

350 Years of University Ceremony – the Sheldonian Theatre

The Sheldonian Theatre opened 350 years ago this year. Every student of the University walks through its doors to be admitted, all those who graduate are celebrated and congratulated within its precincts, and every year on the Wednesday of ninth week of Trinity term, it hosts the University Encaenia to award honorary degrees, commemorate its benefactors and celebrate the academic year past. It also proudly provides the central and readily accessible meeting place for Congregation, the sovereign body of the University. As famous for its exterior metaphysiae heads as for its interior, it has served the University as its ceremonial heart since it opened on the 9 July 1669.

This article is a reminder of why the Sheldonian was built, by whom, and how the development of Oxford as an intellectual centre in Restoration England shaped its design and function. It then turns to what the building does and how it is run today, and to end with some of the thoughts of the Curators – of whom I am one – on how we will celebrate 350 years, and look forward to the continuation of its ceremonial duties alongside its other role as a public venue at the heart of the historic central Oxford University buildings.ⁱ

In the beginning. Oxford, in the 1630s, went through a flurry of legislative improvements under William Laud, Chancellor of the University (1629-41). After a century of adjustments, especially under James 1, its medieval statutes which ‘had fallen into an unco-ordinated if not chaotic state’ were finally codified, and published; they were to govern the University for the next 200 years.ⁱⁱ A new Charter consolidated and extended the University’s privileges *vis a vis* Common Law, and reinforced the legal status of printing by the University Press.

The surge in building of spaces began with Bodley’s decision to refound the University Library in 1598, and continued without interruption until 1637. Alongside the Convocation House, Chancellor’s Court and ‘Selden End’ for the Library (1634-37) designed to decant daily University functions away from St Mary’s, several college chapels were renovated, the Canterbury Quad at St John’s, and the south porch of St Mary’s itself constructed.ⁱⁱⁱ Laud himself was a divisive figure who sought to reinforce the place of religion in Oxford, equally his energy led to new endowment, such as the Laudian Professor of Arabic with income from benefices in Bray, Berkshire^{iv} as well as through the donation of manuscripts and other material to the Bodleian.

Laud anticipated the removal not just of day-to-day University activities from St Mary’s, but also ‘The Act’; the late medieval ceremony used to award senior degrees of the University – the Master of Arts and the higher degrees (doctor in Law, Medicine or Divinity) – that admitted the candidate as a member, not as a student, of Oxford as a corporate body. The Act took place annually over a weekend and consisted of two sets of disputations – Vespers and Comita – held publicly before an assembled audience seated in a temporary wooden scaffold built in the nave of St Mary’s. An excellent description of The Act itself and its ceremonial purpose is available in Anthony Geraghty’s book^v but, as the culmination of the academic year and a public highlight, it was clearly conducted in a carnival atmosphere (*plus ça change*, the Curators remember a recent, very merry, postprandial graduation ceremony). The high point was not the academic disputations, but the bawdy speeches. Two *terrae filii* (sons of the earth) delivered satirical commentaries on the current state of the University, playing the role of official jesters. Keenly anticipated by Oxonians and visitors alike, they were described by one modern commentator as ‘somewhat malevolent tour guide[s] of seventeenth century Oxford’.^{vi} Their speeches, often disseminated as manuscripts, were insulting of authority, rude to townsfolk, and in particular they singled out notable aspects of dons’ behaviour for ribald ridicule; not for nothing are their speeches the documentary evidence element of The Act most likely to remain in the archives. Public Orators and Oxford Magazine contributors take note! Plans to

remove the public spectacle The Act were proposed by Laud in the 1630s, but lack of a suitable site delayed the project.^{vii}

The conclusion of building works on the Bodleian in 1637 was rapidly followed by the outbreak of civil war in Scotland (1639), Ireland (1641) and England (1642), the trial and execution of Laud himself in 1645, and of Charles I in 1649. During the first civil war, Oxford was transformed from a university town to political and military headquarters of the royalist cause, fortified by artillery defences which finally fell to the New Model Army after a length siege in 1646. After the parliamentary triumph, a 'visitation' and 'reformation' of the University followed, together with the 'correction of abuses' and a political and religious purge. In the midst of all this confusion, the energetic building work of previous decades ceased almost completely. Only after the end of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, and the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, did the royalist-inspired generation return to Oxford, and to Laud's plans.^{viii}

Return of the King, another archbishop and an architect. Oxford in the 1660s was a place of unfinished business; Oxford dons had suffered for their loyalty to the old King. Gilbert Sheldon himself had been Warden of All Souls since 1636, the year in which the Laudian statues were published, and 1648, when he was physically ejected as part of the purge. The new Chancellor, Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, sympathetic with Laud's reforms, saw plans for a new building to become the ceremonial heart of the University as an opportunity to signify the re-establishment of Church and secular order. The link to Laud was strengthened by others key to its construction: Sheldon, successor to Laud as archbishop of Canterbury (1663-77) and to Clarendon as Chancellor of Oxford University (1667-9), and John Fell, Vice-Chancellor (1666-69). Early in 1663, when Clarendon wrote to Walter Blandford, Warden of Wadham, proposing a building project to 'free' St Mary's from The Act, he was acknowledging that construction represented a return to established order for those college fellows recently returned to Oxford from their Commonwealth exile. This might explain why matters moved ahead so quickly. By March 1663, the City had approved a site to the north of the Divinity School along the line of the old city wall; by the end of 1663 the site had been cleared. Would that all Oxford building construction might proceed so quickly and smoothly with such a modicum of paperwork, planning or controversy!

The architect for the site was a scion of Anglican blood and from a loyal royalist family. Christopher Wren, Savilian Professor of Astronomy and also a fellow of All Souls, was the right man at the right time and in the right place intellectually and physically. His reputation was as one of the finest Geometricians in Europe, at the time when the framework of mathematical practice included architecture. Paradoxically, the selection of Wren, by those looking back to the certainties of pre-Civil War Oxford and its gothic design, instead reinforced new architectural styles at Oxford, aligned with the progressive intellectual movements of the day, such as the Royal Society.^{ix} Hitherto in Oxford's forty-year 'building boom', classicism had been poorly understood and perhaps derivative; the City would now no longer be dominated by perpendicular and Jacobean architecture. Wren made full use of his knowledge of Classical architecture, and in relating the new building to the existing Convocation House and Schools. His design looked forward to the achievements of English baroque, which reached an English apex in the rebuilding of St Paul's, and of course including Gibbs' 1749 Radcliffe Camera (on the site Laud originally proposed for the new theatre).

The building function was highly unusual: there had never been a 'conventional way' to build an academic assembly hall beyond, perhaps, the example of the Divinity School. Moreover, it not only had to be capable of staging The Act, but serve also as the building for the new University Press, with the printing presses in the basement, and the main roof space became a store room. Notwithstanding, the project continued to advance at pace, albeit less ambitiously than originally

proposed: Wren's original plans, laid before the King, had to be scaled back. The budget would be constrained by coming from just one – private – purse: Sheldon's. Finding donors for buildings was as challenging then as now.^x The foundations were laid in July, and, when, from September 1664, John Fell became 'Treasurer for the Worke', the building work progressed quickly. By the summer of 1666 decoration of the interior had begun, and the exterior was completely finished in 1667. Attention was also paid to the new building's surroundings, such as in the Vice-Chancellor's accounts, which showed that £365 was paid to pull down house the north of the theatre 'to make a paire of faire staires to their new erected Theatre'.^{xi}

Wren's technical and architectural design solutions focused on mirroring the temporary scaffolding set-up for The Act that had occupied St Mary's. The U-shape is redolent of court theatres in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, and ensured that the interior tiered seating focused all eyes on its primary function – the award of degrees. Calling it a theatre therefore reminded contemporaries of its function as a public showcase. We are reminded of the original Act that took place by the two boxes on the first floor, where those involved in the disputations could hold forth to the public and academic audience. When it was built, the University's functional heart was still the Schools: the Sheldonian should also be viewed and entered from the south, where its ceremonial entrance aligns to the Divinity School. Today, entry the Sheldonian is most often from Broad Street through the 'paire of faire staires', note the self-consciously monarchist doorway with the royal Stuart arms and an inscription giving the style and titles of Charles II above it.

A team of master craftsman were employed on the building. The master mason, Thomas Robinson, employed up to 41 masons, paid 1s 6d a day, and 20 labourers, at 1s a day. The stone came from quarries across the county, with a quarry leased at Shotover, the ground storey in Headington stone, and smoother Cotswold stone for the upper story; some 48 fodder (roughly 48 tons) of lead costing £777 was brought from Derby; wood for the great roof beams and interior panelling came from various localities, as well as material supplied from the estates owned by New and Brasenose colleges, and Christ Church. The more elaborate interior woodwork was undertaken by two London craftsmen, brothers William and Richard Cleer. In an early example of prefab, their work was made in their London workshop, and then sent to Oxford by barge to be installed. The former's bill reached £1,347 3s 2d, the latter's, which included the Vice-Chancellor's chair, the shields with arms over the main doors, and decorative work of on the galleries, amounted to £288 15s. 9d. The ceiling painting by Robert Streater, Sergeant Painter to the King, cost £448; installing his 32 panels, sent down from Whitechapel by water, another £210. The interior painting, undertaken by an Oxford craftsman, Richard Hawkins, cost £235 3s. 1d. The final bill Sheldon paid was £14,470 11s. 11d, around £3.1 million today.

The Sheldonian Theatre officially opened on 9 July 1669. At 8 o'clock that morning, a special Convocation took possession of the Theatre with the Registrar reading the donation charter signed by Sheldon, and a celebration of the launch of the University Press. In the afternoon, the first Encaenia completed a day of triumphal ceremony, with the Act on the Saturday, and the following Monday underlining the building's continuity of purpose. The opening was also made memorable by a scathing attack by the University orator, Robert South, on the Royal Society. Ironically, although he was specifically excluded from South's attack, one of its principal members was Christopher Wren. It opened at a time when Oxford's (and Cambridge's) traditional logic-based scholarship was being challenged by the new experimental philosophy championed by the Royal Society.

The Sheldonian then, seeing ceremony, celebration and controversy in its first few days, quickly entered the heart of Oxford. Architecturally, it was the first full-scale, free-standing classical building erected by the University or any of its constituent colleges – a very forward-looking gesture in

contrast to the perpendicular style of the University's pre-war building boom. Its archiepiscopal patronage marked it as a clear statement of the re-establishment of monarchical order. As the University's first location for its Press, it provided a long-planned separation of university ceremonial and procedural business from medieval religious surroundings. Those enjoying the first ceremonies might also have seen the building as a highly sophisticated technical and architectural achievement, at least in an English context. Admiring the ceiling, they would have recognised the importance of its subject matter: Truth descending to be with the Arts and Sciences, and the expulsion of Envy, Rapine and Ignorance. Undoubtedly those present recognised the symbolism of the visual allegory, as much as the Theatre itself represented a return to power and monarchical order. They might also though have considered Wren's technical accomplishment:^{xii} the 24 metre unsupported roof span was a highly sophisticated effect that impressed contemporaries greatly. Oxford's taste for statement architecture is not wholly new.

350 years on. The Sheldonian today continues to fulfil its role as the University's ceremonial centre. The exterior remains similar to that of 1669, although the roof was changed in 1802, when Wren's original circular rooflights were lost, and in 1838 the cupola was enlarged; the exterior stonework has been replaced and repaired at various points. The Press of course moved out comparatively quickly to the purpose-built Clarendon building in 1713. The interior underwent redecoration between 1720 and 1727, a new organ was installed on which Handel premiered his oratorio *Athalia*. The ceiling has been repaired and restored several times. In the early 20th century, further work was undertaken, especially the provision of fire-proof staircases; electric lighting was only finally installed, with some reluctance, in 1934. As many will know, the philosophers' heads outside are the third set. The Theatre is now on its fourth organ, installed in the 1860s (more of that later).

To bring the story up-to-date, the building's interior underwent extensive work from 2004-08, including the £1 million removal and restoration of Streater's celebrated ceiling, and the reinstatement of Wren's original colour scheme. As a consequence of careful prior research that documented at least eight paint schemes over the centuries, the interior today is as close to the original Wren scheme as possible. In the summer of 2018, the upper gallery seating was altered, reducing the overall capacity, but improving the comfort and safety of those who use the building.

The Sheldonian is an 'University Body' as defined by the Statutes, and the Curators are charged with its running; since 2012 it has been well-supported by the University Estates as one of its managed building. There are three Curators elected by Congregation, the Proctors and Assessor and the Vice-Chancellor (or nominee).^{xiii} While the Curators are responsible for the building and its precincts, we could not discharge our duties without the excellent support of the University's professional staff. Estates oversee the staff of five who keep the building running, and provide a group of around 20 volunteers for events, the Academic Administration Division's degree conferrals team organises matriculation and degree ceremonies, and the University's events team support *Encaenia* and other University occasions. Keeping the Sheldonian running in top-order is a collective, collaborative effort.

In 2017-18, its total income was approximately £563,000, roughly one-third from JRAM allocation, and two-thirds generated from events and visitors. Expenditure, including staff, premises, maintenance and repairs (and of course a substantial contribution to University capital and infrastructure charges), was almost equal. Over the year, the Sheldonian hosted 223 hire events, 13 degree days, five Congregations (an exceptional number!), two matriculations, and of course *Encaenia*; many thousands of students, graduands and proud relatives are greeted, sensitively directed, and looked after by our staff and we pay tribute to their professionalism and sense in meeting many and varied challenges. The Theatre opens annually for Oxford Open Doors in September, and this year 3843 visitors were shown around. We were also privileged in June to host

500 local school children from 10 different primary schools who performed a world premiere of 'We are the Children of the World' in seven different languages; the culmination of a project called Creative Multilingualism run by the Faculty of Modern Languages and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council with additional sponsorship from the Vice-Chancellor.^{xiv}

Paul Coones († 2018). Chair of the Sheldonian Curators, emeritus Fellow of Herford, Assessor 2006-07, Paul passed away last summer. His dedication to the Theatre in his retirement was exemplary and the current Curators acknowledge his efforts in sustaining its ceremonial and musical life, and pay tribute to his dedication; we are all the poorer for his passing. His obituary was minuted by the Curators and will become part of the University record of the Theatre; a small mark of honour that we hope he would have appreciated.

The Future. The improvement of the fabric of the building over the past decade, and the stability on the staffing side provided by Estates means that the Theatre remains fully fit for its ceremonial University role. The Curators will work to ensure this continues, as the Curators have done since John Fell and Christopher Wren in the 1670s. We have collectively discussed and agreed some project ideas that are outlined below for readers.

Our key objective, apart from celebrating 350 years, is to begin tackling the final improvements to the building fabric: renewal of the organ. Anyone who has heard the current instrument – electronic, and now almost 40 years old – will understand why this is a priority in our anniversary year. The Sheldonian needs an organ fit for its ceremonial role and this year is a timely point to begin planning. The cost may be considerable – somewhere around £400,000 for a new pipe organ, less for an electronic instrument – although, properly maintained, this is a one-hundred year investment. The Curators will explore how to raise the requisite finance and investigate options for its replacement.

The Curators also agree that more could be done to support use of the Theatre by local groups that might currently be deterred by the standard commercial terms on which it is normally made available. Recently, we agreed a pilot scheme to invite local community groups, which had a demonstrable link to the University either through shared contacts or especially as a result of researcher engagement or opportunities to co-create public events. We expect there to be significant interest and that our wonderful theatre will be used by groups that might not otherwise be able to fund an event in central Oxford. Check our website for more information.

To fund all of this, the Theatre must continue to be available for hire. The Curators are very grateful for the excellent work of the Oxford University events venue team, alongside our own staff, to diversify its functional use to include award ceremonies, meetings, lectures and so forth. We will continue to ensure that such functions do not detract from its ceremonial use, and we are always mindful of its status, as a University building, and its Grade 1 listing. Despite tempting offers, we will not be holding any boxing matches, notwithstanding how perfect Wren's design is for such purpose!

The Curators also want to refresh and enhance the exhibition that currently occupies the attic to bring it up-to-date with the latest interpretations of the building and to explore immersive and virtual reality options. In conversation with colleagues in History, we would like to develop high-resolution scanning of the interior, and then to do the same with the exterior as a new way of seeing and understanding the building. All of this would be packaged with the existing digital resources available in the Bodleian's Cabinet project (<https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk>) or in collaboration with another external provider. A small workshop will be organised later in the year to discuss the place of the Sheldonian in Oxford's intellectual and architectural history. We are also planning to revamp our current website to help visitors understand the building and its contents.

If you have not recently visited the Sheldonian, perhaps not since a half-remembered graduation, it is open, free, to all University members on production of a valid University card.^{xv} If this article has raised your interest in getting involved, keep an eye out in the Gazette for Curator elections. Maybe it has sparked ideas of how you or your colleagues might use the space for community engagement or to contribute to its celebrations with memories or photos. If so, the Curators would welcome your comments via curators@sheldon.ox.ac.uk.

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ⁱ The 'state of art' analysis from which much of the first part of this essay is taken is Anthony Geraghty's *The Sheldonian Theatre: architecture and learning in seventeenth century Oxford*, Yale University Press (published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art) 2013.

My thanks to Professor Howard Hotson and fellow Curator Dr Stephen Payne for reading and commenting on a draft, and for all the Curators who have taken an interest. All grammatical factual and interpretative historical errors remain mine, and are there despite their best efforts!

ⁱⁱ https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/375-092.shtml#_Toc30485128 [Accessed 3 Feb. 2019]. My thanks to Professor Hotson for the reference.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/south-porch-university-church-st-mary-virgin-oxford-1637-0> [accessed 3 Feb. 2019]. The St John's Canterbury Quad was built at Laud's expense between 1631 and 1636; St Mary's Porch with funds donated by Dr Morgan Owen, Laud's former chaplain. Its statues of the Virgin and Child were considered so redolent of Catholicism that Parliamentary soldiers shot off their heads in 1642. Not the last time that a statue in the vicinity of the High caused controversy.

^{iv} *The historical register of the University of Oxford : being a supplement to the Oxford University calendar, with an alphabetical record of University honours and distinctions completed to the end of Trinity term 1888* (Clarendon Press, 1888) p.57 <https://archive.org/stream/historicalregist00univuoft> [accessed 12 Jan 2019].

^v Geraghty, pp11-17.

^{vi} Kristine Haugen, *Imagined Universities: Public Insult and the Terrae Filius in Early Modern Oxford*, History of Universities 16,2 (2000), p. 14

^{vii} Laud's first choice, land behind St Mary's that would eventually become Radcliffe Square, was unavailable

^{viii} This paragraph in particular benefited from Professor Hotson's re-drafting.

^{ix} Geraghty, p.48.

^x In June 1664, Sheldon subscribed £1000 to begin construction, by 1669 he footed the whole bill as no further benefactors came forward.

^{xi} Vice-Chancellor's Accounts 1666-7, cited in Crick Smith Architectural Report, April 2010.

^{xii} Wren designed a composite roof truss but he may also have considered a design for the ceiling by another early fellow of the Royal Society and Savilian professor (in this case of geometry), John Wallis:

<https://www.soue.org.uk/souenews/issue4/wallis.html> [Accessed 13 Jan. 2019]

^{xiii} http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/181-084.shtml#_Toc86825837 [Accessed 13 Jan. 19]

^{xiv} <https://www.creativeml.ox.ac.uk/projects/multilingual-concert-we-are-children-world> [Accessed 13 Jan. 19]

^{xv} Opening hours and other information is available on our website: <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/sheldonian/>