The College Buildings

The expanding college

St Antony’s has always lacked adequate buildings, and space in which to pursue its aims has been at a premium. However, as David Dilks says:

St Antony’s constitutes a remarkable achievement. It never had very much money and pushes resources to the limit. That policy has been triumphantly vindicated: in St Antony’s chosen fields of study, there is surely no more distinguished a college anywhere, though there are plenty better funded. So you can have poor buildings and a fine college, if you have good staff and good students, but without good staff and students you can have all the money in the world, and the finest library, without producing an excellent college.¹

The Banbury Road near St Antony’s was a road in pre-Roman times. During the Roman occupation there may have been a building on the college site because Roman coins, and bricks intermingled in layers, have been found during building excavations. Later the area, which was bought by St John’s College in the seventeenth century, was used as farmland and subsequently as market gardens until St John’s leased the land south of St Philip and St James church (built in 1862–6) and north of Bevington Road for an Anglican convent to be built.

The convent of the Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity was founded by Marian Rebecca Hughes (1817–1912), a follower of Pusey, in 1849. She selected a site for the nunnery in 1864, commissioned Charles Buckeridge as architect, and occupied the building in 1868. The stone used came from Gibraltar Quarries between Shipton-on-Cherwell and Kirtlington, to harmonize with that of St Philip and St
James church next door. The roof was of Stonesfield slates. Most of the cost was borne by Mother Marian’s private fortune. The design was narrow and E-shaped, envisaging further extension northward along the Woodstock Road (the bare brickwork, without facing stone, on an exterior wall where the extension was to be built, can still be seen, though now it is concealed by ivy). The chapel, by John Loughborough Pearson, was added in 1891–4, narrowing the small courtyard to little more than a passage. The apse was adorned with paintings by Charles Edgar Buckeridge, the original architect’s son, and Ethel King Martin; they were restored in 1996.

The church of St Philip and James contains a small stained-glass window, depicting Mother Marian, high up in the clerestory, immediately opposite the south door, along with a similar window portraying her successor. Mother Marian’s Society ran three schools and a girls’ orphanage. Two of the schools had separate sites. One of them, St Denys School, which had moved from St Giles in 1876, was adjacent to the convent on the corner of Winchester and Bevington roads. The third establishment, St Michael’s, an upper school for twenty-five girls of professional background, was situated in the north wing of the convent, until it moved to Cirencester in the late 1920s. The north wing then had only two storeys, but in 1900–1 a third (designed probably by Leonard Stokes) was added and became school dormitories. The room below became the main classroom. In the south wing were the orphanage and the nuns’ rooms. The St Michael’s girls were not permitted to speak to the orphans, who wore pink dresses, aprons and caps in preparation for the time they would be put into ‘service’. The orphans helped with the convent’s cows. The nuns also ran another school, St Faith’s, at 115–7 Woodstock Road.

The original college JCR, now the computer room, housed the orphans’ quarters; the former Buttery, now containing Russian books, was the nuns’ refectory; and the former college kitchen, now the book stack, was partly kitchen and partly nuns’ common room. The nuns’ cells were on the north and south wing of the first floor on both sides, with a narrow passage down the middle. The orphans’ sleeping quarters were on the top floor, and the mother superior occupied the present Warden’s study and his secretary’s room (previously James Joll’s bedroom and sitting room). The convent library was beside the present Warden’s office. The Gulbenkian Room (formerly the college dining hall) was the dining room for the school, and the room off its end (previously the lower SCR) the convent chapter house. The blocked-in circular staircase from first floor to ground was known as ‘Helen’s stairs’.2