

FROM THE LODGINGS WINDOWS

..... *we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see*

This has not been the easiest of years in which to look out from the Lodgings windows. When they have not been out of action for repairs – clearly in some cases the first since installation in 1776 – they have been clouded with dust rising from the disabled access scheme in the basement, the first phase of an ambitious and costly plan to provide wheelchair access from the Provost's Yard up to the Terrace and within the Lodgings.

The need for such a scheme has been more evident since we opened, during the year, 87 new rooms on the Northern side of the College site in a new quadrangle beyond the Sainsbury Building. After a Long Vacation of intensive work there should be new lifts up to the Terrace and down to the Pump Quad – in time for 32 more new rooms in a building following the line of Ruskin Lane. By halfway through the academic year 2007-8 the Ruskin Lane Building will be faced by 34 further new rooms, partly the reconstruction of 14, 15 and 16 Worcester Place, partly a wholly new pastiche of those houses to complete the line.

These developments will mean that over 250 rooms will have access to the Lodge via the orchard, the Provost's Yard and Staircase 6: the need for a good wheelchair-friendly route becomes obvious, and the desirability of improving the whole look of the Provost's Yard compelling.

Adapting listed buildings for disabled access is necessarily very expensive, but as trustees of beautiful buildings and grounds we owe it to future generations to commission as elegant and ingenious a scheme as we can afford. Similar considerations apply to the renovation and conversion of 5, 6 and 7 Beaumont Street. Contrary to the belief that St. John's College laid out the whole of Beaumont Street in the 1820s, research undertaken as part of our planning application to redevelop these properties showed that they were originally built for Worcester, which helps to make the great expense of restoring and adapting them to 35 student rooms somewhat more palatable.

If only it had not turned out that the internal walls were holding up the rear external walls! Curiously, the renovation of 'Staircase 24' (14, 15 and 16 Worcester Place) is running late for much the same reason: additional structural strengthening has been required here, too. Whether preserving and clearing the façade of these houses is quite in the same league of architectural importance as it is for Beaumont Street only future generations will tell. Still, these delays have given us an unexpected opportunity. Rather than have 60 new rooms lying empty for half the academic year 2007-8, we are going to move the occupants of the Casson

and Wolfson Buildings (Staircases 17 and 18, 19 and 20) into Beaumont Street and Worcester Place during the Hilary Term, and take the opportunity to fit these rooms, too, with en-suite bathrooms.

By October 2008 all this work should be completed. All undergraduates – some 425 nowadays, about 40% of them doing four-year courses – will be able to live in College for the whole of their time, something which has not been possible for at least a century (see Sir John Masterman's memoirs, *On the Chariot Wheel*.)¹ Even more importantly we shall be only about 50 rooms short of being able to house all 600 or so students, graduate as well as undergraduate, for the whole of their courses in Oxford.

In October 2008, then, after five years of intense activity, during which we shall have built or completely renovated 231 rooms, we shall pause to evaluate our future strategy. We cannot afford to leave rooms unoccupied: so how many undergraduates, in their third or fourth year, will want to live out of College, perhaps with friends from other Colleges? What kind of accommodation is needed for graduate students? When we started the current intensive phase it seemed that the University's newly-built flats would more than satisfy the need for small family units, but recent indications are of a resurgence of this type of demand.

So much for the builders' dust which has pervaded the Lodgings. Irritating as it has been (and for the whole Long Vacation will continue to be), this dust is, as it were, constructive and optimistic dust, leading to a better College in the future. I wish I could be so positive about the metaphorical dust with which the University has surrounded itself in the past year.

There have been two major disputes, in one of which individual members of the College, in the other the College as an institution, have been in strong opposition to official policy. The first dispute has been over 'governance', on which I touched briefly last year; the second over the proposals for a 'Joint Resource Allocation Mechanism' to distribute public funds between central university divisions, faculties, departments and services on the one hand and the Colleges on the other ('the JRAM'). Each issue has been hotly contested, but much of the heat has been over details which are unlikely to be of compelling interest to all but the most avid readers of this *Record*. Yet whilst Oxford has been full of contending groups, Cambridge, which faces exactly the same issues, has sailed serenely on, ignoring what Oxford policymakers have clearly regarded as strong hints from outside bodies which must be obeyed. As the former

¹ Sir John came up to Worcester in 1909. 'Those receiving tuition when I came up were, as nearly as I can calculate, about ninety in number..... We could all have two years in College, and some could have three.' (loc.cit. pp 61,65)

head of a Cambridge College, previously a distinguished Oxford Professor of Economics, remarked to me last October 'Why has Oxford lost its self-confidence, Dick? We in Cambridge would very much like you to rediscover it.'

At the risk of seriously over-simplifying matters, it does seem to me that self-confidence, or the lack of it, has been at the heart of both disputes. The sorry tale of governance reform began with a problem not unfamiliar in the private sector and quite common in the public sector and government departments – the installation by the University of a new computer system for financial accounting, its design problems compounded by senior staff inadequate to the task of implementation. In vain did many inside the University argue against the proposed system; in vain did they point out that Cambridge had adopted something similar, with embarrassing results, a couple of years earlier – lessons had been learned, we were assured, and the juggernaut rolled on. The newly incoming Vice-Chancellor, Dr. John Hood, who brought great 'outside' expertise to this part of the job, was rightly furious at the mess. But then, wrongly to my mind, he interpreted it as evidence of *structural* failure, to be cured by major changes in the governance mechanisms which had been introduced in the wake of the North Commission, mechanisms which had barely had time to shake down. Under his chairmanship a committee, which had originally been intended to review the detailed imperfections of North in the light of experience, devised a new bi-cameral structure which bore little relationship to any previous Oxford structures. The Committee bolstered its recommendation for an external Board of Trustees with quasi-legal arguments about the implications of the impending Charities legislation. This legal justification was quickly rubbished by the University's many expert trust lawyers; whilst the proposed Academic Council, representing departments and Colleges in a 150-strong assembly, was widely felt to be unworkable as a serious organ of policy-making or implementation. A second version was circulated within a few months, modifying the flawed legal advice and abandoning the Academic Council in favour of a different bi-cameral system under which a small Council, with a slight majority of members external to the University, would be responsible for managing institutional risk – to reputation, financial stability, and so on – whilst decisions on academic matters were to be left to a smallish Academic Board. After a long period of consultation this second set of proposals was further refined, and came up for vote in Congregation in Michaelmas Term.

It has been easy for the press, even the better parts of which seem incapable of handling subtleties of argument, to misrepresent the two resounding defeats which Congregation – the ultimate sovereign body of

the University, the assembly of all with senior posts in teaching, research and administration, numbering almost 4,000 members – inflicted on these proposals. The first votes were registered by over a thousand members of Congregation in person, after a lengthy debate in which Worcester speakers were prominent; then, after supporters had called for a postal vote on the grounds that it would be more representative, the motion was again defeated by almost exactly the same margin (61%) of a larger vote (2,537). Opponents have been portrayed as unreformed conservative port-swilling old duffers united only by a wish to prevent far-reaching and needed reforms. In reality the opponents have also called for reforms, but only after a careful evaluation – so far lacking – of what has proved unworkable of the North structures. Nor are they opposed to an increase in the number of external members of Council, or even to an equality between internal and external members, if that were felt desirable, if chaired permanently by the Chancellor. For he is usually a distinguished ‘outsider’ (at present Chris Patten, previously Roy Jenkins and before him Harold Macmillan) but one who is elected by Convocation – roughly Congregation plus all alumni holding an MA, a constituency surely broad enough for any government official adhering strongly to the doctrine of the importance of external ‘directors’. (There is, incidentally, no convincing *empirical* evidence of the improved quality of decision-making when there is a majority of non-executives, or even a substantial number, on a governing council or board: could this be a kind of fashionable management fad, promulgated by the kind of ‘how to manage’ texts which crowd bookstalls in American airports, adopted by the gullible in the name of ‘best practice’?).

Since December there has been little movement on governance. The Chairman of the Higher Education Funding Council for England wrote to enquire about progress in terms which suggest both that he has bought into the importance of non-executive directors (maybe excusable for an eighteenth-century historian) and that he believes that the world of knowledge is like a product market, in which other universities’ recent progress is somehow to be combated by Oxford (a ‘market share’ argument which is profoundly depressing in someone educated here). Oxford’s response has apparently been conciliatory. Yet at the same time so important, apparently, are external members of Council that one of the four places at present available has long been vacant, and for another an incumbent is being re-nominated for a third term of office, against the canons of ‘best (outside) practice’ to which reference is so often made. ‘Curiouser and curiouser’, as Alice might have said if Dean Liddell had been at Cambridge, whose governance proposals firmly reject any notion of a majority of external members.

If 2006 was the year for the dust of battle over governance, 2007 is the year for JRAM. Since this has only recently appeared in the national press, as the result of a letter from JCR Presidents declaring – correctly in my view – that the tutorial system may be in danger, Old Members will know even less about it than about governance. Let me explain.

From the early 1960s to the late 1990s Oxford and Cambridge Colleges charged a fee which for most UK, and latterly EU, students was paid through their Local Education Authority. This fee was based on an index of costs, and increases were agreed annually in negotiations with the Department of Education (whatever its precise nomenclature). The central University's grant from the Higher Education Funding Body (again, the nomenclature changed frequently) was reduced by an amount calculated to represent those costs which in a 'unitary' system would be carried by the university but in Oxford and Cambridge were carried by the Colleges, and therefore already reimbursed via the agreed College fees of undergraduates by the Local Authorities.

The incoming Labour Government of 1997 changed this system, imposing a 'single cheque', paid by HEFCE to the University, a part of which represented a College fee component, drastically reduced and set for further reduction over ten years. It was against this background that we in Worcester launched our recent, highly successful, Appeal. As a result of your generosity we have been able to maintain tutorial teaching in a number of subjects where we would otherwise have been forced to reduce tutors or even abandon the subject altogether.

This 'single cheque' obviously has to be divided between the University and the Colleges. Ideally the division should have been based on the pre-existing College fee. But the cheque was never large enough for this. College Estates Bursars, who had many years of experience of discussions with the Department over College fees, argued robustly, and probably achieved an initial settlement which was rather too generous to the Colleges. After the initial year the principle was agreed that the University and the Colleges should share equally in the changing fortunes of the 'single cheque'. Simple, you would have thought – except that each year the Government, through HEFCE, changes its allocations, now 'ring-fencing' one activity, now encouraging another, so that comparing one year with another to get a simple percentage enhancement becomes very difficult. This has always been true, but now instead of tempers fraying between the Colleges and the Department of Education, they become fraught between the Colleges and the University.

After several years of tough negotiations, accusations of bad faith and even threats of libel action, an alternative system has been devised which, in essence, mimics the way in which funds are calculated as due to the

University by HEFCE and uses these 'prices' (which certainly do not reflect actual costs) to allocate the 'single cheque' to University departments and Colleges on what is dubbed the 'as earned' principle. Although the proposals have been adjusted from the pure application of this principle so as to produce roughly the same share of the single cheque to the University and the Colleges as was the case under the annual discussion system (known as 'the Quantum'), within the College element there are big gainers and losers. In particular Colleges are for the first time explicitly rewarded for their contribution to research. This produces big gains for Colleges which themselves fund high quality 'research active' Fellowships. But many of these Colleges are already very well-endowed – indeed that is the reason they can afford to fund the Fellowships for whose contribution to the University's research earnings they are now to be rewarded. So Colleges with many students and low endowment lose, whilst Colleges like All Souls and Nuffield with few students but high endowment gain. Such changes are to annual income, so in endowment terms they are the equivalent of handing an extra £18 million to some who are already rich and recovering £10 million from others who are poor. This is not just Alice's 'Curiouser and curiouser' but Humpty Dumpty, and Worcester has opposed it root and branch even though, as it happens, our long-run position would be very little changed by the new system, largely because, thanks to your generosity in the most recent and earlier Appeals, Worcester has, for its general size, quite a number of College-only funded Fellowships which are contributing to the University's attraction of research funding from HEFCE.

The proponents of JRAM argue that it will 'align incentives across the University', encouraging Colleges to appoint more research-active Fellows. But Colleges do, in general, seek to appoint research-active staff, and most permanent staff in any case hold joint college and University appointments, so Colleges can hardly be solely to blame (but perhaps instead to be praised?) if sometimes a brilliant researcher who evinces neither interest in nor talent for teaching loses a Fellowship election to someone who is very good at both. No wonder JCR Presidents have expressed concerns that teaching will suffer, at least in those poorer Colleges which cannot afford to appoint both Research and Tutorial Fellows. The dynamics of the system have not been properly thought through: staff conditions and student experiences between rich and poor Colleges threaten to diverge widely over time.

Yet is this turmoil necessary? No. There is no reason for a University to regard the way in which HEFCE calculates its grant as, in general, binding on the way the University itself chooses to use the funds. There is no empirical evidence (shades of the other dispute about external

members of Council, a.k.a. non-executive directors!) either that Colleges fail to appoint the best *all-round* qualified staff, or that their research performance is handicapped because their Colleges do not get adequately recompensed – has All Souls, once described by Provost Franks as ‘infirm of purpose’, now become totally mercenary? So we return to that lack of self-confidence, to a desire to leave decision-making to blind market forces (except that these forces are not backed by any kind of market, just the value-judgements of HEFCE). And what of Cambridge? You’ve guessed it: they use a simple division of the single cheque – a ‘Quantum’ system. (And this year, just to compound absurdity, the Oxford ‘Quantum’ negotiations have been smooth and free from acrimony!)

In the long run neither misguided governance proposals nor foolish resource allocation mechanisms will destroy Oxford, because good sense will eventually prevail. Indeed one of the most encouraging features of this disputatious year has been the reassertion by Congregation of its voice and its power. Colleges have been at the heart of this rediscovery of the benefits of democracy: they are still small enough for lively discussion across faculty and divisional boundaries, still not separated from students by layers of professional administrators, still capable of focussing as a close-knit family on a common purpose. Out of the year’s most tragic event, the death in a traffic accident at the Holywell end of Broad Street of Tsz Fok, came for me immensely powerful and moving demonstrations of the force of the College community. I shall never forget the intensity of the silence when the choir filed out of Chapel after a brave and moving performance of Fauré’s Requiem, the doors opening on a beautiful spring evening, the gardens beyond at their loveliest, uniting those who had crowded into every part of the Chapel with those sitting on benches in the cloister outside. A week later and the raw grief was constrained within established ritual as the College community widened to include Tsz’s extended family, his many friends from elsewhere in the University, from his school, and from the Royal Academy of Engineering in what was possibly the first celebration of a Catholic Requiem Mass in the University Church since the Reformation. In desperate sadness I felt also great pride in a College which is a real community, where people grow and support each other in so many ways. Forget disputes over governance and resource allocation mechanisms: when the dust clears communities are as much at the heart of Oxford as when the Benedictines of Gloucester first occupied our site.

R.G.S.