

## A Second Postcard from Oxford: Rudolf Steiner at Keble College

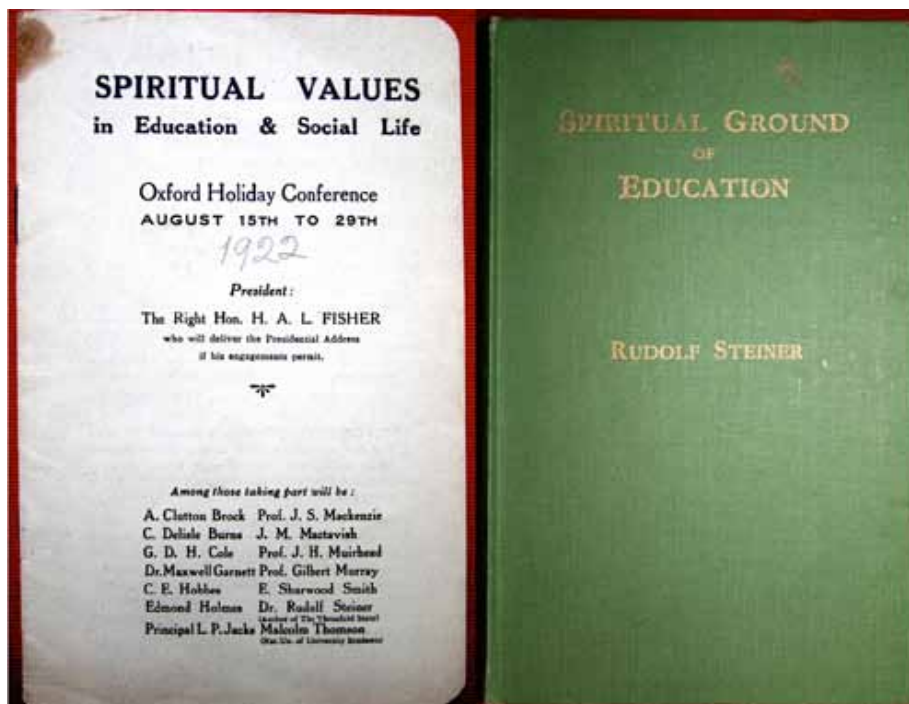
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Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) spent a fortnight in Oxford in the summer of 1922. Of his five visits to Britain during the years 1922 to 1924, it was the Oxford Conference, 'Spiritual Values in Education & Social Life' (15-29 August; Plate 1) that is arguably the most important.

It was this conference that attracted the greatest media attention - it was widely and favorably reported in the local and national British press.

The conference was a happy and optimistic event and Oxford was an inspired choice of venue. Steiner



**Plate 1.** The programme for the Oxford Conference (left) and the book of nine of Steiner's Oxford Conference lectures.

commented: "I have been most happy to explain these impulses here in Oxford where every step you take outside in the street brings inspiration from ancient times and where such strong influences come to the aid of someone wanting to speak out of the spirit" (1922a, p.166).

The Oxford Conference introduced Waldorf schooling to an English-speaking audience. An enduring legacy has been the proliferation of Waldorf schools in Britain, throughout the Anglo world, and beyond. The conference was organised by Millicent Mackenzie who, as a Professor of Education at Cardiff University, was the first woman to hold a university professorship in Britain (Cunningham & Goodwin, 2001).

Waldorf education was, at the time, in its infancy. The original Waldorf school had been established in Stuttgart, Germany, in September 1919 (Rosenkrantz, 1922). Although Steiner did not speak English, language-learning was a part of the Waldorf school curriculum and he commented presciently that "English is taught because it is a universal world language, and will become so more and more" (Steiner, 1924b, p.139).

The morning lectures of the Oxford Conference were presented by Rudolf Steiner at Manchester College (now Harris Manchester

College) and the afternoon and evening events were presented at the nearby Keble College (Paull, 2010). The Foreword to the book of Steiner's lectures of the Conference is incorrect in stating that Conference lectures were held at Mansfield College, Oxford (D.H., 1947, p.3); no Oxford Conference events were held at Mansfield College.

Keble College is one of the 38 constituent colleges of the University of Oxford. It is a few minutes walk north from the centre of Oxford, and an eight minute stroll around the corner from Manchester College. There is no signage identifying 'Keble College', however the buildings are decorated with polychromatic brick work in muted shades of red, white and blue which makes them quite distinctive (Plate 2). The main entrance is on Parks Road (Plate 3) across from two important Oxford institutions, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Britain's oldest botanic garden, the University of Oxford Botanical Garden, is diagonally across the road.

Keble College was founded in 1870 (Bullen, 2008). It has one of the largest student enrollments of Oxford colleges. The College is named in memory of John Keble, a Professor of Poetry, who was a founder of the Oxford Movement



***Plate 2.*** The college chapel showcases the polychromatic decorative brickwork of Keble College.



***Plate 3.*** The entrance to Keble College.

which sought to restore to the Church of England some of the traditional aspects of Christian faith.

As well as accommodation, Oxford colleges typically possess three important components: a dining hall, a chapel and a library. Keble's chapel and dining hall were paid for by profits from agricultural inputs. William Gibbs (1790-1875) was the leading British importer of guano (bird droppings). This was valued as an agricultural fertiliser, it was rich in nitrate and phosphate, and Gibbs sourced it from Peru where it was mined on offshore islands (Mathew, 1981). This nineteenth century trade in guano preceded the Haber-Bosch process for the industrial production of synthetic nitrogenous fertiliser, a process which was not demonstrated until 1909. Gibbs amassed a fortune from guano and he was a major benefactor to Keble.

Keble College hosted the afternoon and evening events of the Oxford Conference. These events included the twelve daily lectures by speakers other than Steiner (16-29 August, excluding Sundays), four "Eurhythmy" demonstrations (16, 19, 23 & 26 August), and two evenings of "Celebration and Plays" (21 & 22 August) (Mackenzie, 1922b, pp.4-5). The conference programme used the spelling 'Eurhythmy' whereas the spelling 'Eurythmy' is now generally

adopted (e.g. Spock, 1980). These events were reported as being presented in Keble's hall (the dining hall; Plates 4 & 5) and Eurythmists were photographed on the lawns of Keble's main quadrangle, Liddon Quad (The Gentlewoman, 1922), and on the steps on the eastern side of the Quad (The Lady's Pictorial, 1922) (Plate 6).

Eurythmy was described as "visible speech" in which "girls in long silk frocks and veils move their arms and bodies in accord with the emotions raised by a recited poem or a piece of music" (The Lady's Pictorial, 1922). These Oxford demonstrations were reported to be the first Eurythmy performances in Britain (Education, 1922). They included presentations by a Eurythmy troupe from Dornach as well as by Oxford school students: "a class composed of children from The Oxford Central School placed the results of two months training before the Conference" (Schoolmaster, 1922).

Steiner told his Oxford audience that: "A school such as the Waldorf School is an organism" (Steiner, 1922c, p.89). Such a characterisation will be familiar to students of Steiner's Agriculture Course in which he stated: "Truly, the farm is a living organism". (Steiner, 1924a, lecture VIII, p.7).

On the afternoon or evening of the penultimate day of the conference,



*Plate 4. The dining hall of Keble College.*



*Plate 5. Frieze of mandala-patterned decorative wall tiles outside the dining hall of Keble College.*

Steiner gave an address which is not listed in the programme: "On founding an association for further work along the lines of these lectures" (Steiner, 1922b). An immediate outcome of the conference was the formation of the 'Educational Union for the Realisation of Spiritual Values' which was established to promote new schools world-wide (Mackenzie, 1922a).

At the close of the conference Steiner told delegates: "I remind you that everything we are starting in Dornach [at the Goetheanum, Switzerland] is only a beginning that cannot become reality without such efforts as have taken place here in Oxford" (1922a, p.164). He added that: "it has been deeply satisfying to give these lectures and suggestions for the future here in Oxford surrounded by impressions of ancient, venerable learning" (1922a, p.166).

In a short time the Oxford Conference bore the tangible fruit that had been hoped for. The first new Waldorf school in Britain was 'The New School' at Streatham Hill, London, opened in January 1925. The name changed to 'Michael Hall' in 1935. A decade later it moved to Kidbrooke Park, Forest Row, Sussex, where it remains today and continues to practise and promote Steiner-Waldorf education (Bamford, 1995; Michael Hall, 2010).

The "Waldorf school movement" has grown to be "the largest independent school movement in the world" (Anthroposophic Press, 1995, p.141).

Nine of Steiner's Oxford lectures appear in the book *Spiritual Ground of Education* (Steiner, 1922c; Plate 1) and the remaining three - of his twelve lectures that are listed in the Conference programme - are available in *Rudolf Steiner Speaks to the British* (Steiner, 1998).

The Oxford Conference of 1922 played a pivotal role in the global diffusion of Waldorf education, and nine decades later the Waldorf school movement continues to grow, evolve and engage contemporary students, teachers and parents world-wide.

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**Plate 6. Liddon Quad of Keble College.**

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