

Restoration and retirement

Peterhouse, Cambridge

As the University of Cambridge celebrates its 800th anniversary, the oldest college witnesses two important changes. Clive Aslet is impressed by the restoration of the college hall, and Jeremy Musson takes a farewell glance at the rooms of an eminent, now Emeritus, Fellow

Photographs by Will Pryce

IN 1209, three scholars in Oxford were hanged for murdering a local woman. The university temporarily dispersed, and, in the diaspora, some scholars first found their way to the fen town of Cambridge—an event commemorated by the university in its 800th anniversary celebrations this year.

There are some (alumni of Peterhouse, for example) who might question whether the university can be said to have had substance until the scholars were organised into communities similar to those that they had left. As the first college, it is Peterhouse that boasts the oldest piece of fabric from Cambridge's early days still used for its original purpose. Having begun life, inconveniently, in the Hospital of St John in about 1280, the college (*Fig 1*) was moved to its present site, next to Little St Mary's church, in 1284, which is now taken as the date of its foundation.

The 14 scholars—or, as we would now call them, fellows—who initially comprised the college were able to make use of two hostels. Soon, however, Peterhouse's founder, Hugo de Balsham, the elderly and otherwise unremarkable Bishop of Ely, left the means to build 'a handsome Hall' in his will (*Fig 2*). This work of art, where fellows and students have dined together since the Middle Ages, has just been sensitively restored, thanks to a generous legacy by Richard Harris, a former member of the college, with the support of his widow, Gisela Gledhill.

De Balsham's will enabled the scholars to build a hall of carefully squared clunch—a kind of chalk dug up from nearby Cherry Hinton—whose Early English doorways to the screens passage survive, albeit restored. It must have been a singularly impressive structure in what was still a largely wooden town—its status contrasting with the poverty that dogged Peterhouse for decades (unlike Merton College, Oxford, on which Peterhouse was modelled as an institution).

After a century, the hall was remodelled, with a new roof and windows. The operation is dated by an unusual Lancastrian badge of livery carved on the archway leading to the combination room. It implies that someone very closely associated with the new Lancastrian king Henry IV patronised the



↑ *Fig 1: Old Court, Peterhouse, showing the 17th-century chapel and (to the right) the oriel of the hall. The hall was first built after the college's founder Hugo de Balsham's death in 1286; the oriel was added as part of an inspired restoration by G. G. Scott Jnr in 1868*



Badge of royalty

Decorating the hall arch leading to the Combination Room is a sculpture of a stag or hart, encircled by a pale or fence. This penned-in animal is a metaphor for Henry IV's political achievement: the hart was Richard II's emblem, the king whom he deposed and imprisoned in 1399. The hart—Richard II's badge—is thus symbolically caged. The badge was used by Lancastrian adherents as a mark of livery or membership of the royal household.

remodelling. Most probably, it was executed early in the reign of Henry IV, 1399–1413.

As the college's patron, John Fordham, Bishop of Ely since 1388, had ceased to engage in politics, the most likely source of funds is John de Bottlesham, who became master in 1397, and was appointed Bishop of Rochester in 1400. Surviving accounts show that substantial works in the college were still going on in the 1420s.

By 1868, the walls of the medieval building were being pushed outwards by the weight of the roof. In an age of greater academic rigour, in which both the subjects taught and the number of students were expanding, many colleges felt the need to upgrade their buildings—as well as to stop them falling down.

The fellows unhesitatingly turned to the leading church architect of the day, Sir George Gilbert Scott, not knowing, perhaps, how happy this connection would prove. Although Scott himself was a hard-boiled professional, whose over-zealous restorations inspired William

→ *Fig 2: The hall, with panelling by Rattee and Kett. The central portrait shows Rev H. Wilkinson Cookson, master from 1847–76*



Morris to found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877, he had a son. Unlike Scott, that son, G. G. Scott Jnr, was given a university education—indeed, at Cambridge itself (Jesus College).

Life for Scott Jnr was hardly easy, as can be gathered from his death from cirrhosis of the liver in 1897—strangely, in his father's Midland Grand Hotel, London. But working in his father's practice as a young man, a job such as Peterhouse, which involved refashioning the combination room as well as the hall, suited him perfectly. It gave him the opportunity to display his progressive sympathy for old architecture, execute an imaginative but archaeologically convincing scheme, and employ some of the greatest talents of Victorian art to decorate it.

'Peterhouse gave Scott an opportunity to display his progressive sympathy for old architecture'

The hall required a new roof. Scott removed the old one, replacing it with an elegantly arch-braced structure, springing from gilded corbels. It is topped with a lantern louver (unnecessary, of course, as a wall fireplace had been built in the 16th century). The walls were buttressed, the dais lit by a new oriel (Fig 3) and new windows added to Old Court.

The design for these north windows was in the Perpendicular style of those that survive on the south side. Fellows would have preferred a conjectural reconstruction in 13th-century Early English style. However, not only Scott Jnr, but also his father weighed in to save them. This made a signal contrast to Alfred Waterhouse's harsher treatment of Pembroke College. Not that everything was plain sailing at Peterhouse. Piqued by criticism, the Master of Pembroke, the Rev John Power, wrote that some of the Peterhouse walls had collapsed during restoration.

Scott designed the panelling, incorporating old portraits that originally lined the walls of the combination room (Fig 4), but the decoration of the walls and windows was entrusted to Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, the furnishing company founded by Morris (Fig 5). Ford Madox Brown designed most of the stained glass. We see Edward I and his queen (one the embodiment of chivalry, the other of Pre-Raphaelite womanhood), during whose reign Peterhouse was founded.

Other conspicuous figures from the history of the college also feature de Balsham, the founder, drawn by Burne-Jones, as well as the poet Thomas Gray looking suitably elegiac, and the scientist Henry Cavendish



↑ Fig 3: The oriel window designed by Scott Jnr, with William Morris glass in the form of a tree of life, including figures by Ford Madox Brown and heraldry by Philip Webb



↑ Fig 4: Portraits of Simon Langham, Bishop of Ely and Edward III's lord chancellor, later Archbishop of Canterbury and a cardinal; and the Elizabethan fellow Robert Smith



↑ Fig 5: A detail of the stencilled decoration. Although an Oxford man, Morris undertook several Cambridge commissions, such as the hall at Queens' and Jesus College chapel

David Watkin's rooms

The rooms of Cambridge don Prof David Watkin, the nation's leading authority on Classicism, embody their occupant's interests

THERE are moments in men's lives when their whole destinies are decided. This is certainly true for David Watkin—Fellow of Peterhouse and Cambridge University's distinguished professor of architectural history. In 1962, when an undergraduate reading English at Trinity Hall, he would spend his spare time taking in the wonders of Cambridge's architecture. On one door in Jesus College, he happened to see a notice announcing a new Tripos in art history.

It was the beginning of a distinguished career as an architectural historian, vividly reflected in his Fellow's rooms in St Peter's Terrace (Fig 6), where so many of Britain's architectural historians have, as undergraduates and graduate students and friends, been entertained, instructed and encouraged.

Prof Watkin, twice head of the Department of History of Art, has occupied these rooms for nearly 40 years, but moves this year to his new home, a house in the heart of medieval King's Lynn, Norfolk.

At first glance, St Peter's Terrace would appear to belong to the late-Georgian period, and it is a surprise to find that it dates to about 1850. It was part of an ambitious development by Peterhouse in a self-consciously metro-



↑ Fig 6: St Peter's Terrace, Cambridge, an elegant Classical terrace built in 1850 and owned by Peterhouse, in which Prof Watkin has had his set for nearly 40 years

politan style, shielded from Trumpington Street by railings and trees. There is a strong Classical tradition for the terraces of Cambridge, but St Peter's is different, perhaps more Kensington in character. The site was advertised to let for a term of 40 years, in the *Cambridge Chronicle*, November 30, 1850, applications to be made to a Mr Elliot Smith.

The handsome 21-bay terrace was built in gault brick, with a stuccoed ground floor, and ➤

carrying a jar for collecting hydrogen. The armorial glass in the oriel was designed by Morris's friend, the architect Philip Webb. Complementing the stained-glass windows is a charming filigree of delicately coloured stencil work, foliage below and roses above, covering the unpanelled sections of the walls.

The object of the restoration has been to revive the woodwork and stencil decoration, without it being obvious to anyone not in on the secret that anything has been done at all. This has been triumphantly accomplished by a committee, chaired by the Art History fellow, Prof David Watkin.

The team of specialist craftsmen was led by Keith Stock, the college's Clerk of Works, and the stencilling and gilding work was done by restoration specialists Hare and Humphreys. The work has achieved precisely the result intended. When Rev James Porter wrote to thank Scott Jnr for a letter congratulating him on becoming master in 1876, he recalled that 'almost the happiest years of my life have been those in which I came into intimate relations with you, while you were restoring our Hall & Combination Room'. The joy of this collaboration still shines on those who dine at Peterhouse, Cambridge's oldest college.



↑ Fig 7: The drawing room. Book-lined, with red-flock wallpaper evoking 19th-century interiors, it is furnished with Regency pieces and hung with portrait prints of architects. It is a room in which generations of undergraduates have discussed the history of architecture

open Tuscan porches in the end and central houses. The main rooms are on the first floor, and it earned an unusually appreciative description in *Royal Commission on Historic Monuments City of Cambridge Part II* (1959): 'In St Peter's Terrace the revived Roman spirit and the contemporary style are combined with virtuosity and much logic in a street front of architectural distinction.'

Prof Watkin's rooms on the first floor form a small but elegant apartment, the only set approached from the staircase. On the north side lies the dining room, with its handsome marble chimneypiece and a William IV dining table and chairs, the library (**Fig 8**) or writing room, and bedroom. To the south is the drawing room and gyp room (a simple kitchen named after the traditional name for a Cambridge manservant) and bathroom.

The principal rooms evoke late-18th- and early-19th-century interiors—a red flock in the drawing room (**Fig 7**), a Soanean yellow in the hall. At present, they house a collection of 10,000 books and are hung with paintings and engravings, reflecting Prof Watkin's interests, friendships and travels. These range from the moody engraving by Piranesi of the Campus Martius in Rome, a recent gift from a student, to a contemporary composite painting of the works of Cockerell by Carl Laubin, to engraved portraits of architects such as Jones, Wren, Vanbrugh, Gibbs, Kent, 'Athenian' Stuart, and Smirke. There is also a series of comfortably elegant Regency and 18th-century furnishings, and a model made by Gavin Stamp of Cockerell's designs for the University Library.

Indeed, Prof Watkin's rooms form something of a cabinet of curiosities. Their character is perhaps a reflection of the older bachelor dons' rooms of his early experiences of Cambridge—surprisingly few such interiors have ever been recorded. He describes them as 'civilised men, with good porcelain



↑ **Fig 8: Prof Watkin's library, where so many influential works on Classical architecture have been written. The bust of Prof Watkin is by Alexander Stoddart**

and their own silver' who consciously tried to pass on their values to the undergraduates who studied under them (Michael Jaffé of King's was a particular influence).

In Prof Watkin's case, his own undergraduates have included eminent architectural historians such as Prof Gavin Stamp, Prof Alan Powers, Prof Deborah Howard and Dr Frank Salmon; writers and publishers including Clive Aslet, Nicholas Coleridge, and James Knox; Sir Hugh Roberts, director of the Royal Collection, other museum directors such as Charles Saumarez-Smith and Christopher Woodward; and auctioneers such as

Lord Dalmeny and the Hon James Stourton.

Prof Watkin has continued to collect furniture in the Classical spirit for many years, and his rooms reflect the fact. The Regency mahogany hall chair bears the arms of Ralph, Viscount Nevill, and the drawing room is adorned with a number of rosewood William IV pieces, including a chaise longue and desk; the modern harpsichord is by Arnold Dolmetsch. The bust of Prof Watkin in his study/library was a gift to him from its sculptor, Alexander Stoddart. On a block that derives from the ancient herm form, it was exhibited at Leeds City Art Gallery in 2002–03.

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As well as his renown for his research interests (Thomas Hope, Charles Cockerell, and Sir John Soane), Prof Watkin also enjoys some national fame as a champion of contemporary Classical building—reflected in his recent book *Radical Classicism: the Architecture of Quinlan Terry*—and for his opposition to the doctrinaire orthodoxy of Modernism in British architecture.

Other books written in these rooms include *Morality and Architecture* (1977), *The Rise of Architectural History* (1980), *The English Vision* (1982), *A History of Western Architecture* (1986), *German Architecture and the Classical Ideal, 1740–1840* (1987), *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures* (1996), and, forthcoming, *The Roman Forum* (2009). He has been well placed with his own library and in having the art-history departmental library only a minute's walk away.

Prof Watkin has also been a regular contributor to *COUNTRY LIFE* since 1967, particularly on contemporary Classical works by John Simpson, Robert Adam and Hugh Petter. He recalls: 'I read Christopher Hussey's *English Country Houses: Late Georgian* when I was still at school, and made copious notes then. My first articles were on two Norfolk houses, Letheringsett Hall and Shotesham Park. I can still remember being introduced by John Cornforth to the then Architectural Editor, who said: "No quotes in German and absolutely no footnotes".'

Rules that, as you see, still apply. 🐣

A strong influence in the Classical tradition



The influence of one particular legendary Cambridge figure is particularly evident here. Part of Prof Watkin's library, as well as some engravings and furniture,

was left to him by his friend Monsignor Alfred Gilbey, the long-term Roman Catholic chaplain of Cambridge University from 1932 to 1965. Gilbey, notably keen on field sports, also had a passionate interest in architectural history and shared his architectural enthusiasms with Prof Watkin when the latter was an undergraduate, with numerous visits

to little-known architectural gems. Prof Watkin edited a memoir of Gilbey, published by Michael Russell in 2002. This includes a description of Mark Hall in Essex, his childhood home, a house in the Wyatt manner in a landscaped park by Repton, in the drawing room of which Gilbey was actually ordained.

Gilbey had a profound admiration for the elegant world of the Georgian country house, shared by Prof Watkin. He famously lived out his retirement at the Travellers' Club, where he was permitted a private oratory chapel on an upper storey. There he enjoyed the quality of Barry's Italianate *palazzo*, part of the cycle of the British Classical tradition.