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An Auspicious Alliance: Pugin, Bloxam, and the Magdalen Commissions

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This article forms the sequel to "The Balliol that Might Have Been: Pugin's Crushing Oxford Defeat" (JSAH, XLV, 1986, 358–373). That study showed that Augustus W. N. Pugin (1812–1852) was prevented from carrying out his plans for renovating Balliol College, Oxford, because of his somewhat singular views and oppressive nature, combined with the prevailing sentiments against Roman Catholics in the University. The present study surveys the history of the two small commissions that Pugin was granted: the Magdalen College gateway and the Church of St. Lawrence, Tubney (the only Anglican church Pugin ever built). In both cases Pugin was appointed as architect through the benevolence of Dr. John Rouse Bloxam, in appeasement for the failures at Balliol. Pugin executed the designs in secrecy and with extraordinary speed, thereby hoping to avoid criticism or scandal, in an effort to erect a small monument to himself in Oxford, his "city of spires," which he hoped could serve as the model for the 19th-century Gothic revival in England.

PUGIN'S SERIES of "defeats" in Oxford culminated in his experiences at Balliol College in 1843. He had been promised the commission to renovate many of the buildings and had drawn up an elaborate set of presentation drawings as a gift to the College. At the last minute, however, permission to employ him was revoked because of his strong anti-Protestant rhetoric, combined with the adverse opinion of him that was formed by the Master, Richard Jenkyns. The dashing of his hopes represented a major emotional setback for the successful Gothic architect; he regretted his unseemly behavior in dealing with the University authorities and considered his painstaking efforts "miserable failures."¹ He did, however, experience two small

victories in Oxford: the new gateway for Magdalen College (1844) and the Church of St. Lawrence at Tubney, eight miles from the city center (1844–1846). Both projects were carried out under the influence of Pugin's friend, Dr. John Rouse Bloxam, who had carefully followed the course of events at Balliol; he wished to cheer up the architect by letting him make a contribution to the city of which Pugin had said, "It is of the greatest importance to have a good thing in this place."²

Pugin had been interested in Magdalen College long before his appointment as architect. In a letter to Bloxam from the late 1830s, Pugin wrote: "Perhaps you are not aware that there is hardly a detail of your glorious college which *I have not drawn*. I consider it as a whole one of the most splendid collegiate edifices remaining."³ These drawings were done in the course of Pugin's sketching tours, which he undertook regularly while training under his father in the early 1830s.

Pugin's praise of the College buildings may be seen as an attempt to win the sympathies of those Oxford academics and clerics who were involved in the ecclesiological revival in the Established Church. Among them was Bloxam (1807–1891), who had allied himself with the Tractarian Movement and was, from 1837 to 1840, John Henry Newman's curate at Littlemore. The Magdalen Fellow and Vice-President introduced such innovations as gilded candlesticks, wooden alms-dishes, black silk stoles, a credence table, and a litany desk into Littlemore church. These were later copied by Frederick Oakeley at Margaret Chapel in London and thence came into general use. Bloxam's friendship with Pugin, De Lisle, and others mark him as one of the first Tractarians with pronounced Roman Catholic sympathies. He was joined in his support for the Romanists by the octogenarian President of Magdalen, Martin Routh (1755–1854), who was revered by the Oxford Movement, and to whom Newman dedicated his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church* (1837).

Routh, who occasionally dabbled in architectural improvement, knew of Pugin's work through the competition held in

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1. See my previous article, "The Balliol that Might Have Been: Pugin's Crushing Oxford Defeat," *JSAH*, XLV, 1986, 358–373. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 528, letter no. 153 (24 December 1850), from Pugin to John Rouse Bloxam.

2. Letter to Lord Shrewsbury, 6 November 1840; quoted in P. Stanton, "Welby Pugin and the Gothic Revival," Ph.D. diss., University of London, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1950, 308.

3. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 528, letter no. 8, no date.

Fig. 1. John and Mathias Christmas, Magdalene College gateway, Oxford, 1635 (The President and Fellows of Magdalene College).

1844 for renovating the Chorister's Hall (now the Library), which was won by J. M. Derick.⁴ Routh also had lauded Pugin's 1843 designs for Balliol. As a result, the architect had written excitedly to Bloxam: "I am truly grateful at what you say respecting your venerable President's approval of the Balliol drawings. His opinion should carry much weight with it as he is a very learned man in ecclesiastical antiquities."⁵ Routh's approval was not, however, an influential factor in the Balliol episode.

The commission for the College gateway was the "gift" of the sympathetic Bloxam to Pugin. The previous gateway, built by John and Mathias Christmas, was in bad repair and somewhat of an eyesore to the College authorities (Fig. 1). They therefore

4. H. Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford*, New Haven and London, 1983, 99. Derick was the runner-up in the competition for designing the Martyr's Memorial (1840). Pugin's comments on this memorial to Cranmer, Ridley, and Latymer incurred the wrath of many important University officials and served to damage the architect's reputation in Oxford.

5. Oxford, Magdalene College Archives, MS. 528, letter no. 88 (19 May 1844).

Fig. 2. A. W. N. Pugin, Magdalene College gateway, Oxford, 1843. Preliminary design for the figures over the doorway; left, college coat of arms; center, Mary Magdalene; right, Winchester coat of arms (The President and Fellows of Magdalene College).

decided: "that the great or outer gateway of the College, built in 1635, and, like other works of that century, extremely hideous, should be destroyed. The new one, in a style conforming to the adjoining buildings, was entrusted to Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, easily the leading architect of the present time."⁶ This entry in the College Register, which was privately recorded by Bloxam and subsequently published in seven volumes (1853–1881), reflects his personal sentiments concerning his friend.

The designs for the gateway (Figs. 2, 3, and 4) were executed rapidly and were not unveiled until the official College Order appeared in February 1844. The reason for this secrecy is clear: after the Balliol dispute, Pugin, Bloxam, and Routh did not want this project to end in failure as well. As early as November 1843 Pugin wrote to Bloxam: "I have not spoken about the Magdalene sketches to any body."⁷ Even in March 1844, when an attack on Pugin appeared in the *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*—the same journal that had damaged his reputation at Balliol the previous year—he still maintained: "I have not mentioned it about & been very careful [*sic*]."⁸

The desire to avoid bad publicity meant that the construction too was completed with great speed. The following letter to Bloxam, dated 26 March, reveals Pugin's anxiety: "In a few days, I will forward you the form in which the contract should be worded & which can be signed when I come down after Easter, but in the mean time I wish you would send me the drawing [Fig. 4], as I want to get the gates cut out & seasoning. I have got capital oak. . . . I also want to have the figures modelled without delay & the canopies. It is not a light job but so

6. Quoted in Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford*, 101.

7. Oxford, Magdalene College Archives, MS. 528, letter no. 74 (8 November 1843).

8. Oxford, Magdalene College Archives, MS. 733, letter from Alton (26 March 1844).

Fig. 3. Magdalen College gateway, Oxford, 1843, demolished 1885. Preliminary sectional design (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

full of detail that it will take time & therefore none should be wasted.”⁹

Two days later Pugin sent another letter to Bloxam, enclosing a draft agreement and again impressing upon his friend the speed with which he wished to execute the plan: “There is no time to lose, for spring is rapidly advancing & it will be a good thing to say to any restless spirits that the work is in hand. For myself the whole must be prepared in London. Having said this I should think the penny a liners will leave off. It is my singular wish that all these things are known, however I think the beauty of the work will silence all the grumblers.”¹⁰

It is interesting to note that Pugin wished all the work to be done in London, so that in Oxford it would be necessary only

9. Ibid.

10. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 733, letter from Alton (28 March 1844).

Fig. 4. Magdalen College gateway. Final design. Figures from left to right: Bishop Wainflete, College arms, Mary Magdalen, Winchester arms, St. John the Baptist; the Bishop & St. John were reversed when the gateway was built (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

Fig. 5. Magdalen College gateway. Drawing of the completed structure (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

Fig. 6. Magdalen College gateway. Photograph of the completed structure (Oxfordshire County Council Library Services).

to fit the pieces together. The architect had taken every precaution to ensure the safety of this project.

Pugin executed countless works on the scale of the Magdalen gateway, and most were dashed off with characteristic speed. This project, however, was different: "I want to make this little work as perfect as possible," Pugin explained, "& I shall be able to introduce a deal of beautiful detail . . . & the carving must be exquisitely done. . . . I shall take immediate steps for starting the work in London & all got ready for fixing so that the gate will be built during the long vacation."¹¹ The care he took with such a minor project is unique, attesting to the importance he attached to the commission.

The gateway was assembled during August, at a cost of £679 0s.7d., thus bringing the sequence of events, in Bloxam's words, to "a happy conclusion" (Figs. 5 and 6).¹² Insignificant as it might seem in the catalogue of an architect who is best known for his larger works, the Magdalen College gateway served as a small "victory," effected through a friend's kindness, and restored to Pugin some of the self-respect and credibility that he had lost during the four previous stormy years.

Almost concurrent with the gateway was Pugin's creation of the Church of St. Lawrence at Tubney. The need for this church was perceived in 1839, for the 190 inhabitants of the village, who had no church, found it difficult to travel to neighboring

Fig. 7. A. W. N. Pugin, Church of St. Lawrence, Tubney, Oxon., 1844–1846. Preliminary sketch (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

11. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 733, letter from Pugin to Bloxam (1844).

12. Quoted in Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford*, 101.

Fig. 8. Church of St. Lawrence, Tubney. The architect's original idea, including a tower instead of the eventual belfry. Underneath, in an anonymous hand, this note: "from a little church near Fairford, Gloucestershire" (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

churches in Fyfield of Appleton. The College therefore decided that £200 be subscribed toward building a church at Tubney.¹³

Nothing further seems to have been done until 1844, when the Bishop of Oxford, Richard Bagot, was made aware of the need for a new church. For the second time in less than a year, Bloxam intervened. He thought that if his friend could be given the commission, the latter's sense of achievement in the city precincts would be given a boost. After convincing the Bishop and the College of the advantages attached to Pugin's selection, Bloxam wrote to Pugin with the proposal. The architect consented and replied:

I herewith send you a sketch of your small church [Fig. 7]. I have set it out on a working scale and I find that it will cost with the greatest economy £596, including a plain stone Pulpit and Altar. I first drew it out with a Tower [Fig. 8], but it cost £645 so I have altered it into a Bellfry [*sic*; Fig. 9]. I have supposed the Floor of the Church chancel to be laid with plain tiles. You will perceive that I have a good Chancel and a Vestry with a fine place. You will have to take the usual commission into consideration, but there will not be any travelling expenses, as I shall make the journeys to the College Gateway answer both ends. If you approve of the plan, the sooner we get to work the better so as to get the roof on early. I can send you the working drawing [Fig. 10] by the beginning of next week.¹⁴

This letter—the only one extant relating to Pugin's church at Tubney—is similar to those written during the gateway episode in its urgent request for speed of construction. To this Pugin added the attractions of economy: plain tiles, no tower,

13. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 743.

14. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 743, letter to Bloxam (undated). The stone pulpit was never built: Pugin erected a wooden one instead (Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 528, letter no. 98).

Fig. 9. Church of St. Lawrence, Tubney. The architect's modified design (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

and no traveling expenses—all in order to allay any possible misgivings on the part of the College authorities.

By 1 July 1844 all the arrangements had been made; the College agreed to hire Pugin's favorite builder, George Myers, who had extensive experience in carrying out plans to the architect's liking. The first stone was laid in mid-July 1844, in a simple ceremony, attended by Bloxam, Routh, Bagot, and a number of the Fellows, and characterized as "very quiet but decorous," perhaps in order to avoid attracting attention.¹⁵ The building was completed in 1846 (Fig. 11), and the consecration was held on 1 February 1847.

Unfortunately, tragedy later befell the two structures. Pugin's gateway remained standing for a very brief period, just over 40 years. By the 1880s there were plans for new buildings at Magdalen: the present St. Swithin's Quadrangle. It was decided that the gateway did not blend well with the new designs, and it was therefore replaced by Bodley and Garner (Fig. 12). The College, however, failed to complete the quadrangle in the form envisaged by the architects, thus accentuating the tragedy of the gateway's destruction. Indeed, Pugin's project, coming so soon after the rejection of his designs for Balliol, was, in Colvin's words, "an architectural manifesto";¹⁶ its subsequent demolition was part of a series of mismanaged commissions that left Magdalen with a collection of beautiful buildings which, however, lacked the essential unity of a college.

The church at Tubney, though still standing, was also visited by tragedy. In 1951 the roof collapsed, and the building was left in disrepair due to lack of funds. Luckily, in 1952, the centenary of Pugin's death, the Poet Laureate John Betjeman, who was a lover of Victoriana, presented a radio program about the architect and his life; in it he lamented the fate of Tubney church and launched an appeal for its restoration. Money poured

15. Oxford, Magdalen College Archives, MS. 743, letter from Bloxam to Routh (July 1844).

16. Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford*, 101.

Fig. 10. Church of St. Lawrence, Tubney. Working drawing (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

Fig. 11. Church of St. Lawrence, Tubney. Anonymous water-color (The President and Fellows of Magdalen College).

Fig. 12. G. F. Bodley and T. Garner, Magdalen College gateway, Oxford, 1885. Photograph of the completed structure (Oxfordshire County Council Library Services).

in, and the church was rebuilt. This generosity attests to the esteem in which Pugin was held, even a century after his death.

The Magdalen gateway and the Church of St. Lawrence were two small contributions to the architectural face of Oxford and its environs. Furthermore, thanks to Pugin's friendship with Bloxam, they were treated as special cases: in both instances no competition was held; the appointments were made and the designs subsequently executed without publicity. It is certain

that these almost concurrent commissions were part of an attempt by a sympathetic friend to cheer up Pugin; yet Pugin acted professionally, accepting and carrying out these commissions as he would have done any other, but with greater attention to detail, speed, and cost. Although appeasement was, in part, the reason for his employment, the gateway and church stood as examples—however small—of what Pugin could do for Oxford were he given the chance.