

*An address given in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, by Anthony Smith CBE (Magdalen's President from 1988-2005), on 20 October 2013, the anniversary of the Chapel's dedication in 1480.*

When my undergraduate days were done I got a training job at the BBC and was put to work in news magazine programmes and it was there that I learned about anniversaries. Everything that happens has an anniversary: and when you are looking for a reason to broadcast something you find interesting, you look for that essential peg on which to hang your call on the listener's or viewer's attention. So we often hunted for a suitable anniversary to nudge the audience into taking an interest in something we wanted to tell them about. An anniversary seals the audience into, gives them a relationship with the event.

Anniversaries can re-ignite memories and stimulate the imagination. They rouse curiosity. They give sudden or new meaning to things previously ignored. They don't have to be grand centenaries or jubilees to get you semi-consciously measuring the distance between yourself and the event.

Today, October 20th, is the anniversary of the completion of this Chapel, more than five hundred years ago. This glorious building was built to serve the rather small population of late 15th century Magdalen; William of Waynflete, the Founder, had decreed that there should be one President, forty Fellows and thirty demies, or semi-Fellows. There were also four chaplains and a choir of eight clerks and sixteen choristers, just one hundred souls, large by Oxford standards of the time, all enjoying free board and lodging, their company supplemented by a fluctuating number of paying students, who mostly lived over the quad at Magdalen Hall, where a cherry tree used to stand, now replaced, I'm told, by a *Clandestris Kentukea*.

From that moment on the liturgical throughput of this Chapel was copious to say the least. There were four or five daily services, all with music; there were daily processions in and out of the chapel and around the college and cloisters, with additional activity on Sundays and Saints' days. Waynflete had laid down that there should be numerous special requiems, services of intercession for the souls of various monarchs and benefactors. So many services that many took place simultaneously, at several altars around the chapel – these were removed after some doctrinal reverse in the following century. He also ordained that regular lectures and theological disputations should take place out in the Ante-Chapel. There must have been a constant priestly traffic jam where today we enjoy meditative calm.

And all of this was under the direct inspection of the President who had a spy hole in the wall of his private chapel way up in the Lodgings through which he could gaze down at the *va-et-vient* below. He cannot do this today as the spyhole is blocked and covered by the Last Supper painting.

October 20th is the anniversary of all of that. And yet the archives provide us only with the date on which this torrent of devotional activity was unleashed. What the College did that day to mark the occasion we simply do not know.

But knowing the mind of the Governing Body of Magdalen as I do, I will advance some speculations. Magdalen always thinks big. One of the Fellows must surely have said: "Let's invite Edward IV, let's have the King come round and do the honours." But the Bursar would have winced at the thought of the vast monarchical retinue turning up in Oxford yet again, eating and drinking up the budget. It had happened before. And the Deans would have recalled the appalling habits of some of the royal retinue, not the kind of thing to have go on with the choristers around. Then another Fellow might have said "Well, why don't we get the Archbishop of Canterbury instead?" But the eyes of the four chaplains would have met, their heads shaking in quadratic unison: they would have remembered how cool relations still were between Waynflete and the family of Thomas Bouchier, the Archbishop; back in the 1450s, there had been some bad business over a tract of land in Norfolk: the Bouchiers thought it belonged to them but the ingenious Bishop Waynflete somehow slipped it, with disputed legality, into an endowment he was building up for his favourite project. You can guess what it was - his new Magdalen College. So the Archbishop might take the invitation as a taunt rather than a compliment.

Then some naïve Fellow might have suggested getting the Chancellor of the University to come, but Chancellor Woodville was twenty-five years old, yes twenty-five, and he was the brother-in-law of the King, Edward IV, aforementioned. His appointment to this high academic office had been more a case of whoyerknow than whatyerknow and he seemed not to take a close interest in academic affairs.

It is just possible that a Fellow, probably young and green, would have come up with the bright idea to ask the old President back to do the honours. William Tybard was enjoying a dignified retirement. And with unkindly accuracy one of the Fellows would have remarked: "But isn't he a bit past it?" and another more tactfully would have corrected him: "Well, no, not entirely - I think". "Oh, he wouldn't come", a third might have said. "Oh, he'd come," the President might have added, knowing his man. "We could give him lunch", the Bursar might have chipped in, with characteristic generosity, relieved to note that the more expensive options were being abandoned. Well, all we can do today is to speculate on what was done to mark this noble occasion. The archives are silent.

It is difficult when sitting in this quiet place, to realise that when it was built and for generations to follow men killed, tortured and executed each other in quarrels over religion. Cities were sacked, populations brutalized over issues of religion; there was danger in belief - something, alas, familiar in our own time in other parts of the world. The bitter divisions that beset the Reformation and led to the English Civil War were reflected in the ritual, the music and the spectacle of the Chapel; each twist and turn in those political upheavals was evidenced within this community of Magdalen. The fabric of this building for the most part escaped the mayhem but what actually went on in here was subject to the rise and fall of doctrine and faction.

Incense came in and out again. Relics disappeared. The organ was jettisoned and then a better one replaced it. Rich vestments came and went and came back again. The Fellowship became for a time predominantly Puritan and surplices went out. And then Queen Elizabeth herself, entirely unamused, on a visit to Oxford had a word with the President and the surplices re-appeared. The altar became a table and then an altar and then a table. The violent ructions of the outside world were reflected in the materials of worship and the behaviour of worshippers. For a brief time

many of the Fellows were expelled for obstinately or faithfully, according to opinion, clinging to a politically incorrect shade of doctrine.

But the Choir never ceased to sing, throughout the Reformation, though there were periods when those in charge paid little regard to the music. At one time it was decreed that the Choristers had to be at least 11 and three quarters, their voices half broken, and then to leave the Choir at 15 and a half. But soon the commitment to fine music was re-confirmed and choristers were again chosen for the quality of their voices. But then came a harsh edict, soon happily reversed, forbidding them to play bowls between services on Sundays.

You can still see evidence of these events. In the midst of the turmoil preceding and during the Civil War a man called Accepted Frewen took office as President. He was sent on a diplomatic mission to Spain and brought back a stream of ideas. He painted and redecorated, carved and rebuilt. He had a series of paintings of saints attached to the Fellows' stalls, one of which has just come to light and is at this moment under restoration. He acquired the magnificent brass eagle lectern from which the lessons are read. And it was there incidentally that Oscar Wilde some centuries later stood and decided not to read the prescribed scripture of the day but to recite to the congregation some risqué passages from the Song of Solomon - for which misdeed, as he wrote home to his mother in Dublin, he was "rebuked for levity at the lectern".

But after Frewen came the cataclysm. Magdalen had sheltered and funded many of the royalist community who fled for their lives to Oxford but was then forced to accept the conquering regime of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell and his men came here to dine one evening – an evening said to have been marked by 'good cheere and bad speeches', a party which ended with the guests coming into the Chapel and smashing much of the medieval glass. But the great West Window, new at the time, was untouched by Cromwell's drunken hooligans; it survived to be removed to a place of safety just before the Second World War, a place where it was badly damaged, and was brought back and painstakingly restored only ten years ago.

Design and doctrine continued hand in hand into the 19th century when massive alterations took place during the time of what is known as the Tractarian movement – a movement which brought back many of the more Catholic traditions and transformed many chapels and churches around Oxford. A general redesign and rebuild was decreed and Lewis Nockalls Cottingham was commissioned. He was an anticipator and precursor of the High Victorian Gothic. Many visitors look at this Chapel and assume it was designed by Pugin, famous because of his contribution to the rebuilding of Parliament, but it is in fact the master work of Cottingham, some decades earlier. Cottingham stripped out all the seats and provided what we sit upon and see around us today. The ancient misericord seats, whose wood didn't match, were taken out and used around the walls of the Ante-Chapel with their amusing and fearsome carvings. The Chapel later became Pugin's inspiring model; he was a close friend of Bloxam, Magdalen's mid 19th century priest and historian. In this Chapel and indeed all around Magdalen there are examples of Pugin's work, items perhaps given as presents to Bloxam, a cupboard here, a table there, a door handle, a candlestick, a bookcase.

Cottingham had a wonderful time rediscovering what lay beneath centuries of old plasterwork. He discovered the doors at the altar end which once led into a vestry and he found the medieval niches which he re-fashioned and now hold the images on the great reredos. He was instructed to

restore the niches but to leave them empty, for now a new debate raged in and outside Magdalen over whether images in churches would become doctrinally incorrect objects of worship. For thirty years the debate raged among the Fellows until a compromise: images could return but they would, apart from the one of John the Baptist, be Old Testament kings and prophets. And there they are today in their magnificence.

The Chapel has reflected events in the wider world, but the reverse has also often been the case. In 1688, the Fellows hurriedly elected a new President in this Chapel, according to their rules, in an attempt to get a new one before the King, James II, imposed one on them. The King heard and took umbrage and expelled all of them, forcing the Catholic Bishop of Oxford into the presidency. The Fellows wandered the streets protesting as the King's position weakened and was himself forced to abdicate. Thus this Chapel played a significant part in the political process we know as the Glorious Revolution. And for three hundred years afterwards no Bishop of Oxford was permitted to enter Magdalen.

Then in 1709 a vituperative sermon preached by Dr. Sacheverell, a Magdalen Fellow with stronger political conviction than tact, very pro-Tory and very anti-Whig, led to a terrible cataclysm. He repeated his inflammatory sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral and published it as a tract; mobs rioted in London streets, a treason trial took place in the House of Lords, a general election was decreed and, counterproductively, the Tory government was thrown out. Dr Sacheverell returned to Magdalen and often thereafter read morning prayers to packed congregations.

So many events have an echo in today's anniversary. But there are also the presences of people, ordinary and extraordinary, whose lives and prayers are embedded here. Martin Joseph Routh, president for 64 years and still in office until weeks before his 100th birthday. C. S. Lewis, in his seat at the altar end who in the fifty years since his death has become probably the century's most effective disseminator of Christian ideas around the globe.

But what one feels in here is the long steady accumulation of the devotions of centuries. One must remember that when this Chapel was built Oxford had already been in business for centuries. This Chapel was an addition to a many-Chapelled University. Today as your bus bursts through that great cleft in the Chilterns on the M40 and reveals the spreading plain of Oxford – a view that never seems twice the same in colour and atmosphere – you can see a sort of permanent mist, whatever the weather, rising up from this Holy City of Oxford. It always thrills. I often feel that it is the miasma of prayer, rising from the Cathedral, the countless churches and chapels, and the new scattering of mosques, synagogues and temples around the city.

It is as if the prayers rise from these many sources, layer upon layer and lodge in the ether, their varying colours spread across a changing sky. And it is the music of many choirs that fuels their upward journey, melting away the controversies behind the varieties of belief and unbelief. This is the real gift of the ancestors, in physical and audible form, in architecture and music, an eternal gift to those who pass below.