

THOMAS HOBSON.

WE confess ourselves rather puzzled to know in what manner to deal with the hero of the present chapter, under so many different forms is he represented by his biographers. The greater part of them represent him as uniting the professions of horsedealer and carrier in his own person, and at the same time exhibit him as a benefactor of our town in a way hereafter to be told. One chronicler hails him

“Thou friend to man, and the less friended beast.”

Another,

“A man not learned, yet a man of letters;”

while Milton endeavours to overthrow all these opinions by asserting him to be

“Made of sphere *iron*, never to decay.”

But as the last named authority elsewhere informs us that

“Death hath broke his girt
 And here, alas, hath laid him in the dirt,”

we must reject his evidence as contradicting itself, and treat our hero as a man indeed, but of that species of which Proteus was the progenitor.

And, first, all dwellers in and visitors of Cambridge are well acquainted with a stream which runs by their side for a quarter of a mile as they come into the town on the London Road, and which, after accompanying them from the Bridge to the end of Downing Terrace, is there separated into two parts, one of which runs down both sides of Trumpington Street as far as Pembroke College, where it disappears like the Arethusa of old and is seen no more until sought for in its ortygia, the conduit in the Market Place: the other branch is carried along Downing Terrace and thence flows down both sides of Regent Street, until like its fellow it disappears opposite Christ’s College and flows underground to the same conduit. This stream called “the little

new river” rises in “the nine wells” situated on or near the bounds of Shelford and Trumpington, at the foot of the high ground formed by the chalk. The idea of bringing this into the town appears to have first suggested itself to Dr. Perne who communicated it in a letter to Lord Burghley, found in Strype’s collection and dated 1574. The object of the proposal was to cleanse the King’s Ditch, which, as Fuller describes, having been made to “defend Cambridge by its strength, did in his time offend it with its stenche.” It remained however for the next generation to carry the scheme into execution, and contracts¹ between the University and the town on one part with Thomas Chapley², Lord of the Manor of Trumpington, were signed Oct. 26, 1610, by which the stream and “six feet of soyle” on each side were given to the two bodies for 1000 years on the annual payment of 20*s.*, to be appropriated to keeping the banks, &c. in repair; and it was covenanted that he should be made a freeman, which covenant has extended to succeeding Lords. The plan was Edward Wright’s, who was M. A. of Caius College, and the best mathematician of his day; and gave also to Sir Hugh Middleton the plan for his New River.

The above-mentioned conduit owes its existence to our friend³, who at his death left “his seaven leas lying in Swinescroft, als St. Thomas’ leas,” the rents whereof were to be applied for its preservation and for raising it a yard higher. The year after his death, 1632, Alderman Potto, of the parish of Great St. Mary, left some houses in Union Street, the profits of which the officers of the above parish were to apply to the same purpose. Soon after the restoration of Monarchy, the King’s Arms were affixed on the summit of the conduit. On the

¹ Indenture in Public Regist. of Graces, 230. See Harl. MSS. 7044.

² Or Chaplyn, according to Cole.

³ The first free stone of the foundation was laid Aug. 9, 1614. Another indenture respecting it is mentioned in the Corporation books, and a letter of James I. addressed to the Vice-Chancellor and Mayor, alludes to subscription having been made; but though it appeared evidently a work tending to the common good and safety of the town, yet “the inhabitants thereof for the most part deny, or have very slenderly contributed” to the work. Subsequently, a general benefactor, Dr. Perse, became a benefactor to this object also, by leaving an annuity of 8*l.* to its support.

16th of May, 1661, the Corporation gave an order for that purpose to their Treasurers; this order was however rescinded on the 4th of June, “in regard that it might tend to bring a charge upon the Corporation.” On the 6th of March following, £7. were directed to be expended about setting up and beautifying the King’s Arms on the Conduit, but it was declared that it was “not to be a precedent for time to come, forasmuch as the Corporation ought not by right to bear the charge⁴.”

On occasion of William the Third’s visit to Cambridge, on the 4th of October, 1689, the Conduit ran wine; but the quantity was not very considerable, as the expence amounted to no more than thirty shillings⁴.

In 1667 these two charities were united, and the officers of St. Mary’s parish were joint trustees for about 80 years after Alderman Potto’s death, after which time it was in the hands of the University officers: at present the Commissioners of Paving and Lighting share with the Trustees⁵ the management of the work. In the words of one of Hobson’s biographers,

“All blessings on their heads, who thus we find
 Extend a general bounty to mankind;
 Who to themselves some luxuries deny
 To give to needy thousands a supply.”

So far our friend and Pope’s Man of Ross,

“From the dry rock who bade the waters flow,”

have corresponding claims upon the gratitude of their fellow-townsmen, but no farther; for Pope’s hero proceeded to the common-place expedients of giving away bread, building alms-houses, “portioning maids”, and “apprenticing orphans”, while Hobson, with a praiseworthy zeal, mounted upon a carrier’s cart⁶, went at regular intervals “betwixt Cam-

⁴ *Corporation Common Day Book.*

⁵ Respecting this trust, see Report 31, of the Charity Commissioners.

⁶ He was employed by the University as letter-carrier, and this character of his is commemorated in the title of a book, “Hobson’s horse-load of letters of President for epistles of Business,” 1613. He used himself to ride, as his portrait shews, but he also had a ‘long tilted wayne’ on the road, an establishment such probably as his father had before him, and described in his will as ‘the cart and eight horses, and all the harness and other things thereunto belonging, and the nag.’ The superintendance of the post was reserved to the University in the Act of Queen Anne. As late as 1753, licence was given by the

bridge and the Bull” for many years. His visits appear from the following document to have been weekly :

“William I commende me hartely vnto you—you shall receave by hobson theise preells. I had no more store of Dr. Bridges’ bookes bounde one disapointed me of half a dossen in post which I would have sent you but the next weecke you shall have them in the meane tyme shewe theise to the heades of the houses 7Dr. Styll and Dr. Copcotes etc the next weecke I will sende Mr. Neville one. I pray you go now againe to Mr. Dr. Whittaker and knowe his answere and see what he will—

ffare you hartely well your loving freind Thomas Chayre.”

Another indirect notice is found in a letter from Mr. Mead to Sir Martin Stuteville, dated Christ’s College, July 9, 1625, wherein is the following passage alluding to the plague;—“it grows very dangerous on both sides to continue an intercourse of Letters; not knowing what hands they passe through before they come to those to whom they are sent. Our Hobson and the rest should have been forbidden this week, but that the message came too late. However it is his last.”

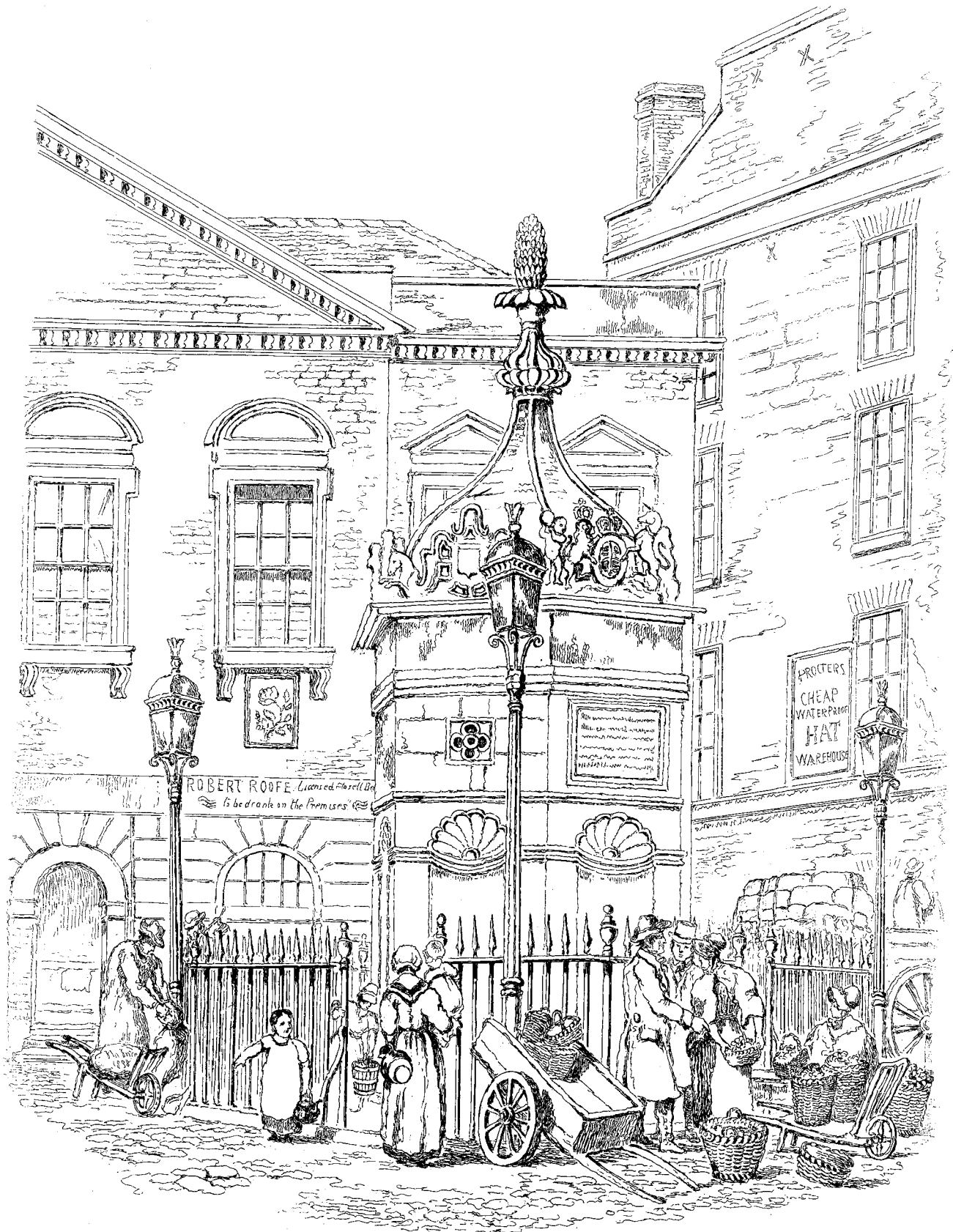
We have yet one more form under which to present our hero, and in so doing, we shall explain the expression “Hobson’s choice”, which is in common parlance used to denote an alternative, where there is in fact no alternative at all, or no more than a highwayman offers you, when, with a cocked pistol within an inch of your ear and his knee on your breast, he pronounces the words ‘your money or your life.’ In fact, the English of Hobson’s choice⁸ is “this or none.” Now, to his other avocations, Hobson added that of letter of horses to the Cantabs of 1600, a business that originated with him; and although we fear that when we say he was an honest one, we shall appear to be uttering a libel upon the profession, and practising upon the credulity of our

University to eleven persons ‘to carry letters and small parcels’; five to London and one to each of the following towns, Bury St. Edmund’s, Downham, Kettering, Lynn, Northampton and Norwich. See Carter’s *Cambridgeshire*, p. 50.

7	John Still was Master of Trinity from 1577 to 1593
	John Copcot - - - - C. C. C. - - - 1587 - - 1596
	Thomas Neville - - - Magdalene - 1582 - - 1593
	William Whittaker - - St. John’s - - 1586 - - 1595

These dates will fix this letter between the years 1587 and 1593. It is copied from a fly-leaf in a printed book in Caius College Library.

⁸ See a paper in the *Spectator* by Steele.



Hobson's Conduit

ON THE MARKET HILL

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readers, yet truth compels us to assert it, and also to add, that not only was he honest, but, which is equally anomalous, he was humane. Cambridge, as is well known, has always been famous for her hacks: Hobson's were excellent; but he, contrary to the usual custom of his race, resolved when he had a good horse to keep him, and not allow him to go out day after day at "each capricious youth's desire." Accordingly when a young gentleman comes to our friend and asks to see a horse, he is brought to the stable and shewn the one which stands nearest the door; this does not suit him; he asks to see another, but "This or none" is the reply. For it turns out that the dealer puts every horse as it comes into the stable, after its work, into the farthest stall, and it gradually moves down to the door as other jaded brutes come in, and by the time it arrives at the nearest stall, it is the freshest horse in the stable; and "this or none" persists the dealer in spite of the entreaties and threats of his customer.

As this was his constant custom, and we never find it to have been attended with evil consequences to his business, we may fairly conclude either that our Cantabrigian forefathers had better tempers than their descendants, or that Hobson had no rivals in his trade, and therefore had no reason to fear that his customer would turn upon his heel and hire a horse from some more tractable dealer. To be sure, we are informed by a MS.⁹ that he did it

—"filled with humanity, in friendly tone;"

but if we know any thing of modern Cantabs, we venture to assert that let Mr. Jordan smile the smile of a seraph and he would scarcely induce an undergraduate of 1839 to bestride an indifferent nag. From this custom sprung the proverb "Hobson's choice."

Having thus been faithful chroniclers of the good deeds of this notable man, "it is our painful duty to announce" that he was lost to the world on Jan. 1, 1631, doubtless "deeply regretted by a large circle of friends" who followed him to his grave in the chancel of St. Benet's Church on Jan. 12, in that same year, the eighty-sixth of his age: but

⁹ A poem by the Rev. J. Plumtre, late Fellow of Clare Hall.

no monument or inscription marks the spot; a circumstance which cannot fail to create surprise. We will conclude his history by recommending the following epigram to the notice of as many horse-letters and horse-hirers as can construe it:

Complures (ita, Granta, refers) Hobsonus alebat
 In stabulo longo, quos locitaret equos;
 Hac lege, ut foribus staret qui proximus, ille
 Susciperet primas, solus et ille, vices:
 Aut hunc, aut nullum—sua pars sit cuique laboris;
 Aut hunc, aut nullum—sit sua cuique quies.
 Conditio obtinuit, nulli violanda togato;
 Proximus hic foribus, proximus esto viæ.
 Optio tam prudens cur non huc usque retenta est?
 Tam bona cur unquam lex abolenda fuit?
 Hobsoni veterem normam revocare memento;
 Tuque iterum Hobsoni, Granta, videbis equos.

An original portrait of Hobson is to be seen at this hour at Mr. Swann's waggon-office in Hobson Street. He is mounted on a stately trotting black nag, himself bedecked in the finest possible garments. This portrait hung for a hundred years at the Bull, Bishopsgate Street, London, whence it was brought by Alderman Burleigh and left by him to Messrs. Marsh and Swann, who resisted the importunities of Dr. Clarke to present it to the University Library. It now ornaments Mr. Swann's counting-house. The street in which these premises are, is called now Hobson's Street, in compliment to his memory and from respect to tradition which assigns locality in it to one of old Hobson's yards. Another was at the Half-moon in Trumpington Street—then "extra portam Cantabrigiæ." His house was at the south-west corner of Peas Hill.

Of the above-mentioned painting three copies were made by Freeman, and there are engravings of it. A half-length by Payne came into the hands of the antiquarian Roger Gale: from this too an engraving was made. His autograph may be seen in a Bible in Benet Church, "the gift of Thomas Hobson, carrier, of Cambridge."

The sign of "the Old Hobson" stood in Mill Lane till 1780; and till a short time before, 'Hobson's house', opposite to Catharine Hall, continued to afford entertainment. These are monuments of his popularity.

Baker has preserved ¹⁰ these memorials of him :

Hic jacet Hobsonus, qui vixit fowerscore et unus.

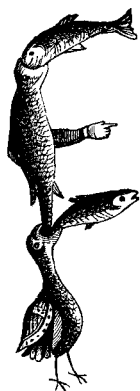
Heere lyeth Hobson under this stone
 Dryinge his carte at fowerscore and one.

Heere lyeth Hobson, amongst his many betters
 A man not learned, yet a man of *letters*.
 Fewe in Cambridge, unto his prayse be it spoken,
 But can remember hym by some good token.
 From thence to London rode he daye by daye,
 Tyll death benighting hym tooke him awaye.
 No wonder think ye, that he thus is gone;
 For moste men knowe he longe was drawynge on:
 His teame was of the beste, neyther coolde he have
 Byn mired in any place but in a grave:
 And there he stycks indeed styll lyke to stand
 Untyl some Angell lend hys helpynge hande.
 Then rest thou here, thou ever toylyng swayne,
 The supreme waggoner, nexte Charles his wayne.

"This I suppose was composed by some waggish scholar."

As further proof how great a favorite he was, it may be told, that in the present century his saddle and bridle were in existence at the Town Hall.

He left also the building called the Spinning-house, or 'Hobson's Workhouse'; but not, as Lysons state, the Alms house in Benet Parish, which is of remote antiquity.



FROM the Corporation records it appears that a fountain existed on the same spot as Hobson's Conduit in 1423. It was allowed to go to decay, and as probably it was allowed also to continue in a state of ruin, the inhabitants became hardened to the inconvenience; and when a late effort was made to procure the restoration the public could not be incited to support it.

It may be here noticed, that this was not the only object of the kind. The White 'Freres' had their 'Conditt'; and that of the Grey-Friars gave its name to the street now Sidney Street.

¹⁰ Harl. MSS. 6734.

Henry VI. in his will directs that in the midst of the great quadrant of King's College "shall be a conduit goodly devised for the ease of the said College": and for this purpose gave licence to the Convent of Barnwell to grant a piece of land called "Holwelle situate at Madingley, near the grange belonging to the Convent called Moorbarns for a subterranean aqueduct to be made thence to the College¹¹."

There was also King's Hall Conduit; for which Henry VI. had in or before 1450 granted to that College 'a voide place of ground' being near it¹².

The conduit now standing in the great Court of Trinity College in all probability occupies the place of the one which had belonged to King's Hall. It was apparently built about the reign of James I. The armorial bearings carved upon the summit are those of Archbishop Whitgift, Dean Neville, and Bishop Ferne, all of whom were Masters of the Society. The two former were contemporaries; but Bishop Ferne died March 16, 1661-2, having enjoyed the episcopal dignity for five weeks only.

Hobson's Conduit is occasionally confounded with THE MARKET CROSS, a structure now no longer existing. It is mentioned in the will of William Boley, dated 1467, whereby he gives twelve pence for the repair of the pavement near it.

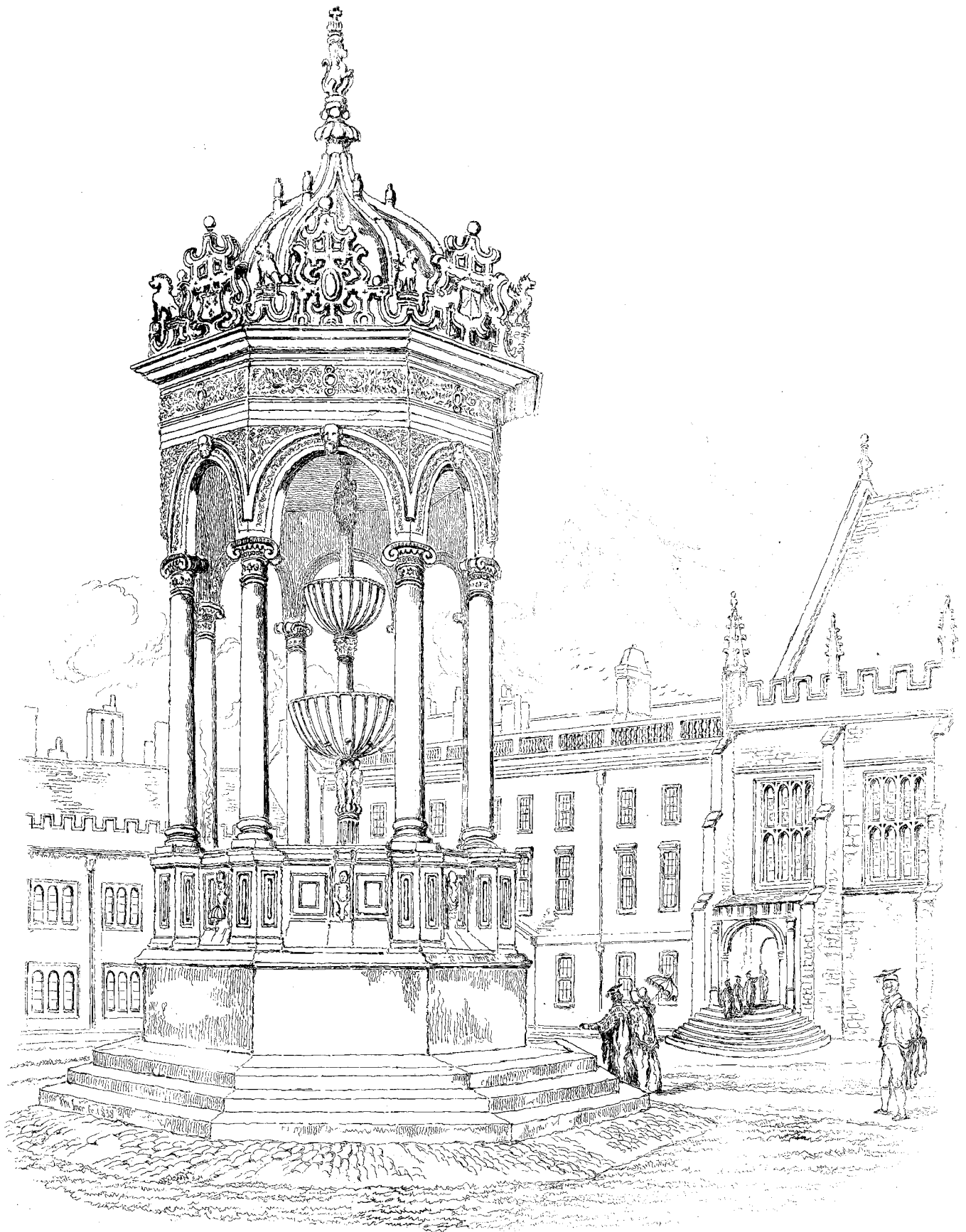
In 1553, Queen Mary was proclaimed at this Cross by the Duke of Northumberland, who had previously espoused the cause of Lady Jane Grey and who was the same night arrested for high-treason and shortly afterwards executed¹³. At the present day the University and Town authorities are accustomed to proclaim the new Sovereign at the spot on which the Cross formerly stood. Rogues underwent the process of whipping at this Cross, and it would seem that the barbarous "sport" of bull-baiting was occasionally practised near it. In 1606 the Heads of Colleges ordered certain offenders against a decree then promulgated, to "be punished by imprisonment and setting in the stocks at the bull-ring in the Market Place¹⁴."

¹¹ Rot. Parl. v. 94. Royal Wills, 305.

¹² Ibid. v. 193, 300.

¹³ *Stow's Annales*, ed. 1605, pp. 1033, 1034.

¹⁴ *Stat. Acad. Cantab.* 473. *Dyer's Privileges of the University*, i. 313.



The Fountain.

TRINITY COLLEGE.

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