

The jewel of the Backs

*Clare College, Cambridge
By courtesy of the Master
and Fellows*

The architectural coherence and grandeur of this college belie its complex development from the 17th century, as Patrick Monahan explains.

Photographs by Paul Highnam

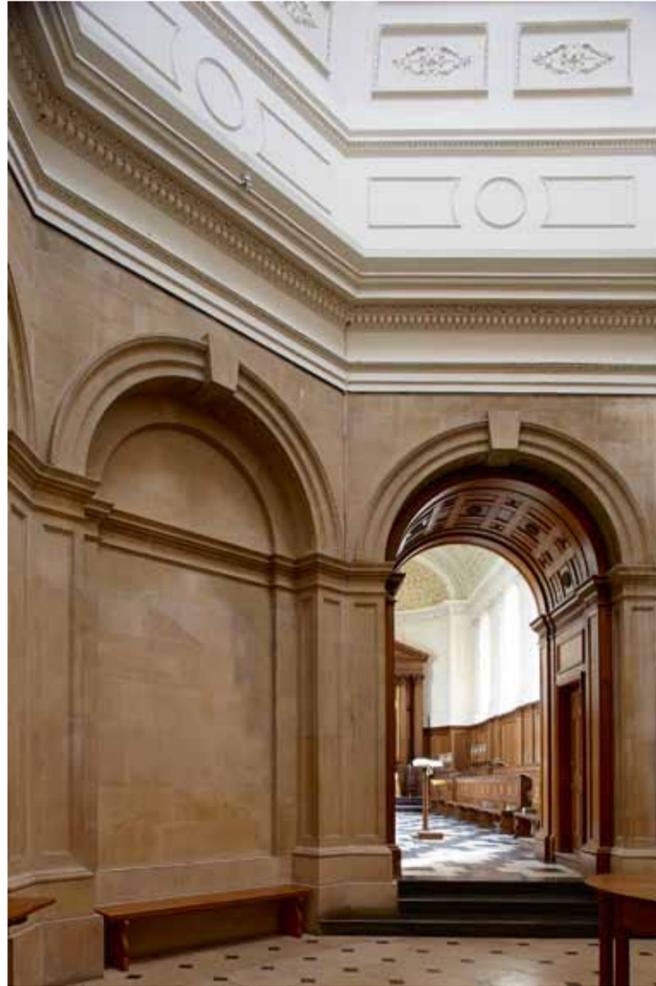
ALTHOUGH Clare College is the second oldest at Cambridge and the oldest on the Backs, its modern aspect is largely a 17th-century invention. The four ranges and chapel that enclose Old Court—hemmed in by Trinity Hall at the north, King's College at the south, Trinity Lane at the east, and the river Cam at the west—were built between 1638 and 1769. This compact space and prolonged evolution produced a sympathetic variety among its buildings, one made all the more fascinating by the many figures that had a hand in their creation.

The college was founded as University Hall in 1326 by Richard de Badew, Chancellor of the University. Ten years later, when a fire ravaged the original buildings, Elizabeth de Clare, granddaughter of Edward I and widow of three titled husbands, stepped forward as the college's patroness. She made provision for new buildings as well as 15 fellows and 10 'poor scholars', and, by 1339, the college was known as Clare Hall.

Following another fire in 1521, the buildings were reconstructed, and a record of their altered appearance survives in a drawing by Edmund Prideaux, dated 1714, but based on an earlier view. It shows a four-sided, two-storey court abutting the street, marked with Hall, Master's Lodge, Library, and Chapel. Overall, the appearance is similar to that of Old Court, Corpus Christi College, >

→ *Fig 1: The 17th-century front was set back from Trinity Lane to dignify the approach. The chapel is to the right*

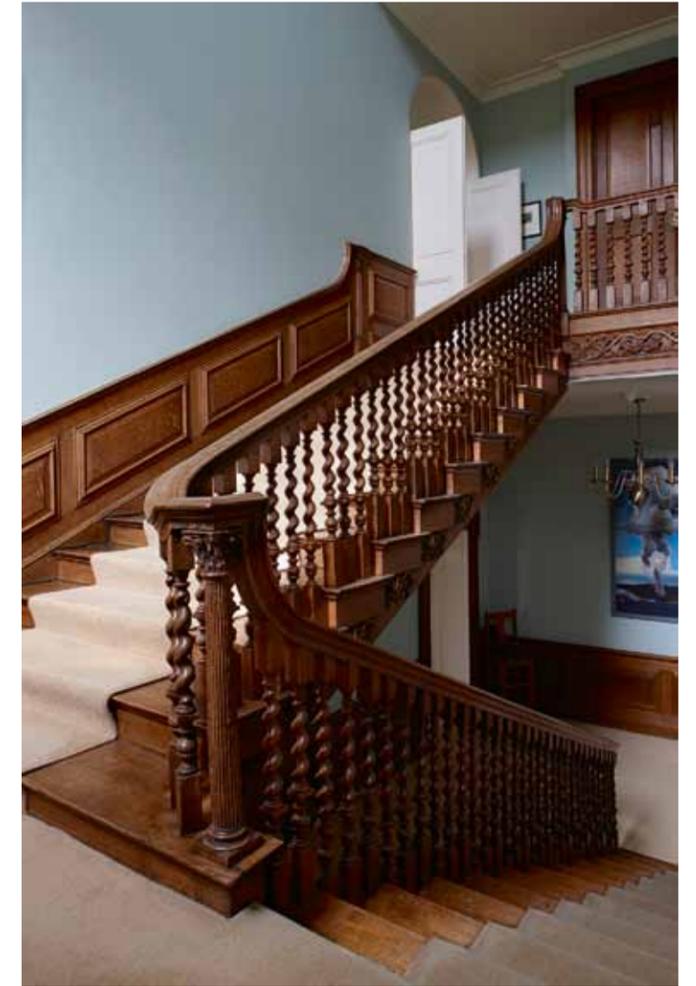




↑ Fig 2: The chapel, with its distinctive domed ante-chapel, was begun in 1763. The architecture of the building is strongly influenced by the work of Christopher Wren. There is an elaborate plaster ceiling on the octagonal ante-chapel dome



↑ Fig 3 left: The regularity and discipline of Clare is unusual among college quadrangles. They make it a perfect architectural foil for the splendours of neighbouring King's College Chapel. ↑ Fig 4 right: The main stair of the Master's Lodge, completed in 1715



Cambridge. By the early 17th century, these buildings were dilapidated, and, by 1635, college accounts (hereafter exceptionally well-preserved) record materials being bought. The project was still ongoing in the mid 18th century, when William Cole, a college fellow and antiquarian, wrote: 'What our Foundress built for us decayed; part of it fell down; and that the College and its Inhabitants might not be buried together in the same Ruines, that new and unfinished Fabrick we now enjoy was begun'.

Work started on the east range in May 1638. Unlike its predecessor, which obstructed the view to King's College Chapel at the end of Trinity Lane, the new block was set back considerably from the street. This more stately entry concerned King's almost as much as Clare; the latter, eager to expand its college garden, petitioned the King for the land along the riverbank opposite the college, owned by King's and known as Butt Close. After much discussion, King's ceded Butt Close to Clare, and Clare promised to leave the chapel approach open, plus a small parcel of land between the two colleges (Fig 1).

An elaborate gateway is at the centre of the east range, stacked with embellishments: two oriel windows, one above the other, are flanked by Ionic pilasters and capped with a pediment perched over the dormer. These Classical devices are applied as superficial ornament to a building that otherwise follows in the medieval tradition of Cambridge collegiate architecture. The gate passage, for example, is covered by a fan vault whose detail and form imitates the celebrated high vault of King's College Chapel.

The most distinctive feature of the three-storey façade is the curtain of shallow bays on either side of the gateway, which alternate in counterpoint rhythm. This *leitmotif* is carried around three exterior façades (the fourth fronts on an alley, leaving its brick unfaced) and three inner sides of the court. Its striking subtlety is best seen on the south range (facing King's), begun just after the east range and completed in August, 1642 (Fig 3). Here the Ketton stone, weathered to a rich ochre, highlights the in-and-out pattern, which, uninterrupted, carries the vast front.

Although this motif is not unique among

17th-century buildings, it is particularly prominent at Clare. The library at Brasenose College, Oxford, opened in 1664, utilises a similar (although less pronounced) pattern on two façades, which are themselves continuous with other buildings and do not dominate the college front. Blickling Hall in Norfolk also features the pattern as part of a more elaborate composition—temptingly, masons from the Northampton quarry of Thomas Thorpe, who supplied Blickling from 1618 to 1623, also worked at Clare (COUNTRY LIFE, February 13, 2013).

No architect is recorded at this stage in the building accounts. Most likely, builder John Westley and master mason Thomas Grumbold collaborated on the east and south ranges under the oversight of Barnabas Oley, the college bursar. That the east gateway seems freely translated from a French design book (perhaps engravings in Jacques I Androuet du Cerceau's late-16th-century architectural treatises) supports this practical approach. A source for the whole has not been identified, although the pointed niches on either side of the gateway's inte-

rior front are lifted from Peterhouse College Chapel, constructed only a decade earlier.

Thomas Grumbold was very likely the author of the bridge linking Old Court and the college gardens. On January 18, 1638, he was paid 3s for a drawing of it, followed by larger sums the next year for cut stone. The bridge was completed early on in the scheme to bring building materials into college and reveals Thomas Grumbold as a plausible candidate for the initial design of the new court. Three graceful arches span the river, lined with diagonally-set balustrades and mythological friezes at each pier. The railings are punctuated with stone spheres, one of which is missing a section (accounted for by countless college legends). When civil war broke out in 1642, Cromwell's troops destroyed the Cam's bridges, but spared Clare's—a testament, one hopes, to Thomas Grumbold's skill.

Work continued on the west range after the war, with the southern half completed by 1676. At first glance, the monumental pilasters and pediment-and-keystone covered windows of the river façade seem to depart

Compact space and prolonged evolution produced a sympathetic variety among the buildings of Clare

from the previous ranges, forming a stylish new front for the college on the Backs. Those responsible for the work had also changed: a Mr Jackson surveyed the range in 1669 (taking over from John Westley, who died in 1656) and Robert Grumbold, son or nephew of Thomas, was paid regularly as mason. Oley, a staunch Royalist, was expelled from Clare with other scholars in 1644 by East Anglia's Parliamentarian overlord, the Earl of Manchester. Yet the foundations for this front were laid in 1640, when work on the south range was progressing. Building resumed, haltingly, in the 1660s, and it is likely that the new design for the river façade was already in place by then.

Sash windows, introduced in 1719 and lengthened in 1815, misleadingly differentiate the river front from its neighbours; with its original transom and mullion windows, the façade would have remained flamboyant, but better integrated. Even now, the string courses of the earlier front not only match that of the latter at every level, but continue their profiles as they wrap around the corner. The rhythm of pilaster and pediment in the river front also echoes the in-and-out counterpoint of the south, using pediments as rakish dents in a compressed string course. The northern half of the west range, housing the Master's Lodge, was not completed until 1715 (Fig 4). A gateway, designed by Robert Grumbold in 1705, features a tympanum of palm fronds at its centre, joining the two.

In September 1684, Robert Grumbold was paid 50s for a drawing of the north range, to include Hall and Library (Fig 5). Recessed panels frame the bays of the two-storey range, echoing the familiar in-and-out arrangement. These panels derive from the river façade of Christopher Wren's ➤

Library at Trinity College (begun 1679), where Robert Grumbold was also working as master mason. The gables' whimsical pattern of triangles and half circles is the same as that of the west range, which suggests Robert Grumbold's authorship.

The north range preserves some of the college's finest interiors. The Hall, panelled in 1688 by Cornelius Austen, who worked at several other Cambridge colleges, has an inset portrait of Elizabeth de Clare behind the dais. Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt made alterations in 1872, installing an elaborate plaster ceiling (Fig 7) on iron girders and adding swags and arabesques to the wainscoting. The upper walls were also painted during this period and an extravagant Victorian fireplace installed below the dais. The latter two, purged in the mid 1930s, are recorded in *COUNTRY LIFE*, July 3, 1926. The heraldic stained glass dates from 1910.

6 When civil war broke out in 1642, Cromwell destroyed the Cam's bridges, but spared Clare's ;

Beside the Hall entrance, a balustraded staircase of 1687 by David Percy with contemporary plasterwork by David Fyfield leads to the Combination Room (common room), which Cole described as 'be best proportion'd Room in be whole University'. The panelling, also by Austen, is particularly fine. Beyond the Combination Room is the Fellows' Library, its walls fitted with a continuous run of bookcases. It appears to have been additionally furnished with Jacobean presses from the old college library into the early 20th century.

The chapel was begun on May 3, 1763, replacing a narrower structure of about 1535 in the north-east corner of the court. Sir James Burrough, Master of Gonville and Caius College, designed the chapel in the manner of Wren; the Corinthian pilasters and niches of its east front clearly recall Wren's Chapel at Pembroke College. Inside, an octagonal, domed ante-chapel with cupola—perhaps inspired by Wren's design for Chelsea Hospital—gives way to the chapel (Fig 2). The interior would have been quite sombre, were it not for its warm wooden fittings, which remain remarkably complete. The altar, flanked by dual Corinthian columns and inset with an Annunciation by Giovanni Battista Cipriani, as well as the pews and organ screen, are contemporaneous with the building. A Snetzler chamber organ of 1755, tuned to Baroque



↑ Fig 5: The south range incorporates the Hall, Combination Room and Library. Its windows are recessed in panels, a treatment inspired by the Wren library at Trinity College



↑ Fig 6 above: The entrance arch of Memorial Court lies on an axis with the tower of the neighbouring University Library. → Fig 7 facing page: This fine plaster ceiling is all that survived the purge of the college hall's Victorian decoration in the 1930s

pitch, has stood beside the altar since 1985. The building was renovated in 1935, when Victorian stained glass was removed and new panels were produced by Hugh Easton.

In addition to the Chapel, the 18th century saw Old Court subtly regularised. Battlements on the south and east ranges were replaced with balustrades to match the north and west ranges, and pointed window casements on the east and west ranges were squared. Gates featuring extraordinarily fine ironwork and stone piers were also added at both entrances.

Modern development has continued

beyond the Backs. Clare was the first college to extend itself across the river with Memorial Court, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1923 in honour of Clare's war dead (Fig 6). In 1986, the Forbes Mellon Library, designed by Sir Philip Dowson, filled the centre of Memorial Court, and in 2009, the addition of Lerner Court completed Scott's monumental scheme. Memorial Court's pharaonic columns and grey brick, shaded by pensive pine trees, seem to round out a long architectural sentence, as a nearly 700-year-old college moves forward.

Acknowledgements: Richard Hewlings

