

Oxford sees red

Keble College, Oxford

Brilliant in colour and bold in form, William Butterfield's buildings for Keble College, designed in 1867, exemplify the avant-garde principles of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, as Michael Hall explains

Photographs by Will Pryce





Fig 1 previous pages: The clocktower and library range at Keble College. The chapel is in the distance on the right. Butterfield had hoped to use bricks of an even more intense red, but they proved too expensive. ↑ Fig 2 above: The Senior Common Room. Still with the wallpaper Butterfield chose for it, this is one of his best-preserved domestic interiors

TATE BRITAIN'S new exhibition on the Pre-Raphaelites attempts to tear down barriers. As Tim Barringer and Jason Rosenfeld write in their introduction to the catalogue, it seeks to 'present the art of the Pre-Raphaelites as an avant-garde movement whose achievements across many media—painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and the applied arts, as well as literature and political theory—constitute a major contribution to the history of modern art'. But what about architecture? Its total absence from the show is startling, as, in the 1850s, the radical young architects who wanted to develop Gothic into a modern style declared that they, too, were Pre-Raphaelites.

The clearest statement of this was made by the architect George Edmund Street in an article, *On the Future of Art in England*, which was published in 1858. He argues that 'the Pre-Raphaelite movement is identical with our own... The systems and rules against which architects and painters had to contend were identical. Alike we had to contend against an established system, of false laws and idle traditions, with all the prestige of an Academy to back it, and all the power in the hands of its professors. Alike we had to recur to first principles—to maintain first of all the necessity in all matters of art of absolute unwavering truth'.

Both painters and architects returned to

earlier and supposedly purer models than those generally admired—the art of the 15th century on the one hand and the architecture of about 1200 on the other. Both were impatient with the busy picturesqueness of so much mid-Victorian art and design. Street identified their other shared characteristics as an emphasis on 'truth' and 'reality' and a determination to use colour boldly: 'We found that colour and form were no longer held to be both necessary for the perfect development of our art; and indeed the men who prided themselves most on the purity of their taste seemed almost to hate any colour more intense than light salmon or pale lavender, if they did not absolutely and deliberately prefer simple whitewash.' He concluded: 'In truth, what Pre-Raphaelites are doing for painting must be done for architecture.'

And it was, as anybody who visits Oxford can easily see for themselves. Go to the Ashmolean Museum, which houses one of the country's finest collections of paintings by Millais, Rossetti and Holman Hunt, and then make the 10-minute walk to the most magnificent demonstration of Pre-Raphaelite principles ever built (Fig 1). In its hard-edged forms, brilliant use of colour and emphatic modernity, Keble College, designed by William Butterfield, achieves in architecture everything that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had sought to do in art.

Surprisingly, there is no history of Keble



↑ Fig 3: The hall. Its huge size allowed the whole college to dine at once. The stained glass over high table depicts the Supper at Emmaus

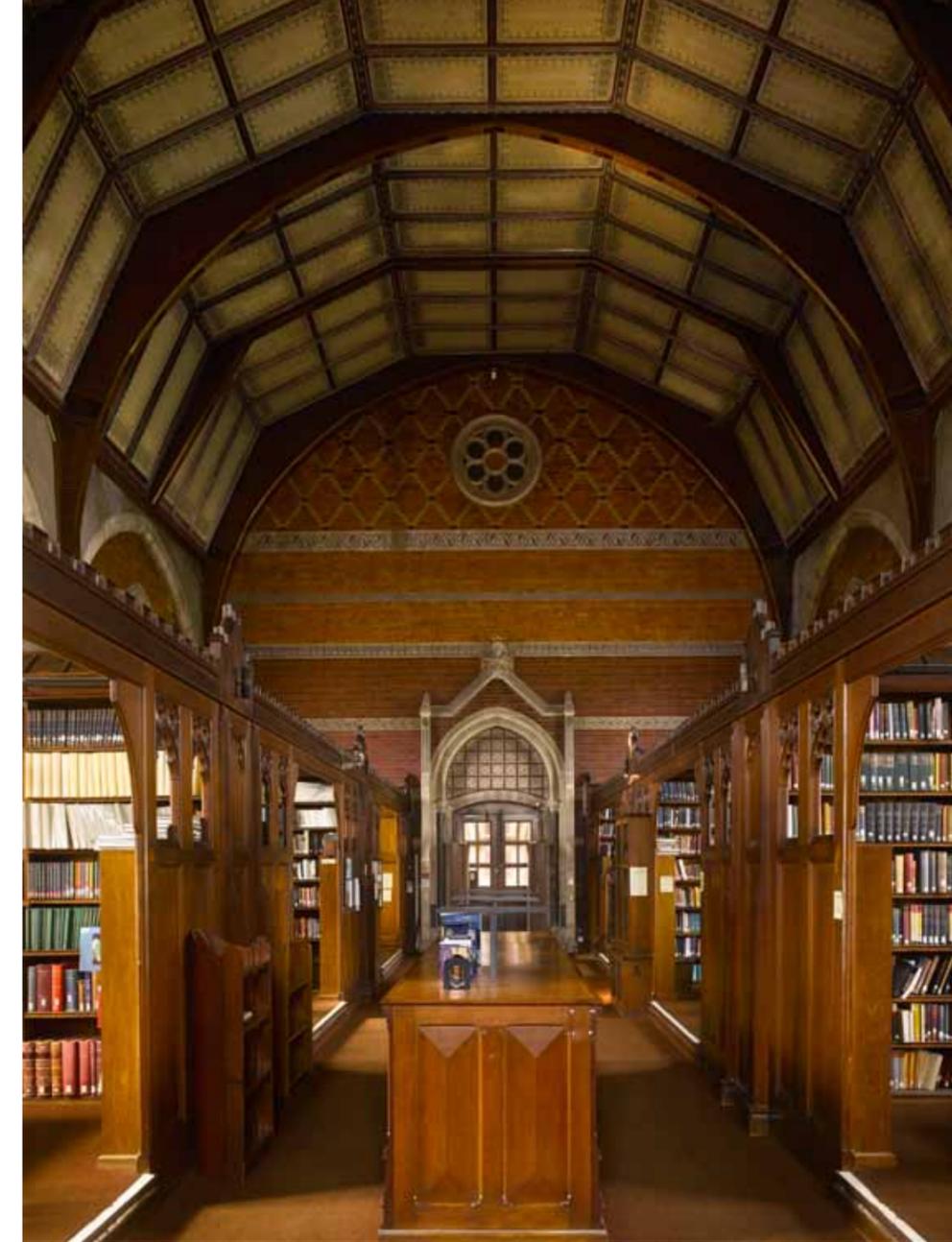
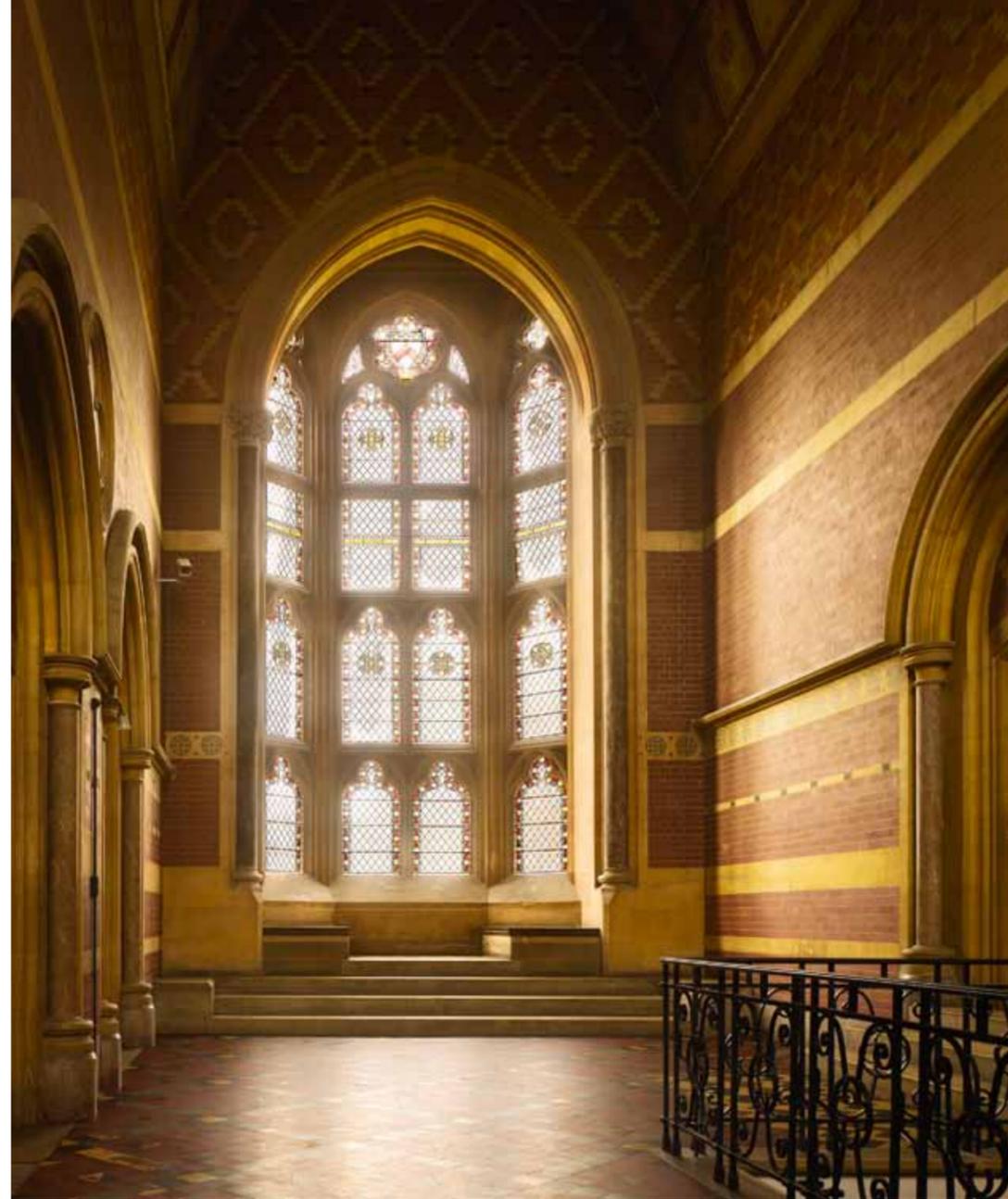
(although one is in preparation). However, the story of its foundation is set out with great clarity in a chapter by Geoffrey Rowell in volume seven of *The History of the University of Oxford* (2000), which also contains the best short account of its buildings, in Peter Howell's chapter on Oxford's 19th-century architecture. Keble—the university's first college since Worcester in 1714—was intended primarily to educate men who wanted to enter the Church, but had been deterred by Oxford's reputation for being expensive. The general

background to this was a desire by High Churchmen to reinforce the university's Church of England character at a time when it was being eroded by reforms, such as the abolition of the requirement that college Fellows had to be in Holy Orders.

There were two more immediate motives. In 1865, the university commissioned a report into ways that it could broaden its admissions. When published in 1866, this supported the idea of a new college aimed

at men of modest means. It is likely that any such project would have begun quietly had not a major opportunity for fundraising presented itself with the death of John Keble on March 29, 1866. Keble is now remembered as one of the leaders—with E. B. Pusey and J. H. Newman—of the Oxford Movement, launched in 1833, which sought to recover Catholic principles of doctrine and liturgy for the Church of England. Yet his fame far outstripped even theirs, thanks

to his immensely popular volume of poetry *The Christian Year*, published in 1827. By the time he died, it had gone through 95 editions. The decision to make the new college Keble's official memorial and name it after him attracted a deluge of subscriptions. A site near the Parks was bought from St John's College and, by the time the contractor, Parnell of Rugby, started work in May 1868, the building committee had raised £30,000 of the £50,000 needed. ➤



↑ Fig 4 left: The chapel, with stained glass and mosaics by Alexander Gibbs. ↑ Fig 5 right: The staircase that links the hall and the library

↑ Fig 6: The library, one of the rooms funded by the Gibbs family of Tyntesfield, has a great collection of medieval liturgical manuscripts

Butterfield's designs had been approved in December 1867. An architect with strong High Church beliefs, he had connections with many of the college's founders, and had also worked for Keble himself. At Oxford, he had restored Merton College chapel, and designed two major collegiate buildings: the chapel at Balliol and the Grove Building at Merton. Both exemplified his belief that Gothic could be developed into a style that would suit the needs of the 19th century. This was to be achieved by creating a new synthesis from a variety of sources, foreign as well as English. This is evident at Keble, where, although details such as window tracery adhere to 13th-century English precedents, the closest model for the chapel is the upper church at Assisi. Butterfield also sought to use modern materials—brick, encaustic tiles and polished granites—

partly for the opportunities that they provided to infuse his buildings with colour. Butterfield's modernity is most clearly exemplified in the way that he reformulates collegiate traditions. One of the most admired aspects of the college is its picturesque planning. The buildings of the main quad are raised on terraces above the central lawn. This was largely necessitated by the uneven site (it had been a gravel pit), but Butterfield exploits the sense of drama it provides by allowing his two quads to open into each other and placing the main entrance between them, at the principal quad's south-east corner, rather than in the middle of a range. As a result, visitors' initial views are on the cross axis. When the college opened in 1870, only the first residential ranges had been built, but perceptive observers could already see that

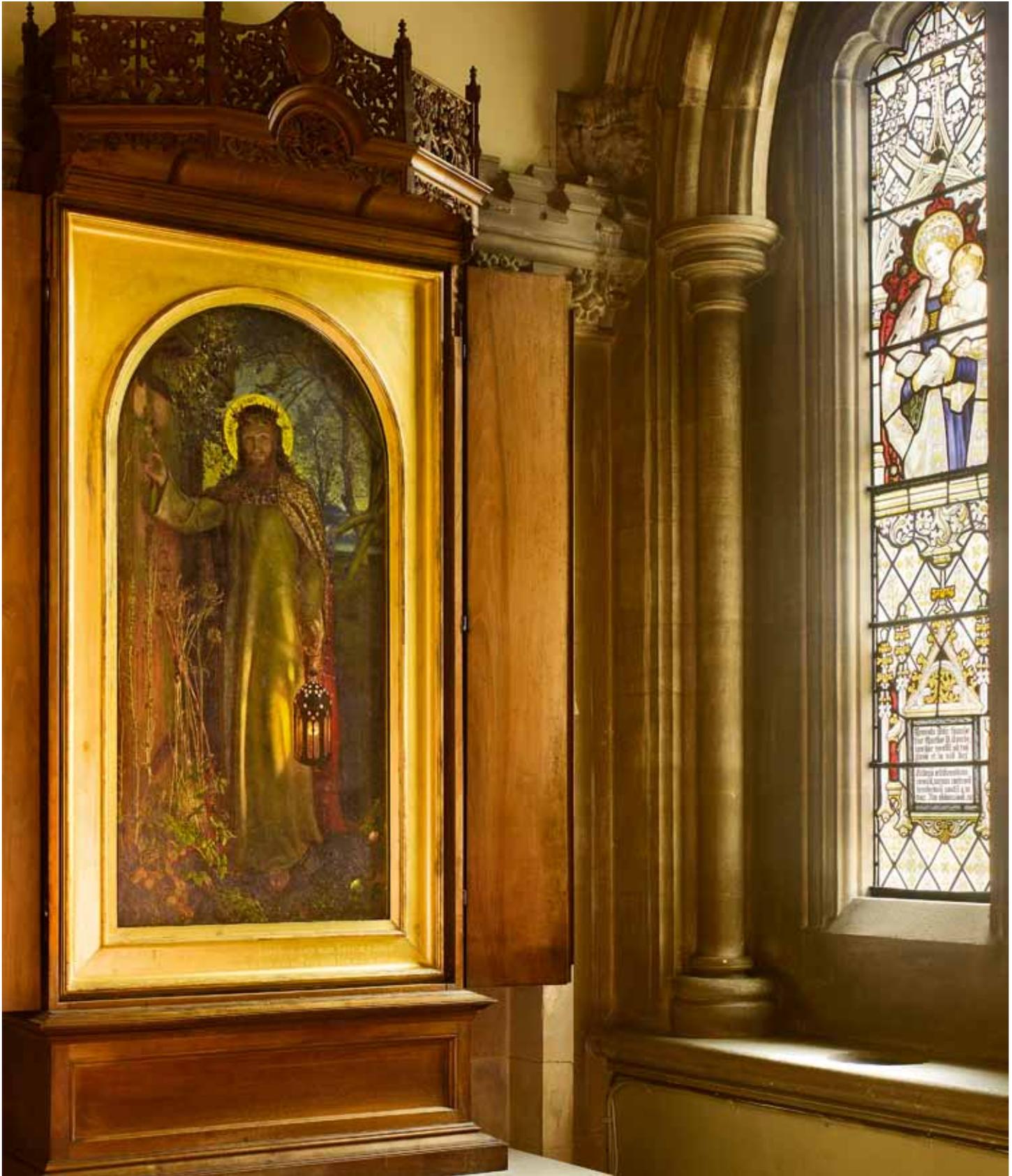
Butterfield had achieved something new. Lady Frederick Cavendish—whose sister, Lavinia, was married to the college's first Warden, Edward Talbot—wrote in her diary: 'Considering the College is now nothing but rooms, being minus chapel, library, and hall, it is very well-looking; original and as little monotonous as possible.' The originality extended to the layout of the residential ranges. Butterfield decisively broke with Oxbridge precedent by arranging the undergraduates' rooms along corridors rather than around staircases. This was largely for reasons of economy, but it proved a problem, as, despite the college's high-minded aspirations, the undergraduates used the corridors for 'bear-fighting, cricket and football', and partitions had to be erected to keep order. None of Butterfield's domestic interiors in the college survives untouched,

but the Senior Common Room (Fig 2) is well preserved and even retains the wallpaper he chose for it, as well as his characteristic bold and simple Gothic detail in such features as chimneypieces. Butterfield paid attention to every practicality—his correspondence in the college archives ranges from the temperature of the beer cellar to the position of the coal-chutes. The main buildings followed on quickly after the college was opened, thanks to the generosity of the Gibbs family of Tyntesfield, Somerset, who paid for the chapel—completed in 1876, it cost £40,000—hall and library (Fig 6). The latter rooms are on the south side of the main quad, facing the chapel. Both are on the first floor and are reached by a dramatically tall staircase (Fig 5) that lies between them. The hall (Fig 3) is of immense size—it is a couple

of feet longer than that at Christ Church—again for practical reasons, as it allowed all members of the college to dine together, which was more economical than multiple sittings. One curiosity of the plan—the placing of the minstrels' gallery on a lateral wall rather than at the opposite end to high table—was probably also for practical reasons, in this case audibility. The college had a strong musical tradition from the start and its choir was trained in plainsong. In every interior, but most unforgettably in the chapel (Fig 4)—a complex polychrome, polyphonic masterpiece of marble, mosaic and stained glass—there is colour. Like the banding and diapering of the external walls, it reveals Butterfield's mastery of pattern, which was so greatly admired by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Yet, in some ways, it is not surprising that the colours

of Keble—which Butterfield described as 'gay'—were held by many to be the embodiment of Victorian ugliness. They were undoubtedly intended to be a challenge, of exactly the sort that the Pre-Raphaelite painters had made. The love of colour, pattern and strong, simple forms that linked artists and architects was, as Street had said, an assault on the Puritanism that they hated in Victorian culture. Perhaps because that stream of Puritan disdain for visual exuberance re-emerged so powerfully in British culture in the white walls of the Modern Movement, Butterfield's work at Keble still makes some people feel uncomfortable. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, he was an insistently modern, avant-garde artist. Because of that, his buildings, like their paintings, have never lost their edge. Acknowledgment: Peter Howell ➤

Keble College chapel: *Light of the World*



THIS painting, which was completed by William Holman Hunt in 1853 after eight years' work, hangs in a side chapel at Keble College, Oxford. It remains perhaps the most familiar and widely copied work of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement: Christ knocks at the door of the human soul, which is choked with weeds. The modern fame of the painting is, however, but a shadow of its Victorian celebrity: a large copy went on a world tour and attracted vast crowds. In 1873, 'moved by impulse of sacrifice', Martha Combe, whose husband, Thomas, was head of the University Press, offered the original *Light of the World* to Keble. Butterfield evidently disliked the evangelical tone of the painting and complained that it would disturb the chapel: 'For it will be a popular lion and will be put down in Oxford Guide books, and visited by the Americans and such like folk in throngs.' It is currently on loan to Tate Britain (*see review, page 144*). **JG** 🐦