The Founder

Magdalen College was founded by William of Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester, in 1458. William was born about 1395 at Wainfleet, Lincolnshire, the son of a prosperous merchant called Richard Patten. As Master of Winchester College in 1429 and later as Master and then Provost of Eton, he seems to have been an educator of surpassing ability. In 1447 he was made Bishop of Winchester. He also proved a distinguished administrator and King Henry VI created him Lord Chancellor in 1456. He held office for four years. Later he was able to make his peace with the Yorkist king, Edward IV, and shield his foundation against political reprisals. William of Waynflete died old and honoured in May 1486 and was buried in Winchester Cathedral. On St. Swithin's Day in 1958, the quincentenary of the College, the College choir joined in a memorial service at Waynflete's Chantry in Winchester.

Waynflete had already founded a Hall at Oxford, but when he became Lord Chancellor his plans grew more ambitious. Situated outside the city was the old and decayed Hospital of St. John the Baptist, whose buildings and endowments, he persuaded Henry VI, could be put to better use. The King gave them to the President and Fellows of Magdalen Hall and, after various legal delays, the College was officially founded 12th June, 1458.

On the new site there was plenty of room for expansion, but the first thing needed was a defensive boundary wall. This was complete by 1467. Meanwhile, the Hospital buildings were in temporary use by the College. Waynflete's grand new building scheme destroyed most of the old Hospital in time but two parts still remain today: the range facing onto High Street incorporates much of the Hospital Chapel, and its late thirteenth or early fourteenth century Hall is now the College bar. It has a splendid sixteenth century roof.
Early Construction

The new building work was entrusted to William Orchard, who had already worked at Oxford and Eton. At first there was a shortage of skilled masons as the Divinity Schools were then under construction and King Edward IV was building St George’s Chapel at Windsor but, nevertheless, work went on apace. Stone came form quarries at Headington but later on Taynton stone was used also. The Chapel was begun first and in May 1474 the foundation stone was sanctified and put in place in the middle of the high altar. Soon a crane was needed for the building work and some windows were in position. By 1479 Orchard was working on the buttresses and battlements of the Hall, Chapel and Library, on Cloister chambers and the Muniment and Founder’s Towers. The buildings were probably occupied by the summer of 1480.

As well as endowing his College generously William of Waynflete gave valuable gifts of books to the Library.

The Scholars

Under the Founder's Statutes the College was to consist of a President and seventy Scholars, forty of whom were Fellows, and thirty Demies (younger scholars). Strict rules of conduct controlled the almost monastic life of the community. Waynflete intended his College to become a home for moral and natural philosophy (science) and theology rather than canon and civil law and he stressed its teaching responsibility. Three Readers were to be appointed to instruct not only the Demies, but anyone coming from outside and without a fee. There was also provision for a maximum of twenty Commoners, sons of nobles or powerful friends of the College, who provided their own maintenance. Both of these were new features of a College. In medieval times a College had been for graduates only to promote advanced study and research. The undergraduates lived and worked where they could but generally in Halls: boarding houses established by a master for a number of scholars, of whom he was principal. It was some time before undergraduates became part of colleges but Magdalen led the way; and already by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I Gentlemen and Poor Commoners came to outnumber the Demies (junior scholars on the foundation).
Kings and Patrons

On 22nd September, 1481, came the first of a long line of royal visitors to the College. King Edward IV, who was staying at his palace at Woodstock, entered Oxford after sunset with a large company, innumerable torches burning before them. They were welcomed by the Chancellor, Lionel Woodville, the Queen's brother, and escorted to Magdalen where they were received by the Founder, President Tibard and the Scholars. They spent the night and much of the next day at the College. By the time of this visit, most of the buildings, except for the Cloisters and the Muniment Tower, would have been complete.

In 1483 Edward's brother, King Richard III, visited Oxford. He too stayed the night at Magdalen and next day, at his request, two solemn disputations were held in the College Hall. The Cloisters would have been almost complete then except for the walk by the Hall and Chapel, possibly not part of the original scheme, and the 'gargels', the grotesque figures on the buttresses, which were added in 1508-9.

The Founder stayed on at College after the King left, and delivered his Statutes - the rules by which the College should be governed. The book was deposited by his order in a chest in the Muniment Tower.

Early Endowments

Besides Waynflete's rich endowments some of the estates of Sir John Fastolf, a career soldier of the Hundred Years War who had died in 1459, after long disputes accrued to Magdalen. Other endowments and benefactions came over the years and the College estates were once scattered over the southern half of England. The administration of these hinged upon the two progresses, at Easter when the President, a Fellow and the Clerk of Accounts, and in the autumn when a Fellow and a clerk only, went to inspect them. The administration of the College was shared by three Bursars, who were Fellows and were elected to hold office for a year. Some years outbreaks of plague were so bad in Oxford that the whole College retreated to its properties at Ewelme, Wallingord, Witney or Brackley.
Richard Agas's Map

Richard Agas's Map of 1578 shows the lay-out of the medieval College, situated outside the city walls. The East Gate and the Walls appear in the right of the picture.

The Grounds

Although it has expanded over the years the College, with its Grove, gardens, river walks and meadows, has never lost its feeling of spaciousness. Across the Meadow, where purple and white fritillaries bloom in the spring, it still appears to have a rural setting.

Lectures

In the early years of the College the Hall and Chapel were used for lectures and disputations. The wainscotting was put in during the sixteenth century; and there is an unsupported tradition that it came from Reading Abbey at the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The carved panels behind the high table are dated 1541 and contain scenes from the life of Mary Magdalen.

Entrances

The original entrance to the College was through the Great Gateway under the Founder's Tower. When the President's Lodging was enlarged this entrance probably became inconvenient and too noisy for him: so, about 1530, it began to be usual to use the entrance through the Chapel porch - which was quicker to the Hall anyway. In the seventeenth century the porch was given a classical style doorway, but the original Gothic arch was restored in 1902.
Tybard and Mayew

William Tybard, the first President, was followed in 1480 by Richard Mayew, who was much employed by King Henry VII. The King came twice to Magdalen and his heir, Prince Arthur, three times. In 1501 President Mayew was one of the embassy sent to fetch Catherine of Aragon from Spain to be Arthur's bride. Tragically, the young prince died after only five months of marriage and, in due course, she married his younger brother, who later became King Henry VII. Fine tapestries in the President's Lodging commemorate Mayew's mission and show the betrothal of Arthur and Catherine. President Mayew became Bishop of Hereford in 1504 and resigned his Presidency in 1507.

The Bell Tower

The soaring Bell Tower, 144 feet high, is one of the most celebrated views of Oxford, yet its inspiration is unknown. Perhaps President Mayew wanted a lasting memorial to his Presidency or, more simply, the old belfry from the Hospital had become dilapidated and needed renewing. With the splendour of the new college buildings around there was an incentive to build ambitiously. Yet progress was slow after initial enthusiasm and it was almost seventeen years before the tower was complete. The first corner stone was laid on 9th August 1492. The chief mason was William Raynold. In 1505 it was sufficiently complete for the bells to be transferred from the old belfry and a clock to be installed. Originally the tower was probably intended to stand alone but by 1509 buildings abutted it on two sides, to make up the triangular chaplains' Quadrangle.

Elizabeth I

During the course of her visit to Oxford in 1566 queen Elizabeth I came to Magdalen. Behind the Queen in the picture is the Chapel with its original tracery in the west window. The whole visit was a great success. She was feasted, orated to in Greek and Latin, entertained with comedies and tragedies: she listened to disputation and joined in academic exercises.
James I

When King James I and his eleven year old son Henry were to visit the College in August, 1605, a screen was made at one end of the Hall in their honour. The carved wainscot panels at the dais end were painted. At the same time the grotesque figures round the Cloisters were repaired and painted: the figure of Moses was given a new green coat. The Great Chamber in the Founder's Tower, already hung with President Mayew's tapestries, was painted in anticipation of the visit. Like so many heirs apparent Prince Henry died before his father, in 1612, at the age of eighteen.

The Civil War

The early seventeenth century was a period of orderly progress for the College, but then came the Civil War. Oxford University rallied to the Stuart cause and after King Charles I's victory at Edgehill in October, 1642, he made Oxford his capital and chief fortress. For four years the city was full of clash and bustle and academic life almost ceased. Magdalen, commanding the London road and the bridge over the Cher, was strategically important. 'Ordinance and great guns' were placed in the College Grove, trees were cut down in the walks, a battery was set up to defend the river crossings and named Dover Pier after its reputed commander, the Earl of Dover. Preparations were also made to flood the meadows. Magdalen Tower was used as a look-out and stones were taken to the top to be hurled at an approaching enemy. It is said that Prince Rupert, the King's nephew, had his quarters at Magdalen. By 1645 the Royalist cause was lost; and on 27th April, 1646, King Charles, dresses as a servant, slipped out of Oxford. A few weeks later the city surrendered to Parliament. The next year the Parliamentary Visitors came to Magdalen. The President was removed and each member of the College was asked if he would submit to the authority of Parliament. Most refused and about twenty-eight Fellows and twenty-one Demies were expelled, as well as almost all the servants. Their places were taken by men who were more conformable. In 1649 Generals Cromwell and Fairfax paid an official visit to Oxford and dined at Magdalen. Their soldiers damaged the Chapel considerably, but, nevertheless, the Commonwealth period passed comparatively calmly.
The Struggle with James II

Despite its traditional loyalty to the Stuart kings the College found itself in conflict with James II. The King, returning to Roman Catholicism, was determined to make Magdalen a Catholic seminary. When the President died in 1687, the King tried to appoint his own nominee while the Fellows, in accordance with the Founder's Statutes, elected Dr. Hough, one of their number. Neither side would give way. In September, 1687, the King summoned the Fellows to Christchurch, where he harangued them, and refused to accept their petition. The next month three Royal Commissioners, escorted by troops of cavalry, came to Magdalen and met Dr. Hough and the Fellows in the Hall. Most of the Fellows refused to accept the King's nominee: Dr. Hough was expelled, his Lodgings were broken open and the King's man, Bishop Parker, was installed by proxy.

Then twenty-five Fellows were expelled as they would not sign a submission to the King, and new Roman Catholic Fellows were thrust in. The scholars would not recognise the new Fellows and discipline broke down. The Chapel was set up for Mass and Jesuits became Fellows. By October, 1688, it was all over, though. With William of Orange in the wings, King James, too late, realised his folly in trying to force his religion on the English people. The Bishop of Winchester hastened to Oxford and on October 25th, amid great rejoicing, the Fellows were reinstated and the intruders banished. The day is still celebrated as Restoration Day.

Internal Conflict

Hardly had the College settled down after the troubles of 1687-88 before it was involved in litigation over Magdalen Hall: which stood on the site of the present St. Swithin's Buildings, adjacent to the old Gate. The College claimed the right to the freehold of the Hall and therefore to nominate the Principal. On the death of the incumbent in 1693 the President and Fellows chose one man to succeed while the Chancellor of the University chose another. The College's nominee barricaded himself in the Hall and the Vice-Chancellor had to force an entrance in order to admit the rival claimant. The affair eventually went to the Court of Common Pleas, where the College lost on Both counts: the Principal was deemed to hold the freehold and the Chancellor had the right to nominate the Principal.
The College had been negotiating for the site of Magdalen Hall for some time, when, in 1820, most of it was destroyed by fire. About the same time the medieval front of Hertford College (formerly Hart Hall) in Catte Street collapsed. The two societies amalgamated and the College was re-founded on the Catte Street site.

The New Building

By the end of the eighteenth century the old Gothic College buildings were considered unfashionable and more than once were in danger of being demolished. The first serious threat was the plan for the Great Quadrangle. Most of the Cloisters and the Founder's Tower were to be pulled down and the President's new Lodgings were to be on the north side of the oval courtyard. The medieval Song School was demolished and, in 1733, the left-hand range in the picture (still called New Building) was built. The ends were left rough in anticipation of further building.

The scheme for the Great Quadrangle was revived at the end of the eighteenth century. By then tastes had changed again and James Wyatt, then working on the Chapel, produced plans for a plain, neo-Gothic style quadrangle. In 1795 there were discussions about complete removal of the Cloisters but, luckily, this was too costly.

John Buckler's Design

John Buckler and his son were closely associated with the College all their lives. In 1796 a new set of drawings were prepared for a quadrangle where the north side of Cloisters would be replaced by a low Gothic screen.

John Nash and Humphrey Repton's Designs

In 1801 the idea was taken up with John Nash and Humphrey Repton. Both intended a three-sided quadrangle open to the east. Nash's ideas were pure fantasy with little relevance to the actual site but Repton produced one of his famous Red Books and planned carefully. His design entailed flooding the Meadow.
The Battle Over Cloisters

Other designs were produced, Grecian or Gothic in style. Gradually the issue became focussed on the desirability of a pleasing view of the Chapel, Hall and Tower from the New Building, which meant doing something to the north block of the Cloisters, then three stories high. In 1821 Joseph Parkinson, the College consultant, reported that it was in a precarious state and he employed a local builder, Daniel Evans, to remove the upper story and pull down the north face, leaving the cloister walk itself. Responding to vigorous protests the College ordered Mr. Evans to rebuild the north wall and restore the original roof. Work stopped in the autumn of 1822, when much of the north wall had been replaced (badly, said Buckler) and on the plea of severe frost damage it was taken down again.

By 1824 Parkinson had rebuilt the north side of Cloisters as it appears today. The end of the Great Quadrangle controversy was marked by the finishing of the ends of New Building that summer.

The Gravel Walk

Until the late nineteenth century the main entrance to the College lay along Gravel Walk: a picturesque path running parallel with High Street and separated from it by an avenue of elm trees. The picture shows it in the eighteenth century from High Street. At the Longwall Street end (the left side of the picture) is the Greyhound Inn, while Magdalen Hall occupies much of the right hand side. This picture looks along the walk towards the Nicholas Stone gateway. The view is of about 1840, by which time most of Magdalen Hall had been pulled down.

By the late eighteenth century, when the Gothic style became the fashion again, Nicholas Stone's classical gateway was much disliked. James Wyatt produced alternative designs for a new one in the 1790s. The gate shown here was a square set in a hexagon, and made the entrance from High Street rather than Gravel Walk. It was expensive, however, and was probably never considered seriously.
Expansion

Stone’s gate was eventually demolished and was replaced, in 1844, with one by A.W. Pugin, one of the leaders of the Gothic Revival. His gate lasted less than forty years, though, and was pulled down when the College was enlarged. Gravel Walk was swept away then, too. The present gate opens off High Street and was built in 1885 to the design of Bodley and Garner.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the College was reformed and enlarged. More people meant more buildings. With Magdalen Hall gone there was room to expand westwards. The rest of the buildings in Gravel Walk were demolished as well as Pugin’s new Gate, and in 1880-84 St. Swithun’s Buildings and Quadrangle were built by Bodley and Garner. They are distinguished examples of Victorian Gothic, balancing and complementing the fifteenth century buildings. In 1928-30 Sir Giles Gilbert Scott added on Longwall Quadrangle (below), on the site of Magdalen College School.

The School

As part of the Founder’s plan for education a Grammar School was built alongside the College in the 1480s. A new Grammar Hall was built in 1614 and this survived the fire of 1820 which almost destroyed the neighbouring Magdalen Hall. By 1828, however, it was considered unsafe and all except the part by the turret was demolished together with the remains of Magdalen Hall.

The school was transferred to the former Lodgings of the Principal of the Hall for a few years. Soon after 1842 this, too, was pulled down, but a fragment of the old school hall was left detached and was used for a time as a cottage by the College porter. In the 1880s it underwent changes again, but today it stands as a picturesque relic, the only part surviving of the Magdalen Hall complex. Meanwhile, a new Schoolroom and Hall, designed by J.C. Buckler, was built where the Greyhound In had been. The foundation stone was laid in 1849 and the building was used until the school moved to new premises across Magdalen Bridge. It was then converted into the New Library, which was officially opened by the Prince of Wales on 9th November 1932. Prince Edward had been an undergraduate at Magdalen 1912-14.
The Lodgings

By the Founder's Statues the President was to live apart from the rest of the college community, on a more lavish scale and to have special privileges. Originally he lodged in the Founder's Tower, with convenient access to the muniments on one side and the Library on the other, but almost at once further accommodation was provided to the west. Over the years the Lodging has been enlarged and altered.

Dr. Routh, shown here in his study in the last year of his life, is perhaps the best known of all the Presidents. He lived to be ninety-nine; and did not change his style of dress or habits of life from his election at the age of thirty-six in 1791 until his death in 1854. Although he was a recluse his influence in the College was powerful.

The Chapel

The Chapel that William of Waynflete built as the core of his college has undergone many changes over the years. Only the shell remains, and that altered, of the building of 1480. We cannot now reconstruct what it then looked like inside for so much was swept away at the Reformation. During the troubled middle years of the sixteenth century altars and images were broken up, plate and vestiments sold, service books burnt, the rood loft and organ destroyed. By the time Accepted Frewen became President in 1626 little remained of the old Chapel except the wooden stalls with their misericords and some brasses.

President Frewen began to restore richness and beauty to the Chapel. He repaved the floor in black and white marble, added wainscoting, a brass lectern, stained glass and furniture. The tracery of the west window was altered to accommodate new painted glass. The picture shows the marble floor and the medieval stall still in use. The fresco of
the Last Judgement, by Isaac Fuller, was painted in about 1664. The painting on the altar was presented to the college in 1745.

There was alarm in 1790 about signs of decay in the Chapel roof. James Wyatt was called in, who said that both the Chapel and Hall needed reroofing. To allow room for lath and plaster ceilings the new roofs were raised three-and-a-half feet. Wyatt's plaster vault is shown in picture as well as the seventeenth century organ screen. The object seen through the screen is a stove, put in in 1812.

The college next turned to the problem of redecorating the Chapel. A competition was organised and advertisements put in the London papers offering one hundred guineas for the best scheme. The plans of L.N. Cottingham were chosen and the Chapel today is substantially as he arranged it.

Almost everything was altered. Wyatt's ceiling was largely remade, a reredos was put in again (although statues were not added until 1863) the old stalls were removed, a new organ screen was erected, the chequer pavement was reset and new heating introduced. The Founder's tomb was firmly fixed in Winchester but, in 1833, that of his father Richard Patten, was brought from a derelict church in Wainfleet and re-erected in Chapel.

The Outdoor Pulpit

The outdoor pulpit at the entrance of Chaplains' Quadrangle was built in the late fifteenth century. An annual service was preached from it on St. John the Baptist's Day (June 24th) until 1766, when it was discontinued. To create the illusion of a wilderness bullrushes used to be strewn on the ground. In 1896 the outdoor service was revived by Cosmo Lang, then Dean of Divinity but later Archbishop of Canterbury, and has continued until the present day. The picture is based on a painting by Nash. Hanging in front of the pulpit is an embroidered antepodium, dated 1617, and bearing the initials W.W. It is still in the College.
Carols in Hall

The Christmastide celebrations with carols in Hall date only from about 1840. The picture is based on a painting. It shows the plaster inserted by James Wyatt in 1790 in place of the decayed medieval roof. In 1902 the plaster was removed and replaced by a copy of the old roof, reconstructed by Bodley.

The Barge

The College barges were picturesque features of the river scene in the nineteenth century. A subscription was raised in 1886 for the Magdalen barge which was used for fifty years until the present Boat House was built. Thought not belonging to the College the barge is still in existence.

The Botanic Garden

On ground leased from Magdalen that had, in early times, been the Jews’ burying ground, the Earl of Derby, in 1621, founded a Physic Garden. His intention was to help medicine by growing suitable herbs and plants. Three acres were enclosed by a wall, and trees and and plants were arranged in formal patterns. There was also the first conservatory to be built in England. When Charles Daubeny was appointed Professor of Botany in 1834 he found the gardens neglected. He built a laboratory, rebuilt greenhouses, made pools and fountains, and planted trees. For Daubeny the purpose of the garden was to discover what plant study could do for all fields of science and industry, not just medicine, and so, in 1840, he changed the name from Physic to Botanic Garden. The Garden was extended in 1944 and the present greenhouses were rebuilt in 1970.
May Morning

The annual practice of singing from the top of Magdalen Tower to greet May Morning was already "an ancient custom" by the mid-seventeenth century. Then and during the eighteenth century, it was a lengthy secular concert. One wet May Morning at the end of the eighteenth century the concert was impossible as the choir could not keep its music dry. It did, though, know the words of the College grace, "Te Deum patrem collimus", and were able to sing that. This started the tradition, and by 1844 the wearing of surplices was introduced as the old concert had by then become a service. It has for many years now been a popular spectacle, attracting great crowds on land and river.

Maintaining Magdalen

The maintenance and restoration of buildings five hundred years old is an increasingly necessary operation. Over the centuries there has been damage by fire and tempest as well as occasional wanton destruction, but the weathering and wear of stone and timber is continuous. New buildings for a changing society are needed too. Apart from mechanical aids little has changed in the methods of working. The modern craftsmen, carving stone and restoring the buildings are working in the same tradition as those who, with William Orchard, under William of Waynflete's direction, first built the College of St. Mary Magdalen in the fifteenth century.