CAMBRIDGE AND ITS COLLEGES

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Abstract:The well-known University of Cambridge, which was founded in 1209, has managed to be among the five best universities in the world. The permanent struggle of scholars and personalities of the centuries have offered the University a tradition of more than 800 years. Blooming gradually, even during times which didn't prove to be quite beneficial to progress, each college of the University still has its own individual attraction, deriving from its pre-college history of the land it occupies, its famous alumni and the intellectual, cultural or sporting traditions which undergraduates maintain. Even different, they combine to form the special character which distinguishes one college from another.
The purpose of the hereby paper is to present a brief history of Cambridge Colleges along the centuries, considering the fact that they derived from hostels.

Keywords: colleges, scholars, teaching, structure, academic community.

The Origins of Colleges

Before the first college was founded at the end of the thirteenth century, members of the university lived in hostels or private houses; for centuries many continued to do so, as the colleges which were established accommodated very few scholars. The masters, who were licensed by the university to teach, regulated the conduct of university members; in this, the university was much like a medieval guild. In the very earliest days of the university less experienced teachers would gather round a master, but these were ephemeral groupings which rarely outlived their leader. More permanent college communities became possible only when the monarch, aware of the advantages a university could bring to the state, was persuaded to grant certain groups of scholars' legal recognition. This gave colleges the crucial right to hold property in mortmain.[1]

This single right underpinned the survival of a college. First, it encouraged groups of academics to accumulate wealth for their college in the knowledge that it would be shielded from tax liabilities. Secondly, the evident permanence of these new communities encouraged the rich to leave their worldly goods to colleges: colleges came to be perceived as *academic chantries*[2]. As far as the living was concerned, the colleges brought stability to the academic community; they were the means through which the university grew strong. Such academic communities were well established on the continent, particularly in Paris, before they emerged in Cambridge.

Hostels and the Earliest Colleges

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[1] Mortmain, meaning literally 'dead hand' (as mortgage means 'dead pledge'), allowed property to be passed in perpetuity to a college without incurring death duties.

[2] Many academic colleges can be justly titled 'academic chantries', their *raison d'être* being the commemoration of the founders and benefactors. The earliest chantry was founded in Cambridge in the 13th century and all chantry founders were concerned to secure the continuation of services after their death, for a number of years or even in perpetuity. (Hussey in Rubin, p. 191)

It surprises those from outside to learn that the university and colleges have separate legal identities. They each have their own privileges and rights which are jealously guarded against infringement by another college or by the university itself. Where the university has provided the structure for the academic community, the colleges provided the domestic comforts which to this day enhance the lives of their senior members: examinations, teaching in 'schools' or faculties and managing the relationship with the state are the responsibility of the university. Its most senior positions – such as the vice-chancellor – and, indeed, the university's ruling bodies have, however, been filled by academics who were also members of a college.

The foundations of the colleges, one at a time, followed that of the university. They were primarily domestic conveniences designed to make the lives of the fellows both more congenial and more secure. Initially only a few scholars joined a college, almost as servants. Those that were admitted came from the poorest backgrounds and would complete domestic tasks for the fellows in return for tuition and a roof over their heads. Once it was realised that the money to be made from taking scholars into college outweighed the disadvantages of living in proximity to them, colleges determined to provide accommodation and teaching for larger numbers of students. Its tuition, however, was always complementary to, not in place of, the university's teaching.

All scholars were – and still are – required to matriculate into the university, literally meaning to be signed on to the roll, from the Latin *matricula*, a list of register. It indicated an acceptance of the university's statutes and ordinances. The scholar would then seek lodgings in a hostel or admission into a college. A college was a much more permanent institution, through its endowments and special tax status, than a hostel; above all, a college provided an opportunity for a scholar to study under a particular tutor.

Peterhouse, founded in 1284 by Hugh de Balsham, bishop of Ely, is the oldest college of the university. Its small community of scholars moved to Trumpington Street from the opposite end of town, where accommodation had been shared with the monks of St. John's Hospital (later to become St. John College). By this time six colleges had been opened at Oxford, another demonstration of that university's superior position in medieval England. The initiative which led to the next college, King's Hall, came through Edward II in 1317. The issue of foundation dates at the university is imprecise; the confusion over that of King's Hall provides a fine demonstration of the university playing a loyal role in the delivery of political spin around the year 1615, the date of james1's visit to Cambridge.

Michaelhouse was founded in 1324 and University hall in 1326 (refounded as Clare Hall in the 1330s). The hall of Marie de Valence (known later as Pembroke Hall) was founded in 1347. Another three colleges, Gonville, Trinity hall and Corpus Christi, were founded over the next five years. These eight colleges were sufficient to provide a permanent college-based structure for university.

It took time for their impact to be felt throughout the university, however. The heart of the university remained the Old School, which are now behind the Senate House. Individual colleges were small communities, often with very small number of undergraduates. King's hall was the only medieval college to have a significant number in residence; they alone regularly admitted undergraduates and exceptionally maintained 32 fellows in the fourteenth century, a time when they were only 80 fellows in the entire university. The majority of scholars over the first 200 years of the university's existence therefore had to lodge in hostels.

In the fourteenth century there were over 300 hostels, with names like Oving's Inn, Tyled Hostel, garret Hostel and St. Gregory's Hostel. Some were substantial enough to possess dining

halls and have a formal link to a parish church. Others were more temporary arrangements, where a Bachelor of Arts, perhaps studying for a doctorate, might lease a property and rent out rooms to younger pupils. Hostels were licensed and inspected by the staff of the university chancellor. However, without the legal rights of a college, they could be short-lived communities.

Colleges sometimes formed partnerships with hostels. Queens' for example, was closely tied to St. Bernard's Hostel, as Corpus Christi was to St. Mary's Hostel and Gonville to Physick Hostel. Membership of a college was even possible while belonging to a hostel, the former providing accommodation and instruction, the latter only lodgings.

The colleges soon joined the university and the longer-established friaries as the three centres of power within the early medieval academic community. While the hostels sought alliances with colleges and the friars were vying for influence within the university, the burghers of the town had become wealthy through trade, and retained some authority within the town. Medieval Cambridge was a pluralist community in which the university was not yet the dominant force. (Chrimes, p. 96).

During the hundred years following the mid-1400s, colleges admitted more scholars. A college was funded through its endowments; added to these, lodging and education fees paid by scholars eased the lives of the fellowship. Living in proximity to scholars became, and no doubt remains, a tolerated inconvenience for the students. As far as the scholars were concerned, hostels merely provided food and lodging; a place in college offered, in addition, access to teaching, greater stability and the possibility of election to the fellowship – an appealing prospect to some young scholars.

The Impact of Colleges

The move by scholars into college was accompanied by the employment of salaried college 'lectors'. This marked the beginning of the shift from teaching at the centre of the university. Disputations and oral examinations continued in the lecture rooms at the Old School building, but instruction in college lessened the need to attend. Indeed, through to modern times, lectures remain an optional extra to less diligent students. Colleges gradually took over the lead in teaching from the university and developed their own academic syllabi. By the Reformation they were more important than the university's lecture rooms as places of learning. (Chrimes, p. 97)

Even after the rise of the university's faculties in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the colleges' influence on undergraduate, education was maintained through their fellows' role as supervisors to a small number of students. An undergraduate attends, normally on his own, a weekly 'supervision' with his supervisor, during which an essay is surrendered. A student also has a Director of Studies in his college who will advise on the choice of courses. Finally the student is allocated a tutor, who has a role somewhat akin to that of a guardian: at Oxford this position is described as Moral Tutor. In some Cambridge colleges, the role of personal tutor is now combined with that of Director of Studies. Whether this is the case or not, this level of personal attention is exceptional and an immense privilege, but it also places considerable pressure on the student. There is no hiding place for anyone struggling or distracted from their studies. According to the studies, Cambridge University has a relatively high number of students suffering from stress and depression, which the outside observer might connect to the exposure its tuition system brings. While the brightest and most talented, at whom the Cambridge education is aimed, will thrive, the less gifted may struggle – but fewer will drown that might

otherwise be the case as the colleges employ nurses and welfare officers, as well as maintaining a university counselling service for staff and students. This is a support structure which is perhaps paralleled only at Oxford.

As a result, parents living out their dreams through their children now do a huge disservice to their child if they seek a string to pull – or even fund intensive additional tuition prior to admission – in order to secure a place in a college. It is certainly no longer accepted practice at either Oxford or Cambridge – indeed, when in 2002 two senior fellows of the relatively poor Oxford college of Pembroke were exposed discussing such terms, they were both forced to resign.

The college-based supervision system, as an intense one-to-one form of instruction, was revitalised by the arrival of women into university in the early 1870s. The unequal access to lectures enjoyed by women, which continued for some time after they were accepted into the university, was compensated for by close personal tuition from which female students derived great benefits. Such instruction also made up for the often inferior academic preparation they had had before their arrival at the university. It was soon recognised by all colleges that this system was a very effective form of instruction. It also pulled the fellows into a close involvement with students' progress, reducing the risk of withdrawal into their research.

Colleges made it possible for communities of scholars to live separately from the town. As soon as funds were available, private chapels, lodgings for a master and fellows, dining halls and libraries were all built behind vast forbidding gates. As the colleges matured into a framework through which control might be imposed over students via their division into small groups, their impact stretched even further. This has been subtly achieved, as the colleges have always generated immense loyalty from their members.

They also introduced into the university the key element behind advancement in most societies, namely competition. From the master wishing to attract the cleverest student or fellow to the desire to possess the most beautiful buildings, colleges have always competed over many things. Chapels are more glorious, the libraries larger and the fare at top table better as a result of this competition.

Another benefit, incidental to the motives of those who first caused colleges to flourish, has been to underpin the independence of the academic community. The domination of legally independent colleges by outside interests such as the Church, or more recently the government, has always been difficult. For instance, early twenty-first century politicians seek to influence the candidates who are accepted by Cambridge; they press for a change in selection procedures in order to implement positive discrimination in favour of social groups underrepresented at the university. However, the present admission system, in which each college exercises its independence in determining whom it will admit, frustrates these ambitions: it would be simpler for those politicians if the current system were replaced by a central admission office. Allied to this individualistic approach to admissions is the fact that many of the academics who now interview prospective students come from outside Britain and are perhaps less sensitive to the subtleties of the English class system or the political pressures brought to bear from government. They are more likely to select on academic criteria alone and to disregard the nuances of class background. (Chrimes, p. 98)

To sum up, we could highlight the fact that colleges will continue to stay at the heart of the university life. They have been there to help shaping Cambridge from the fifteenth century onwards and have brought great enchantment and quality, traits which are enjoyed by their members, townspeople and visitors.

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