

*The recent changes to the kitchens, servery and adjoining spaces reviewed*

# Utility, dignity and propriety

PETER STEWART

The origins of the Old House project were described in *The Letter* of Michaelmas 2016. The principal purpose has been an overdue renewal of the college kitchens and servery; but the project, which is now complete, extends outwards from its ‘back of house’ heart – where most of the money has been spent – to bring about wider improvements in the more public areas, internal and external, which adjoin the kitchens.

Corpus’s Old Court, built in the fourteenth century, remained intact as a complete quadrangle until the construction of the architect William Wilkins’ New Court project of the 1820s. Wilkins’ scheme demolished the western half of the south range of Old Court to make way for the present dining hall at first floor level (with the result that his addition to the College stands as an architectural composition complete on all four sides to a single design, but Old Court no longer does). The original college hall, at ground floor level in the retained east part of the south range, was converted to kitchens to serve the new hall to its west. In the 1940s, a mezzanine was added to the old hall to increase the available floor area of the kitchens, and to raise the cooking space to the same level as Wilkins’ hall; and in the 1980s, a further reordering of the back of house arrangements was carried out, after more ambitious plans had fallen away.

## Preparation and planning

The renewal of Corpus’s Leckhampton dining hall, completed in 2016, can in retrospect be seen as a trial run for the larger and more challenging Old House project – in respect not just of the building work, but also the logistical challenge of keeping a major catering operation going without interruption. The successful completion of Leckhampton, on time and on budget, helped build institutional know-how and confidence. Architects NRAP were appointed for the new project, a scheme was agreed and the necessary consents were sought. This is seldom straightforward when undertaking significant alterations to a Grade I listed building. Wilkins had to look no further than the Governing Body for approval of his designs, but today a project of this kind has to be discussed in detail both with the conservation officer of the local authority and with the national heritage body, Historic England – who may not agree with each other. Planning permission and listed building consent were however obtained – the diplomatic and negotiating skills required for this are high on the list of what one should look for in appointing an architect.

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The former medieval Hall, shown here in use as the kitchen, before a mezzanine was inserted in 1948

*Opposite page:* Only five of the original eight corbels supporting the roof trusses over the medieval Hall survived. This is the only corner corbel. Previously concealed in protective masonry, it has been cleaned and illuminated from below

Main contractors Barnes Construction were appointed, and work began on site in summer 2017. The early part of the construction programme allowed for significant archaeological investigations, carried out by the University's Archaeological Unit. The resulting report has improved the understanding of the development over the centuries of both the public and the private parts of the College.

### Construction complexities

Working with old buildings is complex. Just as in war, it is said that no plan survives first contact with the enemy, so it can often go when work on projects of this kind starts on site. Extrapolation based on investigations can prove misleading, and you never quite know what you will find when you open up the building fabric. 'Unknown unknowns' are a risk, and it is wise to put a decent allowance for such things in the project budget. An old building is not necessarily a well-built building just because it has survived, and an episode from this project serves as an illustration of this. The plans required the creation of a significant new opening in an upper section of the original east wall of the Old Hall, in order to improve circulation between the new kitchen and the Parker suite of rooms, and another on the ground floor in order to improve circulation between the two halves of the new kitchen; but in each case when the medieval masonry was uncovered, it was in a considerably worse condition than had been anticipated, and the contractor and college's structural engineer were nervous about cutting it away. Emeritus Professor of Engineering Jacques Heyman, more commonly found advising on the stability of Gothic cathedrals, was persuaded to visit site, and provided the necessary reassurance.

Building work was completed in February 2019, more or less on time and 15% under budget – quite an achievement in the case of major works to a historic building built over several centuries, but also a credit to those, generally unsung, who established the programme and the budget.

The tightly planned hi-tech cooking area and the servery above are located in what was once the medieval Hall. The storage and food preparation area occupy the ground floor of the former Master's Lodge





The oriel window bay accommodates the stairs linking the kitchen to the servery. A ceramic relief of the Lilies of the Virgin is to be mounted on the wall above the stone ledge to the left



Will Gooding's early photo montage of his ceramic relief of the Lilies of the Virgin. The design incorporates botanical images from the Parker Library

## Renovated kitchens and a transformed servery

The new kitchens occupy the ground floor, between Free School Lane and the main stair up to the dining hall. Deliveries come in from the street, and from here there is a well organised linear sequence of storage, preparation, cooking and dishwashing, with impressive ranges of high-tech equipment, all tightly but efficiently planned. Goods lifts on the south side deliver food up to the new servery above. One of the lifts provides, for the first time, disabled access from New Court level to Hall level. Staff access from ground to first floor is via the architectural highpoint of this part of the project, a new staircase on the north side which is set within the projecting bay window of the original hall. Its location facing Old Court through this large window is such that it has been designed as if it were a front-of-house element. Those in the kitchens can enjoy the view out as they go about their work, and those outside can look at a calm and well organised environment, that has replaced the piles of dirty plates and fluorescent strip lighting which were formerly on view here. In due course, the stair will be enriched by a commissioned artwork in coloured ceramics, visible from outside and from inside, the designs based on botanical drawings of lilies in the Parker Library collection.

The servery, sitting above the kitchens, occupies the mezzanine floor which was inserted within the old hall in the 1940s. With the removal of the previous

The free-flow servery.  
Stairhall entrance door at  
left. Pointed arch windows  
to Old Court behind  
students





*Left, looking through the new Wilkins doorway into the servery. Two corbels can be seen at the truss bases*



*Right, view from the servery exit into the Hall. The existing door opening has been lined and framed. The new stone shelf to the left contains the upper part of the restored and enlarged New Court doorway*

kitchen and servery equipment and associated ductwork, and the reordering of the space, the form and detail of the old hall are revealed – the roof timbers, the upper parts of the arched windows and the bay window facing Old Court; and most notably, five of an original set of eight carved stone corbels, likely dating from the fourteenth century, which support the principal timber roof members. A lot has gone on behind the scenes to deal with building services, including in this case major air handling ductwork heavy enough to need its own structural support system, all unseen in the finished project. With its state-of-the-art counters and equipment, the servery has been transformed – from a rather cluttered space that most would hurry through as quickly as they were able, into a calm and ordered environment within which the hall's original form can be seen and appreciated.

### **Wilkins's stairhall recovered**

The stairhall that sits between the servery and the dining hall has been significantly improved both at ground floor and first floor levels. In the previous arrangement, Wilkins' double height space had been chopped up in the 1940s (the architect was Sigmund Freud's son Ernst) to provide access between mezzanine and dining hall; a wall across the space at first floor level denied the visual connection between Old and New Courts; and an unfortunate timber screen had been added later at the foot of the stair. The first floor wall and ground floor screen have gone, so that from within this space – in Wilkins' scheme, the principal connection between the two courts as well as the way up to the hall – one can see from one side to the other at both levels; and the ceiling of this space is restored, so that one can see it complete from end to end, and understand that the space was conceived as a room in its own right – a stairhall and not just a staircase.

The Wilkins stairhall restored as a single space. A new section of matching balustrade guards the servery exit. The modern doors at the foot of the stairs have been removed and new doors, here in the open position, provided at the New Court entrance to the screens passage



The wall which divided the stairhall in 1948 has been removed





*Left*, the New Court entrance into the screens passage and stairhall has been restored as near as possible to its pre 1948 condition. The doorway reveals and the stair handrail are illuminated after dark

*Right*, the stairhall with the fully exposed vaulted ceiling and the new section of stone balustrade. The ceiling is illuminated at night. The new 'Wilkins' doorway to the servery can be seen at right

The project has touched two further areas. On the other side of the servery, the Parker Room has been refurbished, providing an improved space for private dining and small events, overlooking Old Court on one side and Bursar's Garden on the other; the latter, previously a rather unregarded space, has been elegantly landscaped with a new pergola connecting New Court to a gate to Free School Lane.

## Order restored

As with most Oxbridge colleges, Corpus has developed over the centuries through a series of major strategic projects – here, the two courts and the addition of Leckhampton – interspersed with smaller tactical interventions, some done well and some not. While the medieval walls have changed only a little over the years, spaces have been subdivided and rearranged to suit the changing needs of successive generations. Building services, kitchen equipment and so on come and go – though the extent of wires, pipes and ducts increases inexorably with time. The older parts persist for the most part, and acquire patina; newer parts often struggle to match the quality of the old, partly because their job is to accommodate new uses to existing fabric that is not easy to change.

The result, as found here at the start of this project, was an environment that had become muddled and compromised in the way it worked; and in its appearance, not worthy of an important listed building. The challenge for the design team was twofold: to create a better functioning environment to facilitate the smooth running of a major catering operation, increasingly serving conferences and events as well as college members; and to restore visual order to the social heart of an important complex of historic buildings. In other words, utility and beauty.

The final touches to the refurbished Parker Room, the College's finest room, have yet to be completed. A discreet new lighting arrangement allows the portraits to be displayed to full advantage



The Bursar's Garden, used as the contractor's working area during the building works, has been reconfigured. A wisteria covered pergola covers the walkway from Free School Lane towards New Court







One of the objectives of the project was to reanimate the south side of Old Court. This has been achieved through a combination of inspired interventions and skilful lighting

## A sustainable solution

The task of the architect, in making a project work well and look good, is often hardest at the junctions. Here, it was at the junction between the medieval court and Wilkins' project, never entirely sorted out by Wilkins in the first place, and spoilt by successive alterations, that the greatest skill in untangling the muddle was needed. The achievement, now that one can see the completed project, has been to pare away the muddle and create a sequence of spaces – servery, stairhall and dining hall – that are not compromised. Each is allowed to be what it wants to be, and the relationships between the parts are clear and logical. Modern additions, where apparent, work with what was there before rather than fighting it – but avoid the kind of half-baked pastiche detailing not uncommonly found in such projects. Dignity and propriety have been restored. At a time when concerns about sustainability, in the eyes of many, should trump considerations of that kind, I would suggest that to hand on to the next generation beautiful buildings that have served the college well for centuries and are now in good order is in itself a sustainable way of doing things.

*All photographs (with the exception of the smallest) are by David Valinsky*