



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Monks at Oxford

by Father Bede Price, OSB

[The presence of Benedictines in pre-Reformation Oxford had no small influence on the developments of the University. After Henry VIII there followed three and a half centuries of Benedictine absence until the foundation in 1897 of what was to become Saint Benet's Hall. This renewed presence has been a major influence on the development of the English Benedictine Congregation and has made its contribution to the university itself. Father Bede, who studied at Saint Benet's for two years and will soon be M.A. Oxon., writes of this and, especially, of the influence of Oxford on himself. Ed]

Just around the corner from Saint Benet's Hall, Ampleforth's house of studies in Oxford, stand the beautiful buildings of Worcester College. From a strictly architectural point of view, Worcester is pretty second-rate by Oxford standards. Pevsner damns it with faint praise saying that the eighteenth century buildings are Hawksmoorian rather than actual Hawksmoor, suggesting that though Hawksmoor and Clarke were doubtless involved in their design, these designs were not strictly followed by the actual builders.¹ However, these buildings conceal the real architectural treasure of Worcester: a small row of fifteenth century *camerae*, essentially small houses making up one side of the main quad of the college. These humble stone buildings are the most substantial remains of the Benedictine presence in pre-Reformation Oxford. Carved in stone over the door of each small house is the coat of arms of one of the great Abbeys: Glastonbury, Malmesbury, Saint Augustine's Canterbury and Pershore. The shields indicate that these communities were responsible for the maintenance of that section of the building in which their own monks were to reside during their studies.

Worcester, or Gloucester College as it was originally styled, was one of three Benedictine Colleges in Oxford before the suppression of the monasteries. Trinity College was originally Durham College and a third college called Canterbury College was later absorbed into Christ Church. Durham College served the needs of the Cathedral Priory of Durham as well as of the monks of the other monasteries in the Province of York. Gloucester College fulfilled the same function for the monasteries of the Southern Province, though the monks of Canterbury Cathedral Priory had their own establishment in Canterbury College. (The monks of Ely Cathedral Priory, Crowland, Ramsey and Walden Abbeys maintained a college at "the other place", which survives today in Magdalene College.)

Nor was the Benedictine presence at Oxford limited to the Benedictine Colleges. There is in the library at Saint Benet's Hall a map of Oxford as it existed in the fourteenth century. The map shows that the largest landowner in the City of Oxford was the Benedictine nuns of Godstow Priory just on the other side of Port Meadow. In addition, the Cistercians, who follow the Benedictine Rule, maintained their own college of Saint Bernard's (which survives today as Saint John's College, just across the street from Saint Benet's) as well as their monastery at Rewley Abbey (approximately where the Said Business School now stands across from the station).

¹ J. Sherwood & N. Pevsner: *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire*. (Harmondsworth, Penguin. 1974)



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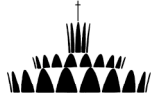
It is typically frustrating that no actual date can be determined for the beginning of the University. Legends of its foundation by the mythical King Memphric or the historical King Alfred the Great are attractive, but only legends. Oxford was, however, clearly a place of learning and study by the middle of the twelfth century, because in 1167, King Henry II banned English students from attending the University of Paris. By 1214 the University had a recognized Chancellor and in the 1230s the term *Universitas* is being used to describe the corporation of Masters and Students. The first records we have of Benedictines resident in Oxford date from 1277, and papal legislation from the first half of the fourteenth century required the English monasteries to support the studies at the university of one monk in every twenty. The point to be made was that Oxford before the Reformation would have had a pronounced Benedictine character, even if Benedictine students were not always the most academically outstanding members of the university. In the forty-year period just prior to the suppression of the monasteries, over 250 monks studied and lived at Oxford, to say nothing of all the other orders.²

This situation was ruthlessly brought to an end by Henry VIII's radical secularization of the Church. Although Gloucester College and Durham College were refounded and Canterbury College was swallowed up into Christ Church (surviving to this day only in the name Canterbury Quad) the spirit of these institutions (and of the whole university) was no longer the same. The Benedictines were to wait over 350 years before they could officially return to the university they had helped to shape.

In 1897, the monks returned to Oxford when the Ampleforth community established a house of studies, which after the First World War became Saint Benet's Hall. In the last century, hundreds of monks have, because of Saint Benet's Hall, been able to take advantage of the opportunities that Oxford has to offer. Indeed Ampleforth's contribution to our Congregation and to the success of our schools can, without any fear of exaggeration, be said to be extraordinary. Saint Louis Abbey in a particular way owes a debt of gratitude to both Ampleforth and Saint Benet's. When the decision to make the American foundation was taken, it is no small matter that Abbot Byrne chose to send monks who were all Oxford graduates (though only Father Columba and Father Luke could claim Saint Benet's as *alma mater*, Father Timothy's allegiance being to Christ Church).

Without prejudice to the new situation and new horizons that a new school presented, the Oxford tradition was doubtless a formative part of the growth of Saint Louis Priory School. This tradition continues to the present day. Of the current monastic community, a third have had the experience of studying at Oxford, and Priory is unusual and perhaps unique among American high schools in currently having five Oxford graduates on its faculty. Oxford impresses upon its students (even its most academically humble students) a love of learning, and an appreciation for the tradition of Christian humanism and culture, which they in turn strive to pass on to their own students. It is a considerable thrill to find oneself studying under the men and women who had hitherto been known only as the authors of weighty academic tomes.

² Henry Wansbrough & Anthony Marett-Crosby (eds): *The Benedictines in Oxford*. (London, Darton, Longman, Todd. 1997)



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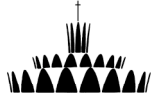
Unlike the typical American experience of higher education, the Oxford tradition remains highly personal. Students and their teachers still form a single community of learners, and access to the great and wise is not limited by the anonymity of vast numbers in a lecture hall. (I had the experience of stepping, umbrella-less, out of a shop, onto High Street and into the not unusual Oxford rain. A self-evidently donnish person, whom I had never met, without any hesitation took me by the elbow under his umbrella and, recognizing the habit, proceeded, until the rain stopped, to chat to me amiably about monks he had known at Saint Benet's. The don was in fact the current Regius Professor of Hebrew. The one-on-one teaching method of the Oxford tutorial makes personal education the foundational philosophy of an Oxford-trained teacher. In the context of Benedictine education, one immediately thinks of Saint Benedict's admonition in the second chapter of his *Rule*, that the abbot should adapt his teaching to the personalities of his monks.

A second formative part of an Oxford education is the role played by reading. This may seem to be a necessary part of any form of learning, but it is particularly stressed by the Oxford system. One is said to "read for a degree" at Oxford, and that is an accurate description of how one spends most of the time. The lectures are intended to supplement and highlight the course of reading the students are assumed to be actively pursuing. To assist them, the students have at their disposal access to one of the world's greatest libraries – the Bodleian. Here again the link between Oxford and Saint Benedict is obvious. Neither sees reading as strictly utilitarian. The reading at Oxford serves the purpose of stimulating thought, and thought reflection, in the same way that reading for Saint Benedict is intended to foster prayer, and prayer contemplation.

Nor is the value of an Oxford education limited to the experience of books, tutorials and the lecture halls. Just walking the streets of Oxford one is exposed to perhaps the most exceptional collection of buildings anywhere in the world. As mentioned earlier, Wren, Hawksmoor, Vanbrugh and others look down on one from practically every angle, to say nothing of the anonymous masters of early English Gothic and Perpendicular.

Oxford, unlike any other city in the world, has three boys' choirs, which sing Evensong daily in three of the most venerable colleges. (During my time there, thanks to a persistent and patient choirmaster, even tiny Saint Benet's had a remarkable reputation for faithfully rendering the plainsong propers and ordinaries of the Mass each Sunday). The Oxford Philomusica, is one of the unforgettable delights of term, providing concerts in the unsurpassed (in terms both of its architectural merit and of the discomfort of its benches!) venue of the Sheldonian Theatre. (I discovered by accident that instead of paying the £5 admission fee, I could go into Duke Humphrey's library, open the window, curl up in a carrel and hear the concerts free and also avoid the penitential benches.) Oxford does not neglect drama either. One of the joys of Trinity term (in addition to the weather) was the succession of amateur productions of Shakespeare performed in magnificent college gardens.

In short, the Oxford experience is a sort of full immersion education by osmosis, which to my mind transplants well on this side of the Atlantic. I can already see ways in which the experience has changed my teaching and the expectations I have of my students. It has made me both more patient with them and at the same time more



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demanding. Time at Oxford also makes it possible for Saint Louis Monks to visit the other houses of our Congregation and to get to know our brethren in England. (I particularly relished the opportunity to serve as chaplain at Stanbrook during the vacations, and so by “brethren” I emphatically include our sisters as well.) As the world shrinks more and more, these contacts are invaluable for fostering identity and for the mutual support they afford. No one can go away from his years at Oxford unchanged. To find one’s place in a centuries-old tradition of scholarship and piety, and to have awakened in one’s soul the desire to pass this heritage on to one’s students is a transformative event. I hope it has made me a better teacher and monk, and I hope it is something that will long be a part of Saint Louis Abbey and the Priory School’s mission in Saint Louis.