

Town and gown

The Oxford and Cambridge Club, Pall Mall, London

Overwhelmed by unsympathetic changes and redecoration, William Palin reports on how this club and its interiors have been returned to modern splendour

Photographs by June Buck



↑ Fig 1 above: The Library, fitted out with bookcases of Russian birch, houses over 25,000 volumes. → Fig 2 facing page: The grand staircase hall, following restoration. The staircase itself has been painstakingly stripped of a post-war coating of white paint

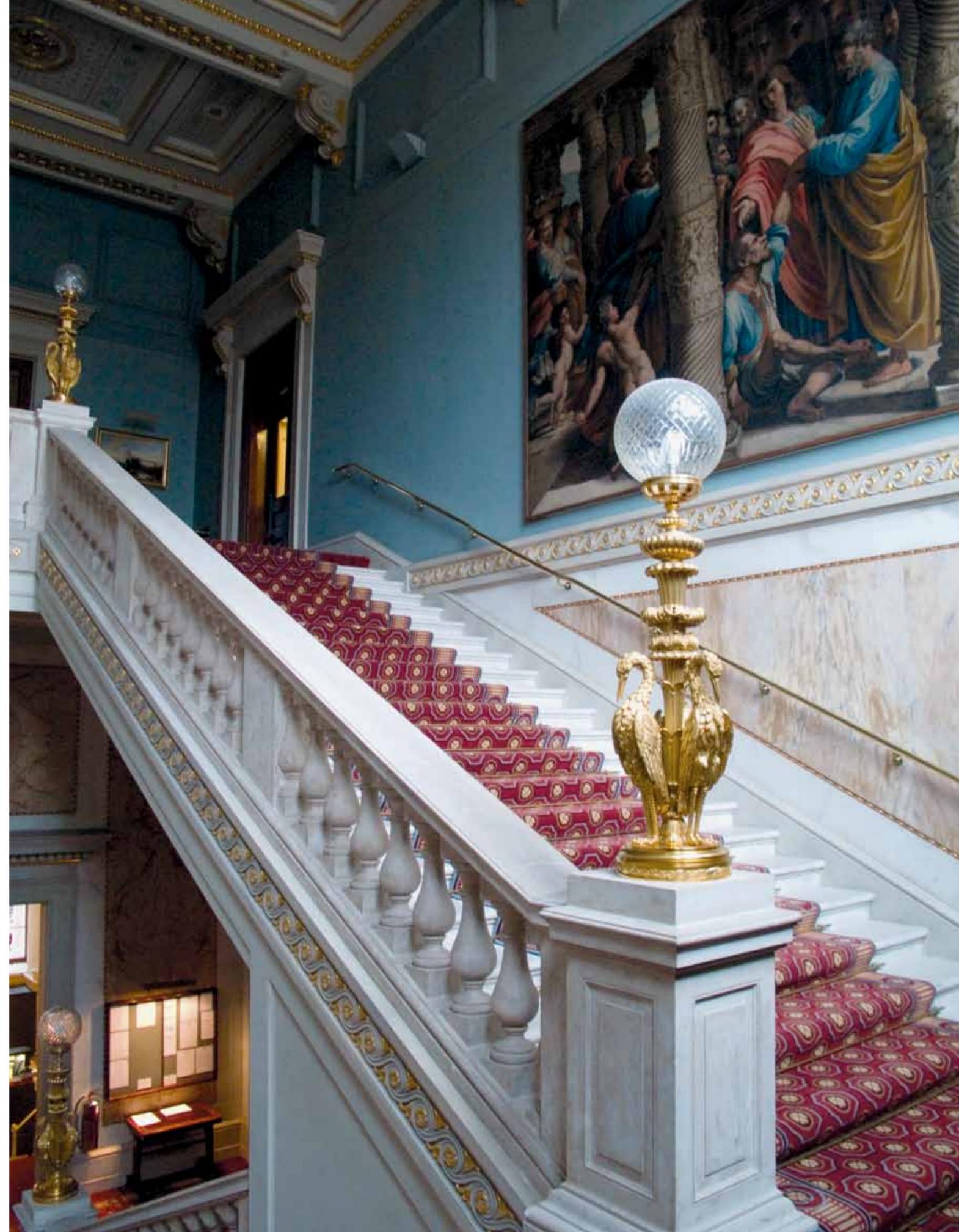
OF the four great gentleman's clubs occupying the south side of Pall Mall, the Oxford and Cambridge remains something of an outsider. This is partly on account of its position—a little distant from that notable trio of the Athenaeum, the Travellers' and the Reform—and partly a consequence of its outward appearance, which Pevsner calls 'strangely incoherent'. However, several years into a programme of careful repair and redecoration, this grand building is at last emerging from the shadows as one of London's richest essays in Greek Revival architecture.

The 1820s and 1830s were boom years for the London club. At the epicentre of clubland was Pall Mall (named, incidentally, after a French variant of croquet, Paille Maille, played here in the 17th century), and five great clubs were erected on its south side in the



← Evoking college life

There was very little evidence for the historic decorative scheme of the hall, so a new one has been created. Taking his cue from antiquity, plus other Greek Revival examples (Schinkel being a favourite), Paul Vonberg created a design of delicate fretwork patterns, primarily in reds, blue-green and gold. In a moment of inspiration, he arranged it to present a narrative of college life—with the rosettes (fountains of knowledge) at the centre, surrounded by 'courts and quads', with the students radiating as stars as they pass through the university. The ceiling (left) proved so popular that it prompted the architect and decorator to form a new business venture, Dolby von Berg, specialising in Classically inspired painted ceilings.



space of only 11 years from 1827. The capital of the Empire was transforming itself architecturally and, with nearby Regent Street reaching completion at this time, the West End would have been consumed by dust and noise as houses, banks, monuments and institutions rose and vied for superiority.

The Oxford and Cambridge University Club (twice since amalgamated—with the New University Club in 1938 and the United University Club in 1972—and eventually to become simply the Oxford and Cambridge Club) was founded in 1830 at a meeting chaired by Lord Palmerston. Gladstone himself was a member of a building committee that appointed Robert Smirke as architect and oversaw construction. Smirke was assisted by his son, Sydney, who continued as club architect after his father's death, and the club was complete by 1838.

'Inside, the quiriness of the elevation evaporates to give way to a series of monumental spaces of great power and beauty'

Incremental changes occurred throughout the 19th century until the arrival of Sir Reginald Blomfield in 1907 heralded more dramatic alterations. These included the upgrading of a number of interiors, and the addition of the prominent dormer storey, which had a major effect on the proportions of the front elevation. One of the challenges of the restoration programme has been to untangle Smirke's work from that of Blomfield.

The richness of surface pattern and detail on the main front (Fig 4) is almost confusing. Here, Smirke chose to set aside his trademark pure Greek style in favour of something more eclectic in its Classical references. The large Corinthian portico sits heavily in the central bay, which, being wider than the others, interrupts the building's horizontal rhythm, and the banded stucco on the first floor looks distinctly odd in relation to the Palladian-style rustication below. Yet the details are very finely conceived—the terracotta panels are beautifully executed and other elements, such as the iron Palestrina railings, a delight.

Once inside, any quiriness evaporates to give way to a series of monumental spaces of great power and beauty. From the street, the visitor enters a vestibule that, although now carpeted, would once have assumed the character of a semi-external space, with a stone floor and hanging lantern. Heavy doors would once have shielded the visitor from the spectacular staircase hall beyond.

Now the lobby assumes the necessary function of a reception and waiting area and,



↑ Fig 3: The Smoking Room is the Club's finest interior. The rich, coffered ceiling with its delicate frieze was returned to Robert Smirke's original decorative scheme in 2001

with the doors to the space beyond long removed, that sense of surprise is dulled. However, the steep ascent to the stair hall is still wonderfully dramatic, producing that effect, so marked in grand Victorian public and institutional buildings, of making the onlooker feel Lilliputian. These buildings were, of course, designed by artists who had seen Classical and Renaissance architecture at first hand. Importantly, therefore, inspiration came from physical experience as well as a firm grounding in the rules of Classical architecture. Smirke was no exception. As a young man, he had travelled widely in Italy and, intrepidly, Greece, much of which was still wild and bandit-ridden.

The stair hall (Fig 2) is one of the great spaces of London clubs. The wide dog-leg staircase with its thick Palladian balustrade rises majestically to fill the huge volume of the hall. However, until relatively recently, this space would have exhibited a rather dour,

institutional feel—its splendour obscured by a dull symphony of blue, white and cream. Paul Vonberg, who oversaw the restoration in 2005, was faced with the unenviable task of understanding the later alterations to the hall and restoring it to some sense of harmony and order. The hall was one of the spaces completely overhauled by Blomfield after 1907, who introduced his trademark motif, the tripartite (or Venetian) window, over the landing, and added some flashy touches such as the panels of marble lining the staircase. Mr Vonberg made the conscious decision to tip the balance back in favour of Smirke, but not to ignore Blomfield completely.

Thus, the marble panels and the console brackets remain, but the painted surfaces have been returned to something more appropriate to the Grecian simplicity of the original design. This Herculean task was carried out by a team led by specialist decorators Tim Dolby and Andy Taylor. The most labour-intensive aspect

The façade reliefs



For these seven reliefs, Smirke used designs from his father, the artist Robert Smirke RA. The 'exalted labours of the mind' were executed by W. G. Nicholl and depict scenes such as Homer declaiming his epic and Newton explaining his system. Before redecoration, the stucco was a deadening grey. Now, dignity has been restored, although the club, understandably, was not able quite to stretch to graining the window frames (a appropriate mahogany-red colour was selected as a compromise).

of the job was the stripping of the layers of white gloss paint away from the Portland-stone staircase and baluster. This was achieved using a series of poultices and, although the job took many hundreds of man-hours, the staircase, restored to its naked state, now looks magnificent. Elsewhere, the decorators used skilful paint effects to imitate stone (as on the running frieze above the marble panels) and wood, with graining on the doors and architraves on the first and second floor.

On the ground floor can be found the Coffee Room (the largest room in the building) and the newly refurbished Morning Room (or Members Bar). The Smoking Room (Fig 3) on the first floor, entered opposite the head of the stairs, was redecorated in 2001. This is arguably the club's finest interior (Blomfield seems to have left it alone), and the rich, coffered ceiling with delicate frieze has been returned to Smirke's original scheme. This room shows the architect at his best, with all the elements effortlessly resolved and perfect proportions. An excellent collection of club furniture, such as a number of low mahogany bookcases inlaid with walnut, sits grandly on a superb Axminster carpet. The room contains one amusing curiosity—a full-height cupboard fashioned into an elegant humidior. Since the introduction of the smoking ban, the dozens of little drawers have been put to new use as repositories for playing cards.

The Library (Fig 1) next door is formed from two interlinking rooms (there are also two more smaller library rooms on the same floor). The key treasures here, as one would expect from a club with such powerful academic traditions, are the exquisite bookcases,



↑ Fig 4: One of the most pleasing and dramatic transformations has been the repainting of the façade of the Oxford and Cambridge Club in the original stone colour, and the cleaning of the 'exalted labours of the mind' terracotta panels above the first-floor windows

fashioned in Russian birch. Collectively, these rooms house some 25,000 volumes.

The main clubhouse is linked on the east side to 77, Pall Mall. This building, dating from 1860 and designed by T. H. Wyatt, was acquired by the club in 1952. It is the former home of Princess Marie Louise, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, and initially served as a separate members' area for women. The large rear room on the ground floor, named after the building's celebrated former occupant, is now used for banquets. Here, Mr Vonberg settled for an Empire-style redecoration scheme with deep red panels in gilded frames and a ceiling picked out in warm greys, white and gold. The rear window looks out on what appears to be a view of a low Georgian

outbuilding behind Marlborough House. On closer inspection, however, it reveals itself to be an illusion—a meticulously painted mural,

complete with an open sash window, a curtain flapping in the wind, and a cat looking out, hungrily, at a passing dove. A spider hangs from the drainpipe bearing the club crest.

The recent restoration programme undertaken by the Oxford and Cambridge Club and its architect Paul Vonberg has already achieved brilliant results. The redecorated façade places the building once more on a happy footing with its illustrious neighbours, but it is Smirke's cool, Grecian interiors, beautifully furnished and dressed again in appropriate Classical hues of green, yellow, red and gold, that are a revelation. ↘

Dedicated clubbers

When it came to club design, Sir Charles Barry (1795–1860) was the undoubted star. Barry (right) made his name with the Travellers Club (1830–32), which pioneered the Italian Renaissance *palazzo* model. This he followed with The Reform Club (1838–41), his masterpiece, brilliantly planned around a double-height internal courtyard or cortile.

Another senior architectural figure well versed in this relatively new building type was Sir Robert Smirke (1780–1867). Smirke (below), whose large and successful practice was built up on the



back of a reputation for reliability rather than architectural genius, made his name by securing a series of major commissions in the capital—the most significant being the British Museum. Smirke had also been successful in establishing his urbane brand of Grecian design as the leading style for the latest gentleman's clubs. By the time he was appointed as architect for the Oxford and Cambridge University Club in 1834, he had already built three others (and his fourth, the now demolished Carlton Club, was under construction close by on Pall Mall).

