

Treasures of Silver at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

This is an account of the unique assemblage of silver and silver-mounted artefacts belonging to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, some of them dating back to the College's foundation 650 years ago. They include extraordinary objects such as a thirteenth-century drinking vessel made of the horn of an extinct animal, as well as the everyday tools and utensils of past centuries. Although some of these objects are well known to art historians, they have never been published in detail.

A college's or other institution's history resides not only in its written records but in the buildings and historic artefacts which define its corporate identity. The objects in this book are especially significant for being documented in the College's archives from the fourteenth century onwards.

This book has more of an archaeological than an art-historical approach. It investigates the objects' construction, how the College came by them, their original meaning and context, how they came to survive the depredations of the Civil War, what happened to those that do not survive, evidence of wear and repair, and what they were (and still are) used for. The ultimate objective is to show how they illuminate the character and functioning of a still-flourishing medieval institution.

The book is illustrated comprehensively with photographs by Dr John Cleaver.

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With photographs by JOHN CLEAVER

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TO THE COLLEGE BUTLERS
 WHO HAVE CARED FOR THE PLATE
 DOWN THE CENTURIES

of whom I know the following by name:

1595–1626	ROBERT GILL (Butler or Promus)
1626–1643	PHILIP WILLIAMS (Promus)
1643–	THOMAS GRAVES (Promus)
1670	JOHN MORGAN (Promus)
1752/3	JACOB GODDARD
1757	WILLIAM KIDD
1761–1762	EDWARD GOODE
1795	JOHN ASHLEY
–1840	ASHBY (died 1840)
1840–1848	WILLIAM MILLER
1846–1864	JAMES CARELESS (Combination-room Man)
1864–1900	WILLIAM DOBBS, THE LITTLE DUKE (Combination-room Man)
1878–1928	HERMAN AUSTIN (cleaner of plate)
1900	Post of Butler created and offered to G. SHRUBB
c.1912–46	GEORGE MATTHEWS
1946–1958	L. E. FREEMAN
1958–1978	ALAN WILSON
1978–	RON STOREY

From Bury's *History*, miscellaneous references in College audit-books and inventories, and graffiti on plate. Undergraduate butlers, whose duties seem to have been nominal, are not listed.

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Foreword

The prized heritage of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge includes a remarkable collection of silver treasures. Some of these date even from before the foundation of the College in 1352, being inherited from the Gilds that founded the College. Pride of place must be given to the ancient Drinking Horn which features prominently in this book and is believed to be more than 700 years old.

From that early beginning the collection has grown. Pieces have been added throughout the history of the College, and the collection continues to receive additions to this day. A particular boost was given by Archbishop Matthew Parker in the sixteenth century. He gave the College some of the finest pieces in the collection such as the great rosewater ewer and basin, his salt and tankard, and the magnificent apostle spoons.

This silver collection is famous for having survived the ravages of the English Civil War in the seventeenth century. As the College historian Patrick Bury wrote in 1952: '[when] various Colleges sacrificed their plate to the royal cause, or were compelled to surrender it to the other side, Corpus prudently distributed it for safe-keeping among the Fellows, who in July 1643 were given general leave of absence'.

This book re-investigates what happened: how Richard Love, the Master at that period, a man of good sense and political acumen, ensured that Corpus was not much affected by the unrest; how the College treasures were returned by Fellows or brought out of a secret store when the nation returned to peace; and what happened to them afterwards.

In this book the author has added much to the interest that these beautiful objects excite by giving us an account of their provenance, the manner of acquisition by the College, and the use to which they were put. Indeed the detailed accounts include fascinating information about the survival of the objects, not only through times of financial difficulty for the College, but also through times of inadequate care or inexpert repair. They are still in use today; even the finest pieces are displayed on Feast days or other special occasions.

This book will be of particular interest to Old Members of the College, who will recall some of the pieces, and particularly the Horn and loving-cups from which all College members drink at least once during their time here. It will also have a wider appeal for readers interested more generally in early English silver. Most of the artefacts have been in constant use over the centuries. The accounts of their usage provide a fascinating social history of a medieval establishment as it functioned over the years to its 650th anniversary, which this book commemorates.

The author, Dr Oliver Rackham, Senior Fellow of the College and Keeper of the College Records, is an acknowledged expert on the buildings and possessions of the College. He brings a scholarly and a pleasantly readable style to the book. His collaborator, Dr John Cleaver, has photographed the collection with meticulous care and brought to life the beauty of the pieces with great skill. The College owes a debt to both contributors, and hopes the book will provide a lasting symbol of its 650th anniversary.

HAROON AHMED
Master of the College, December 2001

Preface

The College of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Virgin Mary, over the 650 years of its existence, has accumulated what may be the finest collection of silver artefacts, commonly called *plate*, of any college in Cambridge or Oxford. These form one of the College's three chief treasures, the others being its incomparable manuscript library and its surviving original buildings.

Over the centuries plate has passed from being a symbol of the status of a family or institution, to a symbol of continuity and stability, a definer of the owner's identity, a link with relatives and benefactors, as well as having a functional use on both ceremonial and ordinary occasions. Plate enters into most college functions, and is still in daily use: almost into the writer's own time every student handled some part of the College treasures every day.

The artefacts have been the material for scholarly study for some 230 years. Studies were concerned at first with their origin and use, and later with silver as a branch of art history and the development of style. The study of plate has now widened, especially through the work of Philippa Glanville, to investigate its functions, why institutions acquired particular objects and what they signified. Plate is a record of social history, especially when the pieces still belong to the original owner. As with any archaeological objects, context is all-important. The artefacts in isolation are of limited significance. Their meaning emerges when their inscriptions, alterations, and marks of wear are compared with archival records of their acquisition, use, and repair.

This book was inspired by the sumptuous volume, *Corpus Silver*, published in 1999 by the sister college of Corpus Christi, Oxford. But its objective is different. That book is a collection of essays by ten specialists on some of the most phenomenal treasures of that extraordinary college. It would hardly be possible to assemble such a brilliant team of scholars and art historians to repeat the research at Corpus Christi, Cambridge.

This book is a more modest and preliminary study. It does, however, cover the entire hoard, as does Douglas Bennett's on the plate of Trinity College, Dublin. Although the earlier and rare pieces are described in more detail, I have not tried to limit the scope to those objects now regarded as 'interesting'. Posterity would be baffled and frustrated by the exclusion of less interesting pieces. I have omitted most of the objects of silver-plated base metal, few of which tell much of a story: they rarely have dates, inscriptions, or graffiti.

It has long been a matter of regret that most Cambridge colleges, like those of Oxford and the monasteries of Mount Athos, lack the means of enabling the wider public to see and enjoy their treasures, except when a few grand pieces are lent to exhibitions. As Keeper of the Plate at Corpus, I have a duty to encourage appreciation of the hoard and research into what it has to say, and this book is a first attempt to discharge that obligation. I very much hope for a solution to the wider problem: Anglican cathedrals and London livery companies, with secure but transparent places for displaying their plate, have shown the way.

Some Explanations

Earlier pieces are arranged in roughly chronological order. After 1700, when many more pieces survive, this becomes impractical, and articles are arranged according to broad categories of type. There is a final chapter on Modernistic Plate, meaning pieces (mostly ceremonial) made in the self-consciously 'modern' styles that developed from 1920 onwards.

Uses and names of plate reflect changes in social habits. Generations pass away, and people forget what spicelate and beryl, charger and argyle, salver and cuspidor, cruet and ashtray were used for. I have tried to identify pieces in neutral terms: Bowls, Two-Handled Cups, Giant Spoons.

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Dates

Hallmarked pieces are dated by letters (p. 11), which were changed on arbitrary dates in the year. By convention, New Year's Day at the London Assay Office is taken to be 19 May down to 1697, 29 May from 1698 to 1974, and thereafter 1 January; thus the date 1830, identified by the letter **P**, means between 29 May 1830 and 28 May 1831.¹ The year begins in July at Birmingham and Sheffield, in October at Edinburgh, and in January at Dublin.

Before 1752 New Year's Day for most other purposes was 25 March: thus the date 14 February 1591 written on a document means 1592 in present reckoning. In this book it will be called 1591/2.

'The 1800s' means 1800–1809, the decade between the 1790s and the 1810s; it is not the same as 'the 19th century'.

Measures and Weights

The dimensions of objects are given in the order of greatest width × height, or length × width × height. With a cup or similar object having one or two handles, the length is taken to be the measurement along the handles, and the width at right angles to the handles.

Measuring plate is not easy: published dimensions can be in error by several millimetres. It is difficult to measure articles in metric units, since centimetres are too coarse a unit, while millimetres are impossibly fine and give a false impression of accuracy. (One can seldom be sure

whether a cup is 176, 177, 178, or 179 mm high, especially if it is old and bent.) Quarters of centimetres would be a practical but unfamiliar metric unit, but rather than wrestle with these I shall use tenths of an inch.

Silver is weighed in troy ounces, 31.10 grams or 1.097 Anglo-American ounces. The ounce is divided into 24 pennyweights, each of 20 grains. Weights are often inscribed on articles in the form 15: 3, meaning 15 oz. 3 pennyweight. (Before 1700, ounces were usually divided into quarters: thus 15: 3 would mean $15\frac{3}{4}$ ounces.) I normally use decimals of an ounce, but give ounces and pennyweights (e.g. 17: 21) where comparing a present weight with an earlier weight which is so expressed.

A pound of money is divided into 20 shillings (*s.*) each of 12 pennies (*d.*); thus £3. 12*s.* 6*d.* = £3.625.

Pints and gallons have their English values: thus 1 English pint = 1.201 American pint = 0.568 litre; 1 English gallon = 8 pints = 1.201 American gallon = 4.55 litres.

Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

Graffiti

I have transcribed the many graffiti which reveal something of the history of the piece or of the College. I omit most of the coded graffiti of letters and numbers which appear on pieces that have been sold or pawned.

Acknowledgements

I am not a specialist in plate. I first handled the Corpus treasures 43 years ago. My interest was stimulated by Geoffrey Bushnell, Keeper of Plate when I was elected a Fellow in 1964. In his later years I used to assist his failing steps at audits and exhibitions, and when he died in 1978 I became his successor. I here put on record the knowledge that he imparted to me: if this book has any pretensions to scholarship they are largely due to him.

I have received great help from Catherine Hall, Ancient Archivist of the College, and have drawn on her unrivalled knowledge of the medieval to Stuart records both of this College and of the closely linked college of Gonville & Caius. Robin Myers, Modern Archivist, has given similar help with post-1800 records. Among Fellows who have helped me I particularly mention Professor Geoffrey Woodhead and Dr Tom Faber.

I am greatly indebted to Ron Storey, for many years College Butler, and his assistants George Boulos, Mark Cox, and Pasquale Gargiulo. They have been unfailingly cheerful and prompt in getting out pieces from distant stores, even at the most awkward times of year.

Ray Symonds, of the University Museum of Zoology, has given practical help to my researches into aurochs and griffins' eggs.

Biographical notes on donors are derived mainly from Venn & Venn, Masters, Lamb, Bury, Woodhead, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Clergy List*,

¹ JS Forbes has recently shown that the actual changeover date could vary by several weeks, especially before 1700 (*SSJ* 12 (2000) 82–4). This complication makes no difference in this book, and I shall ignore it.

or *Crockford's Clerical Directory*. They claim no originality or completeness. Likewise interpretations of hallmarks are from Grimwade, Jackson, and other standard works.

Among those who have helped out my ignorance of art history are Claude Blair, Marion Campbell, Dr Rolf Fritz, Paula Hardwick, and S.B.P. Perceval. I am indebted to Peter Waldron and Richard Came of Sotheby's, especially for interpreting difficult makers' marks. I was much encouraged by the varied interests of Tony Byrne, sometime College Director of Development.

Sir Tony Wrigley and Professor Haroon Ahmed, successive Masters of the College, have given their constant encouragement and support.

Photographs

John Cleaver, of Fitzwilliam College, took nearly all the photographs. I am most fortunate in securing his skills in this notoriously difficult field of photography.

Bayeux Tapestry

The two extracts from the Bayeux Tapestry are acknowledged thus:

<< The Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century – By special permission of the City of Bayeux >>

Drawing of Parker Cup (p. 76)

Reproduced by kind permission of the Master & Fellows of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge.

OLIVER RACKHAM
Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
December 2001

Contractions and acronyms

A.B. or B.A.: Bachelor of Arts.

A.M. or M.A.: Master of Arts.

BM: British Museum

B.M.V. or B.V.M.: Blessed Virgin Mary.

B. Mus.: Bachelor of Music.

C.C.C.: Corpus Christi College.

C.C.C.C.: Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

Corp. Xti: Corpus Christi.

D.D.: Doctor of Divinity

D.D.: gave (*dono dedit*).

M.D.: Doctor of Medicine.

S.T.P.: Doctor of Divinity (*Sacrae Theologiae Professor*).

U.C.: University of Cambridge.

V&A: Victoria & Albert Museum.

Archives and libraries

LCA: Corpus Association Letter

PCAS: Proceedings of Cambridge Antiquarian Society

CC(A): Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Archives

CC(L): Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Library

G&C: Gonville & Caius College