



Building Fitzwilliam College
1963-2013
An Architectural Journey

Exhibition
26 June - 11 October

Photo: Jonathan Webb (Webb Aviation)



INTRODUCTION

In 1963 the Fellows and students of Fitzwilliam moved into new buildings designed by Denys Lasdun, a champion of the International Modernist movement in architecture. Fitzwilliam celebrates 50 years on the site with a symposium and an exhibition of photographs, plans and models showing the ways in which Lasdun's original vision has been interpreted and transformed by successive architects and imaginative landscaping.

Six architectural practices have been involved in building Fitzwilliam over the last 50 years – Denys Lasdun and Partners; David Roberts; MacCormac Jamieson Prichard (now MJP Architects); van Heyningen and Haward; Allies and Morrison, and Edward Cullinan Architects (now Cullinan Studio).

A close look at the buildings and their complementary gardens shows Fitzwilliam evolving into one of the most appealing of Cambridge college environments in which to live and to study.



The south range in 1974, with the original College entrance and gates; the boundary fence of The Grove is on the right. Photograph: Dr John Cleaver.

The Grove estate (detail from Baker's map of Cambridge, 1830)



ORIGINS

1869-1958

Established in 1869 as a non-collegiate institution for undergraduates who were unable to afford membership of a college, what was to become Fitzwilliam College was located initially in Trumpington Street. Before the end of the Second World War the University began to consider increasing the number of students, and in 1948 it was resolved that Fitzwilliam House should develop with residential provision, thereby requiring additional buildings.

A search began for an appropriate site, and in 1958 The Grove estate comprising 10.8 acres (formerly the residence of

Emma Darwin, the widow of Charles Darwin) was acquired by the University from Mrs Winifred Armstrong, the widow of a Cambridge brewer. Mrs Armstrong retained a life interest in The Grove, a house built in 1813–14 and subsequently enlarged, and its adjacent grounds – an arrangement which was to have a profound impact on Fitzwilliam College's development. The property was divided between Fitzwilliam and New Hall, which already owned the adjoining house, The Orchard, with the larger share going to Fitzwilliam.



THE LASDUN MASTERPLAN

1959-1969

With the site secured, the University appointed Denys Lasdun & Partners to draw up plans for its development with funds provided by the University Grants Committee; these were presented and approved in October 1960. The selection of a champion of the International Modernist Movement in architecture was due primarily to Leslie Martin, Professor of Architecture in the University, an influential figure in the great expansion of college and university building beyond as well as within Cambridge in the 1960s and 70s. Fitzwilliam was the first higher-education project undertaken by Lasdun, to be followed soon afterwards by the University of East Anglia and by New Court at Christ's College.

That the entire site would not be available

initially and funding would be provided only in stages meant that its development had to be conceived organically. Lasdun developed the concept of a 'snail-shell' or spiral, with its core centred on a chapel. In plan the Oxbridge tradition of grassed courts with buildings forming the perimeter is retained, but with the difference that the Fitzwilliam courts are open, not closed. The buildings were envisaged as facing Storey's Way, so the principal entrance is not placed in the centre of the range fronting on Huntingdon Road but on the short south wing. A third departure from tradition is in the scale and almost detached location of the principal communal building, which contains the Dining Hall and its associated structures.

“The conception of the College is, as it were, a three storey inhabited wall which spirals round the Chapel and Hall-complex, ending up in a slightly over sized [sic] water jump. During the process of growth, at all stages, the corporate elements of the College remain the central pivots of the scheme (this is not achieved in traditional additive court planning). The inhabited wall defines and contains the College community.”

Denys Lasdun (Denys Lasdun Archive, RIBA Drawings & Archives Collections, LaD/35/1: Denys Lasdun letter to Patrick Hodgkinson c.1961-63.)

THE LASDUN MASTERPLAN REALISATION 1961-1966



If the plan of the new college owed much to Cambridge tradition, the visual vocabulary of its first buildings bears the imprint of Le Corbusier and other exponents of Modernism (what Reyner Banham termed 'New Brutalism'). At Fitzwilliam Lasdun was free, as were the architects of its neighbours New Hall and Churchill College, to develop his ideas without constraints imposed by existing buildings. Restrictions were however imposed by financial exigencies.

Lasdun planned the development in two phases. The first, comprising Fellows' Court, Tree Court, and the Central Building, was completed in two stages between 1961 and 1966; the planned adjacent chapel was not built as it was not funded and, like a further residential phase, it would fall within the garden of The Grove retained by Mrs Armstrong.

Whether for budgetary or for aesthetic reasons, the choice of a dark-brown brick and the exposed horizontal bands of the concrete floors which delineate the three storeys of the elevations imparts a more austere appearance to the perimeter ranges than the warm red brick façades of older colleges. If the cloistered walkways around Fellows' Court are reminiscent of Cloister Court at Queens' College, the

design of the façades with their random and narrow fenestration is indebted to Le Corbusier's Maisons Jaoul (1954-56). The entrance, at the end of a drive leading to Storey's Way and subsequently filled in, rejected the vertical accent of the traditional college gatehouse in favour of an unadorned, flat-topped two-storey gated opening.

In both scale and detail the Central Building makes a much stronger statement. The highly individualistic tall clerestory windows framed by hooded parabolic pods, lighting the dining hall, tower over and dominate the College; equally distinctive is the upper floor of the west façade, with its generous projecting fenestration and copper cladding. The grey internal render of the hall recalls the exterior of Le Corbusier's Convent of La Tourette (1956-60).

Although each subsequent phase in the College's development has its own distinctive imprint and is of its time, the matrix was established by Lasdun's design, scale, materials and palette.



A NEW ORIENTATION: NEW COURT

1983-1986

By the early 1980s the continuing non-availability of The Grove site meant that the College was faced with a student accommodation crisis. The decision was taken to expand south of Fellows' Court. In 1983, MacCormac Jamieson & Prichard was selected to develop the site and New Court was erected in 1985-86. Richard MacCormac's design took its cue from Lasdun's perimeter ranges in its three-storey elevation, use of dark brick with horizontal concrete string-courses and the mix of narrow and wide windows, but there are many differences in detail. The horizontal bands have a warmer and softer texture, and the roof is more steeply pitched and is visible above the parapet, extending over the bay windows of the upper storey. The latter form part of the series of shallow steps and layers which give a sense of rhythm to the

façades. Internally the four staircases (a departure from the traditional dark Cambridge college staircases) give access to kitchens and more spacious and variegated rooms with purpose-built furniture. New Court was much acclaimed; one critic described it as 'MacCormac at his most inventive and spatially ingenious.'

New Court was perceived as the first phase of an expansion for which Richard MacCormac produced alternative designs based on a continuous enclosing perimeter great court linked by a cloister on a rigidly geometrical pattern; this differed markedly from Lasdun's 'snail-shell' concept.

Awards

David Urwin Heritage Award for Best New Building in Cambridge (1989)

“Lasdun's original plan was to make a big court. And so New Court was part of that ambition, really, to keep going to make one big court.”

Sir Richard MacCormac

THE CHAPEL

1988-1992



Probably the most acclaimed of all the College buildings, the Chapel was the only element in MacCormac Jamieson & Prichard's proposals following the completion of New Court to be realized and the first to be erected on The Grove curtilage. A permanent chapel was made possible in 1964, when Ian Rawlins (who had taught for Fitzwilliam House before the war) made the first of several benefactions for the purpose. A chapel is shown on several of Lasdun's designs at varying sizes and on different sites in proximity to the present building. It also appears in versions of the MacCormac Jamieson & Prichard masterplan. The project became viable only after Mrs Armstrong's death in 1988, by which time the Rawlins benefaction had accumulated sufficient funds to finance it. Construction started two years later and the Chapel was dedicated in 1992.

The Chapel combines two separate MacCormac concepts: firstly, the notion of an underworld (the crypt) and an inhabited world (the chapel proper); and secondly, a ship or ark as the signifier of salvation, with the hull represented by the floor and its parapet detached from the outer walls. The magnificent plane tree in the garden provides an appropriate vista through the great east window over the altar. The round tower design is a highly successful end-piece to Lasdun's range, with which it is integrated through the use of the Lasdun brickwork palette and the continuation of the horizontal bands.

Awards

Civic Trust (1992)

David Urwin Heritage Award for Best New Building in Cambridge (1993)

The Carpenters Award (1993)

It's a building made of wood inside another building. Designing the relationship between the ship - the wooden vessel - and the building itself is one of the most difficult things that I've ever, ever, ever done.

Sir Richard MacCormac



New Court (1985)
MacCormac Jamieson Prichard
Photo: Peter Blundell Jones



Chapel (1991)
MacCormac Jamieson Prichard
Photo: Michael Evans



Gatehouse (2003)
Allies and Morrison
Photo: Peter Cook



Auditorium (2004)
Allies and Morrison
Photo: Dennis Gilbert

WILSON COURT

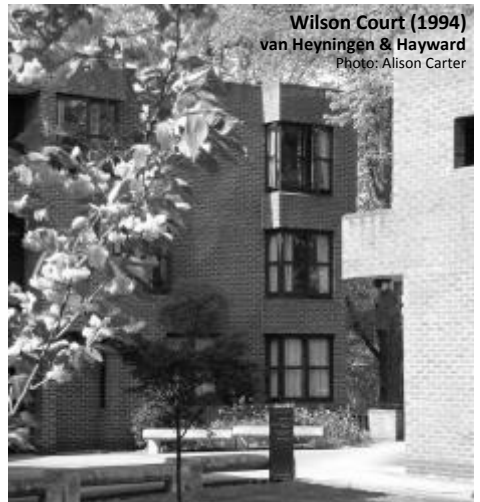
1991-1994



With the College able to expand into the grounds of The Grove, in 1991 a competition was launched for a new study and accommodation block combined with a centre for the training and further education of surveyors. This was to be erected east of Lime Tree Avenue, which leads from Storey's Way towards The Grove. The designated location meant that the building would stand alone, away from the existing structures; as such it represented the final break with the Lasdun masterplan. Van Heyningen and Haward's winning design, however, is on the same axis as the south wing of New Court and respects its scale and use of dark brick while offering a variation on the stepped-bay elevation.

The L-shaped plan defines the south-east corner of the College grounds and, despite the restricted site, the design is notable for the spaciousness of the seminar rooms

and study bedrooms. The free-standing 'pavilion' housing the Gordon Cameron Lecture Theatre was originally intended as a Buttery. Wilson Court, named after the benefactor who funded its construction, won an RIBA Award in 1996.



“[The College] feels so delightfully mature now. The tradition at Fitzwilliam — better than at almost any other college — is to do with landscape and gardening, and making the outdoor really as important as the indoor.”
Joanna van Heyningen



A NEW FRONTAGE: GATEHOUSE COURT

2000-2003

A consequence of the construction of New Court to the south of Fellows' Court was the loss of Lasdun's imposing two-storey entrance. At the turn of the century the College sought to address this issue as well as the need for additional office and residential accommodation. Allies and Morrison, who had designed buildings for the University and for other colleges, were appointed to realize these objectives; the result was Gatehouse Court, completed in 2003.

The L-shaped range abuts New Court, and the imposing entrance is signalled by the top-lit glass lantern, a contemporary interpretation of the traditional college

gatehouse which provides a welcoming ambience. Internally, the cloistered walkway into the grounds also reprises traditional college architecture as embodied in the cloister in Fellows' Court. Continuity with the earlier buildings is maintained by the use of dark brick and pale horizontal banding, but a distinctive feature is the zinc and Douglas fir cladding to the window bays.

Awards

RIBA (2005)

Brick Development Association for the Best Public Building (2005)

Civic Trust Commendation (2007)



THE AUDITORIUM

2000-2004



At the same time as they were appointed to design Gatehouse Court, Allies and Morrison were given a commission for a multi-purpose hall. The result was the Auditorium, which opened in 2004 and is a building of very different character from Gatehouse Court, which is an extension of and reflects the existing perimeter ranges.

The identity of the Auditorium is defined on the one hand by The Grove, with its buff Cambridge vernacular brickwork, and on the other by the eye-catching stainless-steel cladding at the west end. The latter feature echoes the upper parts of Lasdun's Central Building and denotes their common function as communal spaces. The dominance of the Central Building

remains unchallenged, however, as the Auditorium's lower floor is sunk below ground level; the ingenuity of the design also extends to the retractable seating, enabling the building to cater for functions ranging from lectures and concerts to badminton.

Awards

RIBA (2005)

Concrete Society, for the Building of the Year (2005)

“The character of a place is a very subtle thing, and it would have been incredibly easy to have lost the particular identity of Fitzwilliam as other new buildings were added. Each of the architects — it seems to me — has tried very hard to develop a new architecture, and new buildings, but to develop that out of the kind of language which Lasdun established at the beginning.”

Bob Allies



THE OLISA LIBRARY

2002-2009

With The Olisa Library, the latest addition to the College's stock of buildings, the wheel has turned full circle: Ted Cullinan, head of the architectural practice responsible for the design, had worked in the 1960s on Lasdun's schemes for the College.

The location between The Grove and the east range of Lasdun's Tree Court, buildings of totally different design, colour and elevation, was challenging. The solution is ingenious, with the round tower emulating MacCormac's chapel in functioning as a monumental endpoint to Lasdun's building, the fenestration and dark brick of which it echoes. Between this tower and a smaller turret is the

stepped main façade, with its distinctive white-oak cladding blending with the brickwork of The Grove.

By nearly doubling the College's library capacity and incorporating purpose-built IT rooms to replace those hitherto scattered over various sites, the chronic shortage of space for both books and users in the original library has been resolved.

The Library, which was built in 2008-09, is named in honour of its benefactors Ken Olisa, an alumnus of the College, and his wife Julia.

“Over 50 years of repeated development, it's done this: it's maintained the spirit of the thing, while allowing different imaginations to bring their contributions to it. And the result is very understandable. You can walk in and know where you are straight away. And what to do. Fitzwilliam is a series of variables that add up to a whole. So it's a little beyond making a series of courts, and it's very graceful and very calm as a result of it.”

Ted Cullinan



The Olisa Library (2009)

Edward Cullinan Architects

Photo: Simon Feneley

LANDSCAPING THE COLLEGE

1963-2013

In an appraisal of Lasdun's buildings published in 1972, a critic noted that they already exhibited 'a fine sense of enclosure, which mature landscaping can only enhance'. It is widely recognized that this assessment has been fully vindicated by the variegated and imaginative planting schemes which are such a distinctive feature of Fitzwilliam College.

The environment enjoyed today by staff, students and visitors alike was not envisaged from the outset and has evolved only gradually – perhaps even fortuitously. In essence it represents the fusion of two entirely different concepts: the traditional Cambridge collegiate formal grassed court and the 19th-century estate garden. Fellows' Court, Tree Court and New Court were originally conceived on the former pattern, The Grove with its exotically-planted garden and grand beech and oak trees on the latter.

Following the acquisition of The Grove in 1988, Andrew Peters was appointed as a garden consultant to design the horticultural integration of the two parts; his work has been continued by head gardeners up to Steve Kidger, in the present day. The incline across Tree Court and up to The Grove was adjusted, high-quality topsoil was imported, and extensive beds were laid out along the

Central Building and the east range. In front of The Grove, a new circular area paved with setts was linked by paths and steps to the rest of the College and a lawn to the west and south extended into Lime Tree Avenue and New Court, where the former rose bed was replaced by more extensive and variegated planting. To the east of The Grove, a traditional kitchen garden with dwarf box hedging and brick paths was laid. Each subsequent addition to the College has been given an appropriate setting - most notably the Auditorium with its sunken garden, and a wild-flower meadow between the Olisa Library and Murray Edwards College.

The result is a scheme in which there is an almost seamless fusion between the traditional Cambridge formal grassed court and a garden rich in different species of plants and flowers, so conceived that each open space and cluster of buildings retains its own discrete character.



ARCHITECTS AND CONTRACTORS INVOLVED IN BUILDING FITZWILLIAM COLLEGE 1963-2013

Central Building, Fellows' Court and Tree Court (1960-1963)

Architect: Denys Lasdun and Partners

Main Contractor: Johnson and Bailey Ltd

Squash Courts (1981)

Architect: David Roberts

New Court (1985)

Architect: MacCormac Jamieson Prichard (now MJP Architects)

Main Contractor: Sindall Construction Ltd (now Morgan Sindall)

Structural and Services Engineer: Ove Arup and Partners

Clerk of Works: Robin Hill

Chapel (1991)

Architect: MacCormac Jamieson Prichard (now MJP Architects)

Main Contractor: Johnson and Bailey Ltd

Structural and Services Engineer: Ove Arup and Partners

Clerk of Works: Robin Hill

Wilson Court (1994)

Architect: van Heyningen and Haward

Main Contractor: Rattee and Kett (now Mowlem Rattee and Kett)

Structural Engineer: Price & Myers

Clerk of Works: Robin Hill

Gatehouse Court (2003) and the Auditorium (2004)

Architect: Allies and Morrison

Main Contractor: Kier Marriott

Structural Engineer: WhitbyBird (now Ramboll)

Clerk of Works: Robin Hill

The Olisa Library (2009)

Architect: Edward Cullinan Architects (now Cullinan Studio)

Main Contractor: Kier Marriott

Project Manager: Edmond Shipway

Clerk of Works: Robin Hill

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Richard Robinson (MJP Architects)

Joanna van Heyningen (van Heyningen and Haward Architects)

English Heritage

Royal Institute of British Architects, British Architectural Library (Lasdun Archive)

Andrew Peters

Christopher Pratt

Cover photo: Marcus Ginns. Art Direction Smith Ltd. Image courtesy CARO.
Additional quotations are taken from interviews recorded with the architects.

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