

From the Lodgings Windows

With the imminent departure of the mellifluous Sue Lawley, my fantasy broadcast list is shifting from the eight records of *Desert Island Discs* to the pet hates of *Room 101*. At the top of my list, as for most of my generation, I believe, would be the use of mobile 'phones in public (indeed, were I to be wholly truthful I should consign all mobile 'phones to Paul Merton's chute, but I am intellectually persuaded, though not emotionally won over, by arguments about how mobile 'phones can save lives or, at the least, the embarrassment of being late). Equally predictable, I suppose, for someone of my age, my second greatest hate would be music spilling out of passing cars. Admittedly I should not mind so much were it Mozart, Schubert, Brahms or Delius, but it never is: only some mindless thumping deep bass rhythm, usually from a system clearly more expensive than the vehicle in which it is installed.

But a close third would be public sector messages of self-congratulation, the spread of which seems to me roughly contemporaneous with that of the other two. Here in Oxford I am regularly provoked to fury by glossy (well — copiously illustrated in colour) magazines, distributed to all householders, ostensibly telling us what the Councils are doing with our Council Tax, but actually deploying all the artifice of the spin-doctor. 'This year's entertainment in the parks will be even better', they say. (But they do not mean another excellent victory over Cambridge in the Parks such as Chris Stearn and Mike Hobbiss helped the Oxford XI achieve in June ...). Or 'Council praised for better performance', without revealing that this was for an improvement from a standard so dire that it was officially criticized. Only slightly less infuriating are those 'strap lines' on public service vehicles — 'working for a cleaner city' on a street-sweeping vehicle (what else would it be doing — trying to make the city dirtier?). At least they have now painted out 'Oxford — a nuclear-free city' (as if radiation emissions could read and would carefully skirt the boundaries).

These hatreds came quickly to the surface when an American Summer School student asked me recently whether the College had a motto. I had been explaining what martlets were, and how the College's badge derived from that of its founder, Sir Thomas Cookes. He, indeed, did have a motto — 'Deo Regi Vicino' — which has been adopted by his other re-foundation, Bromsgrove School. But Garter King of Arms' beautiful 1902 painting of the College badge, which came to light at the bottom of a box about ten years ago, and which differs from many versions with which Old Members may be familiar (the background colour is gold; the top line of martlets is a horizontal straight line, not a chevron; there is no red hand in the centre), is definitive — and has no motto.

So far as I can tell from the *University Calendar*, only a handful of Oxford institutions have any motto, or even message within their badge — mostly Permanent Private Halls: curious that such a group could not feel able to share in the University's 'Dominus Illuminatio Mea', since Psalm 27 is surely common to all denominations, except that some would number it 26. Mind you, modern bureaucratic pressures have required the University to replace those opening three words of the psalm with a 39 word 'mission statement', which in turn is further amplified in another 194 words. Compression is clearly not the grace of style for those who worship the new Accounting Gods of transparency and

quantitative outcomes. But the American's question set me thinking. As did another comment over tea from a former Worcester student taking his degree earlier this year, a comment which unknowingly fulfilled the hopes of Sir John Masterman when he became Provost sixty years ago. 'I reckon Worcester's the best kept secret in the University: no-one outside has ever heard of it, but everyone I've met from within the University says that if they hadn't been at their own College their next choice would have been Worcester (and in many cases they'd have preferred it anyway)'.

What are we trying to do here? Could it be summed up in a few words which do not fall foul of my objections to public sector self-congratulation? My shot at a motto would be 'to protect and develop'.

Clearly each aim has a number of elements, which fall into three main groups: the academic activities of the members of the College, the undergraduates, graduates, and the Fellowship; the environment within which such activities take place; and the social interactions which bind the members together — not too fancifully an echo of the trio of mind, body and spirit symbolised in the entrance group of the Library spanning the Hall and the Chapel, the buildings a graceful reminder of the Benedictines' study, work and prayer. This year the complex interplay between these elements has been marked by two vertical structures, one natural, the other man-made, which have been clearly visible through the Lodgings windows — a Wollemi Pine to the south-west and a tower crane to the north-east.

As Spring merged into Summer, the Garden Master, the Head of Gardens, and I spent some time evaluating sites for the first of the two Wollemi Pines to be planted out. Because these trees are rare and valuable (a number have been stolen from specialized gardens, like Kew) an enclosed part of the grounds seemed best — either the Fellows' Garden or the Provost's Garden. But the pine may grow to 100 metres, and may live for 300 years. So the question we faced was not only one of security but also of very long-term planning — where would the College be unlikely to want to build in the next 300 years? Our answer ruled out the Fellows' Garden, for at some stage it seems very likely that there will be a new building bordering the north side of that garden, running westwards from Walton Street along the line of the Provost's Drive. The bottom of the Provost's Garden, towards the lake, turned out to be too marshy, whilst the shrubbery on the north side is overshadowed by two magnificent hornbeams, the younger of which was planted by Asa Briggs in 1987 to replace the copper beech which came down in the October gale of that year. Thus a site behind the Rose Garden was chosen, and we were encouraged in that decision by a print of the Lodgings from across the lake, dated 1855, which shows a Scots Pine in roughly the same position.

The Wollemi Pine appears to be thriving in its new environment, but just to be on the safe side its cousin is still chained in the greenhouse. The outdoor tree is, in fact, located close to the centre of a lot of conservation and development work. The new weir, formed in the eastern arm of the lake, has created sufficient current to avoid the stagnant smells which previously detracted from summer enjoyment of that part of the gardens, whilst the new bridge is not only an attractive feature in itself (and already much in use for the Buskins' summer production) but permits the use of much larger tractors and equipment in the gardens and grounds. This autumn attention will turn to restoring the Rose Garden to the

plans of Alfred Parsons, who first laid it out just over a century ago. Careful study of photographs taken for an article in *Country Life* of November 1948 has revealed that a statue of Mercury stood on the western edge of the Rose Garden, opposite the sundial. All that now remains of the statue is a winged foot on a pedestal. It would be interesting to know if any reader can explain what happened to the rest of it (a decanal amnesty is guaranteed!): the *Country Life* photographs make it clear that my own belief, that the lead was requisitioned for the war effort, is wrong, and it has not turned up in the recent dredging of the lake. At all events the plan is to replace it with a similar statue on a new plinth, to be dedicated to the memory of Provost Masterman, 'J.C.', for whom Mercury will be a reference both to his twenty years as Student of Christ Church between the wars, and to his rôle during World War II in MI5's use of turned German agents to send false messages to their former masters, described in his book *The Double Cross System*. Funding for all these projects, for the weir, the bridge, the restoration of the Rose Garden, the replacement of Mercury, and the Wollemi Pine itself, has come from the College Society, the Wilkinson Trustees, and, to the greatest extent, from contributors to the recent College Appeal. We are greatly in their debt.

The second vertical structure which symbolized 'protect and develop' was inanimate – the tower crane which until March dominated the skyline to the north-west of the Lodgings (although on the spring day on which it was dramatically dismantled by a huge mobile crane it seemed from the Lodgings windows as if one was watching two giant insects fighting). Within a few weeks we shall be occupying the 50 new rooms of a building facing the Franks Building at the bottom of Worcester Place. Older readers may recognize the site better as that of an old garage, J.T. Motors; even older ones may remember a small engineering workshop, F.J. Payne & Son Ltd.; whilst more recently part of the site has been squash courts and a small gym. The latter is being replaced with a purpose-built gym on the same site; but the squash courts await relocation (meantime, despite their removal, Worcester women convincingly won Squash Cuppers).

The new rooms combine study bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms, which are also provided in the Linbury Building (17 rooms built in 1990), the Canal Building (50 rooms built in 1994) and the Franks Building (28 rooms built in 1999), with the arrangement of six rooms around a kitchen, which has proved so successful in the Sainsbury Building (30 rooms built in 1982). The whole project, from initial approach to handover, will have been completed, to budget, in just less than 24 months, an achievement for which the design-and-build team of Messrs Leadbitter and the Architects' Design Partnership deserve great credit. The Governing Body, too, can take much credit for delegating authority on design matters to its Domus Committee, aided by representatives of the JCR and MCR. In due course the somewhat harsh outline of the building viewed across the sports field will be softened with new tree planting, and the rather too bright blue-green of the copper facing of the bay windows, (the result, ironically, of an accelerated weathering process), will take on a greyer hue; but the views from within the building across the grounds are splendid, and the rooms are equipped to the standard of a good quality hotel, with television and data transmission cabling and a small fridge in each room. Each large, shared kitchen has two fridge/freezers, oven, hob, microwave and dishwasher, and a dining table for six.

Many will be concerned at this point lest the College is to abandon dining in Hall, but

it should be remembered that this building is the first phase of an ambitious plan to be able to house all our students, undergraduate and graduate, in College for the whole of their time as students. With 600 students thus housed, and a dining hall with a comfortable capacity of 100, no student could dine more than twice a week even if both the informal Hall at 6 p.m. and the formal Hall at 7.15 p.m. were full every night. Formal Hall remains very popular, and the insistence of Harry Pitt, as Dean through the student protests of the late '60s and early '70s, on keeping the full traditions of dress and gowns, has proved an important element in that popularity, especially on guest nights. (At £2.00 for a three course dinner it is also very competitively priced!) But today's students also enjoy being together in small groups, and the 'kitchen' has become a kind of cross between the shared house in Jericho or Cowley and the old unit of 'the staircase'. Compared with a house outside the College the new arrangements will offer academic benefit (especially high-speed data connections), better facilities, easier access to sporting and social activities in College, and, finally, better personal security — given the predilection of many students for clubbing, from which they return in the small hours, they are safer coming back in a sizeable group to College together, rather than splitting into ever smaller numbers as they return to lodgings in parts of Oxford where housing is plentiful but police presence is stretched.

No sooner does the new building, the financing of which has been made possible by the great generosity of Peter Earl (1973), been handed over at the beginning of September than the second and third phases of building on the northern site get under way. The second phase involves complete internal re-working in Gloucester House, turning it from 9 flats to 22 single rooms, all en-suite and with a large kitchen on each floor. The tight timetable calls for this conversion to be complete by the beginning of Trinity Term 2007, at which point those undergraduates occupying rooms in 14, 15 and 16 Worcester Place, made accessible from within the College and designated 'Staircase 24' some years ago, will move into the new rooms, permitting work to start on these Worcester Place properties.

A new building, closely following 14, 15 and 16 in style, will be erected between Staircase 24 and 10 Worcester Place, which, together with Staircase 24, will be reconfigured internally. As with the J.T. Motors and Gloucester House redevelopment, all the resulting study bedrooms will have en-suite facilities and be grouped, mostly in sixes, around kitchens. Meanwhile a totally new building will have been completed, running along the line of the Ruskin Lane wall. This will be of three storeys, two providing 16 bedrooms and 3 kitchens each, above a new large conference/seminar room, capable of accommodating 42 around a large table or 75 'theatre style', and divisible into two smaller seminar rooms, if required, together with appropriate kitchen and cloakroom provision. This building, equipped with solar panels to assist in heating, will face onto a new quadrangle with the Sainsbury Building to the west, the library of Ruskin College (which we hope in due course to acquire) to the east, and the back of the Worcester Place developments to the north.

Thus if one thinks of the Sainsbury Building as a hub, with the sports field to its west and the lake swinging away to the south-west, by 2008 there will be two new quadrangles — the J.T. Motors/Gloucester House site, with 72 rooms, to the north, and the Worcester Place/Ruskin Lane site, with 66 rooms, to the east, giving us 138 new en-suite rooms (and 26 kitchens!), where there are currently 37. We have also bought three houses in Richmond

Road which back on to the J.T. Motors site: these are currently being renovated to provide a further 17 rooms.

The Sainsbury Building, Gloucester House, the Franks Building, and the houses on both sides of Worcester Place currently house 118 students, so the new rooms will more than double this, making these 'northern' rooms easily the largest concentration on our extensive site: 56 live in the Canal Building and the married graduate flats at the bottom of Nelson Street, 58 across Walton Street or in 5 and 6 Beaumont Street, and 137 in the front quad or the buildings to the south of it (Nuffield, Casson, Wolfson and Linbury). Thus improving north-south access becomes vital, as does the provision of proper facilities for the disabled. So whilst we are constructing over a hundred new rooms we shall also be doing major work to provide a wheelchair-accessible lift where at present a steep flight of stairs descends from Staircase 6 on the Terrace to the Provost's Yard, Memorial Room, Besse Building and beyond. The Provost's garages will be relocated, all vehicles barred from the Yard, and there will be covered disabled access to the lecture room. The Lodgings will acquire a new side entrance — also wheelchair accessible — on the garden side of the Memorial Room. Overall the scheme is designed to improve the whole approach to the College from the north, not just for the sake of disabled access or the extra students who will live there, but also for those arriving at the College by car down the Provost's Drive. For them the present unpleasant approach through the Besse Building archway contrasts sharply with the lovely view which pedestrian visitors get as they walk through the Lodge, itself now greatly improved (and wheelchair accessible).

Wheelchair users will thus find it easy to move between the northern buildings and the car park and the Terrace and the Lodge, but we must then make provision for access to the Pump Quad. This will be done in two stages, the first a short-term installation of a wheelchair lift around the Buttery steps, and in the longer term a new lift shaft beside the dining hall, at the end of the loggia, to give access not only to the Pump Quad (where the lavatories will be made disabled-accessible) but also to the Beer Cellar. This more extensive work will, however, be very disruptive, and will probably necessitate closing the kitchens and dining hall for a period: our facilities are booked so far in advance that we shall need to time this work very carefully.

Finally, work began as soon as Trinity Term ended on converting 5 and 6 Beaumont Street, and incorporating 7 Beaumont Street, into a group of 35 student rooms linked by an inner courtyard. Nos. 5 and 6 have long been the College's worst accommodation, worse, even, than I recall the Old Riding School was when I was an undergraduate. They will be transformed, and 7 Beaumont Street adapted in a way which preserves as many as possible of the original features of the house. As with all the other new buildings and renovations, the study-bedrooms will have en-suite facilities, and be grouped around kitchens; indeed even if we did not have the advantage of the 'Sainsbury kitchen-culture' to inform our new designs, we should have been led to the same configuration by studying the Beaumont Street houses, for despite their run-down state, these rooms are usually very popular, especially in No. 5, because the kitchens encourage interaction.

And this is the key to the whole enterprise, which will see 133 net new rooms (190 gross) added to our stock over a very intensive two and a half year period of construction, which began in September last year and, we hope, conclude after that with the provision of

70 or more rooms through the conversion of buildings at present belonging to Ruskin College. Our intention is to be able to house not only all undergraduates but also all graduate students. The great challenge Colleges face is how to remain central to the University, whose shape is changing very markedly as research becomes ever more important and requires not only the devotion of individual scholars, but more often the active mobilization of teams consisting of established academics, post-doctoral researchers, skilled technicians, graduate students and — increasingly — undergraduates for whom a research assignment is part of their course. Embracing (a term I prefer to the verb of the official policy document issued by the University, 'embedding') graduate students, making them truly part of a multi-disciplinary society of students at all levels and ages (I've always liked the emphasis Christ Church puts on this, by calling its Fellows 'Students'), is a major challenge. The College is in very good heart, combining this year Cuppers or league championships success at almost all major sports with a record number of Firsts. I firmly believe that by attracting graduate students on to our lovely site, and welcoming them with the generosity and friendliness for which the College is known, we can ensure both the protection of the College against the enemies of the system and the continued development of its intellectual and social mission.

R.G.S.