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**LANDSCAPES OF LEARNING:
GARDENS AND GROUNDS AT ENGLAND'S
OLDER UNIVERSITIES 1550–1800**

England's older universities, Oxford and Cambridge, developed in ways quite different from their continental counterparts. Oxford received its charter in 1191, and Cambridge in 1201. Within each institution is an amalgamation of individual colleges: nineteen at Oxford, that predate 1800, and sixteen at Cambridge. The land was owned mostly by the individual college institutions, where the students were (and continue to be) housed and taught. Any survey of English landscapes of learning needs to start from this myriad base. It is a complicated story.

Indeed, can English universities even be seen convincingly as deliberate 'landscapes of the Enlightenment' – or are they accidental backdrops against which important intellectual developments took place? If we are to read the Enlightenment as the challenge of reason against tradition and received orthodoxies, it is going to be quite a struggle to find this reflected in the time-deep grounds of Oxbridge.¹

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¹ The clearest survey of this subject is found in Mavis Batey, *The Historic Gardens of Oxford & Cambridge* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Tim Richardson's lavish *Oxford College Gardens* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2015) offers fine overviews of Oxford colleges' development. The individual entries for colleges found on the Historic England *Register of Parks and Gardens* are also useful guides to their historical development and layout. (Oxbridge is a portmanteau of 'Oxford' and 'Cambridge'; the two oldest, most prestigious, and consistently most highly-ranked universities in the United Kingdom.)

The great romantic English poet, William Wordsworth, expressed this in his verse 'Oxford, May 30th, 1820':

*Much have ye suffered from Time's gnawing tooth,
Yet, O ye spires of Oxford! Domes and towers!
Gardens and groves! Your presence overpowers
The soberness of reason.*

The landscapes of learning at English universities are *ensembles* of buildings and grounds, which have been prone to change, and to loss, and which developed without any master-plan. Attempts to impose master-plans were occasionally made, but went nowhere. These glorious university landscapes were unplanned, cumulative, accidental – and none the less interesting for that. They remain as capable of having as deep an impact on the modern visitor as Oxford did on Wordsworth two centuries ago.

The medieval clerical origins of Oxbridge remain very evident today. Walled colleges, entered through securely manned gatehouses, retain this sense of enclosure, privacy and studious retreat in clear emulation of the cloister. This sense of scholastic apartness was not entirely out of a sense of *de contemptu mundi*; there were also strong practical reasons for enclosed seclusion. There were very real threats to students from townsmen, and *vice versa*: town versus gown was frequently a violent dynamic that required fortified protection. Enclosure was also a means of controlling student behaviour: to this day, college gates are still closed at midnight. Some colleges took over monastic institutions: Jesus College, Cambridge was founded in 1496 in the buildings of a former nunnery. The most monastic college in feel is that at Magdalen, Oxford, founded in 1458 by William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester. In terms of planning, the colleges were arranged around courtyards (known as quads in Oxford, courts in Cambridge), with small lawns in the centre. Behind, as space allowed, were gardens: separate grounds for the college authorities, the masters and fellows; and grounds for junior members of the college, the students. And productive kitchen gardens and orchards occupied more space than is now evident. Despite the medieval, and often ecclesiastical, nature of the colleges, Oxford and Cambridge endured the upheavals of the Reformation, and metamorphosed into seats of (largely) Protestant learning. A German visitor to Oxford, in 1598, commented on the college life and the important place of college gardens in it: 'The students lead a life almost monastic; for as

the monks had nothing in the world to do, but when they had said their prayers at stated hours, to employ themselves in instructive studies, no more have these... as soon as grace is said after every meal, everyone is at liberty either to retire to his own chambers or to walk in the college garden, there being none that had not a delightful one.²

Scholarship and private indoor study go hand in hand: how did learning operate outdoors? It is almost possible to trace a lineal descent from the Stoa of Ancient Athens, via the cloister, to the Renaissance loggia. Concepts of inside and outside in early modern England were in flux: private space could be at a premium, and sheltered walkways for exercise and discourse could be greatly sought after. We have little firm evidence of just how much intellectual endeavour took place outside, rather than in studies or libraries. It is a measure of the enduring appeal of these semi-enclosed spaces with lawns, that when, in the early seventeenth century, new quads or courts were built at Oxford and at Cambridge, semi-claustral loggias were included: at Neville's Court, Trinity College Cambridge, completed in 1612, and most spectacularly at St John's College Oxford, where the Mannerist-influenced designs of the London artisans from the early 1630s show how the medieval-style covered areas for walking and discoursing had received a Renaissance dressing.

The rooms for study and sleep, prominent chapels and dining halls, grander quarters for the heads of the college, strictly enclosed premises, and the exclusion of women – fellows other than the Master were not permitted to marry at Oxbridge until the 1870s – all recall the monastic model. And such was the strength of this tradition that in the main post-Reformation college building also adhered to this model. Any consideration of a landscape of the Enlightenment needs to keep this profoundly medieval archetype firmly in mind, and to see the continuities rather than the contrasts.

We know that in the other institutions of learning – in particular the Inns of Court in London, where students often completed their education after Oxbridge by gaining a basic legal training – strolling and talking were important means of conducting business. College landscapes also witnessed more study in their pleasure grounds than one might realize. John Aubrey, the 17th century antiquary and biographer, gives us clues. He reported that a theologian named Chillingworth was wont to stalk the grounds of Trinity College,

2 Paul Hetzner, quoted in Batey, *The Historic Gardens of Oxford & Cambridge*, 43.

Oxford in the 1620s and pounce on passersby in order to engage in rhetorical dispute.³ Twenty years later, when Oxford was the headquarters of Charles I and his court during the Civil War, it became a place of increasingly desperate retreat for the Royalists: Trinity's grounds were said to be as crowded as a London park, and frequently echoed to the Arcadian sound of lutes.⁴ Earnestness, inquiry, distraction and pleasure: the full range of human emotions were played out against these enclosed college landscapes. The lawns – the quintessential college landscape – were more disciplined. These empty grassed spaces were (and remain) zones of exclusivity: only fellows or dons – the senior academic members of a college – are permitted to walk across them. Within the narrow confines of a college landscape, different approaches to the enjoyment of open spaces were to be found.

Landscapes of learning can be about procession through buildings: sometimes this is achieved by architecture without the help of trees and planting. No clearer example can be found than at Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, a 14th century institution re-established in 1557 by Dr John Caius, a medical man who had studied at Padua. When Caius returned from the continent, the influences of his stay were profoundly incorporated into his aspirations for his college, the design of which Caius was directly involved in before his death in 1573. It included a unique sequence of three archways. Stylistically progressive for 16th century Cambridge, they marked the intellectual progress of the scholar. Starting from initial humility, indicated by a gateway close to the entrance, passing through virtue during study, marked by a gate within the courts, and ending with honour upon graduating, with the final, and grandest, gateway marking one's exit out of the college and into the world beyond. The Gate of Honour was on the student's route to his graduation and was seldom opened except during this final ceremony. As Mark Girouard has discovered, this renowned example of Elizabethan collegiate architecture was based on a design for a triumphal arch, probably by Pieter Coecke, for the entry of Philip II of Spain into Antwerp in 1549.⁵ This sequence of gateways by Caius was a unique testament to

3 Ruth Scurr, *John Aubrey. My Own Life* (London: Vintage 2016), 62.

4 *Ibidem*, 51.

5 Mark Girouard, *Elizabethan Architecture* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2009), 159.

the journey of study: architectural progress as a Renaissance tribute to the whole purpose of a college, embodying the advancement of the student's mind.⁶ Whereas most colleges featured statues of founders at their gateways, Caius' solution emphasised learning through its spatial landscape of advancement.

What were the elements of a college landscape? We have already mentioned lawns. However, much depended on the size of the college. we need to distinguish between the land-locked institutions, built within the confines of town, and those on the edge of town that could take advantage of greater space. We can illustrate this dramatically at Oxford. Two of the colleges have deer parks. Amazingly enough, the one at Magdalen, founded on the eastern edge of the town in 1458 by the Bishop of Winchester, is the genuine article complete with fallow deer. The deer park at Brasenose, a college founded in 1509 right in the heart of Oxford, is an ironic name given to a particularly small quadrangle to the rear of the college. The more usual landscape elements included groves, bowling greens, pleasure grounds and functional kitchen gardens and orchards; and the college authorities were able to indulge a taste in horticulture and landscaping which was generally beyond their private means. In broad terms, a change can be discerned towards 1600 when productive gardens – orchards, vegetable plots – began to give way to more ornamental grounds enhanced by gravel walks and formal planting.

Our knowledge of these spaces is considerably enhanced by the bird's-eye views of the colleges at both universities, engraved by Daniel Loggan (1634–1692), a man who, having been born in Gdansk had strong Baltic connections. His compendia of engravings were published as *Oxonia illustrata* in 1675, and the Cambridge equivalent, *Cantabrigia illustrata*, followed in 1690. Loggan's view of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge can be selected as a site that comprised a representative college landscape. This relatively plain site (befitting this originally Puritan establishment founded in 1596) consisted of a modest layout with lawns, avenues of trees and a glade, and some more ornamental zones with flowerbeds, bowers and shrubs; a functional kitchen garden was located right at the back. Loggan's engravings provide a rich insight into the layout and activities of a

6 Robert Willis, John Willis Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886, reprinted 1988), 175 ff.

17th century college's grounds. Not much had changed by 1814, when George Dyer, in his history of the University of Cambridge, wrote a lyrical – almost sensual - description of Sidney's grounds: 'Here is a good garden, an admirable bowling green, a beautiful summer-house, at the back of which is a walk, agreeably winding, with a variety of trees and shrubs intertwining, and forming, the whole length, a fine canopy overhead; with nothing but singing, and fragrance, and seclusion; a delightful summer retreat; the sweetest lover's or poet's walk, perhaps, in the University.'⁷ These can be summarised as landscapes, of exercise, relaxation, discussion and, to a lesser extent, of production, set within a tightly controlled precinct.

The earliest specifically scientific landscapes at the universities are the botanical gardens: and in this, Oxford was in the forefront, as it often was in things related to universities. Oxford's Botanic Garden was opened in 1621, the first in England, but still more than a century after one was established in Paris. Inspired by the *Orto Botanico* at Pisa, founded in 1544, the purpose of Oxford's Botanic Garden was 'to promote the furtherance of learning and to glorify nature', and served the very practical aims of improving medical knowledge. Generously endowed by the Earl of Danby, a soldier and a courtier who had never attended university, the gardens (which stand on the site of a former Jewish cemetery) were embellished in 1632 with lavish Italianate buildings, designed by court mason and architect Nicholas Stone; the main gateway being enriched with statues of King Charles and the Earl of Danby. And at just this time, exploratory travel led to the introduction of new species of trees: at Christ Church, Oxford, a plane tree from the Near East was planted in the college grounds in 1636 by the oriental scholar Edward Pococke. The German tourist Conrad von Uffenbach visited the *hortus medicus* at Oxford in 1710 and described it, rather disapprovingly, as ill-kept and overgrown.⁸

Cambridge's botanical gardens did not open until 1762. A fundraising pamphlet from 1765 made a high-minded appeal to potential supporters by neatly combining religious honour with practical utility: 'the Wisdom and Goodness of God, which is nowhere more

7 George Dyer, *A History of the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1814), 439.

8 Batey, *The Historic Gardens of Oxford & Cambridge*, chapter 6. See also Stephen Harris, *Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum. A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

manifest than in the Vegetable Part of the Creation... And when we employ our best faculties and endeavours, to find out the Salutary Virtues of Plants, and their uses for the convenience of Life; we promote the public welfare and answer the gracious end and design for which they were given'.⁹ This fusion of godliness and reason was utterly characteristic of the early modern university's approach to botany and the landscape of learning. The rather small mid-Georgian site in Cambridge, with a canal for water plants, a 'very commodious' hothouse and a layout 'accurately arranged according to the Linnaean system',¹⁰ was abandoned in the 1840s when the current, very impressive, garden was laid out on Trumpington Road, and finally opened to the public in 1846.¹¹

Early modern science could take place outdoors as well as indoors. Wadham College, Oxford, founded in 1610, was the college of Sir Christopher Wren (1634–1723), the astronomer-turned-architect, and one of the greatest figures of the 17th century English Enlightenment. Around 1651 its grounds (which stood on the former site of an Augustinian priory, closed in the 1530s) were embellished with landscaping of exceptional interest in scientific terms, prompted by its warden, the ingenious Dr John Wilkins (1614–1672). He would become the first Secretary of the Royal Society, the learned assembly founded by King Charles II in 1660, and later, the Bishop of Chester. Wilkins was an important proponent of natural philosophy, encouraging both Wren and Robert Boyle. Before his move to Cambridge in 1659, a mound was built, surmounted with a statue of Atlas, and various mechanical devices were installed, including a rainbow maker, glass beehives which enabled the workings of the hive to be studied, and a talking statue. These were recorded by John Evelyn, diarist and pioneering historian of gardens, who visited Wadham in June 1654: 'We all din'd at that most obliging and universally Curious Dr Wilkins's at Waddum, who was the first who shewed me the Transparent Apiaries. ... He had also contrived a hollow Statue, which gave a Voice, and uttered words, by a long and concealed pipe that

9 Quoted in *The Cambridge Portfolio*, vol. 1, ed. by John J. Smith (London: John W. Parker, 1851), 82.

10 *Cantabrigia Depicta. A Concise and Accurate Description of the University and Town of Cambridge*, printed by Jeremy Bentham (Cambridge: W. Thurlbourn & J. Woodyer, 1763), 190.

11 Batey, *The Historic Gardens of Oxford & Cambridge*, 145.

went to its mouth, whilst one spake thro it, at a good distance, and which at first was very Surprizing.¹²

New plant species such as edible nasturtiums and Indian corn are reported to have been grown in the Wadham College gardens, showing how actively horticulture was being pursued in this great age of discovery. Wadham College may well have led the way in terms of this remarkable fusion of pleasure and experiment, along with pleasurable retreat. Wadham's quads and grounds were captured in a mid-seventeenth century bird's-eye view painting, still at the college, which helps us envision this lost world.

Scientific endeavour within college landscapes was not confined to Oxford. In 1659 Dr Wilkins transferred from Wadham College, Oxford to the altogether grander Trinity College, Cambridge, founded by Henry VIII in 1546. Soon after, in 1661, England's greatest scientist Isaac Newton, arrived as a student: he was to reside at Trinity until 1696, when he moved to London to take over the management of the Royal Mint. Newton's rooms included an addition that led down to the gardens in front of the college, to the north of the principal gateway: here, open to the public gaze from Trinity Street, he conducted his practical experiments in his so-called 'elabatory'. Sir Christopher Wren's library of 1676–1690, one of the greatest buildings of the English Enlightenment is also at Trinity. It was built at the back of college and engages more with the River Cam than any previous college building. Back at Oxford, the original Ashmolean Museum was built on a land-locked site in 1678–1683, as the first building at any English university devoted to scientific experiment.

Gardens are endlessly subject to changes in gardening design. During the 18th century, many other college grounds followed the broad shift in landscape design away from the formal and compartmentalized to a more naturalistic approach and layout. Wadham College lost its prospect mound in 1755, when it was levelled in a move to create a less artificial, more picturesque setting for the college buildings. New College, Oxford once had an exceptionally ostentatious formal garden, arranged around its imposing Tudor mound. It was not long after Wadham had lost its mound that New College converted the starkly artificial (and closely managed) mound

12 *The Diary of John Evelyn*, vol. 3, ed. by Esmond Samuel de Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 110.

into a naturalistic tree-crowned hillock and tore out the surrounding planting in order to create a smooth lawn.

Oxford antiquarian Thomas Hearne was a harsh critic of change. Writing in 1727, he lamented that ‘they cut down the fine pleasant Garden in Brasenose College Quadrangle, which was not only a great ornament to it, and was agreeable to the Quadrangle of our old Monasteries, but was a delightful and pleasant shade in summer time... this is done... purely to turn it into a Grass Plot, & to erect some silly Statue there’.¹³ Modernising landscapes – which often involves the felling of trees – remains an extremely emotive subject. College tradition, here compared specifically to the monastic past, was deeply ingrained.

‘Silly Statue’ or not, monuments and statuary were important ways of imparting meaning to landscapes. An essential aspect of Renaissance culture was paying tribute to persons of achievement. And for the neoclassical English garden, remembrance through monuments and statues were key features. University landscapes are striking for the absence of such features: another reason for the elusiveness of this category of open space. Remembrance was clustered exclusively in college chapels, and Sir Isaac Newton was the subject for the finest statue in any English university setting: Roubiliac’s 1755 marble figure in the ante-chapel at Trinity.¹⁴ Statues tended to become features in college grounds somewhat later – New College, Oxford installed a statue of Minerva in the 1780s, one of the earliest in any college landscape. A more common garden feature was the sundial. The so-called ‘tomb of Dervorguilla of Galloway’ at Balliol, sometimes interpreted as a romantic sepulchre to the wife of the 13th century founder of the college, turns out to be a 19th century assemblage of discarded medieval fragments.¹⁵ Most other statues and sculptures in college settings turn out to be similarly recent arrivals.

The mention of Sir Isaac Newton leads us to consider one particular aspect of scientific endeavour at the universities: the building of observatories, for viewing the skies. Oxford, once more, was in the vanguard. It had long had a botanical garden, and a building devoted to

13 Quoted in Richardson, *Oxford College Gardens*, 42.

14 Malcolm Baker, *The Marble Index. Roubiliac and Sculptural Portraiture in Eighteenth-century Britain* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2014), 61–64.

15 Richardson, *Oxford College Gardens*, 36.

natural sciences: the original Ashmolean Museum.¹⁶ Now it was to have a purpose-built observatory as well. The Radcliffe Observatory (named after the university's major benefactor, Dr John Radcliffe) was begun in 1773, to house scientific instruments and a room for 'experimental philosophy': observing the heavens and recording the weather. Construction started in 1772 based on the designs of Henry Keene, but this was soon taken over by the rising star of Georgian architecture, James Wyatt. The astonishing Greek Revival building, inspired by the Tower of the Winds in Athens, is one of the architectural pinnacles of the English Enlightenment: it has been described as 'perhaps the finest example of scientific architecture in Europe'.¹⁷ Not finished until 1794, it sported many sculptural embellishments (executed in Coade stone, a form of terra cotta) that stated its intellectual purpose of explaining the Earth and its relationship to the heavens. It stood some distance to the north of town, in order to benefit from clearer skies, and was set in a landscaped garden, rather domestic in character – the building was also the professor's residence.

Cambridge's establishment of an observatory took much longer and resulted in a structure rather less splendid than Oxford's.¹⁸ Given the global importance of Sir Isaac Newton, a Cambridge man, this might seem rather surprising. In 1706, an observatory had been set up on the roof of Trinity College's gatehouse, but more extensive facilities were needed. Humbled by Oxford's magnificent facility, Cambridge set up a committee to pursue the establishment of an observatory in 1790. The eventual result, completed between 1822 and 1824, and designed by J. C. Mead, is also classical in design. However, it is less surprising than Wyatt's 'Attic design' and again set in a domestic-size garden. Bentham's *Cantabrigia Depicta* gives this description: 'The approach is by a handsome gateway, through a well-arranged plantation and shrubbery, and the building, which crowns the summit of the ascent, presents a noble appearance. It is constructed of Bath stone upon a plinth of granite, and is erected in the Grecian Doric

16 Geoffrey Tyacke, *Oxford. An Architectural Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127–129.

17 John Martin Robinson, *James Wyatt, 1746–1813: Architect to George III* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2012), 200. Jennifer Sherwood, Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Oxfordshire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 271 are more emphatic – 'architecturally the finest observatory in Europe'.

18 See: Willis, Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 3, chapter 3.

style, the centre being appropriated for astronomical purposes, and the wings for the residences of the Observers... The grounds are laid out with great taste, and have already a very pleasing appearance.¹⁹

Neither university taught medicine, so there was no need for the other scientific building found within the university landscapes of the continent – the anatomical theatre.

Both universities are low-lying with extensive meadows and watercourses on their perimeters. Oxford has its water meadows, fed by the River Thames and River Cherwell. However, the best-known university landscape in Britain is surely The Backs at Cambridge. This less-than-glamorous name covers the sequence of college lawns and meadows that flank the River Cam, forming an open Arcadian space to the west of the town centre. Once marshland, the river had been canalized in the Middle Ages, and the colleges increasingly replaced the trading wharves and converted the water meadows into lawns lined with avenues of trees. Bridges, sometimes of considerable architectural presence, were thrown across the river, and the one built for Clare College in 1639 by the mason John Grumbold, the first to be self-consciously classical, is pre-eminent among them.²⁰ Jeremy Bentham's *Cantabrigia Depicta* (1763) described the area as consisting of 'beautiful Colleges, groves, gardens and green fields lying on the banks of the river... agreeably intermixed; and the stone bridges of several Colleges over the river add to the beauty of it'.²¹ The fractured nature of the land holdings of the ancient universities, in which individual colleges were sovereign within the context of an over-arching university, made it difficult to orchestrate any unifying scheme.

Bentham's 1763 guidebook gives us some details about the lands held by King's College across the river Cam, and hints that schemes were afoot to realize its potential: 'there are several Gardens and Orchards belonging to this College; and, besides the River that runs thro' them, there are some Moats and Canals, with thick shady Groves of Elms, which ender the Avenues to the College exceeding pleasant: and no place is capable of greater Improvement, by cutting

19 *The Cambridge Guide, or A Description of the University and Town of Cambridge* (Cambridge, London: J. Dighton etc., rev. ed. 1830), 65–66.

20 Simon Bradley, Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Cambridgeshire* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2014), 75.

21 *Cantabrigia Depicta. A Concise and Accurate Description of the University and Town of Cambridge*, 8–9.

Vista's through the Grove, and laying out the waste Ground about it into regular Walks and Canals.' And he tells us that these plans had already been drawn up: 'all which is designed to be done (when the remaining Part of the great Square is finished) according to the Plan given by the late Mr Bridgman'.²² This refers to Charles Bridgeman (1690–1738), a highly influential garden designer best-known as one of the pioneers of the more naturalistic approach. He had been involved in the grandiose schemes of the 1720s, which were never fully completed. Had they been, the 18th century re-landscaping at King's would have been a high-water mark in landscape design at either of the universities.

In 1779 Lancelot Brown (1716–1783), the pre-eminent landscape architect of his day, was asked to draw up proposals for a unification of The Backs.²³ Brown, invariably known as 'Capability' Brown for his persuasive ability to convince clients that their landscapes could be further improved, faced a real challenge at The Backs. They were flat, divided up among different colleges, and lined with avenues of trees in the seventeenth-century manner. However, the Duke of Grafton provided £1,000 towards the scheme and a subscription was opened. Could Brown unify this space into a coherent scheme that would give Cambridge a visual heart, focused on the Gibbs building of King's College? Was the University of Cambridge, with its ducal largesse, capable of overcoming the atomized collegiate outlook?

Brown's plan of 1779 is hard to read, but it consisted of widening the river to create the all-important water feature, removing the individual college bridges and enclosures, and creating a stretch of lawn on the riverbank. As Mavis Batey describes it, 'The Cam was to have been widened into a lake with two long islands and on the western side with college boundaries removed there would have been a leg-of-mutton shaped lawn with clumps of trees stretching from St John's to Queens'. A belt of trees would have hidden a new communal carriageway... which turned to cross the Cam at two public bridges. King's College would have had the central position as the great house in the Brown landscaped park.'²⁴

22 *Cantabrigia Depicta. A Concise and Accurate Description of the University and Town of Cambridge*, 50.

23 Dorothy Stroud, *Capability Brown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 181–182 and plates 56–57.

24 Batey, *The Historic Gardens of Oxford & Cambridge*, 121.

Singleness of effect along The Backs would replace an atomized, compartmented, *collegiate* approach. Predictably, nothing came of the scheme, and The Backs remain delightfully random in its layout, possessing a cumulative and accretive charm that arises not from a single master-scheme, but from individual colleges with independent routes across the open lawns. Veiled by avenues of trees, the open views across the Cam towards the bridges and college buildings on the eastern bank provide one of the finest spectacles in England. Oxford's riverside setting resulted in several episodes of picturesque juxtaposition between architecture and water meadow: Christ Church Meadows, like The Backs, form a hard edge between settlement and grassland, while Worcester College took full advantage of its position beside the Thames to endow the Provost's Lodge with a riverside view that would be worthy of a country house; early in the 19th century it became the only Oxbridge college to acquire its own lake.²⁵

A similar tale of thwarted landscape ambitions played out at Oxford early in the nineteenth century. Capability Brown's successor Humphry Repton (1752–1818) was the key taste-maker for landscape design. And had his plans been implemented, his vision would have been most apparent at Magdalen College, Oxford. This is the most rural of the Oxbridge colleges, and one of the loveliest, situated on the eastern edge of town. Its deer park has already been referred to: uniquely among the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, this late medieval institution had plenty of room and could enclose a generous area of ground without any sense of constraint. Perhaps its most famous feature, after the deer park, is the tree-lined causeway which runs alongside the water meadow beside the River Cherwell. This is known as Addison's Walk, after the writer Joseph Addison (1672–1719), a sometime fellow of the college, whose 1712 essay on landscape gardening and the delights of the irregular and natural, forms an important chapter in the development of the picturesque.²⁶ As Tim Richardson recently put it, this Walk is among the most powerful of places to muse: 'one is immediately plunged into another time and place altogether, where clocks become unimportant – notwithstanding the incessant tolling of Oxford's bells. The pleasure is of walking along a raised path under

25 Richardson, *Oxford College Gardens*, 302.

26 See: Mavis Batey, 'The Pleasures of the Imagination: Joseph Addison's Influence on Early Landscape Gardens', *Garden History*, 33 (2) (2005), 189–209.

mature trees – ash, beech, chestnut, hornbeam, sycamore – next to a little river as it winds its course on one side, and the grassy expanse of meadow on the other, where the deer graze for part of the year.²⁷

Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (and thus one of the great figures of the English Enlightenment) described his short spell at Magdalen from 1752 as ‘the fourteen months the most idle and unprofitable of my whole life’. However, he did allude lyrically in his *Memoirs* to ‘the adjacent walks, had they been frequented by Plato’s disciples, might have been compared to the Attic shade on the banks of the Ilissus’.²⁸ Despite its medieval origins, and very English character, Magdalen’s landscape still elicited a classical response in the youthful Gibbon. Today it is hard to imagine any scheme for alteration that would propose any fundamental change. Magdalen, however, had a history rich in schemes for improvements to its now carefully-reserved environs.

Almost a hundred years after Addison’s time at Magdalen, Humphry Repton was one of a series of designers who were asked to envision an enlarged college – an expansion which, perhaps thankfully, never took place. Repton was a key figure in Georgian design, with a particular talent for uniting building and garden into a single picturesquely conceived whole. He was also very sensitive to the historical character of places, and eager to maximize the effect. His designs for Magdalen in 1800 included a radical proposal to flood the water meadows, and greatly extend the post-medieval buildings, the so-called New Buildings of the 1730s, which were correctly Palladian in the Oxford manner of the time.²⁹ These would be masked in Gothic Revival additions, in greater harmony with the college’s renowned 15th century tower, chapel and cloister. This scheme never came to fruition.³⁰ Cost, nervousness, and the lack of what we would today call a business case were the reasons. Remodelling landscapes of learning could encounter infinite challenges: money, agreement on design, and the sheer problem of imposing a vision on what so often was a historical jumble of buildings from different centuries

27 Richardson, *Oxford College Gardens*, 127.

28 John, Lord Sheffield, *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.* (London: B. Blake, 1837), 21–22.

29 Tyacke, *Oxford. An Architectural Guide*, 164–165.

30 Howard Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1983), chapter 6.

and in contrasting architectural idioms. Landscapes of learning in England were frequently accidental, accretive spaces: time-deep, often quite cramped, and very seldom the result of deliberate planning, or the imposition of a single vision, something that the imperial or royal institutions based on the continental model, were better able to realise. Very rarely did one aesthetic predominate in the English landscape of learning. And thus, it is very hard to ascribe an intellectual programme to any of them.

What can be described as the first real college of the Age of the Enlightenment in England is touched on in Professor Whyte's essay. Downing College, begun in 1807, was the first college to be founded at Cambridge after the 1590s. Here, finally, was a new approach to a landscape of learning. Ancient Greece or Rome had no colleges or universities: there was no model to follow. Are we to see the lawns of Downing College as the embodiment of the Enlightenment? Or are they more the culmination of the English obsession with the grassed courtyards, the single most prominent types of university landscapes? In conclusion, what we are observing is the challenge of identifying specific landscapes of learning. Broad trends in the design of space around educational establishments tend to follow those in polite domestic settings and, during the 18th century, primarily away from symmetrical formality towards a more naturalistic approach to planting.

Oxbridge, Britain's oldest universities, are collegiate institutions. As such, they present a myriad and complex story of over thirty individual landscapes. Medieval monastic origins formed a strong tradition that was difficult to escape. They began as private enclaves of retreat and garden production. In the 16th century they started to become more ornamental as the social status of colleges increased. In the 17th century, some were used for scientific experiment, and a botanic garden was founded at Oxford. From the mid-18th century, formal planting began to yield to a more naturalistic approach within colleges, and the building of Oxford's Radcliffe Observatory formed the single greatest scientific structure of the British – not just English – Enlightenment. Ultimately it is difficult to identify a specific English landscape of university learning, and certainly nothing with the cohesion and romantic fascination of Krause's conception of the University of Tartu. What we do have at our older universities, however, is an exquisite sequence of spaces of resort and private retreat, capable – as Wordsworth so powerfully wrote, in 1820 – of overpowering 'the soberness of reason'.

ROGER BOWDLER: LANDSCAPE OF LEARNING: GARDENS AND GROUNDS AT ENGLAND'S OLDER UNIVERSITIES 1550–1800

KEYWORDS: ENGLAND'S UNIVERSITIES; UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD; UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE; UNIVERSITY LANDSCAPE; COLLEGE GROUNDS; BOTANICAL GARDENS; ENLIGHTENMENT

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