The Founding of St Antony’s College

Granting the charter

In 1947 Antonin Besse, a wealthy French merchant whose business was centred in Aden, was considering giving approximately £2 million to the University of Oxford for the foundation of a new college. He was encouraged to do this by R.A.H. Clyde, his London solicitor from the firm Clyde & Co. who had himself attended New College. Besse had been scouting around for a use for his money, as one of his colleagues recalled:

I well remember before Clyde ultimately persuaded Mr. Besse that Oxford University should be approached with a view to the foundation of the College, going round huge country houses which at that time were up for sale in the hope that they would be suitable for ‘the school for rebels’ which Mr. Besse first had in mind. He was so much against the modern tendency for men to accept regimentation and the planning of their lives from birth to death that he felt he must do something to assist ‘the rebels’ who were prepared to uphold the freedom of the individual to make his own decisions and to be master of his own destiny.

On 8 May 1948 Clyde went to see Douglas Veale, the University Registrar, to tell him Besse planned to buy a country house not far from Oxford and establish a college there. Clyde asked whether such a college would be recognized by the university. Informing him that there was no hope of this, Veale claimed he then suggested Besse try to find a building within Oxford and establish the college. Since this would take time, ‘if his client wished for quick results’ he might devote
part of his money – say, a quarter of a million pounds – to increasing the resources of some of the poorer colleges by enabling them to put up buildings, offer scholarships, and employ extra staff.\(^3\) He also said £1 500 000 would be sufficient to found a college. Thus at one stroke Veale denied the new college £500 000 plus one-sixth of £1 500 000, a total of £750 000.\(^4\) Clyde’s version of what happened was different. He said the Vice-Chancellor persuaded Besse to part with £250 000 of the £1.5 million to enlarge some existing colleges so that St Antony’s students could be accommodated in them until they acquired buildings of their own.\(^5\) Whatever the truth of the matter, the £250 000 was divided as follows: Worcester, St Edmund Hall, Keble and St Peter’s received £38 000 each, Wadham £35 000, Pembroke £30 000, Lincoln £18 000 and Exeter £15 000.\(^6\)

Oxford did not submit a definite scheme to Besse. In the depths of the long vacation of 1948 Clyde, knowing that Besse was an impatient man, pressed the university for one, failing which Besse would have to consider withdrawing his offer. Veale, hastily recalled from his holiday, remembered a scheme presented in March 1947 by the committee for the balance of studies. The purpose of this committee had been to observe that a proper balance between the faculties was kept in the development of subjects studied in the university.\(^7\) As members of the committee, A.D. Gardner, the regius professor of medicine, and Professor G.R. Driver, an orientalist, had discussed what they thought was a far more serious problem in the university – the inadequate provision for postgraduates coming from other universities. They had suggested that the situation would be relieved by the establishment of a postgraduate college.\(^8\) Driver and Gardner estimated that £2 000 000 would be required for such a college. It was their report which Veale now submitted to Clyde, and it was accepted as a basis for negotiation.\(^9\)

After further conversations between Veale and Clyde, on 1 September 1948 the Hebdomadal Council met to consider the matter. Mindful of a possible poisoned chalice, it decided to make enquiries about Besse’s credentials at the Foreign Office. It wondered whether the million and a half pounds offered by Besse might be open to the objection that the money was ‘tainted’ in some way.\(^10\) The reply was reassuring, as Veale told the Vice-Chancellor:

I have just heard from the Foreign Office about Besse. The information is rather second-hand, but it is to the effect that he is rather a tough customer, not much liked by his local competitors, but he is in no sense disreputable and no taint attaches to his money.\(^11\)