

History of Jesus College Chapel

<http://chapel.jesus.cam.ac.uk/chapel/history.html>



Jesus College Chapel is the oldest college chapel in Cambridge and it is unique in that it was not originally designed as a college chapel, since it precedes the foundation of the college by three and a half centuries, and the university by more than half a century. It was originally a large Norman church dedicated to St Mary which served the twelfth-century Benedictine convent of St Radegund, which is why the plan of the present chapel, like that of the cloisters that surround it, has a conventual rather than a collegiate character ⁽¹⁾. It also served as the church of the parish of St Radegund which grew up around the convent, which was at that time a semi-rural area located just outside the city of Cambridge: a charter of 113 from Nigellus, the second Bishop of Ely, refers to 'the nuns of the little cell lately instituted without the town of Cantebruge'. ⁽²⁾

The church took about a century to build, being begun about 1157 and completed about 1245, and it was at that time the largest church in Cambridge, being about 58 metres in length and of cathedral-like proportions. Like the modern chapel, it was built in the form of a cross, though with aisles to the north and south of chancel and nave, with a high pitched roof, and was surmounted by a belfry or steeple which was visible for miles around. In 1277 the belfry collapsed, and in 1313 and again in 1376, devastating fires destroyed much of the surrounding convent but largely spared the church itself, causing only some discoloration to the tower. The church itself fell into some degree of dilapidation due to the convent's lack of funds to repair the fabric of the building.

When the convent of St Radegund was dissolved in 1496 by John Alcock, Bishop of Ely, and a new college was founded in its place, the conventual church of St Mary was rededicated to the name of Jesus and part of the church was demolished and the remaining portion was drastically modified. Alcock, who was an architect as well as a bishop, having been Comptroller of the Royal Works and Buildings under Henry VII and having designed parts of Ely Cathedral and Great St Mary's church in Cambridge, himself designed many of these alterations, which were intended to create a chapel that was more suitable in scale for a small community of scholars than the existing church. The beginning of this work on the new chapel was superintended by one of Alcock's friends, William Plombe, who was one of the original fellows of the college, in 1497-98. After Alcock's death in 1500, the work was continued by some other friends of Alcock, Dr William Chubbes, the first master of the college, and the architects Sir John Rysley and Sir Reginald Bray. The reconstruction took considerable time, since Sir John Rysley, who died in 1512, bequeathed £160 towards its completion ⁽³⁾.

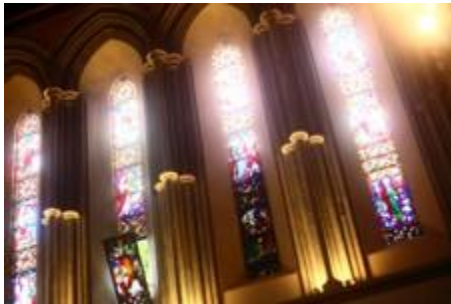


The chancel chapels and the aisles of the nave of the church were pulled down and the cloisters were enlarged. The new cloisters were enclosed by walls that contained four windows in the Perpendicular style. The dilapidated belfry was taken down and the high-pitched roofs of the church were replaced by a lower-pitched flat roof with an oak ceiling. The lancet windows in the eastern wall were replaced by a plain Perpendicular window. Two thirds of what had been the nave of the church were replaced by college rooms, which subsequently became part of the eastern wing of the Master's Lodge, and the chapels on the north and south sides of the choir were pulled down and the northern aisles became part of the cloister: the original columns are still embedded in the wall. The screen which had divided the monastic from the parochial at the west end of the crossing was replaced by a more open screen at the east side. The thirteenth-century

arches which had divided the aisles from the nave were either pulled down to make way for the college rooms or were blocked off with stone and concealed with plaster. The four arches in the

chancel and the two arches in the north transept were all filled in and covered over and in the new walls they placed Perpendicular windows. In the south transept, the eastern arch was also filled in and covered over, two Perpendicular windows were inserted in the eastern and western walls and a very large Perpendicular window was inserted in the southern wall ⁽⁴⁾.

Thus St Mary's church became Jesus chapel. For the time being, it continued to serve as the church of the parish (soon to be renamed 'Jesus parish') and it was used for baptisms and marriages, and 'Jesus churchyard' was used for the burial of the dead, during the first half of the sixteenth century. The last mention of 'Jesus parish' is in a deed of 1552 and it seems to have gradually lapsed into obsolescence, being subsequently incorporated into the parish of All Saints. The western end of 'Jesus churchyard' was separated off early in the history of the college to form the Master's garden. The remainder eventually ceased to be used as a burial ground and came to be known as 'Fair Close', because an annual fair was held there every August for much of the sixteenth century. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the rest of the former churchyard had been transformed into the fellows' garden and the orchard.



The furnishings and rituals of the chapel underwent the usual vicissitudes and reversals of fortune due to the religious reforms and counter-reforms of the sixteenth century; in 1549, during the period of Protestant iconoclasm under Edward VI, the royal Visitors destroyed six altars in the chapel and some images in the Master's Lodge. During the Catholic restoration that followed in the reign of Mary, Dr. John Fuller was appointed Master, in 1557, and he restored the old ritual and ornaments in the chapel. During the reign of Elizabeth, the college fellowship

became decidedly Protestant, although not Puritan, in its sympathies and the elaborateness (and expense) of the services in the chapel was greatly reduced, and the ornaments that had been replaced in the chapel were again removed, although the organ was allowed to remain until 1585 ⁽⁵⁾. James I was a frequent visitor to Cambridge and to Jesus College, in particular, and he worshipped in the college chapel when he visited the city. In 1617, James's Chancellor of the Exchequer and an alumnus of Jesus, Sir Fulke Greville, planned to fill in the nave of the chapel and create new college rooms to cater for the continually expanding membership of the college. Fortunately, this scheme was never carried out. In 1634, under the Mastership of Dr Richard Sterne, a new organ was purchased and an organist was employed to play it and, in 1636, new furniture, plate and candlesticks for the altar were purchased, in the spirit of the High Church reforms of Archbishop Laud. At this period, the college was known as a stronghold of the High Church party in the University and the chapel services were renowned for 'good music, elaborate solemnity and attractive decency' ⁽⁶⁾.

With the coming of the Civil War, the college became embroiled in the dispute between the King and Parliament. In 1641, the House of Commons issued an order to all the heads of colleges 'to displace the Communion table from the east end of their chapels, to take away the rails and level the chancel, and to remove crucifixes, tapers, and basins from the Communion table' ⁽⁷⁾, so that the fellows found themselves obliged to banish all the new furnishings that they had so recently purchased to refurnish their chapel. The fellows were then required by Charles I to raise a loan of £100 and to send pieces of the college plate to his camp in York. Part of the plate was seized by Cromwell's men before it could be conveyed out of Cambridge, but most of it was successfully conveyed to York, for which the Master, Richard Sterne, and the former Master, William Beale, were arrested by Cromwell in the course of a service in the chapel and taken to the Tower of London. The organ in the chapel was taken to pieces and hidden by the fellows and the college plate which had not been sent to the King's camp was buried in the orchard. At Christmas 1643, William Dowsing, a puritan iconoclast, who was commissioned by Parliament to purge the churches and chapels of Cambridge of their 'monuments of superstition' visited the college and 'digg'd up the Steps there and brake down Superstitions of Saints and Angels, 120 at the least' ⁽⁸⁾. The following year all the fellows, except for two, were ejected from the college and Richard

Sterne was deposed from the Mastership. In 1659 a bell was purchased for the belfry. At the Restoration, the interior of the chapel was repaired and restored to its former beauty by the new masters, Dr John Pearson and Dr Joseph Beaumont, between 1660 and 1663, and the organ was rebuilt and reinstated in the chapel. In 1676, the chapel was paved with black and white marble and some time between 1660 and 1680 a gallery was built in the chancel which faced towards the altar. The remains of a classical entrance still to be seen on the south wall from the walk through to the new library may well date from this time.



By contrast with the preceding period, the early eighteenth century was an uneventful period in the history of the college and very few additions or even repairs to the chapel seem to have been made. However, between 1762 and 1765, the piers and arches of the cloisters were demolished and rebuilt to designs by James Essex⁽⁹⁾. The use of the organ in the chapel was also discontinued during this period and the organ was dismantled and given to the parish of All Saints (and the casework may now be seen in Little Bardfield church in Essex). In the 1780s, the perpendicular east window in the chancel was rebuilt and, between 1789 and 1792, a major restoration of the chapel was undertaken in order to bring the architecture into accord with the reigning Classical ideal in architecture. In the chancel, the sixteenth century stalls and some sections of the old carved woodwork from the pulpit and the screen were removed and a partition wall of plaster was built to block off the eastern arch of the tower, above the gallery and entrance of the choir, which was adorned with Ionic pillars. The oak roof of the chancel, with which Alcock had replaced the original high-pitched roof, was now hidden by a new flat plaster ceiling and another plaster ceiling was built across the open square of the tower to hide the roof-storey gallery. About thirteen years later, the external walls of the chapel were overlaid with cement and the battlements and the mouldings of the windows were similarly repaired⁽¹⁰⁾.

The nineteenth century saw major new restoration work on the chapel, inspired by the new spirit of the Gothic revival, which was carried out between 1846 and 1849, and which largely reversed the earlier repairs. The main instigators of this new restoration were the Rev. John Gibson, then Dean of the College, who was responsible for issuing an appeal to old members of the college and was appointed treasurer of the restoration fund, and a notable Victorian geologist, the Rev. Osmond Fisher. Their aim was to restore the ritual as well as the architecture of the chapel, including the restoration of music to the chapel services through the purchase of an organ and the reinstatement of the choir. The new organ was designed and purchased in 1849 by John Sutton, a fellow commoner of the college and a musician, who devoted much of his career at Jesus to writing a book on the subject of organs, and who served as the college organist and published a collection of anthems for use in the chapel.. He also instituted a choir school in the college and taught the boys himself⁽¹¹⁾.

Under the direction of Anthony Salvin, who had recently undertaken a controversial restoration of the Round Church, the eighteenth century partition wall in the chancel arch was removed in 1846, along with the gallery on its eastern side, and a new combined organ chamber and vestry was built on the eastern side of the northern transept. The two arches which opened into the choir were rediscovered and unblocked, together with the two arches which opened upon the north transept below the gallery. The re-opening of the arches of the northern chapel seriously weakened the north-eastern pier of the tower and the removal of its upper story was debated. However, the tower was eventually strengthened by filling the two arches below the gallery with heavy tracery, uniting those in the chancel with a low solid screen of stone and building a heavy buttress in the vestry. The upper story of the tower was also strengthened with heavy iron bolts. These repairs were carried out on the advice of the architect Augustus Pugin (famous for his work on the Houses of Parliament) who was a close friend of John Sutton and who had come down to Cambridge to take the measurements for the organ chamber. On Sutton's recommendation, the college also decided to employ Pugin to direct the continuing programme of the restoration of the chapel⁽¹²⁾.

In the north transept, the Norman windows that were embedded in the north wall were rediscovered. They were preserved as recessed arches and the whole wall was restored. New stalls and a new pavement were also supplied for the chancel. Pugin removed both the eighteenth century plaster ceiling and Alcock's low-pitched roof which he replaced by a high-pitched roof, in a thirteenth-century style. He also rebuilt the choir stalls and the eastern wall and removed Alcock's Perpendicular east window, replacing it with three tall lancet windows; archaeological evidence had been unearthed in the course of the restoration that showed that this was the original form that the windows had taken. Pugin installed stained glass windows of his own design in 1850 and the other windows were later glazed, in the same style, between 1850 and 1858. The newly purchased organ was installed in the organ chamber and on All Saints' Day 1849 the chapel was re-opened with a full choral service ⁽¹³⁾.



In 1862, cracks began to appear in the arches and piers of the tower and further repairs were carried out between 1864 and 1867 by George F. Bodley, who was also working simultaneously on All Saints' Church, opposite the entrance to the college. The tower was refaced and restored, a solid buttress was built for its support in the south-east corner of the Master's garden and a wrought iron rod was placed above the choir screen. Decorations for the newly-panelled ceilings of the nave and the tower were designed by William Morris and painted under his direction in 1867; and between 1873 and 1877 the windows in the nave and transepts of the chapel were glazed by Morris and Company from designs by Edward Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown. A larger and more powerful organ was purchased to replace Sutton's organ in 1887 and was installed in a new gallery at the west end of the nave. Thus by the end of the century the chapel had attained its present proportions and appearance, in which the Norman original, together with Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular elements, Essex's eighteenth century cloisters and Pugin's and Burne-Jones' nineteenth century restorations combine to form this remarkable building ⁽¹⁴⁾.

The twentieth century saw the abolition of compulsory chapel, and the consequent removal of the organ and gallery from the west end of the nave – though the gallery may still be seen over the road at Westcott House. The organist cum schoolmaster was replaced by an organ scholar in 1919, and the twentieth century has seen some distinguished church musicians having their early training at the college. Though the fixtures and fittings have remained much as they were at the outbreak of the Great War, several restorations, the most recent in 2004, have revealed more of the glories of the building, especially with the more advanced lighting systems available to us now. Of particular interest was the uncovering of work on the north wall of the nave, which gives every appearance of being William Morris's demonstration of what the walls would look like if decorated – the fellows, preferring a more austere finish, demurred, and it remained covered in whitewash for over 130 years.

A further enrichment of the college's distinguished choral tradition will take place during the course of 2006, thanks to a generous benefaction, with the installation of a new organ to replace the Mander of 1969, by Kuhn of Switzerland. As the college now has two choirs, of men, women and boys, and a full time director of chapel music, this will be a great asset indeed.

Alex Perkins

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