

A place to prance

*The New Library,
Christ Church, Oxford*

A great college library has recently undergone a major restoration. John Goodall explains the evolution of this extraordinary building and the context of its construction

Photographs by Paul Highnam

WHEN Boswell questioned Dr Johnson about his preference for working in the old library of Trinity College, Oxford, over the more commodious and pleasant modern libraries in the university, he received a characteristically tart retort. 'Sir,' replied Johnson, 'if a man has a mind to prance, he must study at Christ-Church and All-Souls.' At the time, both colleges had just created new libraries on a breathtaking scale and in rivalry not only with each other, but with other university institutions in the city and beyond.

Visiting Christ Church today, it is not difficult to understand why Johnson associated the so-called New Library with ostentatious intellectual endeavour: its splendid interiors seem more characteristic of a glamorous assembly room than a home for scholarship (Fig 1). Yet to understand the exceptional architectural pretension of this building, it is necessary to unpick the circumstances and complexities of its construction.

From the 1660s, Oxford embarked upon a transformative building boom. For many of the colleges involved, the construction of fashionable new buildings was a statement of institutional vigour intended to attract aristocratic—or at least wealthy—undergraduates. Some of these projects were shaped by shrewd business acumen: at Trinity, for example, Christopher Wren was compelled to design a quadrangle because the form made for better fundraising. Nearly all involved a common group of individuals, professionals and amateurs, working collaboratively.

In 1707, Christ Church began its own ➤

→ Fig 1: Both ends of the college library terminate in huge Venetian windows



Dean Aldrich's designs for Peckwater Quad

A detail of one of the two engravings showing Dean Aldrich's original design for Peckwater Quad begun in 1707. The New Library replaced the free-standing range in the distance, but respected many of its features, such as the grand order of Corinthian columns. As originally conceived, this building was to be the principal range in the quadrangle. The central cupola apparently rose over a vestibule. The upper floors comprised accommodation.



that belongs to any society in Europe.'

In the event, Aldrich's design was, in fact, re-cast, apparently by his successor as arbiter of architectural taste in Oxford, George Clarke, a politician and fellow of All Souls. Clarke preserved the Corinthian giant order rising up the façade (Fig 5), but emboldened the design by reducing the number of bays from nine to seven. He also suppressed the attic storey of Aldrich's building, but heightened it in relation to the neighbouring ranges.

Internally, the library chamber was placed at first-floor level. Access to it was provided by a stair projected out from the rear of the building (Figs 2 and 3). The ground storey was opened out as a loggia and articulated with applied Doric pilasters in a composition taken from Michelangelo's Capitoline palace.

From this moment onwards, the project is well documented and the building accounts have been published by Jean Cook and John Mason in the Roxburghe Club series (1988). On January 10, 1717, the ubiquitous Oxford mason William Townsend signed a contract for the completion of the building. Over the next 38 years, work advanced slowly, with the total expenditure being £5,239. Then, on December 20, 1734, Townsend was paid off by the college. By this date, he had created the stone shell of the library with neither a floor nor roof. The latter was supplied, together with a complete set of sashes, in 1738–42 at a cost of £1,567. At this point, work was again halted for more than five years.

One reason for these intermittent breaks in construction was financial, although raising money seems to have been less a problem

rebuilding initiative, a new residential quadrangle familiar today as Peckwater Quad. Carved on the foundation stone, laid by the Earl of Salisbury, was the name of the then Dean, who was identified as the 'architect' of the project. Dean Aldrich, a polymath, numbered heraldry, music, mathematics, logic and architecture among his interests. Indeed, by 1707, he had already played a prominent role in the redevelopment of Oxford. The intended form of the new quadrangle, closed on one side by a freestanding range, is known from two engravings (see box). Strikingly apparent in the design is Aldrich's early interest in neo-Classical design and the work of Venetian architect Andrea Palladio.

It was always envisaged that work to the

quadrangle would be protracted and little can have been done when Aldrich died in 1710. At this date, he gave his impressive library to the college. Such was the volume of material that the existing college library, then in a converted monastic building, had to be extended to receive it. The arrangement was not satisfactory, however, and the college was either driven—or enticed—into modifying Peckwater Quad. By 1714, three of Aldrich's ranges stood complete, but in a letter of 1716, the college treasurer, Dr Stratford, wrote of the decision to redesign the last free-standing range of the quadrangle: 'In our new building we shall observe Dr Aldrich's model as to the case, but we design to turn the inside into a library and to make it the finest library

↓ Fig 2 below: The back of the library building. The central section with the pediment contains the main stair. → Fig 3 facing page top: A detail of the main stair balustrade. → Fig 4 middle: One of the superb plasterwork trophies of life-size instruments by Thomas Roberts. → Fig 5 bottom: The east end of the library with Peckwater Quad to the right. The building uses contrasting colours of stone



than an inconvenient practicality. The lion's share of the money—more than £13,212—came from members of the college. Many gave sums of money on their appointment to the collegiate hierarchy or on their promotion within it. Others left the balance of their Caution Money (a deposit for good conduct) when they left the college.

Another difficulty was the rate at which the New Library attracted bequests of collections, including that of Lord Orrery in 1733. In the college archives, there survives a number of unsigned and undated drawings that offered different solutions to the problem of this excess of books. One shows shelves arranged at regular intervals across the room; another, galleries running along the full length of both lateral walls.

When construction began again in February 1748, neither of these approaches was, in fact, adopted. Instead, a wooden gallery supported on Ionic columns was erected along one side wall of the interior. This permitted the installation of a continuous line of bookshelves rising virtually from floor to ceiling with four sash windows opposite in-filled to accommodate more bookshelves. Articulating these at regular intervals were the remaining window casements and overlaid pediments supported on Ionic columns.

As the furnishings were installed, so attention turned to decoration of the interior. By now, with a clutch of new Oxford libraries under way or complete, including those at Queen's, All Souls and the Radcliffe Camera, Christ Church needed to distinguish itself. The college rose magnificently to the challenge through the labours of the plasterer, Thomas Roberts. He was first paid £93 for the fine oval ceiling over the stairwell. Then, on November 8, 1753, he received the massive sum of £663 11s 3d 'for cieling the new library as per estimate'. This payment is assumed to refer both to the huge expanse of the ceiling with its recessed central section as well as the treatment of the walls.

Most eye-catching of the decoration associated with Roberts is the series of six trophies in the library; great collections of life-size scientific and musical instruments rendered in plaster and notionally suspended together on ribbons (Fig 4). Included among this virtuoso plasterwork is a curious diversity of real and fantastical objects. There are, for example, some 50 musical instruments shown here. These include accurately realised copies of mid-18th-century English-made oboes, bassoons and recorders as well as entirely fanciful Grecian lyres.

Furniture continued to be delivered to the library into the mid 1760s, including the outstanding set of mahogany Chippendale stools and elegant library steps. Even as these final additions were being made to the interior, another bequest by

Gen John Guise demanded further changes to the building. By the terms of his will, a collection of nearly 1,800 drawings and 258 paintings came to the college.

To accommodate Guise's bequest, the architect Henry Keene was commissioned to convert the ground floor into two large rooms with a central vestibule. The collection was hung in these spaces in about 1767 and was open to the public. A catalogue of it was published in 1776. Shortly afterwards, in 1779—63 years after the start of work and at a cost of £15,517—the New Library was completed and its buildings account closed.

As an operating building, the library seems to have been a privileged enclave accessible to the fellows and other scholars by permission. One notable sub-librarian was Charles Dodgson, alias Lewis Carroll, the creator of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The library collection has been augmented over time, but the 18th-century core of it remains intact. Even the principal bequests of books are shelved together in presses clearly labelled with the name of their donors.

‘It is not difficult to see why Dr Johnson associated the library with ostentatious intellectual endeavour’

But although the building may give the impression of having been untouched by time, the reality is different. The paintings were gradually removed from the ground floor, which now operates as a study library for the college, and the main interiors bear the stamp of two important periods of restoration.

From 1957, John Fowler was responsible for redecorating both the main stairwell and then the library in their present colours. The latter work followed major stone repairs to the exterior of the building from 1960 to 1962. Further changes have been undertaken since 2009 by Donald Insall Associates. The company has overseen the complete replacement of the roof, stone repairs, and the treatment of timbers for death-watch beetle. The interior, meanwhile, has been refurbished with new lighting. Fowler's decorative scheme has been retouched and the plasterwork cleaned and restored by Hirst Conservation.

Whether you come to prance, peer or peruse, the library is once again a dazzling monument to Augustan Oxford.

On April 11–14, 2013, a course entitled 'The English Country House' will take place at Christ Church. For details, telephone 01865 286848 or visit www.chch.ox.ac.uk/conferences/conferences-own