton would be prepared to take up the contract under the terms of their tender. The quantity surveyor was asked to measure the extent of the work already executed, and the clerk of works required to take an inventory of the plant on site.⁶⁹

Mr. Chappell's financial difficulties proved insurmountable and on 19 October he filed a petition for bankruptcy in the London Bankruptcy Court with liabilities of approximately £220,000 of which £43,000 were said to be unsecured. The collapse seems to have taken most people by surprise. Chappell's contracts had been 'very large' and he was, at the time of his failure, involved in a Government contract with the Post Office.⁷⁰ Worse was to come as, at the council meeting of 6 December 1893, the Buildings Committee had to report on another failure, this time of the National Assurance and Guarantee Corporation Limited, the sureties for £2,000 for Mr. Chappell.⁷¹ The mayor, by then Walter Gray, accompanied by Alderman Buckell, the Committee chairman, attended the London hearing. In the long term, the company was reconstructed and the corporation was able to make arrangements for the repayment of the debt after a number of years, during which time they received 4% interest.⁷²

By the time this second anxiety was encountered, the construction work was well under way again. Both Parnells and Willcocks had revised their tender since the original date in February, and now required more, due to 'the unsettled state of the labour market and a rise in the price of materials'.⁷³ Willcocks' tender had risen to £58,334 and Parnells' to £56,876. Buckell visited Hare who had talked to Parnells, but the builder was not prepared to reduce the new tender figure. Three courses were open to the committee: to invite the lowest tendering firm to take over the contract, to advertise for new tenders, or for the council to undertake the works themselves. On 25 October 1893, the committee recommended that the council accept Parnells' increased tender which would involve a loss of £2,693 but would give them the least delay possible as Parnells could start work almost immediately.⁷⁴ The proposal by Mr. Hawkins, for the trades unions, that the corporation should make arrangements to complete the work, was fully discussed but it was generally considered too risky an undertaking.⁷⁵ Councillor Kingerlee, a local builder, advised against it as the job was too large;⁷⁶ the corporation had no plant or machinery so a lot of sub-contracting would be required and the delay could be considerable. Parnell and Son were well known in Oxford, having built Keble College, Mansfield and Manchester Colleges, and some of their senior workmen had been employed by Walter Gray on his building projects in North Oxford.⁷⁷ The firm's tender was therefore accepted and they began work the following week. The foundation stone was subsequently relaid without mention of Mr. Chappell.⁷⁸

⁶⁸ *OT*, 15 May 1897.

⁶⁹ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 24.

⁷⁰ *OCPS*.

⁷¹ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 36.

⁷² *OCPS*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 31.

⁷⁵ *OCPS*.

⁷⁶ *OC*, 28 October 1893.

⁷⁷ *OCPS*.

⁷⁸ S. Taylor, *The Town Hall Oxford: Centenary Year 1997* (1997), 33.

Once Parnell and Son were on site, the building operation in general terms moved along swiftly and smoothly, directed very ably by Richard Evans.⁷⁹ There is little doubt that the construction was of the highest quality. The best materials were used, and both internally and externally the work was considered to be of a 'substantial and durable nature.'⁸⁰ The exterior stonework on the front elevation is ashlar from Clipsham in Rutland, a very hard wearing stone introduced into Oxford by Jackson in buildings like the Examination Schools and in refacing the Bodleian.⁸¹ The interior stonework is of Bath stone supplied by Kinglerlee of Oxford, and the rubble for the side elevation from a Mr. Tolley of Bladon, near Woodstock, again used by Jackson for the Examination Schools. Collyweston stone slates, noted for their durability, were used for the roofs, and much was made at the time of the secure method used in laying the roofs.⁸² As well as Bath stonework internally, polished Hopton Wood stone and Black Birdseye marble were used for dado rails and balustrades, and pillars of Frosterly marble support the musicians' gallery over the fireplace in the Assembly Room. Fibrous plasterwork decorates the ceilings in the main rooms, and oak and pine panelling and floors are to be found throughout.⁸³

The building was constructed using the most modern construction principles available, including heating, ventilation and lighting. Steel was used in the roofs and floors and the largest basement room has three steel stanchions.⁸⁴ This type of construction was designed to support the heavy loadings produced by office accommodation and large function rooms seen in civic buildings and had the added advantage of being fire-resistant. Electric lighting was still a relatively recent development and it was as recently as 1893 that *The Builder* thought it worthy to note that most large buildings were being fitted with electricity.⁸⁵ The supply of electricity to Oxford's municipal buildings' 1,100 electric lights came from the Oxford Electric Supply Company, and the *Oxford Times* and *Oxford Chronicle* carried detailed descriptions of how the current flowed around the building, including the 91 strands of wire, each one eighth of an inch thick, in each of the mains cables.⁸⁶ Electricity also drove several large ventilating fans, which warmed some of the main areas of the building by the 'Plenum' system. Although a fuller understanding of bacteriological infection was closer to being achieved by this time, and the concept of 'bad air' being discounted, ventilation was still of prime consideration making a constant supply of fresh, warm air essential.⁸⁷ A low-pressure steam, or gravity return system, run by two large Cornish boilers in the basement heated many of the rooms and corridors by radiators. Cooking in the various kitchens was done by gas.

It had been agreed at the beginning of the project that no alterations or additions to the plans of more than £25 were to be permitted unless signed by the architect and the chairman of the Buildings Committee.⁸⁸ Throughout the construction process, the committee's

⁷⁹ *OT*, 15 May 1897.

⁸⁰ *OCPS*.

⁸¹ P. Howell, 'Architecture and Townscape since 1800', in Whiting, *op.cit.* note 12, p. 69.

⁸² *OCPS*. Taylor, *op. cit.* note 78, p. 24, reports that the slates were in fact badly laid and have had to be replaced with Cumbrian slate or red tile.

⁸³ *OCPS*.

⁸⁴ M. Dewe, 'Henry T. Hare (1860-1921): an Edwardian public library architect and his work' (unpubl. MA thesis for Coll. of Librarianship, Univ. of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1981), 128 (copy of chapter on Oxford Town Hall in Centre for Oxfordshire Studies).

⁸⁵ R. Fellows, *Edwardian Architecture: Style and Technology* (1995), 88.

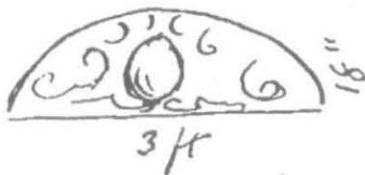
⁸⁶ *OCPS*.

⁸⁷ Fellows, 69.

⁸⁸ *OCA*, FF.3.6, 13.



Shield under Justices window



Window head for gable over bay window



Entrance to public library - over door

Fig. 8. Examples of stone carving from Aumonier's amended estimate to Hare, 12 July 1894 (OCA, D.9.1, reproduced by kind permission of Oxford City Council).

minutes reveal a variety of material and constructional changes, very often suggested by the architect, sometimes originating from the committee. For example, Hare requested in May 1895 to be allowed an extra £500 to spend on fibrous plaster work on the ceilings in the main rooms which occasioned 'a miniature battle' at the monthly council meeting.⁸⁹ The £500 was approved after a vote in which Gray, as usual, voted with Buckell. Hare also reported at the same time that no allowance had been made in the original tender for the fitting out of the kitchens and a further £278 had to be agreed. At an early stage the entrance to the public library section was moved from its original position on the corner of St. Aldate's and Blue Boar Street to a new position further along the Blue Boar elevation, substantially altering the SW. corner of the building. The change made possible an enlarged reading room and other modifications in the library block, including the addition of a ladies' room and a small librarian's office.

Parnells undertook the main construction work but separate contractors were employed for each of the other elements, including heating, electric lighting, decorating, furnishing, and carving. The external sculptor (Fig. 8) was William Aumonier of London, a colourful figure with long flowing locks and high felt hat, well known and highly esteemed as a wood carver and architectural sculptor.⁹⁰ He worked with Reginald Blomfield on Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford and with Aston Webb on the Birmingham Law Courts amongst many other

⁸⁹ *OT*, 8 June 1895.

⁹⁰ *Royal Inst. of Brit. Architects Jnl.* 14 February 1914, p. 239.

buildings. Frederick E.E. Schenck, another well known sculptor, was responsible for the figures that adorn the second floor galleries in the main hall.⁹¹

In May 1895 it was reported that the public library section would be ready for occupation that autumn. Hare had stated at the public enquiry that the whole building would be completed by September 1895 but alterations and additions had delayed the project. There was a move to defer the library opening until the whole block of buildings was completed but this was defeated in council in June and the library opened in November, without public ceremony, beginning with the newspaper room. The lending library and ladies' room opened in December 1895 and the reference library in the following February.⁹²

THE GRAND OPENING

In April 1896 planning began for the opening ceremony the following year. This was an important occasion in the history of any big building venture and the attendance of royalty was vital to ensure the success of the project.⁹³ It had been hoped that the Queen would perform Oxford's ceremony but she was too heavily committed. The Prince of Wales, however, accepted the task, giving an important royal seal of approval to Oxford. It was all the more gratifying as public building programmes were at a peak in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year and royalty were 'exceptionally busy'.⁹⁴ The Prince was no stranger to Oxford. He had spent his undergraduate days at Christ Church, had visited Oxford with his new bride shortly after his marriage, and his last visit had been to lay the foundation stone of the Indian Institute in May 1883.⁹⁵

Oxford celebrated the opening of the new Municipal Buildings in grand style on 12 May 1897. Local newspapers issued lengthy pictorial supplements packed with minute details of the project, including its history, specifications and decorations, and profiles of all the key players. The opening day coincided with the Wednesday cattle market so the latter was moved to the previous day. A public holiday was declared and flags and bunting adorning the town. Electricity was part of the celebrations for the first time in Oxford with many commercial premises sporting small electric incandescent lamps placed under translucent celluloid coloured shades, some arranged in patriotic letters such as 'VR'.⁹⁶ The Municipal Buildings themselves were illuminated with electric lighting strung along the balustrades and cornices with a giant 'VR' and Prince of Wales' plumes made of coloured shades.⁹⁷ Gas illuminations in the evening produced stars, crowns and ostrich feathers in all directions. The university's *Oxford Magazine* felt it necessary to comment on the excess of 'loyal contortions' seen in the twisted gas pipes arising from windows and pavements with no thought of overall effect. The magazine considered the colour combination of the Union Jack – although splendid – was 'not well adapted for clusters' and thought flags would have looked much better against the grey stone of the colleges than against the bricks of the town – especially college colours.⁹⁸

⁹¹ *Builder*, 15 May 1897.

⁹² Dewe, *op.cit.* note 84, p. 116.

⁹³ Cunningham, *op. cit.* note 23, p. 216.

⁹⁴ Supplement to *Architecture*, ii, November 1897.

⁹⁵ *OT*, 15 May 1897.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *OC*, 8 May 1897.

⁹⁸ *Oxford Magazine*, 12 May 1897.

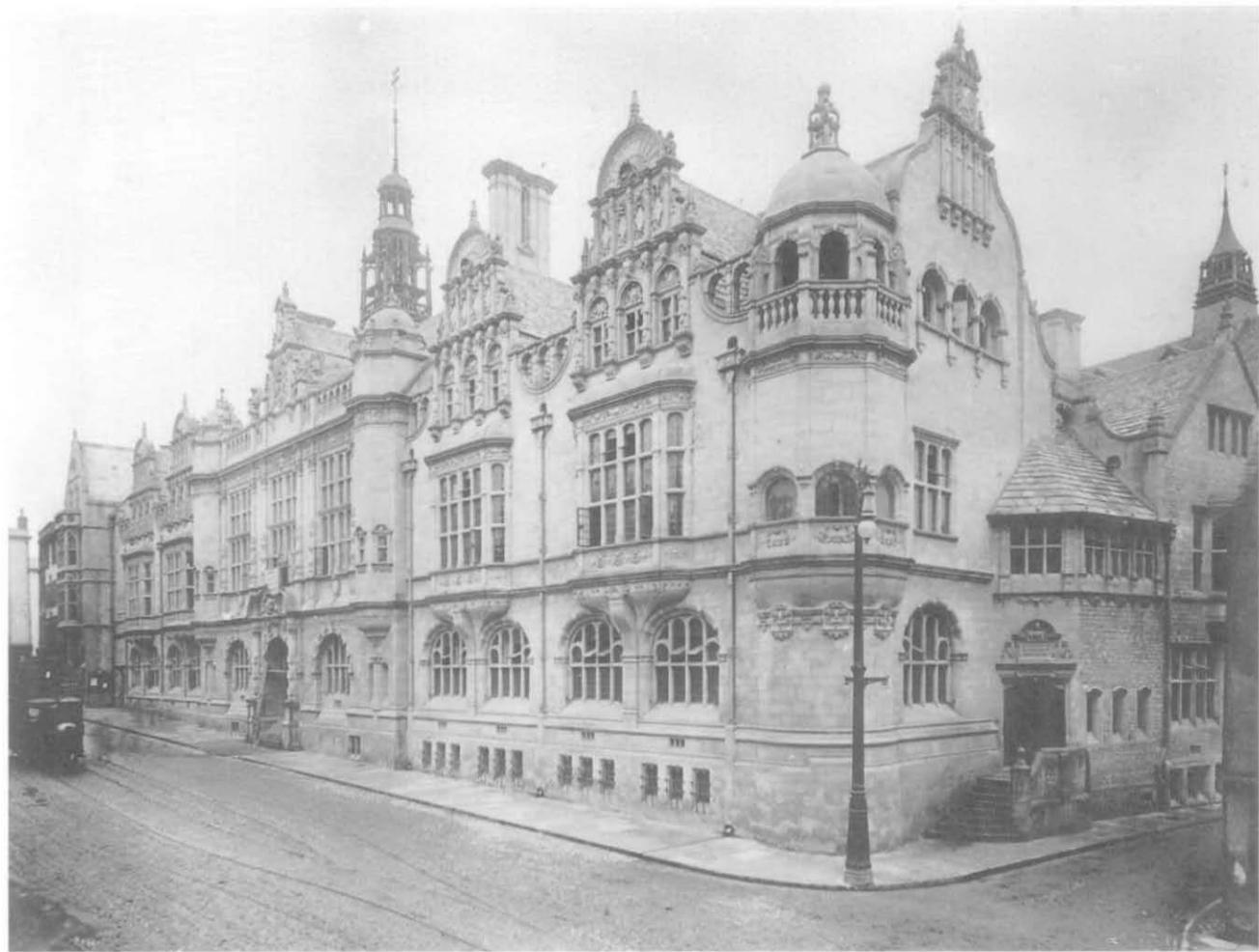


Fig. 9. The new Municipal Buildings, c. 1897 (Oxfordshire Photographic Archive, Oxfordshire County Council).

The Prince of Wales came by Great Western Railway to Oxford, inspected the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, lunched at the Randolph Hotel, and then processed with various dignitaries to the Town Hall where the opening ceremony was performed before a packed hall. The 1,359 invited guests had been seated to a carefully arranged plan, their arrival staggered during the afternoon with the result that some guests had been in their seats for an hour and a half by the time the ceremony began. Entertainment was at hand from a selection of solos on the new organ played by various distinguished organists of the city and the university.⁹⁹ The organ was a large item of expenditure not initially budgeted for but perhaps inescapable as organs were 'almost *de rigueur*' for new municipal buildings.¹⁰⁰ A sub-committee led by Sir John Stainer, Professor of Music at Oxford, had prepared the specifications. Built by Henry Willis and Son of London, it was a huge four manual instrument, one of the largest seen in this type of building, and its cost had been £2,200 plus £70 for a special case designed by Henry Hare.

During the ceremony, Hare gave the Prince a portfolio of photographs of the buildings. That evening, after dining with the governing body of Christ Church, the Prince of Wales was present again at the Municipal Buildings where the current mayor – appropriately Robert Buckell – and the mayoress were 'at home' to guests invited to have the honour of meeting the Prince. Regrettably, disturbances during the evening between some undergraduates and the police, many drafted in from the Metropolitan force, resulted in some undergraduates experiencing at first hand the accommodation provided by the new police cells of which the *Oxford Magazine* had been moved to a glowing report, stating that the spotless, sanitary, roomy cells with electric lighting were in great contrast to the 'cupboard which is frequently both in college and in lodgings considered fit for the undergraduate'.¹⁰¹

Following the afternoon ceremony the Prince had opened the Sarah Acland Home in Banbury Road, which had been designed by Jackson. The style of the new Municipal Buildings is sometimes seen as Hare's attempt to out-Jackson Jackson. Betjeman refers to the Municipal Buildings as 'in Sir Thomas Jackson's manner, and even more in the manner than Sir Thomas himself',¹⁰² whilst Pevsner says that Hare gave Oxford town what Jackson had for fifteen years given Oxford gown, wondering whether Jackson chuckled or foamed.¹⁰³

'A NOBLE PILE OF BUILDINGS'

Despite its past opposition, the *Oxford Times* was generous in its praise of the new buildings, perhaps necessarily so in view of the enormous public interest and admiration the buildings generated. However, having spent so many years and words criticising the 'absurdity of building a new Town Hall',¹⁰⁴ the newspaper was to have its reward in early April 1898. In March the Municipal Buildings Committee had met to consider the building contractor's statement of account and an abstract of payments already made on the capital account in respect of the new buildings. These went forward to the General Purposes Committee meeting on 5 April when the architect was present to explain how £81,630 5s. 0d. had already been spent on the new buildings, and almost £10,000 more was needed to complete

⁹⁹ H. Williams, *The Town Hall Oxford* (booklet, 1992), 1-3.

¹⁰⁰ Cunningham, *op.cit.* note 25, p. 215.

¹⁰¹ *Oxford Magazine*, 12 May 1897.

¹⁰² J. Betjeman, *An Oxford University Chest* (1938), 172.

¹⁰³ Pevsner, *op. cit.* note 36, p. 302.

¹⁰⁴ *OT*, 25 January 1890.

the project, bringing the total to £91,564 2s. 5d.¹⁰⁵ Parnells had received £63,000 and was owed more than £7,500, against a tender figure of £54,573.

The meeting of the council that followed was, not unexpectedly, a difficult one. There was disquiet about the amount of money spent and the General Purposes Committee recommended that an application be made to the Local Board to raise a further sum of £21,500 to complete the expenditure.¹⁰⁶ Alderman Underhill for the Conservatives gloomily predicted that it would be 55 years before the building 'ceased to be an incubus on ratepayers', whilst Revd George for the university echoed the old cry that the cost should have been gone into before the building was started.¹⁰⁷ Buckell responded in his usual fashion explaining that the additions had been sanctioned by the council or the Municipal Buildings Committee and pointing out that 'a mere shell [had become] a noble pile of buildings, the admiration of everyone who looked upon them, and the envy of every outsider'.¹⁰⁸ The *Oxford Times* referred to his speech as 'a great flow of eloquence... even [with] talk of romance... and we all know the worthy Alderman never romances - unless it be when he wants new city buildings'.¹⁰⁹ Buckell defended the financial position, stating that the council had been preparing for some years by careful 'husbanding' of the borough fund and that the 'time [was] propitious as a large amount of money [was due] for the relief of taxation'.¹¹⁰ He felt no serious tax would be inflicted on the citizens generally. The *Oxford Times*, predicting a cost of £2 per head to every man, woman and child in the city, was not slow to point out that it had been the lone voice cautioning the ratepayers 'against the delusive hopes into which they were being led' and to point out how different was this financial statement to the 'sanguine anticipations of a £50,000 expenditure which was to yield a handsome profit to the ratepayers at no expense to the rates'.¹¹¹ A week later the *Oxford Times* was still preoccupied with finances having calculated that the 'extras' on the building had amounted to £16,000, nearly one third of the original contract tender and hardly the 'trifling' sort of extras that the public had been led to expect.¹¹² The bottom line, as the newspaper saw it, was that the original contract had been 'cut down to the lowest penny, leaving other requisites to be added as extras'.

On Parnells' final account several items have been marked with a cross and relate to a handwritten sheet in the records headed 'Items more or less ordered by Committee'.¹¹³ Even the *Oxford Chronicle* commented on expenditure not authorised by the council and was mildly critical of the 'absence of that system of control and check which ought to have been exercised'.¹¹⁴ However, the council accepted the report, the final accounts were settled and in November 1898 the town clerk wrote again to the Local Government Board requesting consent to the raising of £21,500. Another enquiry ensued and in May 1899 a further loan of £21,441 was sanctioned, to be repaid over 45 years.¹¹⁵ When all the accounts were in, the cost of the buildings, including the internal fittings, was to be £94,116, a long way from the original £50,000.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁵ *OT* and *OC*, 9 April 1898.

¹⁰⁶ *OC*, 9 April 1898.

¹⁰⁷ *OT*, 9 April 1898.

¹⁰⁸ *OC*, 9 April 1898.

¹⁰⁹ *OT*, 9 April 1898.

¹¹⁰ *OC*, 9 April 1898.

¹¹¹ *OT*, 9 April 1898.

¹¹² *OT*, 16 April 1898.

¹¹³ *OCA*, P.7.5.

¹¹⁴ *OC*, 9 April 1898.

¹¹⁵ *OCA*, P.7.5, consent document, 2 May 1898.

¹¹⁶ Taylor, *op.cit.* note 78, p. 33.

To put all the accounts of overspending and opposition into perspective, the complaints and criticisms have to be weighed against Oxford's position as one of the 'lowest-rated county boroughs in the country', where the policy of borrowing to fund large projects ensured low per capita expenditure on improvements from revenue.¹¹⁷ It also has to be recognised that most new municipal buildings of the day cost far more than originally anticipated, especially as provision for fittings and furnishings were often not included in the architect's or contractor's estimate. Many schemes took years to get under way and several were only finally built because of the driving force of one or two individuals.

It was not only in the building of municipal buildings and town halls that costs could spiral. Within Oxford, a shining example of overspending is the university's Examination Schools. A limit of £50,000 was set in 1875 but this had been stretched to £108,000 by 1882 and ended up at nearly £180,000.¹¹⁸ It does seem that grand schemes have a habit of escaping financial restraints although the Oxford corporation did manage to draw the line somewhere. In 1896 they had purchased 5 and 6 Blue Boar Street from Christ Church as the site for the chief constable's house. The Buildings Committee asked Hare to remodel his original plans for the residence to bring the cost down to £1,200. The amended plans for £1,250 were accepted in February but at the council meeting in April, when the full extent of the overspending on the city buildings was revealed, opposition to the use of Hare resulted in his plans being abandoned and the city estates surveyor subsequently drew up fresh plans for £1,000.¹¹⁹ 'However ornate an architect Mr Hare may be, and however immaculate his designs, he is not an economical man,' the *Oxford Times* commented, questioning the wisdom of using a London architect for such a job.¹²⁰

Oxford's new Municipal Buildings (Fig. 9) share many of the characteristics of similar public buildings erected at the time, and are part of the development of municipal self-government that was one of the 'most characteristic features' of Victoria's reign, as the Prince of Wales pointed out at the opening ceremony.¹²¹ Towards the close of the century such buildings became considerably different to those of earlier decades, as the needs of administrative offices and amenities became far more complex. As towns and cities grew and town centres became more crowded, town halls tended to become larger and more grandiose in order to stand out, advertising their important role both in the administration of local government and as a ceremonial focal point. Oxford is part of this era. Nationalism was a major influence on architectural style at this time, manifesting itself as the century drew to a close in a neo-Baroque styling which seemed to represent confidence in British imperial and commercial power. Hare moved very successfully from free Renaissance to Baroque styling and at Oxford traces can be seen of this development in his spatially imposing and sumptuously detailed grand staircase and the massiveness of the great hall with its richly decorated barrel vaulted ceiling and galleries (Fig. 10).

Hare's commission for Oxford earned him almost £4,200, a considerable sum but representing at least six years' close involvement with the project. He went on after Oxford to become one of the most successful architects of his generation in the field of public buildings, becoming at different times president of both the Architectural Association and RIBA, the latter during the difficult years of the First World War. Public libraries were his great strength, his Beaux-Arts training showing in the well-ordered interiors, 'clarity of

¹¹⁷ *V.C.H. Oxon.* iv, 243.

¹¹⁸ Howell, *op.cit.* note 81, p. 69.

¹¹⁹ OCA, FF3.6, 167, 169, 176.

¹²⁰ *OT*, 9 April 1898.

¹²¹ *OC*, 15 May 1897.

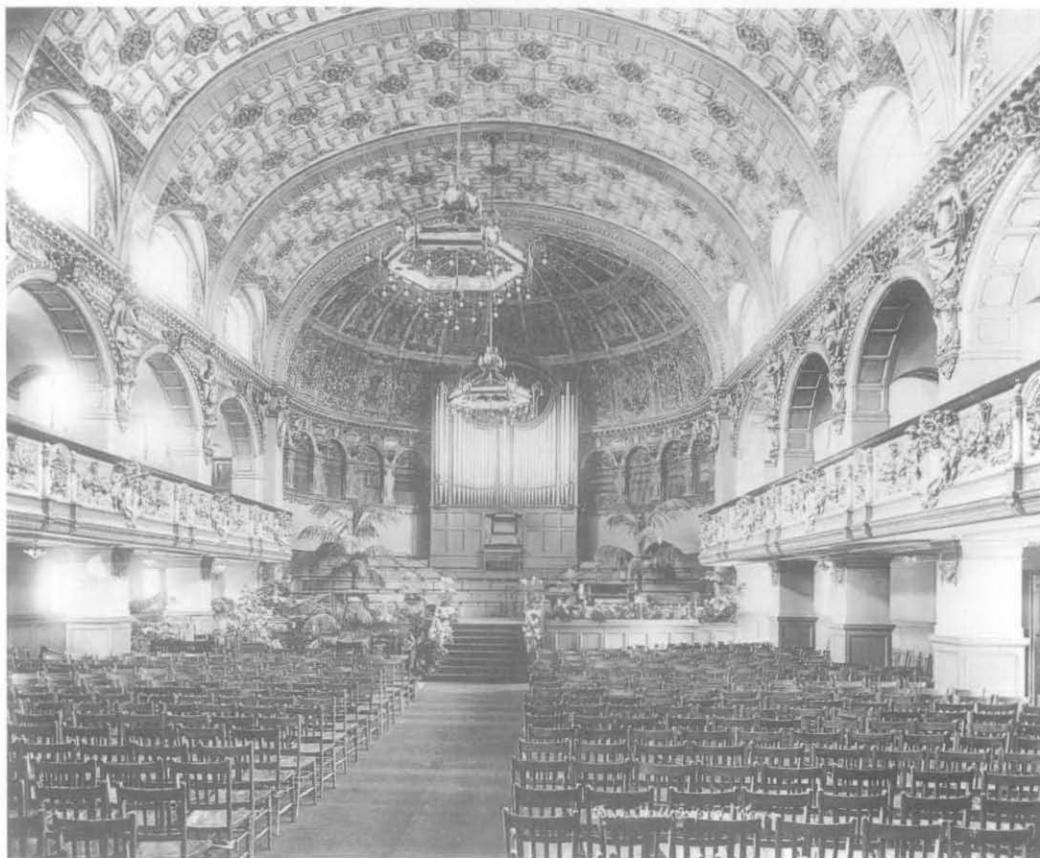


Fig. 10. Great hall, Municipal Buildings, c. 1900 (Oxfordshire Photographic Archive, Oxfordshire County Council).

spatial organisation and the design of effective and appropriate exteriors'.¹²² Oxford is an extremely good example of this. He coped well with a difficult site which had given many of his competitors insurmountable problems. Peter Howell states that 'the excellent planning of its practical and enjoyable interior could never have been matched by Jackson'.¹²³

CONCLUSION

Oxford got what it paid for in the end. If it was more expensive than had been hoped, the corporation accepted it and the ratepayers were delighted. Even the university was gracious in its praise, despite the fact that the university members of the council had tended to vote with the Conservatives against Liberal proposals for the buildings. However, one cannot deny that those who were concerned about the cost were correct from the start, and it is probably also true to say that those most closely involved were aware that the budget would

¹²² Fellows, *op.cit.* note 85, p. 133.

¹²³ Howell, *op.cit.* note 81, p. 72.

be exceeded. The Local Government Inspector had publicly expressed doubt at Hare's ability to achieve everything for the sum borrowed. It is likely that Hare privately shared the Inspector's doubt but general opinion agreed that he had overcome many difficulties at a cost far lower than many other cities and towns had been forced to bear.¹²⁴ Although there had been opposition from certain quarters throughout, it had never been strong enough to halt the project.

Buckell's energy and determination was well rewarded, and the Prince of Wales publicly acknowledged his contribution at the opening. Buckell declared in 1898 that the new Municipal Buildings had been his life's work. Aiding him, on the Municipal Buildings Committee and on the council, had been Walter Gray, and the spirit of cooperation between them had fostered a similar effect on the corporation.

The *Oxford Times* had said in 1891, before the design competition had even begun, that 'the odds are terribly against the proposed [municipal buildings] being a thing of joy and beauty for ever. Rather it may present a humiliating contrast to Wolsey's magnificent front of Christ Church.'¹²⁵ With the aid of Buckell and the Buildings Committee – and, of course, time – Hare was to prove them wrong.

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¹²⁴ *OC*, 15 May 1897.

¹²⁵ *OT*, 20 June 1891.