International Dateline: The Butcher, The Baker, the Candlestick Maker

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While Will King and his fellow autodidacts toiled in Blackwell’s vineyard, the diggers moved in to change the face of Broad Street’s North side. Thirteen old houses to the left of Blackwell’s until the corner of Parks Road, which in some parts dated back to medieval times, were being bulldozed to make way for Sir Gilbert Scott’s New Bodleian. It seemed there was no stopping the tide. More libraries were needed to house an ever-increasing supply of new books to feed an army of old and new world scholars and an increasingly literate and educated public. Blackwell’s used the opportunity to shore up its own future, rebuilding the dangerously unstable East wall of its Queen Anne Buildings. Basil Blackwell explained that this expense was a “symbol of our hope for the future.” It was also a mark of respect for the sundry folks, from all walks of life, who had plied their trades and written their lucubrations in Broad Street’s old houses since time immemorial. Things are on the move again as the New Bodleian, to be renamed the Western Library, undergoes a complete restoration, and the ground floor Blackwell Hall will honour this illustrious bookseller. This instalment tries to re-connect to the ghosts of Broad Street who may, in the imagination, walk the shelves at night. Readers of Against the Grain, should they visit Oxford, may also like to imagine all the souls who lived and worked here.

Scholars and tradesmen have existed cheek by jowl in Oxford’s Broad Street at least as long as the medieval scribes of Catte Street, who crafted manuscripts alongside the Great Bodleian Library. In the early fourteenth century Broad Street, known then as Horsemonger Street, was a favourite place for students to take lodgings; in medieval times they were not compelled to enter colleges, still less reside within their walls. Such inmates found themselves in the company of diverse tradesmen, tutors, medical doctors, dentists, and publicans. At the back of the narrow terrace, they could mingle with, and smell, the livestock, stable their horses, amuse themselves at billiards, or take boxing lessons to keep fit. Their neighbours’ children would scrimp for apples in the long thin town gardens, as Basil Blackwell and his sister did in the 1890s. Broad Street’s eclectic mixture of inhabitants, and its jumble of old dwellings, persisted in a recognizable form until the site was cleared. By 1939 the North side of Broad Street from the east end of Trinity, excepting the White Horse pub at No. 52, was transformed into a world of books. Numbering from 50 to 35, were the four old buildings Sir Basil had saved and united and thirteen former old houses that now formed the New Bodleian. With the New Bodleian and Blackwell’s joined at the hip between Nos. 48 and 47, all and sundry could share the magic space John Masefield described:

(unfinished)

"Half England’s scholars nibble books or browse. Where er they wander blessed fortune theirs" — John Masefield

But if the ghosts of yeysterday were to appear today among the shelves of the bookshop or linger in the adjacent building site, where Gilbert Scott’s icon is being transformed and made available to people from all walks of life, would they not rejoice at this further conjoining of town and gown? Jan Morris had deplored the demolition of the old houses, and Sir Harold Macmillan treasured a childhood memory of the “charming little row of houses which ran from Trinity gates past Mr. B’s shop.” Despite their historic value as timber-framed structures, it is doubtful if the inhabitants would have thanked either Sir Harold or Jan Morris for condemning them to life in these insanitary hovels. Successful in their fields, we can only guess that they would have welcomed change. But just who were they, and what were their stations?

Before the advent of Blackwell’s, the majority of the occupants of 48, 49, 50, and 51 Broad Street were also skilled tradesmen. Living proof of Napoleon’s famously disparaging nation of shopkeepers, they were not to be disparaged. These small businesses were the source of the next generation of more ambitious, socially mobile, and often scholarly progeny, who later went on to the universities. This gentility was arrived at via china men, wassailers (48) and a general servant. By 1871 the heraldry and frame-making (49), plumbing and glaziers (50), and tailoring (51). At the time of the 1851 Census, Susanna Seckham, a dealer in glass and china, and her spinster daughter and their servant occupied No. 48. Elizabeth Rose, continued in this trade from 1881, living with her son Edward, a building surveyor. Next door at No. 49 lived Charles Lobb and his wife Mary, aged 57 and 62 respectively. Incongruously described as haymakers, they must have been doing well, as they kept a servant (1851 census). By 1881 we find resident John Chaundy, a print seller and lay clerk, with his wife, five sons, and a general servant. According to the 1851 census John Bradfield, a glazier and plumber, lived at No. 50, with his wife and five grown-up children, and at No. 51 John Lockwood, with a wife and five young children, was a master tailor employing six men who also kept a general servant. By 1981 John Lockwood’s daughter, who took in undergraduate boarders, was continuing her father’s business, while Benjamin Henry lived over his newly-opened book shop at No. 50 with his mother Nancy.

Behind Blackwell’s, numbering now 48-51, was a jumble known as Bliss Court, which Basil Blackwell remembered as anything but “blissful.” There, he observed, only fowls would grow in the fetid atmosphere fanned by the breezes from the three communal “offices” and a standpipe. Amidst the dwellings of the poor were stables and a hayloft, where “undergraduates were still prone to equestrian exercise.” Notwithstanding the environment, the elderly residents seemed to thrive and could be removed only when nature took its course. Intermittently, assistants in the bookshop would hear the “rapid footfalls and alarum spuds” where students could safely put the gloves on with “Dolly” the boxing coach. By 1939 most of the occupants had departed for Elysium’s Fields, and those remaining were accommodated elsewhere at Blackwell’s expense. More to Benjamin Henry Blackwell’s taste was the headquarters of the Churchman’s Union, deriving from the Oxford Movement. Basil Blackwell recalled...
the visit of the poet Verlaine to these quarters. Before he could meet his audience, Verlaine had had to snake his way through “un dedale de chambers regorgeant de livres.”

Next to Blackwells No. 47 was typical of this row of long, thin, timber-framed houses, with a cottage at the rear; its frontage measured 6 yards 2 feet 4 inches, and its chimney stacks dated from the 16th century. The house had had 16 windows in 1696, wooden panelling, and marble fireplace; there had been alterations in the 18th century. Anthony Wood mentions musical evenings at this house from 1656 onwards, when it was occupied by William Ellis, and in the 1920s there was a detached room at the north end of the garden known as the Music Room. Other former lease-holders were: 1634 - Stephen Hawes, cook; 1652 - Edward Sellwood, cook; 1667 - Edward Sellwood (occupied by William Ellis); 1683 to 1696 - John Taylor, limner (occupied by Dr. John Luffe in 1683 and Thomas Swift in 1696); 1709 - John Taylor, painter (occupied by John Gibbons, victualler); 1723, 1737 - Henry Wise, mercer, and John Taylor, gent (occupied by Daniel Shilfox, tailor, in 1723 and Charles Stephens, cook, in 1737); 1751 - Charles Stevens, cook; 1765 - Rev. Samuel Forster, D.LL; 1779 - Anne Cleeve, spinster; 1793, 1807, 1821 - William Fletcher, mercer who lived at No. 46 and lent this house out; 1835 Joseph Parker, of the bookselling fraternity, leased his property to wine merchant John Parkins, who had a house servant and a porter. By 1861 it was the home of a College Servant, who doubled up as a wine merchant. Until 1882 it was occupied by William H. Allchin, a Professor of Music, with a wife, four children, governess, nursemaid, and general servant, and by 1930, the architect, Thomas Rayson.

No. 46, in common with 47-53, had originally belonged to Chantry of St. Mary Magdalene, which after reformation passed to the City of Oxford. From the 14th to 17th century there was reputedly a succession of cooks and an eating-house. From 1656 - 81 the main occupant was one William Ellis, organist (who also lived at No. 47). Following him in a flurry came more cooks, painters, a victualler, a bookbinder, and Alderman Fletcher in draper and antiquity. Next came Well Hall at No. 45; a tenement of Magdalen College, with the following leases granted from 1591 to an eclectic bunch of labourers, apothecaries, and “gents.” To the east of the house was a narrow passage leading to a long outbuilding used as Billiard Rooms. By the 1840s the shop at the front was divided into two premises, and the back cottages numbered 45a and 45b. The 1851 census shows No. 45 occupied by a wine merchant, a widow, Charlotte Sheard, and her two young children. Also at No. 45 (presumably living in the building behind) was Thomas Betteris, described as “a Billiard Table Keeper” with his wife, two children and a servant. The billiard room must have thrived, since by 1861 Betteris had five children and two servants. Between 1876 and 1881 No. 45 had only a single occupant; an unmarried waiter of forty-nine, and it opened as a boarding house in 1882. More famously, from 1882 to 1889, John Chaundy & Son’s “eye old picture shop” was at 45b. In 1904 the Oxford Chronicle reports that the offices of the Electric Company, which had been at the back, “have been removed to the front premises in Broad Street, thereby offering to the public greater facilities of approach and convenience.” From 1893 to 1904 Biddle Adams & Co. (tailors) are also listed at No. 45, followed by Fred Cutcliffe, English teacher and the Oxford Secretarial Bureau.

Next in line at No. 44 came the Thorpe family, hosiers and drapers from 1783. An advertisement by A. H. Thorp & Co. in the Oxford Directory for 1861, shows that they were also undertakers. The 1851 census cites John Charles Thorp (great grandson of the original Thorp) as a 28-year-old draper, employing eight men, living over the shop with his wife and two young children; three of his employees lodged in the house, with a cook and two nursemaids. Thorp’s partner James Walddie, a Scotsman aged 36, also lived over the shop with his wife and two young children, along with three other shop assistants and four servants. By 1881 the house is occupied by Webber Patterson, an unmarried mason of 46 and the employer of three men, two women, is a boy; he may also have run the downstairs draper’s shop which bore his name. Three of the shop assistants lodged in the house, and there were also two servants, one of them a draper’s porter. Subsequently antique furniture ruled the roost with Henry Adams 1890-1906, Frances Cambay 1907-25, and Cecil Halliday from 1925-36.

To the side of the master drapers, whose stay-making attracted customers from many walks of life, were rather conveniently the medics. Well-known in the annals of Oxford was Dr. (later Sir) Henry Wentworth Acland, friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, who came to Oxford in 1845 when appointed Lee’s Lecturer in Anatomy at Christ Church, who eventually owned Nos. 43-39. Other medics had preceded him: in 1840 a Dr. Wooten had taken over the lease of No. 41, merging it with No. 40 to form one dwelling. This may have been fortuitous, since the building had previously been the Duke of York pub, owned by Christ Church and then leased by Morrell’s Brewery. Acland, married to Sarah Cotton on 14 July 1846, moved to 40 Broad Street in October 1847. By 1858 the Aclands had eight children and nine servants, including a governess and a page. As Regius Professor of Medicine, from 1857 to 1894, Acland was largely responsible for the establishment of the University Museum and endowed a nursing home in Oxford in memory of his wife Sarah that later became the Acland Hospital. He died at home on 16 October 1900, and, like the first B. H. Blackwell and other Oxford worthies, is buried in Holywell Cemetery. From 1902-1911 William Baille Skene, Treasurer of Christ Church, occupied the house. From 1911 the buildings were taken over by the University and named Acland House, housing the School of Geography and then various small departments until the demolition in 1936.

Something of the interior of Acland’s old house in Broad Street can be gleaned from an Edwardian account:

It was Dr. Acland’s amusement and delight to improve this curious old place until he turned it (his house) into

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a veritable museum... Entering from Broad Street you came into a narrow hall with a Devonshire settle made of walnut and with paneling as a dado on the walls. This paneling continued down the long passage which led to the dining-room and libraries, and the doors of the dining-room were also of walnut and made in the same shops. Out of this narrow hall opened a small room, used as a waiting room for patients, or for those many people who came on all sorts of errands to the house. The walls of this room were completely covered, chiefly with engravings from portraits...

Passing down the long passage you came to the first library... Books accumulated everywhere on every sort of subject, down the passage and up the walls, till at least it was all so full that it was a matter of some difficulty to get in or out at all... The stairs to the drawing-room were narrow and steep, but could not be improved, owing to the presence of a massive chimney-stack.... The drawing-room was a low room with a huge beam running down it.... This room was the centre of the family life.... Last the dining-room and the garden, into which the former looked ... in the oldest part of the house, with very thick walls and quaint appearance. On either side of a stone ogival arch cut through the wall was painted in the pre-Raffaelite days, in red letters, the old college "grace" for before and after meat – Benedictus Benedicat: Benedicto Benedicatur.... The garden ran back as far as Trinity Garden Wall, and Dr. Acland's originality and ingenuity were constantly exercised in making it as unlike a square bit of town garden as possible. At the four corners of the little fountain stood four pillars, removed from the Tower of the Five Orders at the Bodleian at the time of its restoration... Acland's neighbours at Nos. 38-39 were also part of this medical enclave: John James Sims Freeborn (1795–1873) matriculated as a "medicus" (doctor) on 15 September 1834, and Robson's Directory of 1839 lists him as an apothecary at 38 Broad Street. By 1851 John Freeborn had moved next door to No. 39, and his 27-year-old physician son Richard Fernandez Freeborn (1823–1883), surgeon, was occupying No. 38 with his wife Clara, their baby daughter and two servants; ten years later they had six children and five servants, including a footman. By around 1860, the Freeborns had combined the two houses into one. In the 1881 census Richard Freeborn is still shown as a physician with four grown-up children living at home: John (a graduate of Exeter College was studying medicine at London), Albert (an undergraduate at Christ Church), Clara, and Mary. They were all well looked after by a cook, housemaid, indoor manservant, and under-housemaid. Richard Freeborn died as a result of a carriage accident in 1883, and his son succeeded him, continuing in the Practice until 1928. Next door at No. 37 was Dr. H. E. Counsell, who campaigned vigorously against the demolition of the houses. In days past, this larger house had been a thriving shoemaking business, more a factory than a cottage industry. Its owner, Mrs. Clara Simms, was a widow of 41 employing 18 men, including her two sons George (21) and James (19). She had three younger children, kept a servant, and took in student lodgers. By the time of the 1881 census, her son George (Simms) had taken over the business. A widower of 51, he lived over the shop with his son of the same trade, his daughter, and a general servant.

At No. 36 there had been a succession of small shopkeepers: watchmakers, jewellers, and cabinet makers. Notably, in 1912, it was the site of Chaundy's Bookshop, mentioned in the lines of John Betjeman's verse autobiography, Summoned by Bells:

One lucky afternoon in Chaundy's shop
I bought a book with tipped-in colour plates –
"City of Dreaming Spires" or some such name –
Soft late-Victorian water-colours framed
Against brown paper pages....

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It may be that Betjeman had written his soft-toned prose under the influence of Bacchus at the Coach and Horses, next door at No. 35. This was the last in the row of houses at the east end, with Rippon Hall behind. The pub had a long-serving record with at least three different names. In 1587 John Carter, described as a “joyner in Canditch” took out a licence to hang up a sign here with the name of the Prince’s Arms (twenty years before the King’s Arms opened on the opposite corner). On 14 February 1723/4 Thomas Cale, a victualler of St. Mary Magdalen, took out a licence for the new name of the Dog & Partridge. The Dog & Partridge was then in the occupation of a Mr. Davis, and its frontage measured 5 yards 2 feet 9 inches. In 1841 the publican was John Ryman, while the 1851 census shows Richard Cozens living at the pub with his wife, three small children, a lodger, and one servant. The pub was re-constructed in October 1881, and Elizabeth Gilbert moved in. She had been landlady of the Coach & Horses at 44 Holywell Street, and when that pub was about to be demolished to make way for the Indian Institute she brought the sign with her and gave the name to this pub instead. How delighted the King’s Arms proprietors must have been! Yet again they will be giving three cheers in expectation of even larger crowds, when the New Bodleian reopens as the Western Library in 2015.

Just as making works of art freely available to the general public saved Gilbert Scott’s iconic Backside Power Station for posterity, so bookshops have ensured the future of his New Bodleian. The Western Library, with its street-level doors opening into the Blackwell Hall, celebrates the lives of former inhabitants and welcomes those from all walks of life who share a love of books. Basil Blackwell in his restored shop had similar thoughts in 1939:

“I have said that this new building (finished 1939) was a symbol of our hope for the future. I am reminded that in 1935, in my valedictory address as Pres of Booksellers Association I said that if our civilisation must go down in the havoc of war, it will be to the bookshops, or the ruins of bookshops, that the men of the future must turn to find knowledge and inspiration to build a better world. There is our hope; and long may this building and this firm stand to bring that hope to fulfilment.”

These sentiments apply equally to the aims of those at the Bodleian and in the wider community, whose vision and generosity has enabled the transformation of the Library. But the old houses of Broad Street are not forgotten. And former inhabitants can rest in peace. As Milton lovers Will King and Basil Blackwell would have assured them: the Muses’ Bowre where medieval scholars polished their writing is safe in Gilbert Scott’s carapace. Bodley’s Librarian, playing Electra, together with her mandarins, has seen off any Alexandrian tendencies!

Lift not thy spear against the Muses’ Bowre,
The great Emathian Conqueror bid spare The house of Pindarus, when Temple and Tower Went to the ground: and the repeated air Of said Electra’s Poet had the power / To save th’ Athenian Walls from ruine bare.

Rita Ricketts, Oxford, January 2012.