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Outline of the College's History

> The foundation of this College is very different from that of any other in either of our Universities; for whereas each of them were owing to the benevolence of one or two persons as original founders, this was the joint work of two several societies: . . . the Gild of the Body of Christ and the Gild of the Blessed Virgin Mary . . .
>
> *Robert Masters, 1753*

The College of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Virgin Mary, otherwise called Bene't College, was founded in 1352. It is the sixth oldest of the thirty-one colleges in the University of Cambridge. It became the successor to the Gild of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the chief religious gild of 13th-century Cambridge. It lies next to the Church of St Benedict or Bene't, the oldest (Anglo-Saxon) standing building in the town.

Cambridge town was far older than the University, with origins in the Iron Age, developing civic functions from the late Anglo-Saxon period onwards; its best-known charter was in 1201. The Gild of St Mary was a large association of townspeople, with spiritual, charitable, convivial, and funerary functions; it was not commercial nor (at this stage) academic. It was an important civic body, whose patrons included two Lord Chancellors, but it included relatively poor people. Its functions were spread through the year, but once a year after Christmas the Alderman, Brethren, and Sisters solemnly met to commemorate departed members, and afterwards held a feast requiring ceremonial plate.[1]

The University of Cambridge had begun in the early 13th century and was probably somewhat older than the Gild. At first it functioned without colleges. In 1280 the Bishop of Ely founded the college now called Peterhouse; this was followed by Michaelhouse (now part of Trinity College) in 1324, University Hall (now Clare College) in 1326, King's Hall (now part of Trinity College) in 1337, Valence Marie Hall (now Pembroke College) in 1347, Gonville Hall (now Gonville & Caius College) in 1348, and Trinity Hall in 1350.

The period 1320–1350 was thus a time of extraordinary activity in Cambridge, parallel to the amazing building activities at Ely. It was the time when the cult of *Corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ, founded by Juliana de Cornillon, the 13th-century Belgian nun, spread through western Christendom: masses were sung, followed by processions and feasting, on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday (varying between 21 May and 24 June). It was not a pleasant time: the Little Ice Age brought cold and insecurity and the verge of famine, culminating in 1349 in the unimaginable grief and fear of the Black Death. People reacted to these disasters by increased devotion to the Body of Christ.[2] An immediate consequence seems to have been the founding of a Gild of Corpus Christi, planned during the Black Death, which held its first meeting in 1350.

There were fifty-odd gilds of Corpus Christi, including those of Shelford, Wisbech, and King's Lynn, but Cambridge's was an oddity among them. It was a small association of businessmen, with (it seems) only two functions: to hold a grand Corpus Christi procession, and to found another college. It lasted only 21 years. The brethren wasted no time: they took over the Gild of St Mary, found a noble patron in Henry Duke of Lancaster, got a licence from the king, secured equipment for brewing beer, appointed the Master and two Fellows, and began building. A large enough site to begin on had already been put together by Gonville Hall, who were persuaded to exchange it with another site belonging to members of the Gild. Its work done, the united Gild faded away; it is last heard of in 1371. The College inherited its assets and its duty of commemorating

1 Hall 1993.
2 M Rubin 1992 *Corpus Christi* Cambridge University Press.

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The earliest part of the College buildings. This picture shows the 14th-century structure, together with alterations in every century since.

departed members, which is still done at the Commemoration of Benefactors in December.[3]

The medieval College

The conventional date for founding the College is 7 November 1352, the date of the king's licence. The buildings are said to have been completed by 1378.[4]

Corpus, though it attracted many benefactions, was less well endowed than most colleges (and far less well endowed than almost any abbey). The original intention was probably to house and feed a Master and twelve Fellows, although medieval lists seldom have more than eight Fellows. The buildings were plain, serviceable, and robust, and are in use to this day. However, even the humblest college had to keep up appearances and show that it was not a mere Hall; the walls were of stone hauled from a distance, rather than timber-framed like ordinary Cambridge houses. It was adapted from the plan of a medieval house, with a hall, kitchen, buttery, and pantry, and living space which was expanded to form the earliest enclosed court in Cambridge. A chapel was unnecessary, since the College became linked to the adjacent church of St Benedict and shared in its services.

Corpus was designed to house students as well as Fellows. Although there were then no garrets in the roof, the Old Court is so spacious that at times each Fellow could have had a whole staircase. Many of the scholars were what would now be called graduate students. Undergraduates may not have existed in large numbers before the 16th century.[5] Other undergraduates might have been housed in various halls and inns which belonged to the College.

Fellows of the College were required to take Holy Orders, as most scholars did at that time. Corpus did not have a tendency towards law, like Trinity Hall, or medicine, like Gonville & Caius College.

3 CR Cheney 1984 'The gilds of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Corpus Christi' *LCA* **63** 24–35.
4 These dates need to be verified by tree-ring dating of the timbers.
5 For undergraduates in medieval Cambridge colleges see Cobban.

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For a poor college Corpus was quick to accumulate treasure. The earliest inventory records plate, chalices, and a remarkable number of vestments as well as precious bedclothes and other secular textiles. The College had inherited the plate and precious goods of the two Gilds, as well as sharing the church vessels of St Bene't's. Two or three items, the Horn, the Coconut, and perhaps the Knob, survive from this remote age.

The inventory might have been even longer had not the townspeople in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 – presumably townspeople whose parents had not been members of the Gilds – sacked the College and stolen £80 worth of plate, or so the Fellows said. The same nearly happened again in 1460, during a crisis of the Wars of the Roses. The College spent 12*d*. on 'the safeguard of the College plate and treasury, with title-deeds', and laid in saltpetre and sulphur, artillery, and twelve arrows.[6] These warlike precautions proved a sufficient deterrent, so that the 'tempestuous riot' did no harm. (The mob again broke in in 1689, but did not get as far as the plate.[7])

The 15th century is a story of the College slowly increasing in numbers and prosperity, of items such as the Cup of the Three Kings and Cup of the Three Bears being added to the plate, and of modest additions to the buildings. In *c*.1487[8] the first chapel was built as an annexe to St Bene't's church, having its own altar but communicating with the church by a squint.

The sixteenth century

The College was spared the wrath of Henry VIII, and avoided the worst of the religious disputes such as those which tore apart Corpus Christi, Oxford. The Corpus Christi procession, the great event of the year, was tamely given up in 1535 and weakly revived in 1554. Old members, however, included a Roman Catholic martyr, St Richard Reynolds, a Protestant martyr, George Wishart, and a heretic burnt by a Protestant bishop, Francis Kett.

All College history is overshadowed by the towering figure of Matthew Parker, Master 1544–53 and Queen Elizabeth's Archbishop of Canterbury 1559–75. He established the Church of England and gave Anglicanism the peculiar form in which it was to spread throughout the English-influenced world. Parker, besides his gifts of plate, bequeathed to the College an unrivalled manuscript library, his vast library of printed books, and his unique personal archive.

Numbers in the College were growing, helped by fellowships and scholarships endowed by Parker and other benefactors. This found expression in additions to the buildings; the only one to survive is the upper storey of garrets inserted under the medieval roof-timbers of Old Court. Distinguished members of the College included John Fletcher and Christopher Marlowe, dramatists, and Richard Fletcher, victim of smoking (p. 91).

The plate was steadily augmented by gifts, but some of these perished in two disasters. In or around the 1530s many of the medieval treasures disappeared rather mysteriously, partly because they were associated with popish-sounding ceremonies such as the Corpus Christi procession (p. 19). It was a much-depleted hoard to which Parker added his magnificent gifts, with stringent precautions lest the College again fritter them away.

The next disaster was inadvertent. In 1578 an old member, Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, noted that the College needed a new chapel, and gave £200 towards the cost. Robert Norgate, Master and fund-raiser, persuaded the Queen, Edmund Grindal (Archbishop of Canterbury) and Francis Drake (maybe the Sir Francis 'of famous memory') to give money, loads of timber, and stone looted from the ruins of Thorney and Barnwell Abbeys. Even so, the project far outran its estimates and nearly bankrupted the College. The plate was plundered: the College pawned £47 worth of it to the University, and apparently never saw it again.[9] Only Parker's plate and those medieval pieces not worth melting (p. 25) were spared. Even this was not enough, and the chapel was not entirely finished until 1662. (Institutions never learn: similar mistakes are still made every year.)

From the late 16th to the early 19th century Cambridge was a class-ridden society. There were five classes of student: noblemen fellow-commoners, gentlemen fellow-commoners, scholars, pensioners, and sizars. Noblemen and Gentlemen – the distinction is often not made at Corpus – had special privileges in return for, among other things, giving plate to the College (Chapter 8). Scholars were undergraduates of academic distinction,

6 CC(A): *Liber Albus* part 2 ff 55, 57v, 58. 7 Lamb 196f.
8 *Accounts 1479–1534* f.44v. I am indebted to Catherine Hall for finding this.
9 CC (A): *Audits 1590–1678*, account for 1590, p.[19].

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the beneficiaries of scholarships founded by particular benefactors. Pensioners comprised the majority of students. Sizars (in theory) were poor students working their way through college, being given jobs like porter or butler, although in practice a professional did most of the work. Scholars or pensioners did not often give plate, although even sizars occasionally did so (p. 155).

Another obvious distinction between this time and the present is the youth of the College personnel. Parker was typical in being an undergraduate at the age of 16, a Fellow at 23, and Master at 40. (18, 30, and 60 would now be more usual.) Only the Master was allowed to marry; most Fellows were young men awaiting a vacant living as a parish priest which would allow them to support a family.

The seventeenth century

The College's fortunes were revived in the Mastership of John Jegon, 1590–1602. Among other ways of raising money, he invited boys from well-to-do families to spend a year or two in the College as Gentlemen Fellow-Commoners; these were to be large contributors to the College plate for the next 250 years. Jegon was later Bishop of Norwich and the last English bishop to try to burn a heretic.

The 17th century brought hard times for Cambridge. The University was increasingly politicized. Plague took its toll every twenty years or so. The College lurched acrimoniously between Puritanism and the fringes of Popery. Two members, heroes of the plague, went on to be victims of politics: Henry Butts, the Master, driven to suicide in 1632, and St Henry Morse, an old member, executed for being a Roman Catholic priest shortly before Charles I's execution.[10] Butts's successor, Richard Love, took the College through the worst of times, the Civil War and the Commonwealth.

The Civil War (1642–7) has entered Corpus legend because of the story that Dr Love dispersed the ancient plate among the Fellows and thereby, uniquely among colleges, saved it from requisition by the King or confiscation by Parliament. The real events are related in Chapter 8. Suffice it to say that the Civil War did not bear hard on Cambridge. Corpus got off relatively lightly, although a number of Fellows were sacked by both sides. Love, though appointed by the King, was careful to be neutral; the College functioned normally during the conflict, and although there was a further meltdown of much of the plate this was done by the College itself, which needed money for repairs.

The Restoration and the eighteenth century

Dr Love saw the College through to the return of Charles II without great mishap. His successor, after a short interval, was the generous John Spencer, Hebrew scholar, who much increased the College's reputation and restored the buildings.

The College advanced in social circles to the political *demi-monde* of Prime Ministers' nephews and less-than-brilliant Parliamentary figures. Advancing in learning, it played a part in the beginnings of science and archaeology at Cambridge. Members included Thomas Tenison, hero of the last plague in 1665–6, and later King William's Archbishop of Canterbury; William Briggs, father of ophthalmology; William Sterne, Archbishop of York and benefactor; Richard Rigby, duellist, orgiast, and father of governmental corruption (p. 154); Thomas Herring, red Archbishop of Canterbury; William Stukeley, father of English archaeology, and several of his followers; Stephen Hales, animal experimenter and father of plant physiology; the second and third Professors of Chemistry; James De Lancey, father of the New York Turf; John Owen, father of the British & Foreign Bible Society; General Braddock, loser of his scalp on the way to Pittsburgh;[11] and Michael Tyson, father of the study of College plate (p. 41).

The nineteenth century

This century brought the two most momentous changes in the whole history of the College. The first was the building of the New Court. The idea of a second court had been discussed for centuries, but nothing came of it. All through the 18th century an increasing number of personnel had been spilling over from the College into town lodgings. Funds had been accumulating since 1758, and in 1822 John Lamb, the young Master, seized the opportunity, summoned William Wilkins the architect

10 M McCrum 1994 'Doctor Henry Butts' *LCA* **73** 42–53.
O Rackham 1992 'St Henry Morse, S.J.' *LCA* **71** 21–32.

11 JPC Roach 1993 'John Owen' *LCA* **72** 14–224.
Fenimore Cooper 1826 *The Last of the Mohicans* Philadelphia.

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and built the whole New Court, then one of the biggest one-period courts in Cambridge, within five years.

Yet more momentous was the change of statute in 1882 allowing Fellows of Colleges to marry, which changed at a stroke the demography and housing structure of Cambridge. No longer was the typical don a young man doing, in effect, a few years of post-doctoral study; being a Fellow could now be a lifelong career. This introduced a new category of plate, the *wedding fine*, usually a piece of silver given by a newly married Fellow to the College in exchange for a wedding present subscribed by his colleagues.

Other general changes affected the College: the repeal of the Test Acts, which allowed non-Anglicans to join the University in theory as well as in practice; the spread of lay Fellows and University Lecturers (though it is still less than a hundred years since the first lay Master of Corpus); the growth of organized sport (beginning with the Boat Club) and sporting trophies as a *genre* of plate; the broadening of the syllabus and the introduction of sciences as undergraduate subjects; the gradual concentration of lectures into the hands of the University; the fading away of Gentleman Commoners; and the growth of drinking parties and of college societies.

The new building filled up and overflowed in turn. A monument to that period is the enlargement of Wilkins's Chapel in 1870. There was then a sharp decline, so that by the end of the century the College was half empty and looked neglected. It contained, however, such distinguished scholars as Edward Byles Cowell, Professor of Sanskrit (p. 225) and Samuel Savage Lewis, donor of the Lewis Collection of portable antiquities.

The twentieth century

From 1906 onwards the College's fortunes were revived in the Mastership of Colonel Caldwell (p. 234). With interruptions during the two World Wars, numbers rapidly increased: Corpus is among the few British institutions from which more men were killed in the Second than the First World War. This led to new buildings in almost every possible corner of the College, and even on top of the New Court. Other colleges had been increasing too, so that despite these increases Corpus long prided itself on being the smallest College in Cambridge.

The 1950s began with the restoration of the Old Court, regrettable by more recent standards, which destroyed many ancient interiors while not dispelling the dingy and institutional air which this wonderful building still wears. In 1960 there was the momentous decision to increase the College's numbers, not in undergraduates but in post-graduate students, and to house them in and around Leckhampton House a mile from the College.

Although numbers of Corpus undergraduates have risen little since 1950, Cambridge has become one of the richest cities in England and thus one of the least suitable for a university. Undergraduates can no longer hire rooms in town, and Colleges have had to build rooms for all their students. In Corpus this has been done on sites of ancient College possession one street away; Bene't Court and the adjacent Beldam Building on the north side, and Botolph Court, converted from old buildings in Botolph Lane on the south side.

The College was opened to female members in 1980. The electronic revolution in computers and data-handling has led to a great increase in numbers and cost of books and in the volume of office paper, so that more and more of the New Court has been taken over by offices and library.

Benefactors have been attracted on a scale not seen since Parker. The period 1960–2000 has been remarkably prolific in gifts of plate.

Although universities in general complain of hard times, Cambridge continues to flourish as never before. Soon the irresistible force of University expansion will meet the immovable obstacle of Cambridge running out of space. I wait to see what will happen then.

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