

An Ascension Day Ritual Revived: New College Choir and St Bartholomew's Chapel

For the last few years, New College choir has revived a tradition last recorded in the seventeenth century, but possibly of much earlier origin. This is the history of the site and of the tradition:

St Bartholomew's Hospital

The Hospital of St. Bartholomew was founded by Henry I (1100-35) in the 1120s, for twelve lepers and a chaplain-warden. He endowed it with £23.0.5 from the farm (rent) which Oxford paid the king in exchange for its privileges as a city, i.e. a penny a day for each person with 5s. a year for clothing. He also gave two loads of hay every year from the king's mead near Osney. Later kings confirmed and supplemented the gift (there is evidence of building in 1162), and in 1238 the pope conferred immunity from paying tithes of garden produce, copse-wood, and the increase of their animals.

Mismanagement in the early fourteenth century, including the admission of too many able-bodied men and the warden keeping a concubine, led the king to regulate the hospital, first by reducing the brethren to six infirm and two healthy brethren to work the farm. Then in 1327 the hospital was granted to Oriel, which college was to maintain the foundation as before, with the addition of a chaplain, although sick members of the college could be sent there too for a change of air. In 1367 various rules were confirmed: the brethren were to live chastely; they were not to go outside the hospital without their habit; none was to be admitted who was married, or in debt, or not free; they were not to invite their friends into the hospital without the leave of the provost; each brother, when admitted, was to contribute all his movable goods, which were to remain with the hospital even if he was expelled; consequently they might not make wills.

Oriel had frequent disputes with the town about the payment of the farm, which was reduced to £19 in 1390.

The college held onto the hospital through the Reformation, but the eight paupers also had to work in Oxford because 9d a week would not sustain them. In 1643 the 'Hospital house was occupied by people who had the plague, and became a Pest-House', but it was demolished in the siege of Oxford in the Civil War; Oriel rebuilt it in 1649 as a row of four almshouses, now Bartlemas House. Bartlemas Farm, to the west, incorporates further C16th hospital buildings. In the later seventeenth century, 'the Chapel was formerly covered with Lead, but in the late Rebellion it was torn off for making bullets'.

The Relics and Indulgence

There was an image of St Bartholomew in the Chapel, amongst other relics. In the words of the seventeenth-century Oxford antiquary, Anthony Wood:

Besides the Image, as before, many other Trinkets in the Chapel drew the Adoration of the People. In King Ed. III's Time was here, *St Edmund* the Confessor's Comb, *St. Bartholomew's* Skin, the Bones of *St. Stephen*, and one of the Ribs of *St Andrew* the Apostle. These reserved in particular and choice Places in the Chapel, were on high Days indulged to view; and happy was he that could come near either to touch or kiss them. –Pilgrims came from afar to be cured by the Reliques,– Such as were troubled with continual Head-Achs, by combing their Heads with *St. Edmund's* Comb, recived Cure; such as had a Weakness of the Joints, by handling and applying these Bones to the Places affected, were restored to their pristine Strength; with many other like Accounts. ... [But Oriel moved these relics to St Mary's in the late fourteenth century, to attract] a greater Conflux of People, than a retired and obscure

Place.

The chapel looks early-fourteenth-century, and this probably coincides with a campaign by Oriel to make the most of the relics. On 31 May 1336 Henry Burghersh, Bishop of Lincoln, granted an indulgence of forty days off the pains of Purgatory to those who came devoutly to the chapel on the feast of St Bartholomew (24 August) or the octave, (Wood again):

... and there with Prayers, Oblations and Gifts worship him; and also of Charity contribute Relief towards the leprous Alms-Folk thereof.— Upon the Publication of which, Multitudes of People resorted here, and performed that which this Bishop required, to the great Benefit of the Priest and Poor; and to honour this Saint the more, they set up his Image in the Windows, and on the Wall of the Chapel; and no little Cringing and Adoration was paid him.— Cooks from *Oxford* flocked here, bringing in on *Whitsun* week the Fly. The Boys on *May-Day* the First-fruits of *Flora*, with their Lord and Lady's Garland, Fifes, Flutes and Drums, to acknowledge with Dancing and Musick, and salute this gladsome Occasion.

And this Injunction and Custom was with great Earnestness and Zeal kept up by the Oxonians and the adjacent Country-Men, till the Reformation of Religion. When *Q Elizabeth's* Act against Images &c. appeared, this Idol was pulled down.— Whence this Custom for a while slept, and the Alms-Folk by Degrees reduced to Poverty, and became the Objects of Compassion. ...

But the worthy Fellows of *New College* principally amongst others, changing their former Day to *May-Day* and *Holy Thursday*, used the same Way as before; and was, in Mr. *Wood's* time, their laudable and constant Custom, till the Presbyterian Times totally abolished it.

Note: *New College* Men made Choice of *Holy Thursday*, because *Magdalen College* Men and the Rabble of the Town came on *May-Day*, to their Disturbance.

The Ceremony

According to Wood, quoting the earlier Oxford antiquary, Brian Twyne (1581-1644), the first formally-appointed keeper of the university's archives:

On the Day of *Ascension*, or *Holy Thursday*, the Fellows of *New College*, after their grave and wonted Manner, early in the Morning used to walk to *Bartholomew's*; where they entered the Chapel (being ready decked and adorned with the seasonable Fruits of the Year) and being seated, the Chaplain of this Place used more anciently to read a Psalm and Chapter allotted for the Day. This ended, the Fellows sung an Hymn or Anthem of 5 or 6 Parts, then the second Lesson was read; after which, another Hymn sung, or else a Collect for the Day, consisting of as many Parts.— Then they went up to the Altar, where stood a Vessel decked with Tuttyes, and therein offered a Piece of Silver, to be divided among the poor Men. The Chapel Service or Ceremonies ended, they walked in Procession to a Well, called *Stockwell*, at the Upper-end of the Grove adjoining (which, with the Way from the Chapel thereto, used anciently to be strewed with Flowers;) where being fixt, after an Epistle and Gospel, as was sometimes used, they in the open Place, like the ancient Druids, echoed and warbled out from the shady Arbours harmonious Melody, consisting of several Parts, then most in Fashion.— But for several Times, about 24 Years ago, they commonly sung an *Oriana*, or else one of Mr. *J. Welby's* Songs of 5 Parts, beginning thus, “Hard by a Chrystal Fountain, &c.” which done, each Man departed home.

Within these sixty Years, says Mr. *Wood*, they sang only the Collect of the Day of

divers Parts; which done, they go up to the Grove.

Besides these, I find other Students of *Oriel* and *Magdalen* College using the same Ceremony.

In their procession to the Hospital, they went the lower Way, in the old *London* road; but in their return to *Oxford*, through the *Divinity Walk*, i.e. through the upper Road, down part of *Heddington Hill*. ...

The Well, called *Winifred's*, about two Furlongs East of the Chapel, was running here till the Time when *Oxford* was a Garrison, and the Rump People stopped it up.

Sources:

Victoria History of the County of Oxfordshire, vol. ii (1907), pp. 157-8: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=40211>

Anthony Wood, *The Antient and Present State of the City of Oxford*, ed. J. Peshall (1773), pp. 273-81

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Revival

On Ascension Day morning this year, it was to this spot that the Choir repaired, early enough in the morning to be a surprise to some clerks, but bright enough to elicit enthusiasm for the novelty of it all. We duly sang a short office in the exquisite chapel (with the East window bursting with morning light), and made our procession to the Well, at the top of the Oriel playing field. We were looking rather for a Spring, and in the wet season you could indeed find some water seeping out of the ground, if not bubbling. Little sign of it however on our bright if blowy Ascension Day morning. Unperturbed, we sang 'Now is the month of maying', a jollier number than Morley's calculated 'Hard by the crystal fountain'. The procession was led by pipe and fiddle, and we strewed the route with flowers as tradition demanded. Plenty of curious onlookers turned out to witness this spectacle: curious and genial. A champagne breakfast concluded the proceedings, this a strictly 21st-century tradition.

Edward Higginbottom
Choirmaster

Pipe and fiddle tunes included 'Sumer is Icumen In', 'Barham Down', 'The Old Tom of Oxford', 'The Cuckoo's Nest' and 'Battered Hake'.

For some time at least the Oxford Times (Saturday 11 May 2013) article and photographs taken at this event should be available here:

http://www.oxfordtimes.co.uk/news/10413500.Stepping_out_in_traditional_style_for_Ascension_Day/