

9-9-97

Christ Church College

Christ Church College is one of the largest colleges at Oxford, and has more to see for visitors than any of the other colleges. One of its walls helps define Oriel Square, making it handy for our explorations. We had read that Dr. Fell of the well-known rhyme which goes, "I do not like thee, Dr. Fell/ The reason why I cannot tell/ But still and all, I know full well/ I do not like thee, Dr. Fell" was rector of the cathedral until his death in 1649. And that was all we found out about Dr. Fell.

Our first visit was through the back entrance, a set of impressive, high, wrought iron gates on the back side of the college. We were there to attend Evensong in the Chapel. The Porter in his formal black suit and black bowler told us that the gate closes at 6:05 and that we would have to exit by a different gate. We walked down a broad pebble walk with the large college library on our left and a three-story dormitory across a broad grass lawn to our right, in the usual "quad" arrangement. At the end of the library, we walked through a broad archway leading to the main quadrangle, a space that seemed large enough to contain the major part of our little Oriel College.



Christ Church College was founded in 1546 by King Henry VIII on an earlier college which Cardinal Wolsey had started, naming it Cardinal College to honor himself. He had elaborate plans for a large quadrangle with an encircling cloister, but the cloister was not completed after he fell from favor. The broad stone walkway around three sides was to have been part of the cloister, with the foundations for the columns of the colonnade protruding at intervals from the walk. The three sides of the building show impressive arches which are broken irregularly and often illogically by doors and windows. The south wall contains the large, beautiful three-story Hall, which can seat all 543 undergraduates and post-graduates, along with a high table for all 48 Fellows, known at Christ Church as Students. From the east wall at its juncture with the south wall rises the Christ Church Cathedral, which also serves as the College Chapel. It was built on the site of St. Frideswide's Monastery dating back to the eighth century. The Cathedral was our destination for Evensong. It is a large building with several chapels in addition to the main chancel and nave. One chapel contains the remains of St. Frideswide, with her effigy topping the stone sarcophagus in medieval style.

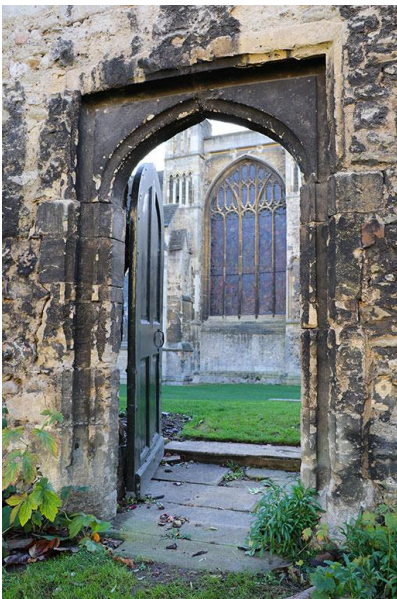
The nave which was the location of the Evensong has beautiful stained-glass windows, most of which date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I found Evensong a beautiful service, with the small twenty-four voice choir singing several Psalms with a beautiful setting. (We learned that the choir which had impressed us was a pick-up choir for the summer. During the academic year, the choir is composed of sixteen boys and twelve men). The following Sunday we attended the eleven o'clock Sung Liturgy service, with a thoughtful homily by the Precentor, a woman who has a beautiful speaking voice as well as a lovely soprano singing voice. The nave was long, with three rows of benches facing each other. The choir occupied another group of facing benches at the entrance to the nave. We were seated for the Sunday service in the chancel. As we left the nave, we read that Christ Church College time is five minutes behind Oxford time because it is located five minutes west of Greenwich Mean meridian.



We left the college through Tom Tower, built by Christopher Wren in 1682 and containing the "Great Tom" chimes which are rung on the hour and quarter hour during the day. At 9:05 p.m. each day the chimes are rung 101 times, representing each scholar of the original college. At that time all the college gates are closed. On the entrance gateway is a collection of brilliantly colored coats-of-arms of the benefactors of the college, from kings to commoners. There is a similar collection of coats-of-arms over the Oriel College entrance.

The second visit to Christ Church College was to see the gallery of paintings and other art treasures given to the college by alumni over the years. Eighteenth century painters of England and Italy comprise the bulk of the collections. Another time we walked down the broad pebbled walk south of the College, between the college walls and the large grassy park leading to the Thames. We sat on a bench on one of the perpendicular walks, enjoying the shade and watching some partridges going about their busy way across the walk. Across from that walk were the playing fields of Merton College, where we had hoped to see a pick-up game of cricket.

Another time we took a tour through the Cathedral. While we were looking at the chapels and windows, one of the stewards told us more about the Cathedral, pointing out the columns which date back to the twelfth century. Some of the stained-glass windows are from the fourteenth century, having survived the destruction of the interiors of churches during Henry VIII's time as well as Cromwell's time. He mentioned some of the famous sons of Christ Church College, including John Locke (Philosopher), W. E. Gladstone (Prime Minister, 1894), C.J.L. Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), John Wesley, Sir Philip Signey (Poet), King Edward VII, and Sir William Walton (Composer). He pointed out a green door opposite the church which opened on a small, colorful garden; it was the entrance to Alice's home where she lived with her father, one of the Canons of the College and also served as the entrance to Alice's Wonderland. Lewis Carroll was a mathematics Don at Christ Church and a great friend of Alice and her sister, for whom he wrote "Alice in Wonderland."



The Hall at Christ Church College is said to be the largest one of all the Oxford colleges. They are the dining halls in the colleges, but that term does not do justice to their "Great Hall" looks, formal settings for meals for undergraduates in formal attire, with assigned seats and Dons seated at the "high table." The beautiful vaulted roof over the stairway leading to the Hall at Christ Church is one of the first sights I noticed as we entered the quadrangle through Tom Tower. The unsymmetrical irregular doors and windows I mentioned are more than countered by the grace of the vaulted stairway.



Christ Church College is grand, but I would prefer the warm intimacy of Oriel College for every day living. Because we were not there during the academic year, we were unable to visit the library in any of the colleges. Since no one mentioned the presence of a copy of the Canterbury Tales anywhere except in the Oriel College library, I presume that the smaller library at Oriel is superior in at least that one possession.