5. The City of Oxford High School for boys



The City of Oxford High School (COHS) for boys was located on the corner of George and New Inn Hall Streets in the center of Oxford, along side the old city walls. New Inn Hall was named after one of the oldest inns or medieval hostels in Oxford, built in the 13th century. The school was designed by T. G. Jackson and opened in 1880. Coincidentally, Jackson also designed the bridge over New College Lane linking the two parts of Hertford College of which I later became a member while I working on my D. Phil. In 1966 the school

moved to the Southfields Grammar School site where it became the Oxford School (see Button 14) and its former building now houses the University's Faculty of History.

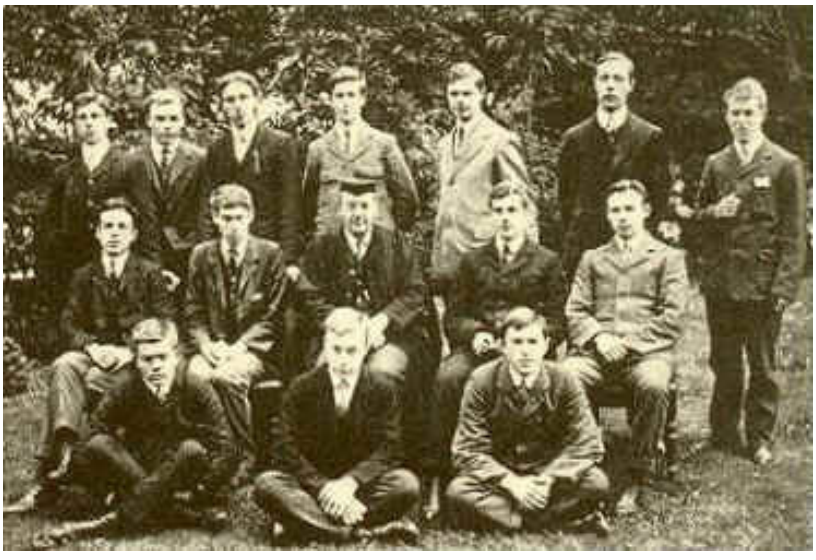
The school was founded by Thomas Hill Green (1832–1882). This is how he was described in the local paper. He was an educationalist, Fellow of Balliol, White's professor of moral Philosophy. Elected in 1876 to be the first University member of the Oxford City Council to help found and establish the High School for Boys (1880-1966), thereby completing the "city's "ladder of learning" from elementary school to University - a project dearest to his heart. Thus town and gown were united in common cause.

This reference to Town and Gown was important. The adversarial relationship between the members of the University and the people of the town started in the middle ages as the autonomy and power of the Universities grew. Town's people resented this. Indeed, on the 10th of February in 1355 a pitch battle broke out in Oxford between the town and gown. It started with a disagreement about the quality of wine being served in a tavern. 65 towns people were killed and some 30 scholars, some of whom were scalped. The upshot of this was that the University gained an even stronger influence in the town and managed to secure much land in the center. Indeed, the riot was commemorated, on what became known as St. Scholastica's day, for the next 600 years. On that day a mass was held for the dead scholars and the Mayor of Oxford was obliged to attend and pay the University a fine of one penny for every scholar killed. The hatchet was metaphorically buried in 1955, and in an act of conciliation the mayor was given an honorary degree and the vice-chancellor was made an honorary freeman of the city!

COHS's *raison d'etre* is best described by its founding principles as captured in this contemporary report when Prince Leopold laid the foundation stone on April 13 1880:

> *At the luncheon following the laying of the Foundation Stone Sir William Harcourt, a distinguished proponent of the School, took the opportunity to refute that the School would be a middle-class preserve (Hear, hear.). "It is more than that. I hope it is intended to be a great stepping-stone between the poorer and wealthier classes of the community, and that those who by industry have so distinguished themselves in elementary classes may, taking advantage of this School, be able to rise to the University itself. (Cheers.)" The aim of the School was to prepare boys for the world of commerce and public service, and the best for a university education.*

And so it did. I came there as a working class kid and left with the makings of a fledgling academic, aware of many horizons outside myself and outside my experience. The stone steps of the staircase leading up to the assembly hall were worn down by the legions of school boys who had rushed up and down them. In the corner on the staircase was a bronze statue of T. E. Lawrence who attended the school 1896-1907. The photograph below shows the sixth form at COHS in 1907. Lawrence is in the back row on the right. He took the photograph by depressing the



plunger of a bicycle pump secreted inside his jacket, which he linked to the camera to depress the shutter through pneumatic pressure. When I attended the school for its final year in 1966 it was overcrowded and we had to travel to get to its sports grounds in Marston Ferry and woodworking classes in St. Ebbes. But, for me, the site in the heart of Oxford thrilled me. The eleventh century city wall, which bordered the play ground, the college spires that could be seen rising over the walls and the very gravitas of the Victorian architecture, the masters in their gowns, all these fused to instill in me a love of Oxford, even as an eleven year old boy. I remember gazing at a memorial for the 80 boys who died in World War I. My grandfather fought in that war and lost several fingers as a machine gunner. I read Robert Graves *Good Bye to All That*, and when I gazed upon their names the horror of the war flooded over me. Somehow I saw myself in them.

Here is the school song, which I knew by heart:

In tranquil days of long ago
Under good Victoria's rule
Their faith in Oxford's youth to show
Our grandsires built a school.
"Labor Vincit Omnia"
Tis work that conquers all.
This gem of ancient Roman lore
Was carved above the prefects' door.
"Nemo Repente Sapit", too,
Was there beside it in full view,
Reminding those of slower pace
That perseverance wins the race.
Labor Vincit Omnia

Tall, brooding, high Victorian school.
T.E. Lawrence and worn marble steps.
Wooden plaques of old boys mowed down at Verdun and the Somme.

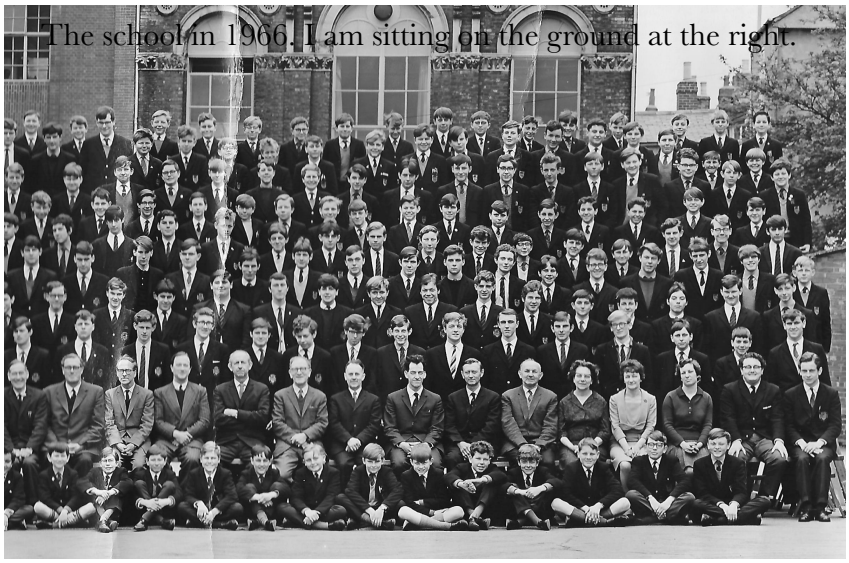
We were taught by Oxford graduates who weren't good enough to do anything else.
The usual bunch of sadists and psychopaths.

I remember the senior Lain master, Atkins.
Always dressed in a dark blue suit stretched tight over his paunch.
He slapped my best friend Nobby across the face because he called him Snoop.

Snoop, Flea, Spud, Tiny, Jock, Poxy
Kids are brilliant at getting the measure of men and each other.

There's the rub.
As the poet Felix Denis said, "There's fame and shame in the making,
But who knows which is which?

The kids.



The school in 1966. I am sitting on the ground at the right.