



Corpus Christi College Chapel

Oxford

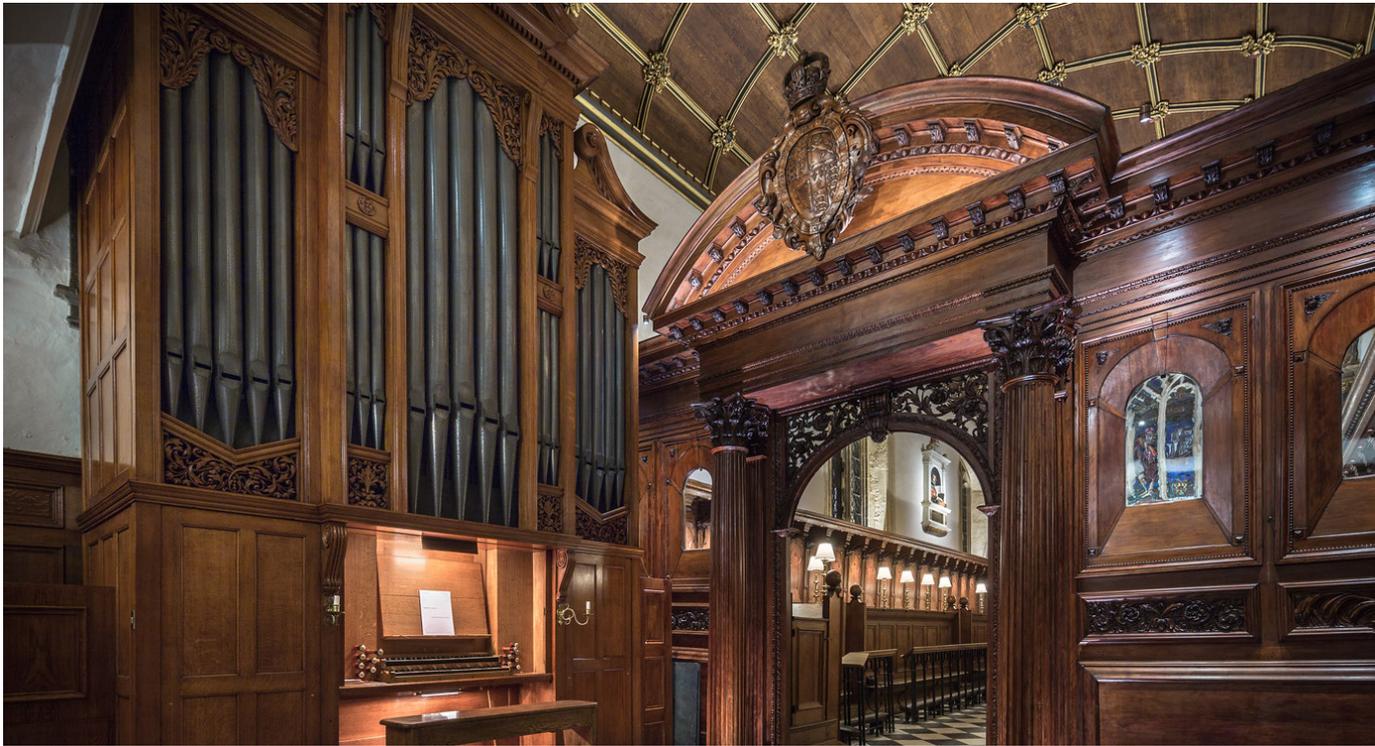
Architect

Principal Designer (CDM Regulations)

Project Management services in-house

Completion: October 2016

Construction: £414,000



A Chapel fit for a King

Corpus Christi College, founded in 1517, is one of Oxford University's oldest colleges. While the College's role in England's religious history is famous, its chapel seemed much less distinguished. A Grade I listed building of considerable age and beauty, the chapel unfortunately suffered from some neglect and the ravages of earlier, ill-considered interventions.

The finer aspects of the chapel's panelling and memorials were hidden under centuries of grime, and its contemporary use brought much clutter that added little to the ambience of the space.

Prior to renovation, visitors entering the chapel had to step over bags, organists' shoes and cleaning materials into a gloomy and slightly dingy space. Water leaked through the roof, the lighting was poor and the acoustics muffled the liturgy, choir and organ.

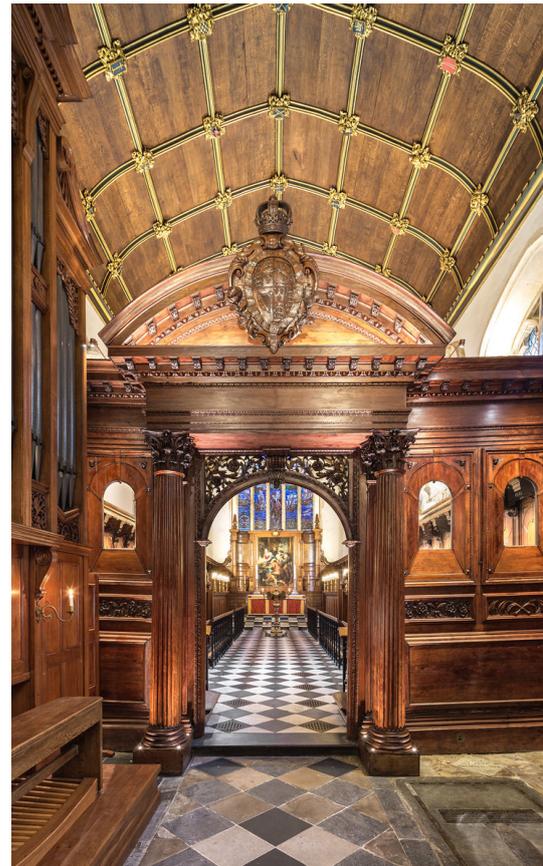
None of this matched the glory of an institution that played a central role in the birth of the King James Bible in the early 17th Century and where John Keble, founder of the Oxford Movement, studied.

Corpus Christi College celebrates its 500th anniversary this year and the Estates Bursar, John Harrison, felt it was time to restore the chapel's original beauty for all to enjoy. "We needed a chapel of which we could once again be justly proud; somewhere to celebrate the college's quincentenary with our alumni and supporters."

A history of historic expertise

Working on such an historic and listed building is complex and demanding. Traditional materials and old building techniques require expert sensitivity. It was therefore essential to select an architectural firm with extensive knowledge of listed building restoration, as well as the possibilities of modern lighting and technology.

Mr. Harrison needed a team able to deliver on time and on budget. Having worked with Gray Baynes + Shew architects on a previous historic building restoration, he felt certain that the chapel would be in excellent hands. The practice prides itself not only on the personal attention given to every client, but also on the hands-on expertise of its design team. The decision paid off.



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Such work would normally be overseen by the Diocese of Oxford alone, but such was the building's singular historic significance that Historic England required a special inspection and Gray Baynes + Shew had to make sure that the needs of both were balanced.

Robin Edwards, Partner at the practice, explained, "One of the most technically challenging aspects of this restoration project involved elements of the cedar screen which dates from around 1675. The original, delicate carvings were missing, but our specialist was able to re-carve these so that they matched the original design perfectly. This attention to detail is characteristic of our work.

"We have good experience from working in a number of Oxford college chapels over the years, and we are well aware of the particular needs in these most precious of buildings, as well as the challenges. Items like those carvings have to be pre-planned right down to the materials that will be used and precisely what the finished piece will look like. It is a criminal offence to work on a listed building without consent, unlike with any other building which would only result in a civil offence. Bursars are therefore understandably very keen to ensure full compliance!"

Mr. Harrison stressed how important this aspect of the project was and was pleased by the firm's sensitivity to the range of architectural features in the chapel.

"Obviously we had layering from 1517 onwards and it needed lots of careful analysis before we thought about how to intervene, and in many cases a light touch and sensitivity were needed. Gray Baynes + Shew were commissioning Cliveden Conservation, a specialist restoration body, and they had to understand the control needed if we were to remain within our budget. The design team also exhibited creativity as there was a need to intervene and create storage spaces in the chapel.

"To achieve this, interventions in and interfaces with the existing fabric had to be considered with great care and agreement reached with multiple authorities on the way ahead. Above all, the new features had to fit seamlessly with those of the existing fabric, fulfilling the contemporary need whilst also allowing scope for future adaptations. Gray Baynes + Shew demonstrated great skill, patience and creativity in delivering an outcome that has exceeded our expectations on every level."

Managing teams and timings

Commenting on working with a team of specialists, Mr. Edwards continued, "As a full-service firm we are able to draw on a wide pool of local specialists as and when required. Whilst we don't carry every specialism in house, we have built up a network of experts over the years and liaise between them and our clients to ensure the work they do is on programme and cost and doesn't contravene any listed building requirements.

"In this case, we worked with an excellent lighting designer, dpa lighting, and a specialist conservation company, Cliveden, who carried out an initial site survey in conjunction with our conservation consultant, Simon Shew, so we could decide on the best way to clean and renovate all the monuments."



Above: Specialist cleaning of one of the alabaster monuments



We had a budget to work to but the envelope expanded as new practical and manufacturing issues became apparent during the design. We had to remain flexible and responsive to these changes, deploying risk managed solutions that maintained the integrity of the time delineated programme.

Nigel Spawton, Partner at Gray Baynes + Shew on achieving success within budget

Mr. Harrison agreed that this was one of the most satisfying elements of working with Gray Baynes + Shew. "They are such a tight team – any call made is answered swiftly and by a relevant expert. Invariably you will be dealing with someone who knows you, the institution, and the guiding criteria for the project.

"Importantly, Gray Baynes + Shew are able to project manage convincingly and 'speak in tongues' so that the various prime and sub-contractors understand the need to work to time, cost and quality requirements. In my experience, this capability is rarely found in architectural practices despite the need to manage resources rigorously and deliver to a strategic plan that demands buildings are serviceable and able to support our work. As you can imagine, balancing the books is a constant challenge in institutions where the majority of the estate is Grade I and Grade II listed."

Staying behind the scenes

The chapel sits in the heart of the College beside the Library. That meant careful control of the work to keep noise down and ensure minimal disruption to students and fellows. Gray Baynes + Shew ensured that the plan kept noisy work to a minimum during academic terms, and reduced it further with the careful use of acoustic screening.

The contracted builder, Kingerlee, erected a birdcage scaffold throughout the chapel to allow safe working platforms at all levels. This also ensured that simultaneous work was possible for the many different trades and specialisms needed during different phases of the project.

A magical transformation

Gray Baynes + Shew prides itself on regular and effective communication with its clients. This meant frequent discussions with the College Chaplain to clarify the needs of the clergy as well as the congregation. For example, the design of the antechapel storage stemmed from a detailed briefing process.

"Our solution for this particular project was the creation of new storage and the installation of a spectacular new lighting scheme. It sounds simple but in reality it was incredibly complex and has something of C.S. Lewis' wardrobe about it, in that you can't imagine from the outside what treasures await you within."

The new storage also helped to overcome much of the acoustic problems. These were largely caused by heavy velvet curtains which sealed off the area where the priest, choir and organist left their belongings, and by the carpet which had been laid where people came in. Gray Baynes + Shew removed the carpet, laid new tiles, and built new storage units designed to look exactly like the timber panels already in place. Visitors now enter through a small, panelled entrance space, behind which is the cupboard storage.



Above: Removal of varnish and re-polishing of the timber ceiling panels



God is in the details

Gray Baynes + Shew also organised the repair, replacement and refinishing of the traditional lime plasterwork throughout the chapel. The 17th century panelled screen between the chapel and the antechamber was cleaned and restored, as was the canopy over the choir stalls.

The 19th century organ case was cleaned, as were all the chapel's monuments, and the roof lining and carved ceiling bosses were also cleaned and refinished. To comply with Health and Safety legislation, the old, obtrusive fire detection system was replaced with an almost invisible aspirating system.

The entire project took Gray Baynes + Shew and their team of dedicated specialists seven months of site work plus an additional eight months' planning time. But this was time well spent as they delivered the project on time and on budget, to the delight of the client.

For Mr. Harrison, the project's success was evident in the reactions of those entering the newly restored chapel, "We rededicated the chapel with the Bishop of Oxford conducting the ceremony on precisely the date we intended, having delivered the project entirely to budget. It was a great delight to me as I sat in stalls that night, watching people just gazing at the roof and the beauty we had revealed. The chapel was once again as our Founder had perhaps intended; a place of calm reflection, and of elegant beauty.

"For me, the looks of the those attending the service that evening stands as testament to the sensitivity and thoughtful execution of the entire project. There was a great comfort with what had been achieved, and I was delighted to observe our Chaplain's obvious pride in leading worship in both a context and style that befits our history and our purpose."

For more information, please visit gbsarchitects.co.uk.



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GRAY BAYNES + SHEW