The Landmark Trust

THE STEWARD'S HOUSE

History Album

**The Old Debating Chamber,
today the Union library**

**Written and researched by
Charlotte Haslam and Harriet Levy**

Re-presented 2015

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 *and Scotland* SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 *Office* 01628 825920 *Facsimile* 01628 825417
Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

BASIC DETAILS

Built: **1910–11**

Architects: **Mills & Thorpe**

Leased to Landmark: **1985**

Work completed: **1986**

Architect: **Philip Jebb**

Builders: **Ernest Ireland Ltd**

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SUMMARY

The Oxford Union Society was formed in 1823 by twenty-five undergraduates, under the name of the United Debating Society. Its establishment as a freely speculating and speaking club was initially viewed with hostility by the University authorities. In December,1825, the Society was tactically dissolved and two days later a new Oxford Union Society bought the benches and books from the defunct United Debating Society.

1829 that the Society acquired premises of its own: a room in which to hold the debates at Wyatt's, 115 High Street, with a reading room nearby. Membership increased rapidly and by 1847, the need for a new and permanent home had become extreme. A committee was appointed to work out how this was to be achieved, in view of the Union's permanent financial straits. A scheme was devised by Dr Bliss, Principal of St Mary's Hall, by which graduates could become life members on payment of a single subscription of £10 – which would generate a steady income – while he himself provided a personal loan of £3000 to purchase a site between Frewin Court and St Michael's Street. There they could erect their own debating hall, with whatever other accommodation they thought necessary.

The architect chosen for the Union's new home was Benjamin Woodward, designer of the University Museum where he had collaborated with John Ruskin. Work began on the new buildings in 1853 and was completed in 1857. That year, Woodward showed two young men round the nearly completed debating hall. They were D. G. Rossetti and William Morris, who had only recently met and found each other inspired by the same ideals of artistic Brotherhood. On the spur of the moment, they offered to decorate the window bays above the debating hall gallery, where the Union library was to be housed. The glorious murals that resulted, on the theme of Arthurian legend, were painted on ill-prepared grounds by the enthusiastic but in experienced artists, and soon began to fade.

By the 1870s, the Union had once more outgrown its debating chamber and Alfred Waterhouse was commissioned to build a bigger one. The Old Debating Hall was all given over to library use. In 1910-11, it was again decided to extend the Union's premises, this time to the design of Messrs Mills and Thorpe of Oxford. At the north end pf the extension, a house was built for the Steward of the Union, described at the time as 'in the Tudor style and ... handsomely fitted'. The Steward was a mostly avuncular figure of authority, appointed to oversee the smooth running of the facilties.

When the Union launched its appeal for funds to restore the Old Debating Hall in the early 1980s, the Trustees of the Landmark Trust were immediately interested. They were in any case more than willing to support the restoration programme, both of the building and of the wall-paintings inside it, but there was the chance too that here was a long-wished-for opportunity to make a Landmark right in the centre of Oxford, John and Christian Smith both being Oxford alumni. So while offering to support the restoration financially, they also enquired whether there was any part of the Union building that was no longer used, and which could be converted into a flat.

It so happened that in 1983 the Steward, Walter Perry, was about to retire and the Committee of the Oxford Union Society decided to take the opportunity to reorganise and reduce their staff. The old office of Steward was to be done away with and his work combined with other jobs for a non-resident House Manager. So the Steward's House at the end of the north wing and with its own entrance on to St Michael's Street was to fall empty. Part of it was already used for kitchens and staff offices, but there was no obvious future use for the bedrooms on the first floor and accordingly these were offered to the Trust, with part of the ground floor as well.

A 40 year lease on the flat was drawn up in 1985, plans were prepared, and work started in l986.

Restoration

Only a small amount of exterior work had to be carried out, repairing gutters and adjoining flat roofs to prevent damp entering; and cleaning the stonework of the windows, with some minor repairs. Then there was the work needed to make the flat into a separate unit blocking off communication with other parts of the ground floor and putting up a solid partition between the first floor landing and the main staircase (which also necessitated moving the bedroom door slightly).

After this the only work necessary was to give the interior and services a general overhaul, renewing plaster, installing heating and so on.

A large cupboard was removed on the landing, and the balustrade of the staircase was extended round to the wall. The smallest bedroom became the kitchen, the largest a sitting room. Otherwise everything was left as it was; the main rooms still have their cornices and fireplaces; the doors, complete with furniture, are all original, as is the mahogany flap-table on the landing. The bath has since been replaced.

All that remained to be decided was the decoration and furnishing, and here the choice was to go for a sense of donnish comfort; a don of the era before the First World War who had grown up under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, perhaps even been at the University with Morris and Burne-Jones and looked on at their work in the Debating Hall, and who still clung to their tastes and ideas. So the hall and stairs have William Morris's Larkspur, the sitting room has Marigold, and the bedroom Sunflower.

William Gill, the Steward who first occupied these rooms, would perhaps have filled them with military trophies and mementos of India; a don would no doubt have covered the floor and the tables with books. You can fill them as you will, with your own experience of Oxford.

The Oxford Union and its Buildings

The Oxford Union Society was formed in 1823, in the guise of the United Debating Society, by twenty-five undergraduates. Its establishment as a freely speculating and speaking club was received with hostility by the University authorities, since they felt: *'that the aims of the University lay not in the encouragement of unfettered enquiry, but the imposition of 'correct' views of Church and State.'*

In the proposed rules of the United Debating Society, the subjects to be discussed were deliberately unprovocative, however: *'…the Historical previous to the present century and the Philosophical exclusive of religion.'*

On April 5 1823 the first debate was held in rooms in Christ Church. The motion read: *'Was the revolution under Cromwell to be attributed to the tyrannical conduct of Charles I, or to the democratic spirit of the times?'*

Democracy was, perhaps, something in which the Society was notably lacking. It was, in effect, an aristocratic club; the members were mainly titled, the subscription was high at two guineas, and undesirable candidates were excluded by blackball. The members tended to be peers or aspirants to Holy Orders. However, as soon as the Society was recognised, would-be politicians began to swell the ranks. Of the eight men who occupied the presidential chair in 1823, one became Dean of Winchester, and the remainder entered one or other of the Houses of Parliament.

W. E. Gladstone, as a student, welcoming the deputation from the Cambridge Union to Oxford, 1829 (from a contemporary print, re-published in the 'Gladstone memorial' number of the *Graphic*, 1898)

The Society lacked premises of its own, as Durnford of Magdalen said:

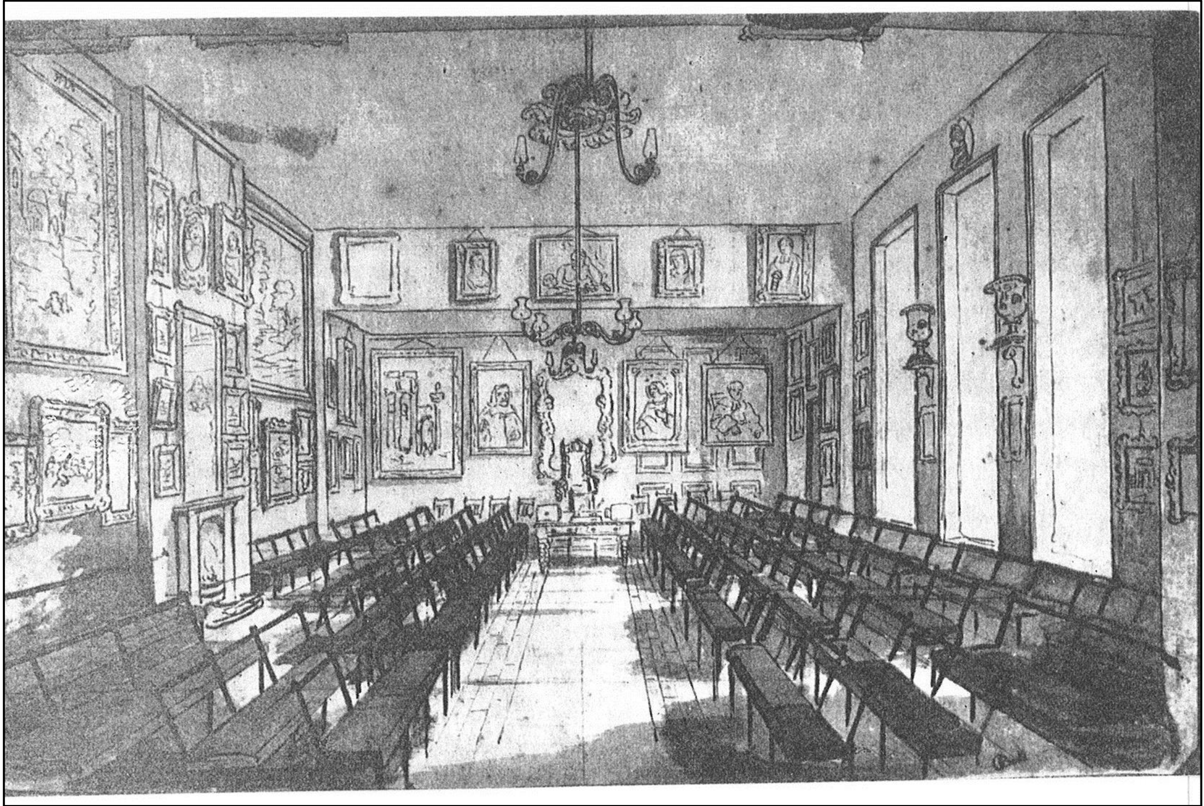
> '*We were a feeble people. We had to meet in a low-browed room at Christ Church to begin with. We were hunted from College to College, taking refuge here and there. Accommodation for our members was only provided by the hospitality of friends.*'

It was, in fact, Durnford who first proposed the acquisition of premises for the Debating Society; a difficult task in the face of the disapprobation of University authorities. An appeal was made to the Vice Chancellor, Jenkyns of Balliol, in 1824 but he refused to help on the grounds that debating would interfere with Undergraduate studies. Jenkyns was not entirely wrong about this.

Samuel Wilberforce, later "Soapy Sam" and Bishop of Oxford (of whom Jowett said, "Samuel of Oxford is not unpleasing if you will resign yourself to being semi-humbugged by a semi-humbug"), made a speech in 1824, defending the dethronement of Charles I. This prompted an attack on the Society from *John Bull*, a scurrilous anti-reform journal. Vane of Oriel (later Duke of Cleveland) intervened, speaking in a special meeting and passing a vote of "regret and indignation" at the journal's conduct, and thereby successfully saved the Society from its detractors, who wanted it to be dissolved.

The affairs of the Society were not yet destined to run smoothly, however. Pressure to disband increased and in December, 1825, Wraugham of Oriel moved and carried a motion to dissolve the Society. This turned out to be a purely tactical move, since only two days later a new Oxford Union Society bought the benches and books from the defunct United Debating Society.

The powers-that-be were still unhappy with the presence of such an organisation within the University. At one of the first meetings of the new Oxford Union Society the Proctors (University officers holding disciplinary power) sent a message demanding that all those present return to their Colleges. William Patten, the Chairman, replied to the Proctors' message with ironic formality: *'Sir, this House has received the Proctors' message and will send an answer to the summons by an officer of its own.'* There were no more disturbances of this kind from the Proctors.



Wyatt's Rooms, 115 High Street, where the Union's debates were held 1829–53

It was not until 1829 that the Society acquired premises of its own: a room in which to hold the debates at Wyatt's, 115 High Street, with a reading room nearby. This was the era of Gladstone's great influence on the Society. Gladstone came up from Eton to Christ Church in 1828. He first made his name at a debate in the Society in 1830, when he spoke on the motion: *'That Mr Canning's conduct as a Minister is deserving of the highest commendation'*, and was elected Secretary in the same year. His subsequent career, which owed the speed of its early progress largely to his extraordinary powers of oratory and, therefore, the platform for debate provided by the Society, gave the Oxford Union itself a new prestige. He illustrated conclusively to the authorities and his fellow undergraduates that a career could be forged as a politician outside academia or the Church; an immediate result was that reports of his abilities as a speaker were relayed by Lord Lincoln to his father the Duke of Newcastle, which led to Gladstone's being offered one of his pocket boroughs at Newark, and thus a direct route into Parliament.

The effect of his personality was to be felt throughout the l9th century, summed up on his death in 1898 by F. E. Smith, moving a motion of adjournment of the planned debate:

> 'Nearly seventy years have passed since Mr Gladstone sat in the chair you fill tonight. He enjoyed in the discharge of your office a wealth of contemporary reputation to which I conceive that none of his successors has even approximately attained, and during these seventy years all parties in this House have admitted him with ready assent the most illustrious ornament in the annals of the Society. Other great statesmen, sir, have sat since Mr Gladstone in your chair; there have debated within the walls of this Society poets like Swinburne, known wherever the English language is known; men of letters like Ruskin and a long roll of prelates and judges, the mere recital of whose names would exhaust the patience of this House - yet I think it was said of none of them, as it was said of Gladstone, the undergraduate, "A man is risen in Israel this day".'

In the years that followed the Union gradually – and not without some battles – took on the shape it was to retain until the end of the century, and which is not greatly altered today. Debates were held once a week, on Thursdays, sometimes continuing on subsequent evenings. The proceedings were divided into Private Business – anything concerning the running of the society itself, and often providing the most heated argument – and Public Business. Subjects for debate were settled in advance, and the "paper" speakers (those moving and opposing

the motion) announced. However, anyone wishing to speak after that, on either side, had to catch the eye of the President at the correct moment.

The principal officers all existed, elected by their fellow members to the posts of Librarian, Treasurer, Secretary and President. But the posts were seldom contested at this time, the outgoing officer often nominating his successor; in addition, there was no bar against graduates seeking election and the periods of office were not fixed as they were to be later. Above all the total membership of the Society grew and grew, aided by the abolition of the blackball in 1847.

In 1847, too, the need for a new and permanent home became extreme. A committee was appointed to work out how this was to be achieved, in view of the Union's financial straits – an eternal problem. In the event a scheme was devised by Dr Bliss, Principal of St Mary's Hall, by which graduates could become life members on payment of a single subscription of £10 – which would generate a steady income – while he himself provided a personal loan of £3000 with which to purchase a site that he had found for them between Frewin Court and St Michael's Street. There they could erect their own debating hall, with whatever other accommodation they thought necessary. The Union's property was to be vested in four trustees, of which Dr Bliss was one.

The architect chosen for the Union's new home was Benjamin Woodward, designer of the University Museum. Designs were drawn up, but work did not actually start on the new buildings until 1853 and they were not completed until 1857; meanwhile debates continued at Wyatt's until Michaelmas 1853, after which they took place in the Star Assembly Rooms.

Woodward, born in Cork in 1815, was a partner in the firm of Deane and Woodward, established in the 1830s. It was said of him that he was a '*grave and curiously silent man: of his partners, men greatly his inferiors, the elder, Sir Thomas Deane was a ceaseless chatterbox, the younger, son to Sir Thomas, stammered.*' The Oxford don Jeune said of them, '*one won't talk, one can't talk, one never stops talking*'. Rossetti described him as

> '*the stillest creature that ever breathed out of an oyster shell'*, and '*the most modest, retiring and shyly taciturn man of noticeable talent whom it has ever been my fortune to meet. He has a handsome and rather stately presence, eminently gentle and courteous'*.

Ruskin paid Woodward a rather curious compliment in a letter of 1855

‘However, if you want sherry you must go to my father. If I want Gothic, I must for the present go to Mr Woodward, or Mr Scott.’

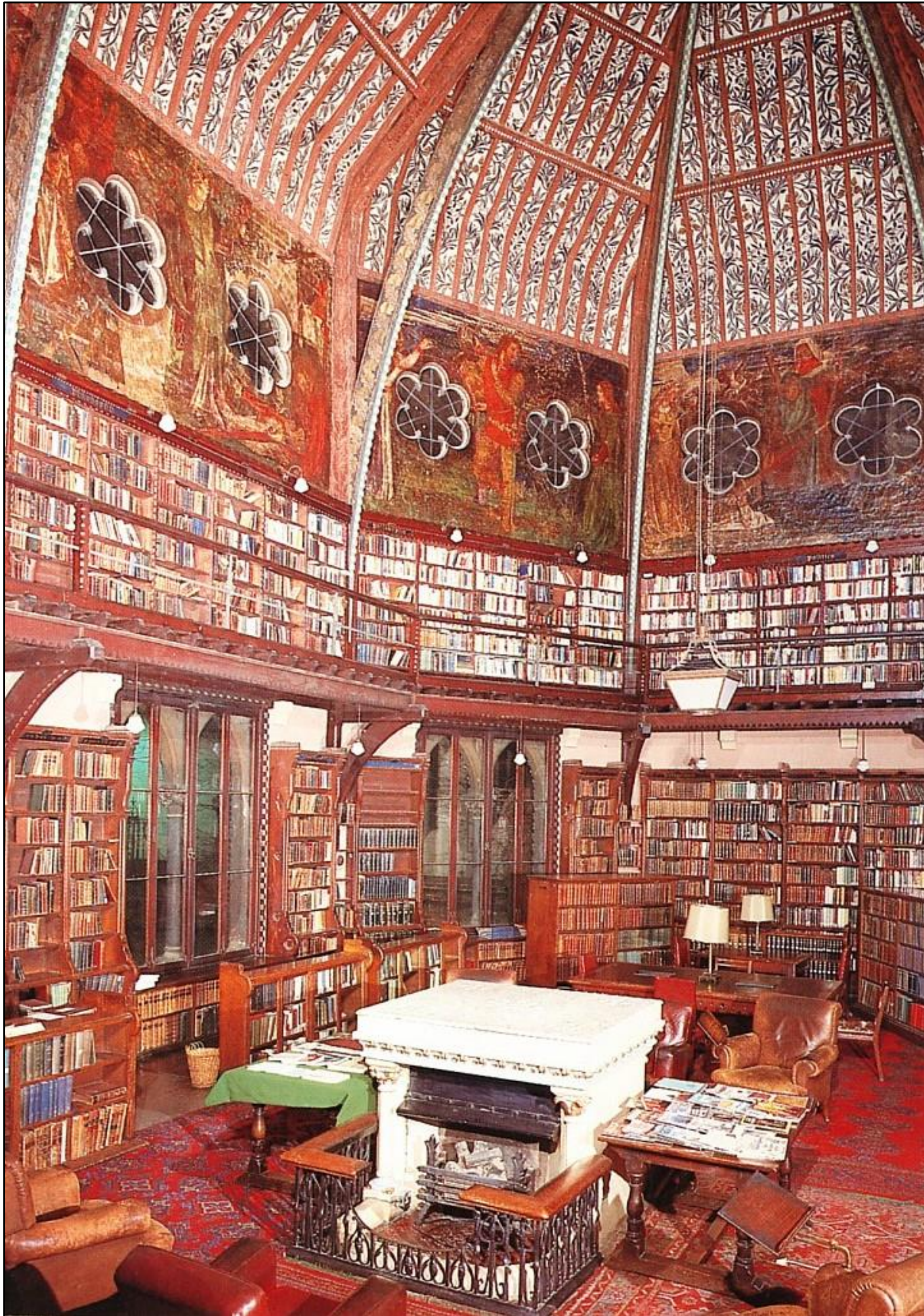
This was no doubt why Ruskin brought in Woodward for Woodward was, in fact, collaborating with Ruskin on the University Museum in Parks Road , a crucial building in the history of the Victorian Gothic Revival. There Ruskin promoted his Gothic ideal, seeing in it a liberating antidote to the formality and restrictions of Classicism, both for the individual and for society; as Peter Davey says in his article “Authority and Freedom” quoting from Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*:

> ‘“Ten to one”, the workman introduced to the freedom of contributing his own unguided effort to the edifice will “make a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool.” In Ruskin’s Gothic ideal, hand in hand with the freedom of the individual craftsman was freedom of planning and composition.’ [1]

The Union had, quite suitably, chosen for itself an architect similarly dedicated to seeking a new freedom – for the Union, of speech and conviction through open debate; for Woodward, of architectural design and execution. And both were to come in for a fair measure of criticism thereby.

But Woodward’s – or Ruskin’s – was not the only artistic movement to contribute to the Union’s buildings: in 1857 Woodward showed two young men round the nearly completed debating hall. They were D. G. Rossetti and William Morris, who had only recently met and found each other inspired by the same ideals of artistic Brotherhood. On the spur of the moment, they offered to decorate the window bays above the debating hall gallery – where the Union library was to be housed. The idea was taken up with great enthusiasm, and other friends enlisted to help, such as Val Prinsep and Arthur Hughes, and most notably Edward Burne-Jones who, like Morris, had been at Exeter College. Burne-Jones had loved Oxford and sent letters of his great enjoyment home. Morris had found it less agreeable; he was described by his tutor as ‘*a rather rough and unpolished youth, who exhibited no especial literary tastes or capacity’*; he was, in fact, entranced by the beauty of Oxford’s buildings but disliked the dons intensely.

[1] *The Architectural Review* Vol 168, 1980,



The Debating Hall, by Benjamin Woodward, adorned with murals by the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood

The theme of the murals upon which they embarked was Arthurian Legend, hoping to inspire the speakers below to seek after Truth with similar dedication. The artists, sworn to ideals of Brotherhood themselves, gave their services free, the Union only being required to offer them refreshment in the form of soda water. They set to work with admirable high-mindedness, but that didn't stop them enjoying themselves – "What fun we had at the Union! What jokes! What roars of laughter!" recorded Val Prinsep. It is easy to see why, with the fun of working together, and especially the excitement of embarking on something quite new and in many ways revolutionary: Ruskin came to watch them, and so did the poet Algernon Swinburne, and no doubt many others as well. They all felt that they were reviving a sense of companionship among artists and craftsmen which had been dead since the building of the great medieval cathedrals.

But they were also reviving problems of a more practical nature, and it was these that doomed the project ultimately to failure. Inevitably, the work took far longer than they had expected, and in the end several of the paintings remained unfinished. However, this was not the main difficulty. Ruskin foresaw some of what was to come when he warned: "The fact is, they're all the least bit crazy and it is difficult to manage them." The truth was that none of them knew how to prepare the walls for painting and in their eagerness to start none of them bothered to find out. They painted straight on to the distemper that covered the bare brickwork, and hardly were the murals completed than the colours began to fade.

Repairs and redecoration were attempted at several times, without success. But in the early 1980s another effort has been made, under the guidance of Dr John Renton, of the University's Engineering School, and the Ashmolean Museum. The aim was to clean the paintings and to stabilise them by solving the problem of damp which had been a constant enemy – and also to avoid mistakes made in earlier restorations which had led to their failure. The work was completed in l987 and the walls and ceiling are brilliant once again – "So brilliant as to make the walls look like the margin of an illuminated manuscript," as Coventry Patmore marvelled at the time of their completion.

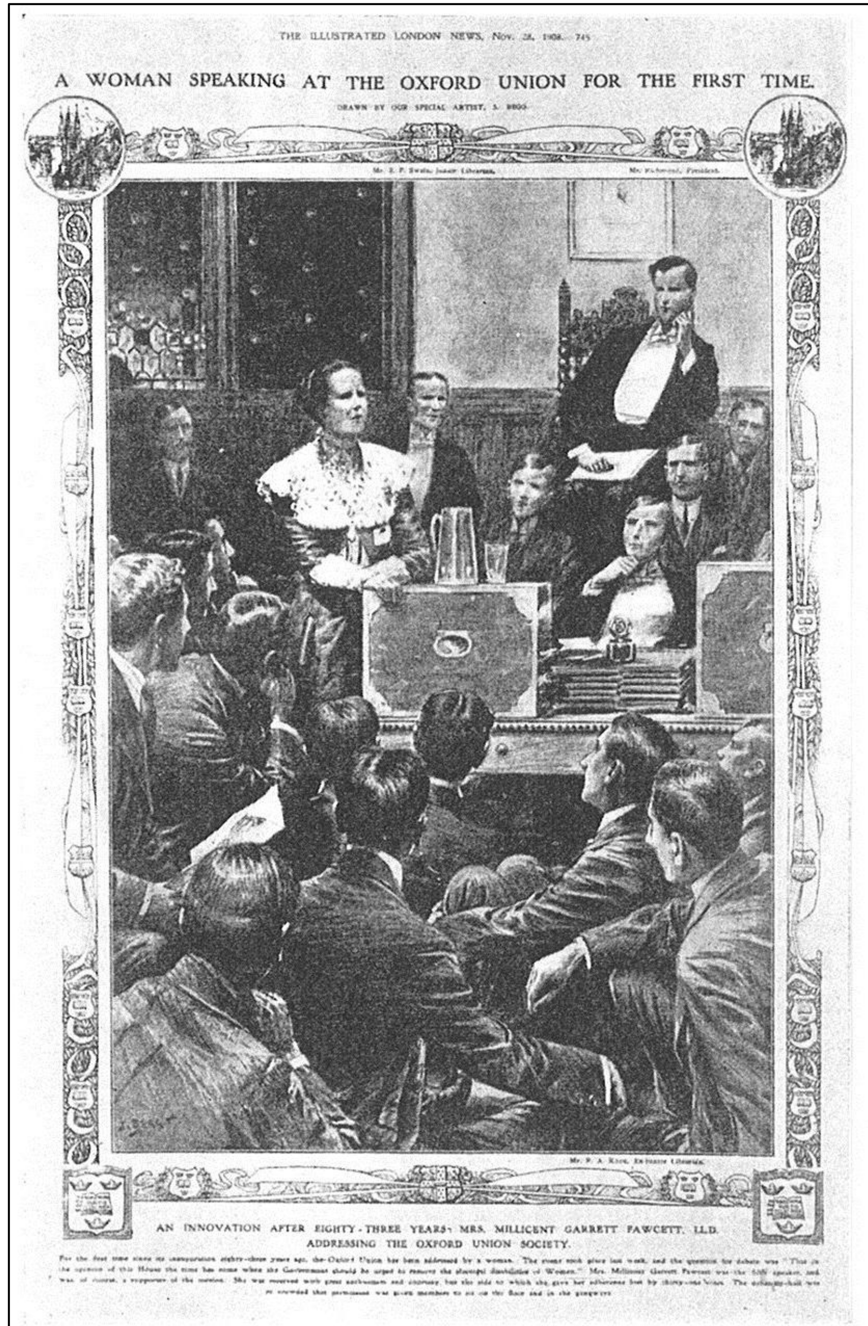
For twenty years the Union conducted its business happily round the central fireplace in Woodward's hall, which served as both hall and library. By the 1870s, both the attendance at debates and the size of the library had increased enormously, and the Union was bursting at the seams. The obvious answer was to build a new hall for the debates, and to let the library take over the whole of Woodward's building. This time, with a caution which was by then perhaps more characteristic, the Union went to a less revolutionary architect, Alfred Waterhouse, who had recently completed the Hall at Balliol (Ruskin thought it '*a dull sort of church'*) and the buildings for the Cambridge Union Society. The new Debating Hall was in use in 1879; only a year after the foundation stone had been laid.

Ten years later the Union had one of its periodic rounds of self-reform. The most far-reaching of these was the appointment of a permanent Senior Treasurer, an older man who could take a longer view of the Union's finances than his undergraduate counterpart. This in turn led to a determined effort to attract more members, who would also be encouraged to use the Union's general rooms more regularly.

Part of the appeal of the Union had always lain in the escape that it offered from the regulations of College existence, which remained strict even at the end of the 19th century. So the reading room had always been a place of comfort and relaxation. The habit of having coffee there in the morning was initiated in the 1870s. In 1891 the Committee went further still and decided to create a smoking room. Later there followed a billiard room, a bar and eventually a dining room and lavatory (the latter of monumental proportions). Much of this work was done in 1910–11, when a new Library was built as well, and also the north wing containing at one end the Steward's house (now occupied on the first floor by the Landmark flat) to the design of Messrs Mills and Thorpe of Oxford – described at the time as '*in the Tudor style and ... handsomely fitted*'.

The Library had of course always been a major attraction, as it developed into one of the most extensive collections in Oxford. Successive librarians devoted their time to cataloguing and adding to it, some preferring that work to the more public side of the Union's activities – with such effect that after a hundred years of its existence Herbert Morrah was able say that '*From some points of view the library is more important than the debates ... May it not be hoped that if the debates were ever to cease, the Union would still survive, attached to a Library?*' In 1907 a Senior Librarian was appointed who, like the Senior Treasurer, could bring greater experience to the work and take a longer term view of its management.

In the 21st century the Union continues to hold its place in Oxford, though it is still independent of the University and free to do as it wants. It has become more professional perhaps – mirroring events elsewhere. From their first appearance in 1888, guest speakers have increased their hold, so that now each debate is honoured by greater or lesser figures from some field of professional life, and so is no longer purely an undergraduate event.



THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, Nov. 28, 1908.—745

A WOMAN SPEAKING AT THE OXFORD UNION FOR THE FIRST TIME.

DRAWN BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST, S. BEGG.

AN INNOVATION AFTER EIGHTY-THREE YEARS: MRS. MILLICENT GARRETT FAWCETT, LL.D. ADDRESSING THE OXFORD UNION SOCIETY.

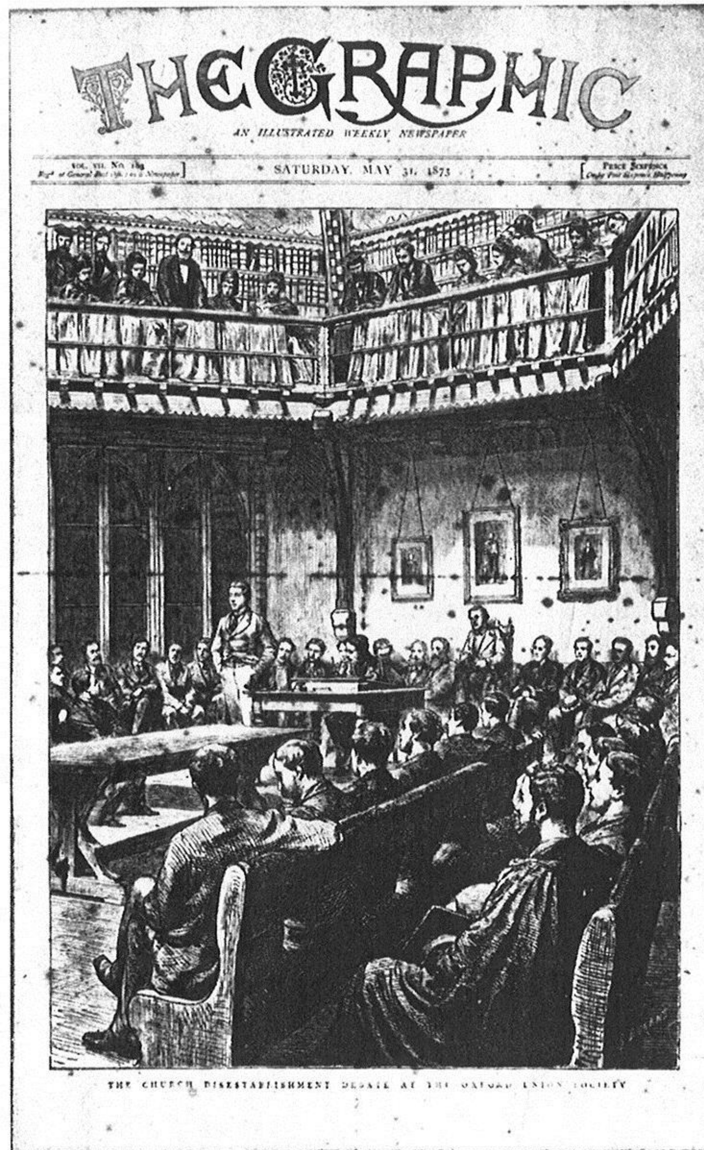
The first woman to address the Union, 1908

And it has all become more public, too. In the earliest decades debates were not allowed to be fully recorded; the first of which such a record survives is the great Protection debate of 1850. Later, newspapers started to mention the debates occasionally, and in the early part of the 20th century they were reported in full in the *Morning Post*. In the 1920s and 30s came the amusing but rather less accurate reports in *Isis* and *Cherwell*, at one time written by Evelyn Waugh. Then came the radio – the first debate to be broadcast was the traditionally frivolous Eights Week Debate of 1938, when Monsignor Ronald Knox was guest speaker. Finally, in 1953, television cameras entered the debating hall, and the habit has of course grown, until in 1975, in the run-up to the EEC Referendum, the Union's debate on the subject was staged as a major part of the campaign coverage, and was thought to have had considerable influence on the outcome.

There have been other great changes. The ban on theological debate was lifted in 1950, having remained firmly in the rulebook for 127 years. And it was only in 1963, after decades of heated argument, that were women admitted to full membership, followed five years later by the election of a woman President.

The social side of the Union's life has become more organised too, though the full evening dress in which officers attend debates has not changed, surviving even the most radical periods. In 1939, under the Presidency of Edward Heath, the Union held its first Ball:

> 'That was a wild success because the Union has got lovely rooms. To be able to enjoy oneself there, to dance there and to have supper was very pleasant. The other thing I did was to say that if we really wanted to encourage undergraduates to become members of the Union, then we must improve the dining room and the bars and we must allow credit there. This was widely acclaimed. Everybody was absolutely delighted, except for the Senior Treasurer, who found that at the end of my term none of them had paid their bills and that the credit was still there. Anyhow, they sorted that out.'



THE GRAPHIC

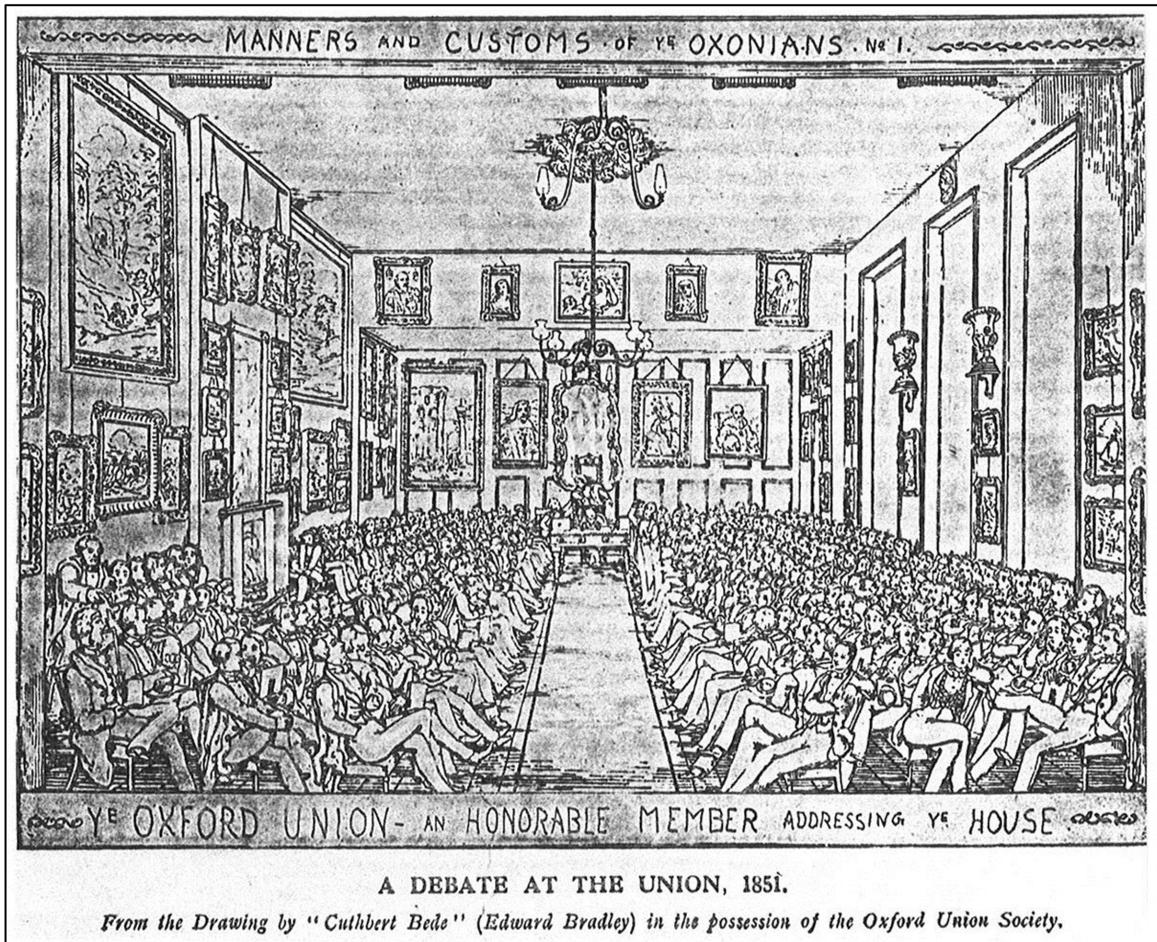
AN ILLUSTRATED WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

SATURDAY, MAY 31, 1873

PRICE SIXPENCE

THE CHURCH DISESTABLISHMENT DEBATE AT THE OXFORD UNION SOCIETY

The Jubilee Debate, 1873



A DEBATE AT THE UNION, 1851.

From the Drawing by "Cuthbert Bede" (Edward Bradley) in the possession of the Oxford Union Society.

A packed debate, at Wyatt's Rooms on the High Street when the Debating Society still met there.

Shortly after the War, Roger Grey as President, with his Treasurer Anthony Wedgwood-Benn, instigated the raising of the President's allowance to enable more lavish entertainment of guests on debate nights, accurately guessing that this would give the Union itself an increased social prestige.

But perhaps it is the office of President which has changed most since the Union's beginning. Christopher Hollis (President Michaelmas 1923) remarks in his *History of the Union* (1964):

> 'The life of a President of the Union today is enormously different from that of past generations – perhaps largely because the President has so much more business of entertainment and of arranging visitors. Today for one short term the President finds himself equipped with all the paraphernalia of a business executive on a scale which he will not enjoy again for many years, if ever; private office, messengers, private telephone and the like, and the reason is simple necessity. He has his own telephone because he has to do such a lot of telephoning. It could not be otherwise. I cannot recollect ever telephoning to anybody when I was President of the Union.'

The Union has been an extraordinarily successful institution, surviving financial crises, periods of stagnation and of poor speakers, periods of political extremism; it has built, enlarged and maintained its home and managed the staff to make it work, created a remarkable library and earned the good opinion of world leaders, some of whom, such as Presidents Reagan, Nixon and Carter, have spoken there; and all this has been achieved by a small, constantly changing group of 19-, 20- and 21-year olds, with only minimal outside help.

The reason for this success must be that not only has it been enjoyable and interesting but that it has actually been useful to undergraduates in preparing for a career and, looking back, to grown men, and more recently women, in furthering that career once it has been embarked on. Morrah says that already by the middle of the 19th century it had become a definite ambition in Oxford to excel at the Union, and the benefits are no less now than they were then. But in the end the assessment of its value must be left to those who have been part of it:

Dr Herbert James, President of St Johns (President of the Union 1871):

> 'I am convinced that undergraduates who go through their course here without joining it lose more than they realise at the time. It brings men into contact, more or less personal, with contemporaries who think; it diverts their thoughts and conversation from the eternal topics of athletics and the problems of the schools; and it enables them to hear the

two (or should I say the many?) sides of every question debated. It is a nursery of thought, of speech, of culture.'

The Right Hon G. J. Goschen, MP (President 1853) at the Jubilee Banquet, 1873:

> 'I cannot look at those who have been members of this Union, who now are members of the Legislature, and hold high offices of State, without looking also to those before me who are to form the material of future legislators – future Lord Chancellors, future Prime Ministers, future Secretaries of War, future First Lords of the Admiralty, future Attorney-Generals – not prompted by the low ambition of calculating minds, but by the high aspiration of men who desire to do good service to the Commonwealth, and who now are training themselves in all the fire of youth, the vigour of their fresh intellect, and the energy of their will, set upon our great public service, in the Oxford Union.'

The Marquess of Salisbury (Secretary 1848, Treasurer 1849–50) at the Jubilee Banquet 1873:

> 'I cannot forget that we are here this evening not to celebrate the University of Oxford, but a remarkable institution in it – an institution which is more remarkable because it receives no official recognition from the University whatever. It is a glorious thing, and is strikingly illustrative of the way in which Englishmen do their work. I believe there is no educational instrument so valuable to the large class of students – I mean those who have to express themselves in public – as the Union Society; yet it is a voluntary association which has never received any sanction or recognition from the University; indeed in a certain portion of its career it has received that gentle stimulus which is always given to any English institution by the disapproval of those in authority.'

Sir John Simon (President 1986):

> 'The Union has its ups and downs, and does not at any time lack critics who belittle its performances. But it is a great institution nevertheless to which many of us owe much. There is a great deal to be learnt in trying to persuade that fastidious audience and there are friendships to be made with the fiercest of your opponents which will last through life. One of the best things about the Union is that it gives the man from the small college, who may otherwise move in a limited circle, the opportunity of matching himself against the best of his contemporaries, and the thrust and parry of the debating hall are the finest preparations for more serious controversies afterwards. The Union is a field in which all comers are welcome and I never saw any success gained there by other than open and honourable means. In my day the Liberals were in a minority, though this did not prevent us from getting our full share of election to office. And office-holding at the Union is a very useful experience: the junior treasurer has the management of a larger income than he is likely to acquire, at any rate for many years to come, and is responsible for a big staff of servants; the librarian has charge of one of the best general libraries in Oxford, and has no light task when he "brings forward his weekly list of books", and in his heart of hearts every President takes

> more satisfaction in inheriting the traditions of the chair, than in most things that happen to him in these three or four unforgettable years.
>
> In every Oxford generation there are some superior individuals who affect to despise the Union and refuse to belong to it. They make, I think, a great mistake, for it is one of the representative institutions of undergraduate life, in which everyone may get something of interest and value by taking his share.'

Lord Birkenhead (as F. E. Smith, President 1894):

> 'There (in the old debating hall) the portraits hang, row on row, a pictorial constellation of the past and present ... Here are Salisbury, Gladstone, and Asquith standing on their enduring pedestals – Manning and Mandell Creighton, E. T. Cook, York Powell, the Cecils and the Asquiths, the Mowbrays and the Talbots, and on the living roll of fame, Milner and Curzon, Anthony Hope and A. E. W. Mason. Here within a single chamber lies the sifted ability of Oxford.'

Harold Macmillan, Earl of Stockton (Secretary, Treasurer and Librarian-elect – the outbreak of war prevented him from serving his term in this office – in successive terms of 1914), in a foreword to The Oxford Union by David Walter (1984):

> 'The Oxford Union is unique in that it has provided an unrivalled training ground for debates in the Parliamentary style which no other debating society in any democratic country can equal. The Oxford Union occupies a special place in the history of our nation, as a glance at the list of those who have held office and have distinguished themselves later in life will show.'

David Walter in *The Oxford Union*, 1984:

> 'The Union continues to attract large houses for big debates, and its membership has started rising again. Many still consider the style of debating mannered; they find the spectacle of nineteen- and twenty-year-olds behaving with the pomposity of people double their age unedifying. But although the guests are more prominent and the undergraduates are sometimes more prone to put on an act, or to clown, the forms of parliamentary debate are still observed, and prowess at mastering those forms is still admired. Speaking in the Union remains at least a test of nerve; it is as difficult as it ever was to impress what has always been a hypercritical audience.
>
> Rightly or wrongly, presiding over the Union remains a qualification which is respected. Seventies Presidents are climbing much the same ladders at much the same speed as their predecessors. '

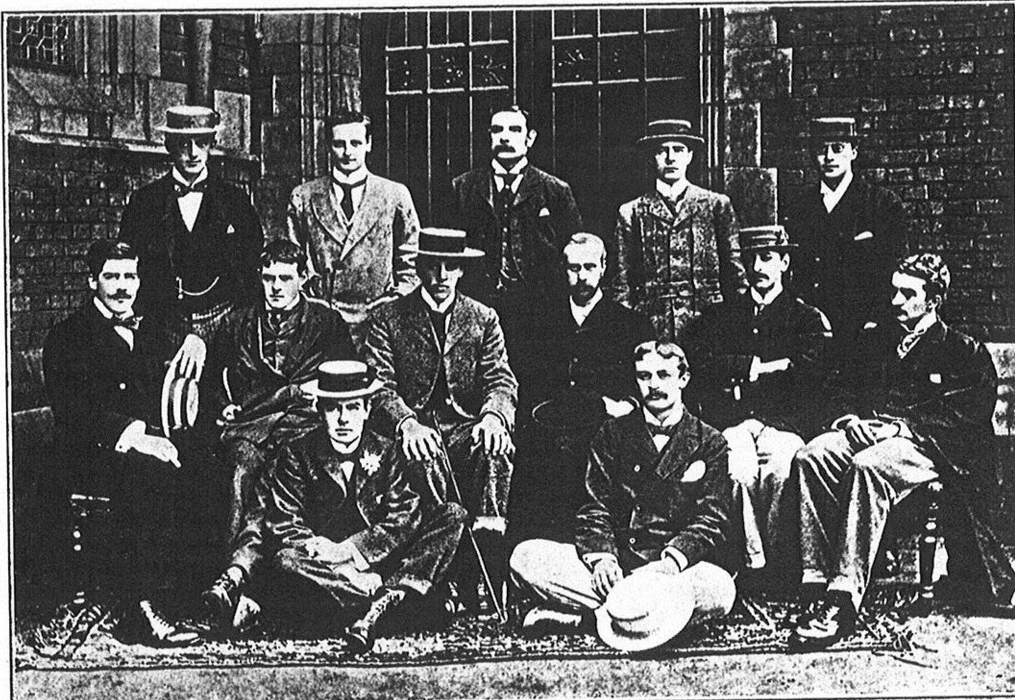
The Union as Debating Society: Topics and Personalities

The fame of the Union itself ultimately rests upon its reputation as a place of debate, and its role as a breeding ground for would-be politicians and public figures. Its success in this field has inevitably led to its being known as the nursery of great men. And, indeed, its record is impressive. Among its officers there have been a number of prime ministers[2], as well as party leaders and countless ministers. Archbishops, cardinals, ambassadors, judges, professors – Union officers have gone on to become all these. Its writers, playwrights and poets have been among the most widely read and influential; editors of great newspapers and broadcasting corporations have begun their careers here. The roll can become a little forbidding and awe-inspiring, and it helps to remember that not all Presidents of the Union have become household names, and not every officer of the Union is fired by ambition to become so. They are all undergraduates, after all, and as such not inclined to take life too seriously.

Inevitably, though, by adopting the outward form of parliamentary debate, comparison will be made with its model chamber, the House of Commons and opportunities arise for poking some gentle fun at sometimes over-weighty young men. Cuthbert Bradley says it all in his book *Verdant Green* when he writes of Edward Bradley's experiences at the Union of 1851:

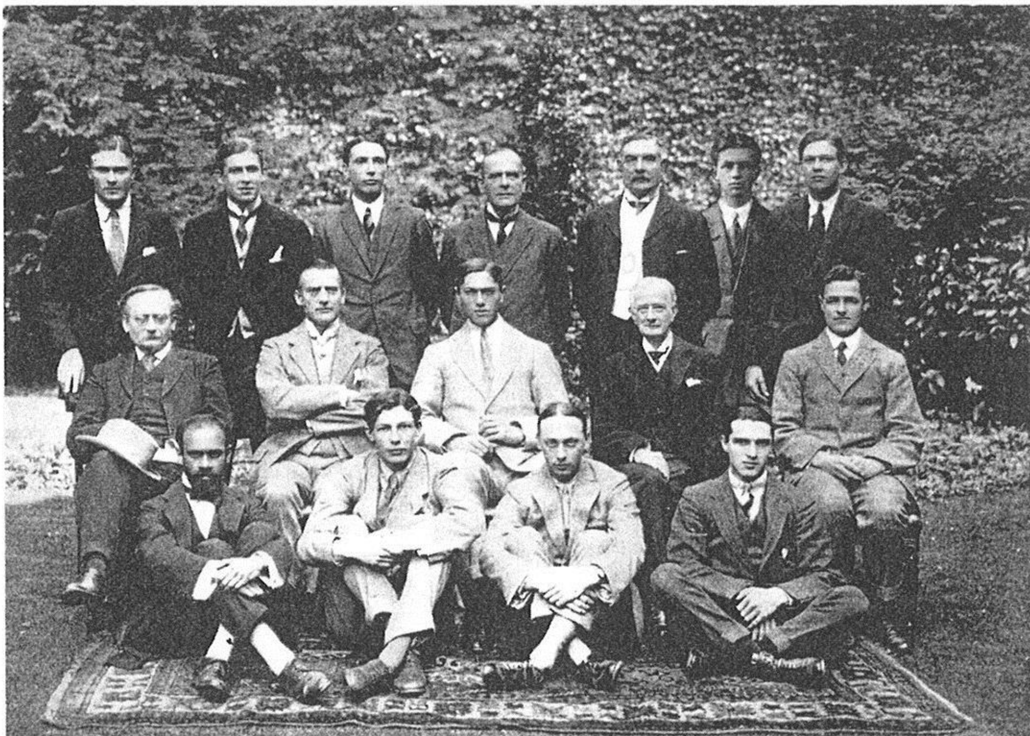
> 'He also attended the debates which were then held in the long room behind Wyatt's; and he was particularly charmed with the manner in which vital questions, that (as he learned from the newspapers) had proved stumbling blocks to the greatest statesmen of the land, were rapidly solved by the statesmen of the Oxford Union. It was quite a sight, in that long picture room to see the rows of light iron seats densely crowded with young men...and to hear how one beardless gentleman would call another beardless gentleman his "honourable friend" and appeal to "the sense of the House", and address himself to "Mr Speaker"; and how they would all juggle the same tricks of rhetoric as their fathers were doing in certain other debates in a certain other House.

[2] Tony Blair, Harold Wilson, Edward Heath, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Harold Macmillan (Lord Stockton), Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, H.H Asquith, the Marquess of Salisbury, the Earl of Rosebery, and William Ewart Gladstone.



Hills & Saunders, Oxford.]

The Oxford Union Standing Committee 1892. The President, F. E. Smith, is seated third from left in the middle row; Hilaire Belloc is on his right. William Gill, Steward 1890-1924, appears in both photographs: in the back row, centre above and third from right, below.



The Union Committee in 1914; Harold Macmillan is seated on the ground, second from left; the guest speaker, Sit Austen Chamberlain, is seated second from right; the President is A. Wedderburn.

> And it was curious, too, to mark the points of resemblance between the two Houses... and how they went through the same traditional forms, and preserved the same time-honoured ideas, and debated in the fullest houses, with the greatest spirit and the greatest length, on such points as "What course is it advisable for this country to take in regard to the government of its Indian possessions, and the imprisonment of Mr Jones by the Rajah of Humbugpoopoonah?"'

More recently, Liberal MP Shirley Williams now Baroness Williams of Crosby, has said that the one was an excellent training for the other because '*both institutions are dotty out-of-date gentlemen's clubs'*.

Golden Ages

The Union has undoubtedly had periods of humdrum debates and dull speakers, but it has also had its Golden Ages. The point has been made that, with potential speakers being in regular attendance only for three years or so, it is impossible to compare one generation with another. Nevertheless there have been times when the standard of speaking has been extraordinarily high, often in response to one – or very often two – especially gifted men, spurring each other on in rivalry, and producing greater efforts from the rest.

In the 19th century, while Asquith shone a single star, the two other future prime ministers Gladstone and Lord Robert Cecil (Marquess of Salisbury) met skilled opposition from, respectively, Henry (later Cardinal) Manning, and G. J. (later Lord) Goschen. Early in the 20th century, the decade that produced the Union's fourth prime minister, Harold Macmillan, was made brilliant by the exceptional fluency of A. P. Herbert, Philip Guedalla and above all Ronald Knox (noteworthy too in that none of them became politicians), who carried the art of epigram to unsurpassable heights ('*The honourable gentlemen have turned their backs on their country and now have the effrontery to say they have their country behind them'*), and set a style that lasted until the Second World War and beyond.

But perhaps the most golden of golden ages occurred in the 1890s, when Hilaire Belloc ('*a great orator...an immense and unparalleled success'*), F. E. Smith ('*amazingly vivacious and brilliant'*) and John Simon all held their audiences spellbound. Later in the decade John Buchan was President, and the Union was established on a high plane which lasted until the outbreak of war in 1914. Between the wars Quintin Hogg, Michael Foot (and his elder brothers Dingle and

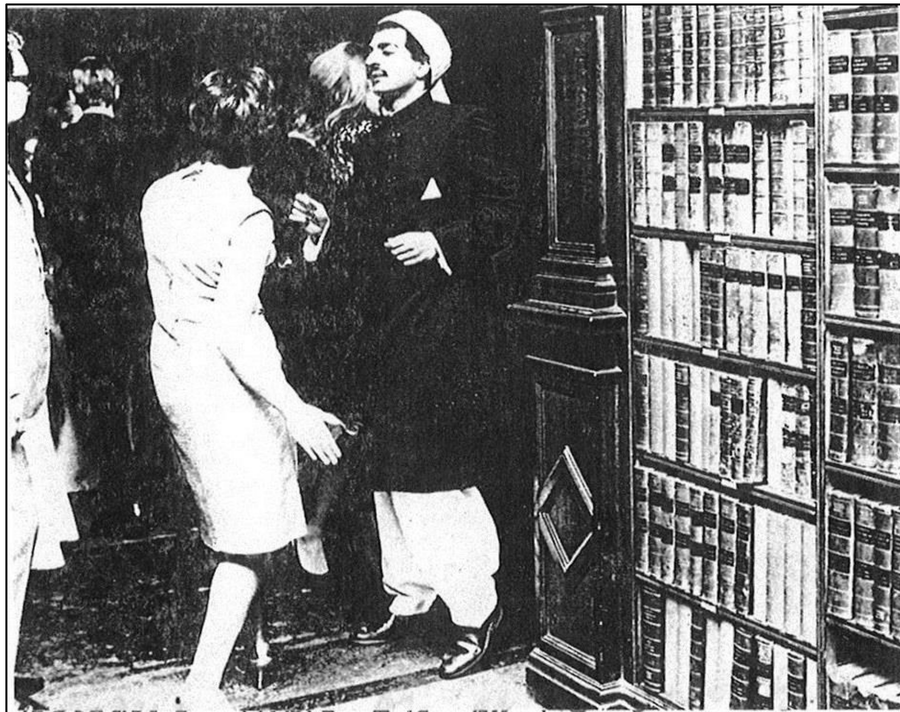
John), Philip Toynbee and – equal only to Ronald Knox in the art of '*Belaphors and Maxagram'* – Max Beloff all swayed audiences with their wit, eloquence or forceful reasoning. Immediately after the war Anthony Wedgwood-Benn and Edward Boyle confronted one another, but both were eclipsed by the antics of Kenneth Tynan, who dazzled the Union with his theatrical displays. Political journalist Robin Day held the chair in 1950 and has been quoted as saying that he went on doing the same thing ever since, only for money – to the trepidation of many of his interviewees..

Presidents like Robin Day, and William Rees-Mogg who followed him in the role in 1951, reveal a change in the makeup of the Union's officers. Future politicians have always been uppermost, and there have also been plenty of would-be diplomats, lawyers and writers. But before the First World War the politicians were nearly equalled by the churchmen. By the 1950s this was no longer the case; the most popular chosen profession after politics had become, and still is, the media. And as David Walter points out in his book, in some ways they fulfil the same moral function – he adds that there is no doubt as to who, at the time he was writing in 1984, held the television equivalent of the See of Canterbury – Robin Day.

The sixties and early seventies, like the thirties, could be described as a golden age of the Left. Union figures such as Tariq Ali, the military historian and activist, stood out for their radicalism rather than their skills as orators. Student power reigned supreme – in 1970, shortly after the American invasion of Cambodia, at a debate on foreign policy at which the Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart was guest, the minutes recorded that '*For the first time in 147 years of the Society's existence, the House voted to stand adjourned sine die on account of riot*.' A group chanting "Ho Ho, Ho Chi Minh" and other slogans prevented any possibility of speech, and would not be evicted.

Other demonstrations of student opinion were more positive: in 1965 the Union held a Teach-In on Vietnam, which though organised by anti-Americans, gave their supporters a voice and represented a genuine attempt to increase knowledge of the real issues involved. Conservative MP Eldon Griffiths said '*that it was a disgrace that the debate was taking place at Oxford and not at Westminster'*. The Union does not lose its political instinct, even in extremes.

Robin Day coxes the Oxford Union boat against the Cambridge Union (1950)



President Tariq Ali at the Union Ball, 1965

Motions for debate

And what have they talked about all these years? Everything under the sun, of course, but certain subjects have recurred again and again, and there have been some surprises among them. The heart of the matter has always been the current affairs and policies of the day – it is what the Union exists for – but in the early days politics had to be partly in disguise as history (it was not until the 20th century that it became customary to debate a motion of no confidence in the government of the day every Michaelmas term). So Cromwell and Charles I were regularly on the agenda during the first half of the 19th century, providing a fruitful vehicle for more topical matters, as did Napoleon and the French Revolution. Less predictably, capital punishment and divorce were frequently debated in the later l9th century, though they might be difficult to recognise as the same subjects today. Britain's relations with America and the sins of *The Times* were other apparently 20th-century subjects which had already been raised before 1850.

Every so often the Union tires of politics, and resolves – after a debate on the matter, of course – to table more general motions. But except for a few very determinedly radical periods, there has always been a fair leavening of non-political discussion, ranging from the literary to the supernatural, and of course the purely frivolous – and then there have been times when it was felt that there were too many of these, and the House has determined to spend more time debating the serious issues of the day.

The only real change to have occurred since 1900 is that the range of subjects regarded as permissible has grown – to include sexual morality, for example, and (most notably) religion, after the long-standing ban was lifted in 1950, in time for the House to declare that it did not believe in God in 1962. "Anti-establishment" motions are, naturally, much more frequently tabled today than they were even between the wars.

Oxford Union Society.

Thursday, 9th February, 1933,

at 8 p.m.

QUESTION FOR DEBATE.

"That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country."

Moved by MR. K. H. DIGBY, St. John's.

Opposed by MR. K. R. F. STEEL-MAITLAND, Balliol.

MR. D. M. GRAHAM, Balliol, Librarian, will speak third.

THE HON. QUINTIN HOGG, Christ Church and All Souls, Ex-President, will speak fourth.

MR. C. E. M. JOAD, Balliol, will speak fifth.

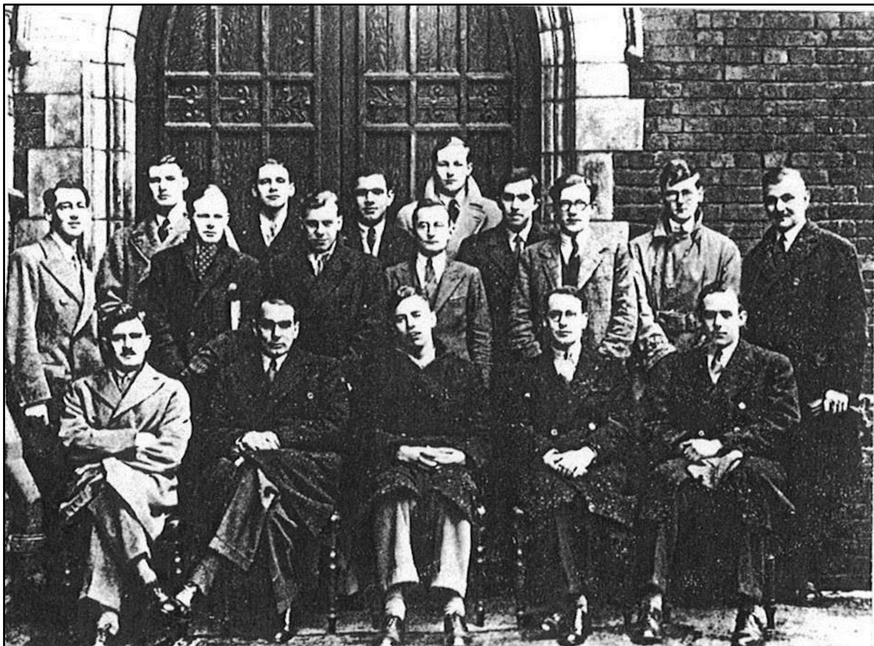
TELLERS.

For the Ayes.
Mr. M. Beloff, C.C.C.

For the Noes.
Mr. R. G. Thomas, Brasenose.

Christ Church,
4th February, 1933.

F. M. HARDIE,
President.



The Standing Committee, Lent term 1933

King and Country

A debate held in 1933 is still the most notorious ever to have taken place in the history of the Union. It occurred in Hilary term, the second term starting in January, under the presidency of Frank Hardie, a Labour man. The House carried by 275 votes to 152 a motion '*that in no circumstances would it fight for its King and Country*'. The Junior Librarian, David Graham, had suggested the motion to the President, who said: '*My dear chap, this is a very good motion but you can't really suppose you will get anyone to speak in favour of it*.'

The guest speakers were carefully chosen, because the President thought it unlikely that many undergraduates would want to speak in favour: Professor C. E. M. Joad, a well-known and dedicated pacifist, was to speak for the motion; Quintin Hogg (later Lord Hailsham) of All Souls would oppose it. In the event, a number of undergraduates wished to speak on both sides, and the debate was well attended, though not packed. That the vote went in favour was thought to have been as much a recognition of the skill with which Joad put his argument as any overwhelming conviction that what he said was right.

It was not thought likely that the press would be interested; debates on pacifism and disarmament had been held before, and in 1927 an almost identical motion had passed in the Cambridge Union by 213 to 138 votes: '*That lasting peace can only be secured by the people of England adopting an uncompromising attitude of pacifism'*, which had aroused little comment. Nor was there any in the days immediately following the Oxford debate.
However, a few days later the *Daily Telegraph* carried a leader alleging that the vote was the product of "communist cells in the Colleges" (though in fact there had been few Communists present at the debate, and only one had spoken).
Next, the *Daily Express* ascribed the vote to *'practical jokers, woozy-minded communists and sexual indeterminates*'. *The Times* spoke of "children's hour", and correspondence poured in, full of disgust at the undergraduates' behaviour.

Then a group of life members, led by Mr Randolph Churchill and including Quintin Hogg, decided to come up to the next meeting and move a motion in Private Business to expunge the motion from the Society's records. It was this above all

that gave the debate its notoriety, because when on March 2nd 1933 the motion was moved, it was defeated by 750 to 138 votes.

This was nothing to do with Oxford students' pacifist intentions, but a lot to do with their indignation at having the Union's affairs interfered with by people no longer resident at the University. A thousand people packed the hall, determined to see that the motion was squashed; among them the Chairman of the Conservative Club, whose patriotism was not questioned. Churchill was loudly booed, escaping only narrowly from being debagged and thrown in the river.

It was inevitable, however, that those who so wished would see this vote as a triumphant upholding of the original motion. The Oxford Pledge, as it became known, took on a symbolic significance for many pacifists, and further debates were held, both in this country and in America. Much has been claimed to have resulted from the Union's vote, from Mussolini's involvement in the War to the Second World War itself. Historians agree that this is very far-fetched, and it was not talked of in Berlin at the time – after all, Hitler had only been Chancellor for a few weeks at the time of the debate, and it was communist Russia, not Germany, who was generally thought of as the "enemy".

Christopher Hollis, in his history of the Union (1964), suggests that the only tangible result, in fact, was the admittance of women as members of the Union itself, though it took thirty years to achieve it. The reason for this was an immediate drop in membership – traditionally minded fathers, for instance, were not over-enthusiastic at the thought of paying for their sons to join an institution which had earned itself a reputation for long-haired crankiness. Severe financial problems resulted – the debate was estimated to have lost the Union £1,000 a year in revenue – the only solutions for which were to raise the subscription, which none of the undergraduates wanted, or to admit women, which the life members thought inconceivable. A long and bitter battle followed, which was not settled until 1963 (by which time the subscription had risen as well).

The King and Country motion has been debated in the Union on a number of occasions since l933, and has generally been defeated, most resoundingly in 1983, after fifty years, by 417 to 187 votes.

Style and content

Many people agree that the Union has a style of speaking all of its own, and have attempted to define it. One such was Michael Heseltine (who also admits that he never fully gained his confidence there):

> 'People do identify it, and I think it is there. I think the mannerisms, the polish, the timing, the play with words, the sense of occasion, all of those things come from this place. It is a very precocious situation. In early life, you are pretending to be the elder statesman, and why not? Other people pretend they are all sorts of things. You do learn the tricks which are characteristic of the style of the place. There is a kind of house style, I think, in the Oxford Union.'

Wit has always been greatly admired, and quickness of wit. Edward Heath thinks this one of the main skills to learn there:

> 'The thing which the Union does is to teach you – or force you if you like – to think very quickly on your feet. Because in any speech you can be interrupted by any of your contemporaries who are there at Union debates, and you very quickly fall down if you haven't got the answer, directly you are interrupted. So I think that is another asset of the Union. Again, it makes you prepare a speech which is going to influence people. You cannot just stand up in the Union and produce any sort of speech, because again you very quickly get shouted down. So it means you have got to concentrate on the structure of the speech, decide what you want to say, how you're going to say it, and then try to influence people there to support you, because at the end of every debate, you've got a vote. That is a very salutary thing to bear in mind. In the Union, you have not got whips[3] rushing around telling people which way they have got to vote. You really have to persuade people.'

The question of how serious to be has always been hotly argued. In 1913 C. E. M. Joad, as an undergraduate, was scathing:

> 'Seriousness is not so much a virtue as indolence. One takes oneself seriously because one finds by experience that it is the easiest thing to do. This explains the heaviness of old men. It is easy to be heavy, hard to be light. It is much easier to talk sense about Home Rule than to make a good joke about it. The fact that one tells the truth in a funny way does not invalidate the fact that one is telling the truth.'

On the other hand, sincerity of feeling has always been valued, as is shown by the following comment on Hilaire Belloc in *Isis*:

> 'From Mr Belloc you get a speech different from anything else you will hear at the Union. He dares to be serious and to show it; the ordinary speaker is too much afraid of being taken to mean what he says. He

[3] "whips" are political party officers who enforce voting discipline in the Houses of Parliament.

> loves general principles; has a perfect lust of deduction; and it is the unity in which he comprises all departments of politics, the consistent measure to which he reduces them all, which give colour to the taunt that he has one speech of all work. Of course that kind of oratory is a prey to the scoffer, but its effect outlasts the laugh; Mr Belloc, alone almost of Union speakers, makes converts.'

Politics, and political matters, will naturally be spoken of more seriously than some more general motions, and personal ambition will tend to creep in. In the very political 1930s *Isis* bewailed the fact that:

> 'Oxford politics have strangled the Union. Their petty machinations have ruined real freedom of speech. As an office-hunter advances in seniority, his politics become more important. He must denounce capitalism without appearing an absolute revolutionary. If he is a Socialist he must not appear in evening dress or he would lose twenty votes. At any rate his tie must be a made up one to show his contempt for bourgeois prejudices.'

Dr Herbert James, writing in 1923, recalled that in his day some of the best debates were those on the arts and literature, and not on politics at all. Such debates attracted a different sort of speaker, one who was less partisan, less concerned to score off his opponent: Ruskin, for example, only spoke in the Union on motions concerning drama and poetry. Others have recalled that the most animated and amusing debates were not on the main question at all but in Private Business, when such burning questions as whether to open the rooms on a Sunday, or which American publications should be purchased for the Reading Room, were argued out.

The members of the Union are, not surprisingly, self-conscious when it comes to a discussion of their manner of speaking, but they are not above self-criticism. In 1924 a debate was held on the subject "That this House deserves its doubtful

North elevation of the Steward's House
(from the original drawings for the Union extension, 1910-11)

reputation" in which one speaker defined it as a '*school of oratory where everyone agreed to be bored provided that they might have a chance of boring other people in their turn'*. More recently Jeremy Thorpe defined it as '*the nursery in which we were trained in the minor arts of doing down our opponents in debate'*. But Christopher Hollis, concluding his History, puts it higher than that; for him it is '*a place where the young are encouraged to parade their opinions and to parade them in a light-hearted fashion*'. In this, and in much else, the style of the Union has not changed that much since 1823:

> 'The Union of 1983 makes a time capsule superfluous for anyone who wants to recapture the mood of past eras. Old members going back in search of eternal youth will find the same sort of youths engaged in the search for premature middle age as there always have been. A debate night follows a pattern which has changed very little in 160 years.
>
> The readers who have been frowning over their work in the New Library have gathered up their ring-binders and bicycled back to college. The room has been taken over by the pre-debate sherry party. The officers, all male, are immaculate in their white ties and tails; they appear to have added ten years to their ages by changing out of their jeans. As they circulate amongst their guests, they are unmistakably the grandees of the court. The lesser undergraduate luminaries, paper speakers, committee members and hangers on, cluster round in their dinner jackets. They try to be polite to the guests, but they appear more animated when they turn to discussing among themselves the prospects of the various runners in the elections a week hence ...
>
> Dinner is by candlelight, in the style and of the standard of a good Oxford high table. The Senior Librarian says grace beforehand. After the dessert, the President invites the guests to raise their glasses; the toast is the Queen, Visitor of Christ Church...
>
> Over in the debating hall, a crowd of four hundred has gathered. The undergraduates in the audience would not look out of place in the 1950s. Most of them are wearing jackets, quite a large proportion ties. The girls have more of Selfridges than of Greenham Common about them. Only up in the gallery is there any deviation from the sartorial norm, a handful of young men and women with their hair dyed green. They do not interrupt the proceedings, nor do any speakers make any reference to them. ...
>
> Once the debate begins, we are in an Oxford Union in which F. E. Smith or Ronald Knox would feel quite at home. ... The parliamentary forms are observed more punctiliously than ever. The speeches have a real polish, reflecting the amount of care which has been lavished on them. They are almost all well-delivered, and there is some genuine cut and thrust in the interventions and the replies to them. Sharp words are used, but couched in courteous language. Formal debate may not count for as much as it once did in the outside world, but here in the Oxford Union it is alive and well.'[4]

[4] David Walter, *The Oxford Union*, 1984

The Steward

At the Union I'm assured,
There's a Bursar and a Steward,
A Committee which occasionally commeets,
A President besides,
Who presumably presides,
While the Secretary invariably secretes.

Rules and Regulations:

Rule 54: The Steward shall have general oversight of the rooms and control of all the Society's staff subject to the direction of the Officers and Committee of the Society.

Rule 77: Any member giving a gratuity to a Servant shall be liable to a fine not exceeding five pounds.

Standing Orders: The Steward or his agent shall have power to refuse entry into the Society's rooms, or to enforce the removal therefrom of any person if he or his agent be reasonably satisfied that such measures are necessary.

A most important figure in the Union's administration and continued existence was undoubtedly the Steward, whose oversight of the buildings and management of domestic and other practical affairs was crucial to the smooth running of the Society. Several of them, by the length of their service, came to be closely identified with the institution itself.

When the practice of inviting guest speakers became established in the 20th century, some Stewards made it their prerogative to greet the visitors on debate nights. In later years the Steward was also barman.

The first recorded Steward was Thomas Harris, appointed at the time when the Union's new buildings were coming fully into use in 1857, and remaining in service there until 1885. Bishop Talbot of Winchester, writing his memories of the Union to Herbert Morrah (who himself described Harris as the *'one and only servant who counted for anything for many, many years. ... He received very small wages and did a great work'*) for the Centenary History, *The Oxford Union 1823–1923* (in the bookshelf), had this to say of him:

> 'Let me give a word to a very familiar and much-respected figure, that of Harris, the Steward: always in his little room, always at work, always ready to talk; courteous to the President and the freshman. Some who have since become permanent officials under Government must have remembered in Harris their first known typical permanent official doing all the work which appeared under others' names, tolerating by an admirable courtesy us presidents and treasurers who filed past him, a troop of shadows in terminal rotation, whilst disguising his consciousness (and ours) that the substance of the work, and all the knowledge of it, was his and not ours.'

After his successor, Arthur Harris (1886–1890), came William Gill (1890–1924), who was also fondly remembered by those who knew him. He arrived at a time when the finances of the Union were being established on a firmer footing, and when efforts were being made to encourage new members by making the rooms more attractive for regular use as a club. He did his job well: it was said by T. H. Grose, Dean of Queen's College, who was Senior Treasurer at the time, that under his organisation '*an unwonted air of comfort prevailed'*. The Union came to be the place remembered by Victor Gollancz in *My dear Timothy*:

> 'Better than anything were the long slow winter afternoons, spent amid the haze of tobacco smoke in the Reading Room upstairs. The armchairs were deeper than any in the world, the fires like fires in a railway engine. ... I would sit there from lunch till nearly seven, reading, dozing, eating much hot buttered toast.'

William Gill was praised by Lord Beauchamp in an article in the *Weekly Westminster* (February 23rd 1924):

> 'There is, however, one figure which remains constant in my mind through all the changes. We were fortunate in a Steward who was unusually well-fitted to conduct the internal affairs of the Society. Mr Gill was a wise counsellor and a guide to its officers, a living depository of its traditions.'

Morrah says of Mr Gill:

> 'He served with the Old 90th Light Infantry, trained by famous officers like Lord Wolseley and Evelyn Wood, and brought to the work ... an astounding vigour and an astonishing patience.'

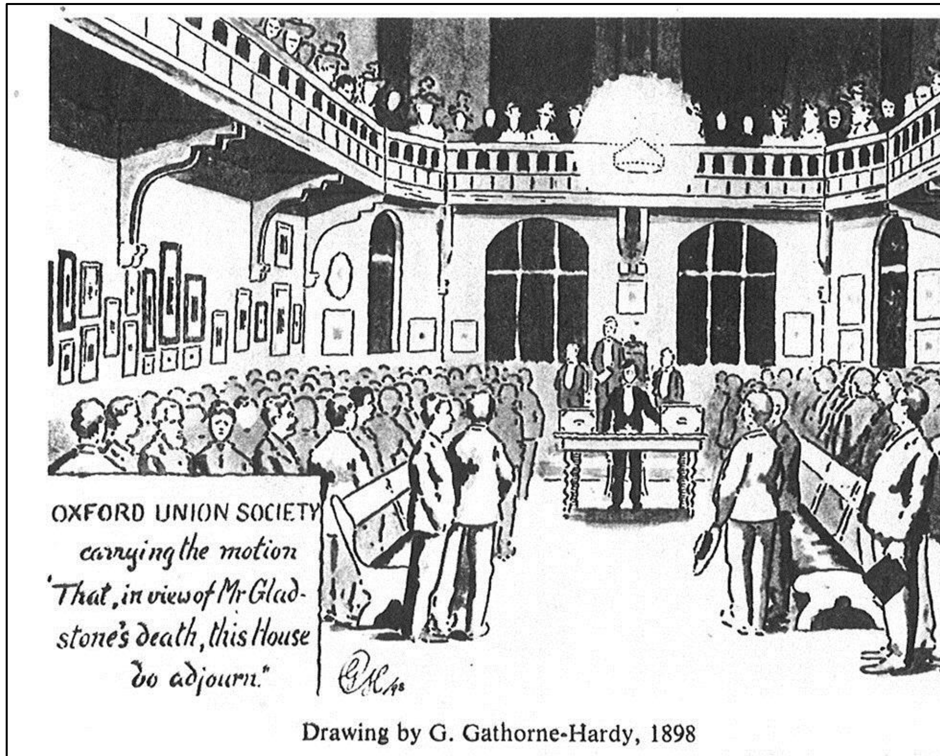
William Gill was the first Steward to be made an honorary member of the Society, which he was in Trinity Term 1924, his last term in office. It was also during his time that the new Steward's House was built.

He was succeeded by Henry Bird (1924–46), another ex-military man who in 1938 was persuaded by the President, Philip Toynbee, to speak in a debate on

conscription against Mr Gollan, Secretary of the Young Communist League. This was the only occasion on which a Steward has taken part in a debate.

Then came Horace Dubber (1946–54), during whose time was the staff supper arranged by Anthony Wedgwood-Benn, when the Union officers turned waiter, and even washers-up; and Leslie Crawte (1954–71) who, like William Gill, was made an honorary member. It was while Mr Crawte was Steward that Janet Morgan was elected as the first woman Treasurer, and they became firm friends, going to market together to buy the provisions for the debate dinners, and choosing the wine and the flowers. They also had an arrangement whereby he would make it appear, at the bar, that she was drinking a great deal more than she actually was, to increase her prestige with her male colleagues.

Lastly came John Williams (1973–8) and Walter Perry (1978–84), after whose retirement the post of Steward ceased to exist.



Drawing by G. Gathorne-Hardy, 1898

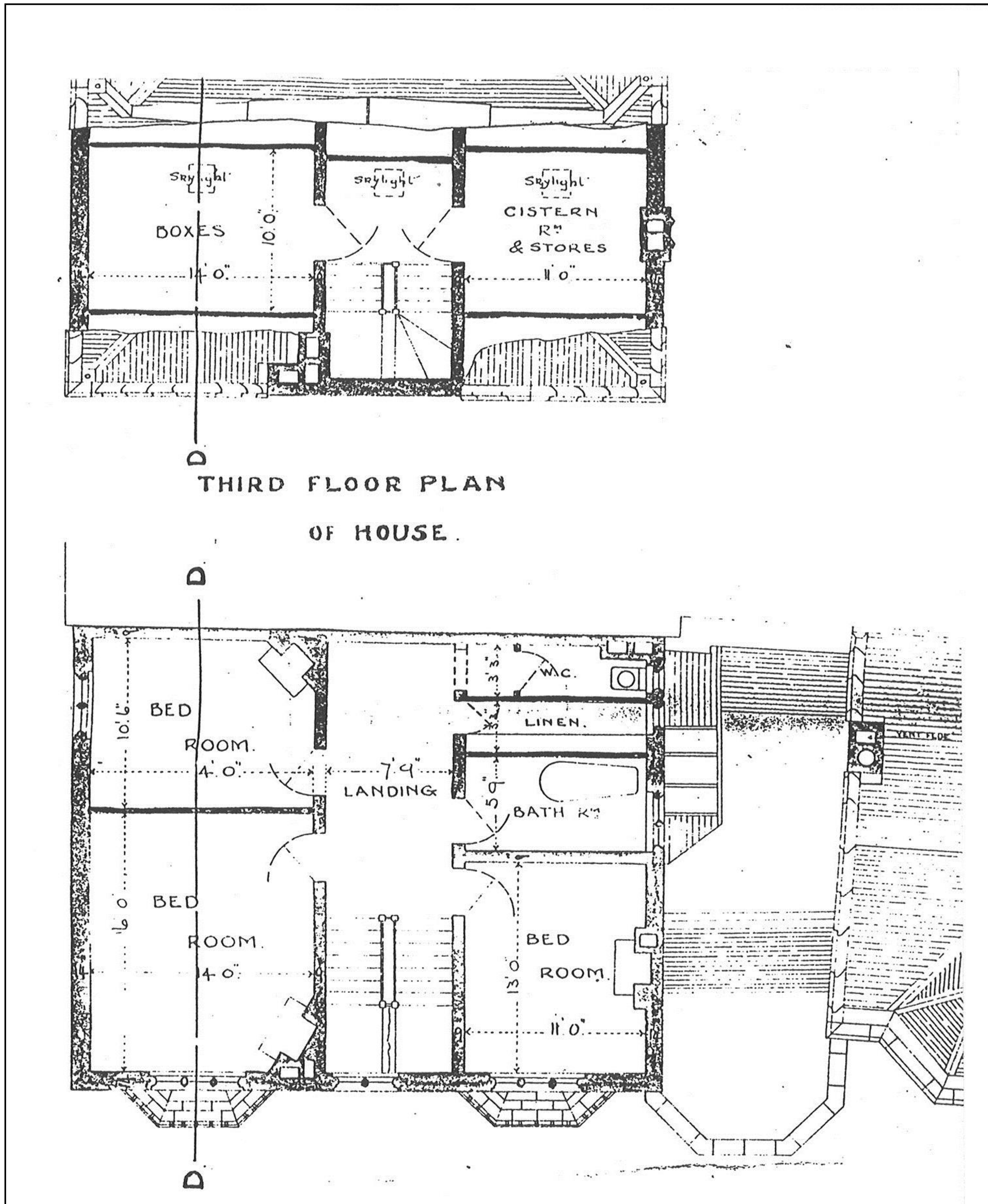
Photo: Hills & Saunders

The Landmark Trust at the Union

When the Union launched its appeal for funds to restore the Old Debating Hall, the Trustees of the Landmark Trust were immediately interested. They were in any case more than willing to support the restoration programme, both of the building and of the wall-paintings inside it, but there was the chance too that here was a long-wished-for opportunity to make a Landmark right in the centre of Oxford. So while offering to support the restoration financially, they also enquired whether there was any part of the Union building that was no longer used, and which could be converted into a flat.

It so happened that in l983 the Steward, Walter Perry, was about to retire, and the Committee of the Oxford Union Society decided to take the opportunity to reorganise and reduce their staff. The old office of Steward was to be done away with and his work combined with other jobs for a non-resident House Manager. So the Steward's House, at the end of the north wing and with its own entrance on to St Michael's Street, was to fall empty. Part of it was already used for kitchens and staff offices, but there was no obvious future use for the bedrooms on the first floor, and accordingly these were offered to the Trust, with part of the ground floor as well.

A lease on the flat was drawn up in 1985, plans were prepared, and work started in 1986. Only a small amount of exterior work had to be carried out, repairing gutters and adjoining flat roofs to prevent damp entering; and cleaning the stonework of the windows, with some minor repairs.



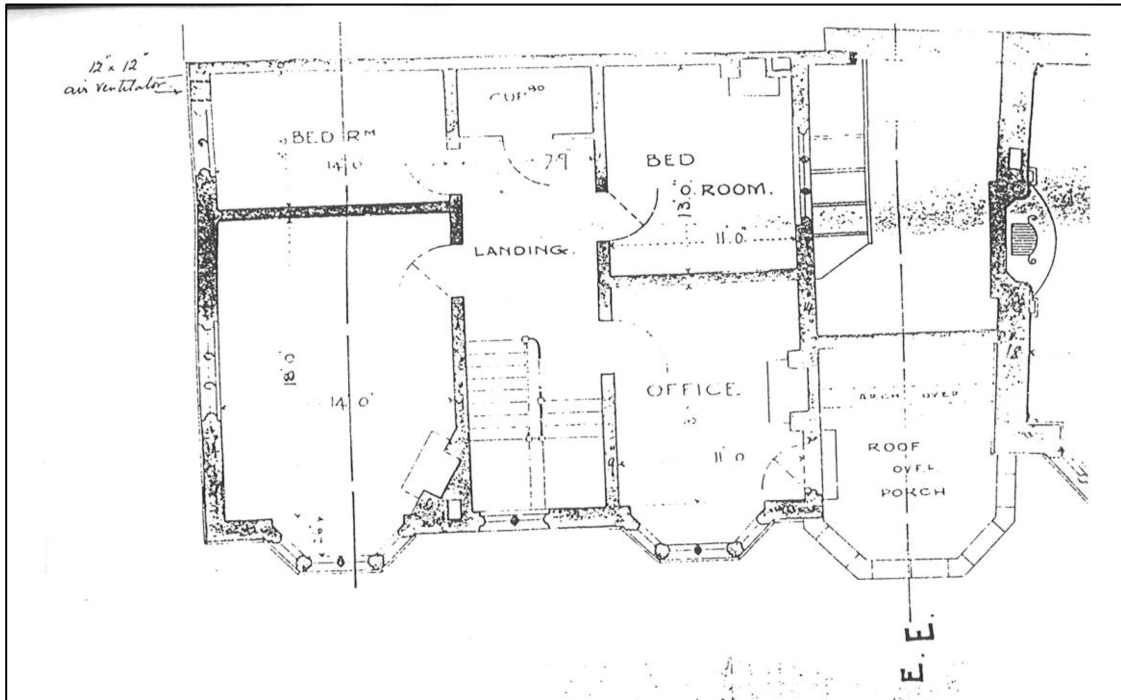
Original proposals for the Steward's House, 1910:
Top: Attic floor- some alterations seem to have been made at the time, or possibly between the wars, principally the insertion of a second staircase and bathroom (compare the 1985 plan); Bottom: First floor

Then there was the work needed to make the flat into a separate unit – blocking off communication with other parts of the ground floor and putting up a solid partition between the first floor landing and the main staircase (which also necessitated moving the bedroom door slightly). After this the only work necessary was to give the interior and services a general overhaul, renewing plaster, installing heating and so on.

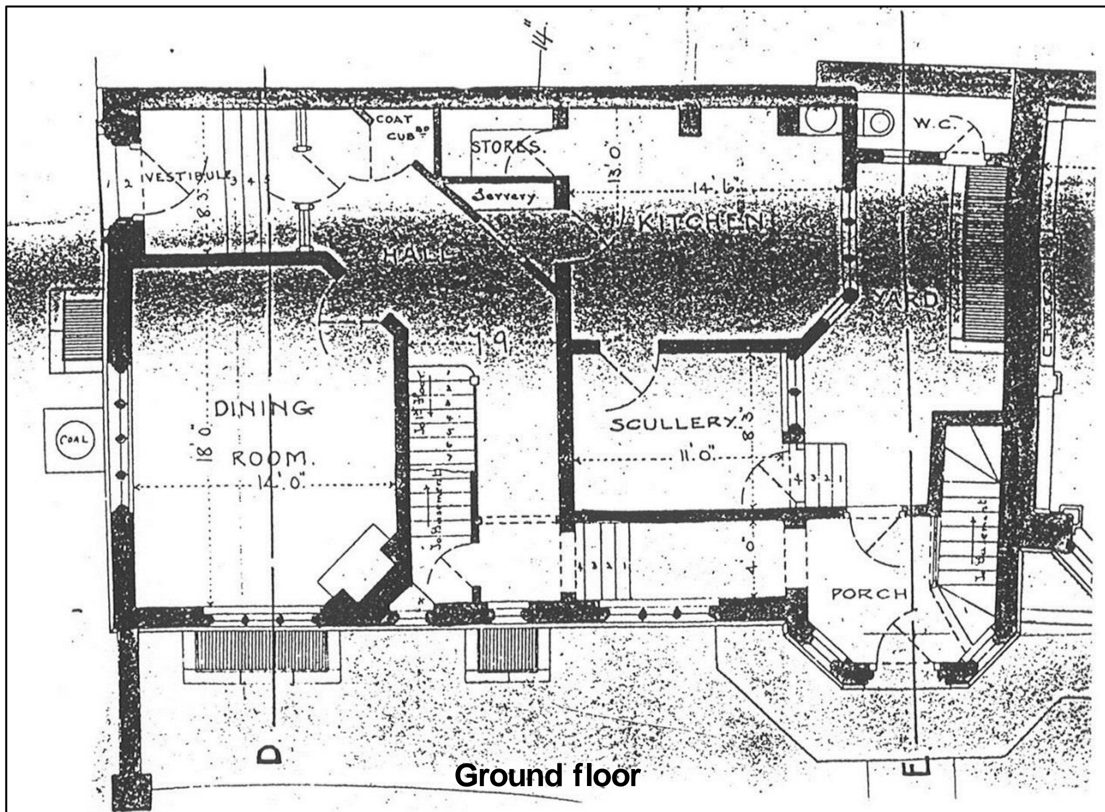
A large cupboard was removed on the landing, and the balustrade of the staircase was extended round to the wall. The smallest bedroom became the kitchen, the largest a sitting room. Otherwise everything was left as it was; the main rooms still have their cornices and fireplaces; the doors, complete with furniture, are all original, as is the mahogany flap-table on the landing. The bath has since been replaced.

All that remained to be decided was the decoration and furnishing, and here the choice was to go for a sense of donnish comfort; a don of the era before the First World War who had grown up under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, perhaps even been at the University with Morris and Burne-Jones and looked on at their work in the Debating Hall, who still clung to their tastes and ideas. So the hall and stairs have William Morris's Larkspur, the sitting room has Marigold, and the bedroom Sunflower.

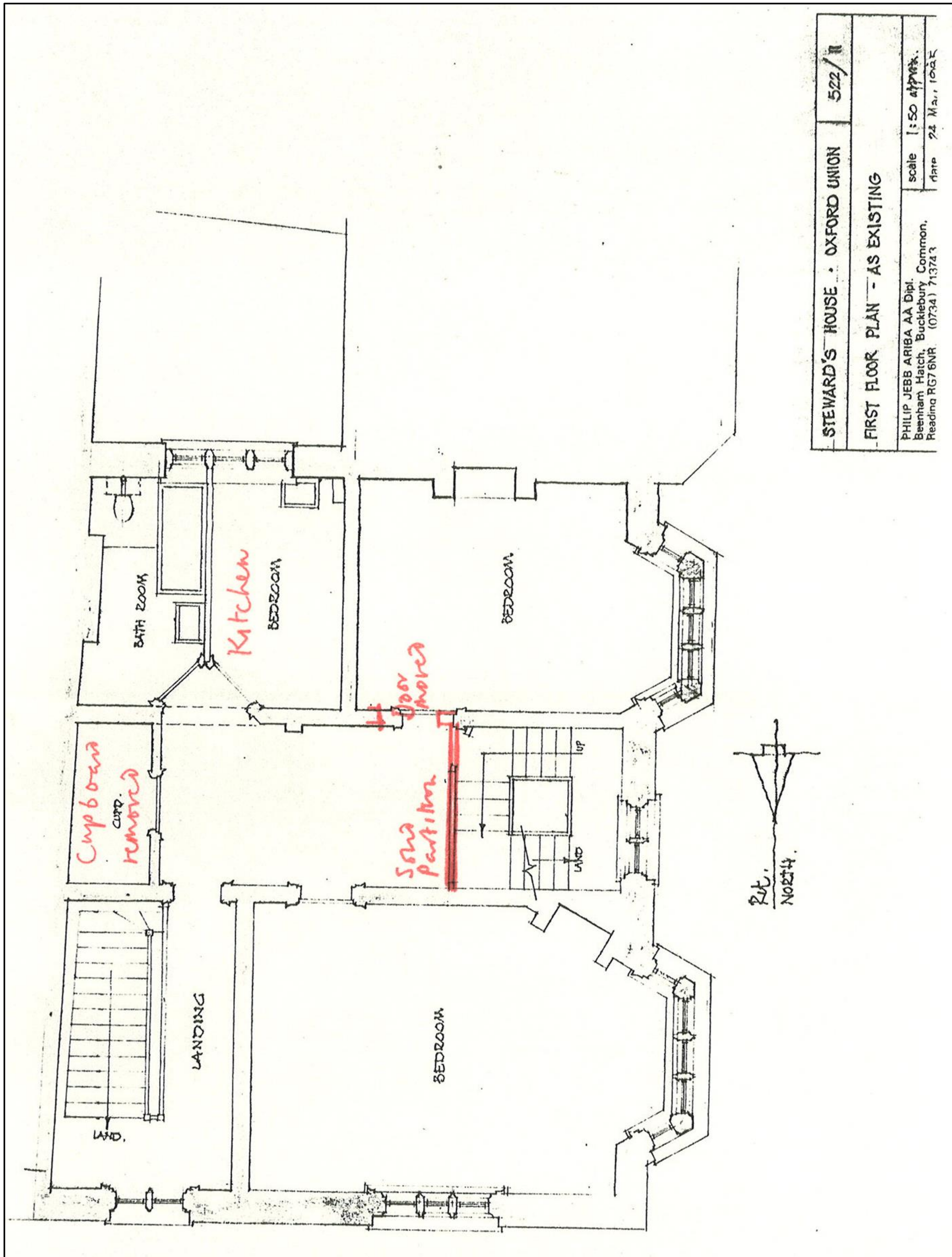
William Gill, the Steward who first occupied these rooms, would perhaps have filled them with military trophies and mementos of India; a don would no doubt have covered the floor and the tables with books. You can fill them as you will, with your experience of Oxford.



First Floor: (Some alterations seem to have been made at the time of or possibly between the wars, principally the insertion of a second staircase, and bathroom. Compare 1985 plan)



Ground floor



The Steward's House: drawings for conversion to a Landmark, 1985

Some questions for debate at the Union

1823 That America has been benefited by its intercourse with Europe.

1825 That religious differences are not a just ground for exclusion from political rights.

1828 That eloquence has produced greater good than evil to mankind.

1829 Was Shelley or Byron the superior poet? (Debate held with members of the Cambridge Union)

1831 That the present ministry (Lord Grey's) is incompetent to carry on the government of the country. Amendment (moved by W. E. Gladstone): That the ministry has unwisely introduced and most unscrupulously forwarded a measure which threatens not only to change the form of our government but ultimately to break up the very foundations of social order, as well as materially to forward the views of those who are pursuing this object throughout the civilised world. (Carried by 94 votes to 38)

1838 That theatrical representations are on the whole highly beneficial to a nation.

That Poetry's true object was more realised by modern than by ancient writers. (The two occasions on which Ruskin spoke)

1843 That *The Times* be excluded from the Reading Room (in Private Business).

1845 Were James Watt and the steam engine a blessing or a curse?

1840s That Eclecticism is the only sound system of Philosophy. Amendment: That this house is unable to grasp the system of Eclecticism.

1850 That the state of the nation imperatively requires a return to Protection. (The first debate of which a full report was made).

1851 That the increasing power of great towns is opposed to the idea of the English constitution, and inconsistent with the national prosperity.

That the French Revolution of 1789 was justifiable, and has conferred the greatest benefits on mankind.

1867 That the Government systematically sacrifices the honour and interests of Englishmen to truckle to the American cabinet.

1865–70 That the habitual use of strong terms is unworthy of an educated Englishman.

That the time-serving policy and falsification of facts makes The Times unworthy of its position as the leading English newspaper.
That the disadvantages of novel-reading on the whole overbalance its advantages.
That the importance attached to athletic sports tends to moral and intellectual degradation.
That this House deprecates the admission of women to any political rights whatever – at present.

1873 That the Church of England ought to be disestablished and disendowed. (Jubilee debate - the motion was lost)
That the restoration of the Empire would form the best guarantee f or the future prosperity of France.

1893 This House would welcome any scheme for associating undergraduates with the government of the University. (Proposed by F. E. Smith; opposed by Hilaire Belloc)

1896 This House would view with horror the prospects of a teetotal England.
That the time has come for the substitution of Arbitration for War as a means of settling International disputes.

1907 That this House would welcome the advent of a Labour Government.

1912 That this House approves the main principles of Socialism. (Harold Macmillan spoke in favour.)

1913 That this House approves of women's suffrage.

1914 That this House condemns the unnecessary and unnatural policy of the Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia against Germany.

1921 That the Government has failed to secure a peace worthy of the sacrifices or adequate to the purposes of the war.
That the Labour Party is capable of forming an effective government.

1923 That the development of the Eastern races of the Empire lies in development on eastern and not on western lines.
That civilisation has advanced since this house first met. (Centenary debate)
That this House attributes to supernatural causes what are commonly known as psychic phenomena.

	That Shakespeare did not mean Hamlet to be mad.
	That this House would welcome a return to Victorian ideals. (Defeated by 417 to 333)
1924	That this House deserves its doubtful reputation.
	That this House believes that disarmament is the best security for peace.
1926	That the Women's Colleges be levelled to the ground. (First occasion on which a woman undergraduate addressed the House – motion carried)
1927	That Europe is in greater danger from America than Russia.
	That birth control should be a national policy.
1931	That this House regards the BBC with distrust and its policy and practice with disapproval.
	That whereas other countries have pasts, Russia is the only country in Europe with a future.
1933	That in no circumstances would this house fight for King and Country.
	That this House strongly disapproves of Hitler's action in withdrawing from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference.
	That this House prefers Fascism to Socialism.
	That this House flatly refuses to view anything with concern, apprehension or alarm.
	That this house has no use for conventional morality.
	That Borstal and Eton are a couple of fine old schools.
1934	That in the opinion of this House the League of Nations should be able to enforce its decisions, where necessary, with full military measures.
1936	That this House recognises no flag but the Red Flag.
1937	That this House expresses its undying faith in politicians.
	That sport is either murder or suicide.
1938	That war between nations can sometimes be justified.
	That the Law is an Ass.
	That this House deplores modern morality.
	That this House regrets the decline of frivolity.(Motion moved by Edward Heath)

	That a return to religion is the only solution to our present discontents. (Carried by 279 to 94)
1940	That no single party is capable of dealing with Britain's post-war problems.
1943	That planning of social security by the State must involve the loss of liberty and initiative by the individual.
1947	That this House prefers to travel with its back to the engine.
	That this House wants to have it both ways.
1948	That this House would rather be a dustman than a Don.
1950	That a political and economic policy of the Extreme Centre constitutes the sole hope for the Country. (Spoken for by Robin Day, securing his election to the Presidency)
	That this House deplores the fall of the House of Stuart.
1951	That the present values of Western civilisation cannot meet the challenge of the modern age.
1954	That this House refuses to be alarmed and despondent at the prospect of 1983.
1955	That this House looks forward to a Republican Britain. (The only occasion on which the Union debated the Monarchy, prior to 1964 at least)
	That the world would be a better place without the political power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church.
	That the methods of science are destructive of the myths of religion.
1960	That neither country nor anything else are worth the use of nuclear weapons.
	That this House has no confidence in the Tory party.
1961	That Ambition is the Last Refuge of the Failure. (Nehru was guest s speaker)
	That the Christian ideal of chastity is outmoded. (Motion defeated by 302 to 227)
1962	That this House does not believe in God. (Motion carried by 295 to 259)
1963	That the State and University authorities should have no part in the enforcement of individual adult morality.
1964	That this House prefers the Beatles to Beethoven.

	That extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice, moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue. (Malcolm X spoke in favour)
1967	That the mini-skirt does not go far enough.
1968	That this House would abolish the armed forces.
	That this House has no confidence in politicians. (Presidential debate, won by Geraldine Jones, first woman to be President of the Union)
1968	That personal liberty in Britain is being dangerously eroded. (The first occasion on which the Union was visited by a reigning monarch)
1972	That it is the role of the student to change the world. (Motion defeated)
1975	That this House would say "Yes" to Europe. (Televised debate, motion carried by 493 to 92)
1977	That the West can no longer live at the expense of the Third World.
	That Capitalism will triumph.
1980s	That this house would hope to revisit Coronation Street rather than Brideshead.
	That this house would support the Social Democrats.
	That innocence is bliss.
1983	That this house would under no circumstances fight for King and Country. (Motion defeated by 416 to 187)
	That Victorian values have their place in shaping twenty-first century society. (Defeated by 150 to 222)

The Freshman’s Vision
by Hilaire Belloc

The Freshman ambles down the High,
In love with everything he sees,
He notes the clear October sky,
He sniffs a vigorous western breeze.

“Can this be Oxford? This the place”
(He cries) “of which my father said
The tutoring was a damned disgrace,
The creed a mummery, stuffed and dead?

“Can it be here that Uncle Paul
Was driven by excessive gloom
To drink and debt, and, last of all,
To smoking opium in his room?

“Is it from here the people come,
Who talk so loud and roll their eyes,
And stammer? How extremely rum!
How curious! What a great surprise!

“Some influence of a nobler day
Than theirs (I mean than Uncle Paul’s)
Has roused the sleep of their decay,
And decked with light these ancient walls.

“O! dear undaunted boys of old,
Would that your names were carven here,
For all the world in stamps of gold,
That I might read them and revere.

“Who wrought and handed down for me,
This Oxford of the larger air,
Laughing, and full of faith and free
With youth resplendent everywhere”.

[From the “Dedicatory Ode” in *Lambkin’s Remains*

The architecture of the Union: Ruskinian Gothic

Woodward's buildings are in the style known as Ruskinian Gothic. The Gothic Revival was undertaken with great seriousness and scholarship in the 19th century, and among its main advocates were John Ruskin and his followers: J. P. Seddon, J. Pritchard, G. E. Street, and E. Godwin. Ruskin himself attempted to establish principles of architectural design in his work *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, which came out in 1849: Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, and Obedience. His next book, *The Stones of Venice*, contains the celebrated chapter "On the Nature of Gothic", which equated the beauties of medieval architecture and decoration with the pleasure taken by the workman in producing them and which was the influence behind William Morris's projects as creator of workshops and as social reformer.

The following excerpt from Eve Bau's book *Ruskinian Gothic* highlights the most important architectural features of Woodward's work and relates it to precedents; both his own and historical ones:

> 'The Union building ... is essentially one large room (measuring 62 × 33 × 48 ft) with a small projecting entrance porch on the east side and a tall chimney on the west. In the form of an elongated octagon, the two long sides are twice the length of the other six, which form trilateral, apsidal ends on the north and south extremities. A low wall enclosing the Union grounds runs along the south and west sides of the building adjoining the buttressed walls.
>
> The original entrance porch is now obscured by later additions to the building. The first of these, the brick building with stone dressings adjoining the debating hall, was designed by T. N. Deane in 1864. In 1878 a new debating hall was built by Waterhouse on the Union grounds just north-west of Woodward's original hall. Further extensions to Deane's wing were made in 1891, when a new smoking room was added, and in 1910–11, when a north wing including a new library, rooms and the Steward's house were erected to the designs of Messrs Mills and Thorpe of Oxford.

The *Ecclesiologist* condemned Woodward's building: 'It seems to us to be singularly devoid of any feature, either in detail or proportion; no doubt it was built with very little money. But we have often seen great effects produced with small resources – there the effect is none at all.' Indeed the Union design was plainly functional and executed within a very limited budget. Practicality was a prime consideration.

The hall had a double purpose, first as an arena for debates and second as a library and reading room. The elliptical form was well suited to the room's dual purpose of providing both the centrality necessary for the debate and a maximum of wallspace for the library. These functions were also kept separate, with the debates taking place on the floor of the hall and the library on the gallery which was reached via a staircase outside the room itself. Thus the public and more private activities could be conveniently accommodated in one room. The gallery also provided additional space for members not taking part in the discussions to observe the debate without causing any interference. Furthermore the arrangement of the hall was acoustically sound. The apsidal ends and roof ensured that the speakers' voices would carry through the room, while the book-lined gallery muffled incidental and otherwise disturbing noises.

The most ingenious practical feature of the hall is the central fireplace. Open on two sides, it projects heat from the middle of the room towards the two far ends of the hall....

As in all his buildings, Woodward made a great display of structure in the Union. The *Illustrated London News* published 'an internal perspective view' of the hall where 'the features of its constructive characteristics' are clearly shown. Indeed, the revealed wooden beams, braces, and wall posts of the gallery and roof constitute the sole 'features' of the interior, and form an entirely rational endomorphic support system. The interlocking of this internal skeleton with the epidermal brick shell of the outer walls is also clearly shown. The outward thrust of the wooden wall posts and braces is taken up by the buttresses on the exterior corners of the building. These are further strengthened at points on the south and west sides of the building where they adjoin the low bounding wall of the Union enclosure and their surfaces merge in a fluid interpenetration of their masses....

No medieval precedents for this type of building existed, and Woodward's design is an amalgam of several different but nevertheless related types. *The Building News* gives a clue as to the first: 'We should judge that this is not an inconvenient form for such a room, where the members rise to speak from their seats in the body of the hall'. Indeed, the most obvious formal prototype for the hall is the English Parliamentary House – a model which is also fitting from an associational point of view. The elongated shape of the room and the arrangement of the benches facing inwards from opposite sides of the hall immediately recall the House of Commons. The seat for the Union President chairing the debates is placed like that of the Speaker of the House at one end of the chamber. Likewise the observers' gallery performs a function similar to that of the Strangers' Gallery in the Commons.

The secondary purpose of the hall as a library has been mentioned, and it is not unlikely that Woodward drew on his earlier design for the library at Queen's College, Cork, with its long hall and book-lined gallery. Once again, the collegiate type is as fitting here as the Parliamentary. The open-timber roof – by long tradition a feature of collegiate architecture – was also used, both in the library and in the examination room at Queen's College. Finally the apsidal ends, clerestory, and ranges of benches suggest a church choir and apse. Indeed the shape of the building in many ways resembles a large chapel. ...

Stefan Muthesius's comment that the Union is 'little more than a big schoolroom' is telling. The large unified space and rustic timber roof are identifying characteristics of the Victorian Gothic village or parish schoolhouse – a type established by Butterfield, Street and White in the early 1850s.

As for style, the building was dubbed a 'Venetian Gothic modification' by contemporary reviewers. Indeed, the red and white band voussoirs of the clerestory openings and the lower windows are Italianate, though the detached window colonnettes are a French convention, and the form of the building is not southern but northern Gothic, even Early English. ...

In short, the Union building can be regarded as a variant of Ruskin's ideal - 'designed in the forms of English and French thirteenth-century Surface Gothic' and 'wrought out with the refinement of Italian art in the details'.

However, particularly un-Ruskinian are the materials used and the resulting absence of 'broad sculptured surfaces'. The brick walls did not allow for great expanses of cut stone decoration. Instead Woodward exploited the polychromatic and textural qualities of the red brick. He chose the best and thinnest handmade bricks available, which though equal in size are uneven in colour, and bonded them together with fine mortar joints. The bricks are laid in English bond – rows of headers alternating with rows of stretchers – to create a fine dense texture. The wall surface ranges in colour from yellowish-orange to bluish-purple. In strong sunlight the juxtaposition of these complementary colours creates a vibrant luminosity. The warm mottled surface coloration, following Ruskin's 'first great principle of architectural colour', is here 'visibly independent of form' ... Woodward did stick closely to Ruskin's principles concerning architectural coloration. While Ruskin maintained that colour 'never follows form, but is arranged on an entirely separate system', he also noted that 'in certain places you may run your two systems closer, and here and there let them be parallel for a note or two'. Thus the brick is banded in the voussoirs of the lower windows and around the circular clerestory lights. But these areas of ordered pattern are clearly delineated from the accidental variegation in pattern on the broad flat wall, and here the colour defines rather than dissolves the form.

The areas of three-dimensional ornamentation are also strictly regulated. The brick architraves are cut into zig-zag and saw-tooth mouldings. Here, following Ruskin's dictum that moulded material should be uniform in colour, Woodward used evenly coloured bricks instead of the variegated ones used for the broad expanses of flat wall.

Representational carving, where in Ruskin's terms 'organic form is dominant', is again confined to specifically restricted areas in the capitals, bosses, circular window surrounds. This carving is probably by the O'Sheas and displays their characteristic vivid naturalism and decorative control. There is a stone tympanum above the main entrance carved in low relief with the figures of King Arthur and his knights by Alexander Munro after Rossetti's design.

The only piece of stone carving in the interior is the central mantelpiece. The rather conventional stylization of this carving is unusual for Woodward and suggests that it is not the work of the O'Sheas. Even more unusual is the applied colour on the mantelpiece, where the carved portions are somewhat garishly painted and gilt. Since this feature was noted by *Building News*, it would seem that the carving and colour are original. In the absence of documentation it is difficult to account for this strange aberration from Ruskinian principles and the obvious surface deceit of this feature.

Some of the most successful functional ornament done in the hall is the metalwork done by Skidmore. The original gasoliers suspended from the ceiling were 'medievalised' in keeping with the general character of the room. So too were the iron railings and attached book rests on the gallery. .. These are exquisitely simple in design, the book rests repeating the rustic notchings of the wooden beams in their decoration. Most striking are the different pairs of finely wrought leaves affixed like spandrils to each post of the railing'.'

Books about the Union

There are three histories of the Union:

- Herbert Morrah, *The Oxford Union* (1923), which concentrates on the founding and establishment of the Union in the first half of the 19th century;
- Christopher Hollis, *The Oxford Union* (1964), bringing the story more nearly up to date;
- David Walter, *The Oxford Union* (1984), a more political book that concentrates particularly on personalities and on the twenty years or so before its publication. Based on interviews with past members, and containing a list of Presidents since 1900, with their subsequent careers.

A detailed account and analysis of the King and Country debate is contained in Martin Ceadel's paper 'The King and Country debate 1933: Student politics, pacifism and the dictators' (*Historical Journal* 1979).

Jonathan Aitken and Michael Beloff's *A Short Walk on the Campus* (1966) is an account of a tour in the United States by a Union deputation.

Some mention of the Union is made in most books about Oxford, and in the countless biographies, memoirs and diaries of members of the Union whose careers prospered enough to merit some record – from Gladstone to Tony Benn.

FT 14 NOV 98

Home Truths

No expenses spared

When summoned to debate at the Oxford Union, who could refuse? Not **Walter Ellis**

It is easy to be overawed by the Oxford Union Society. Its buildings, dating from 1857, with subsequent embellishment by William Morris, suggest a distillation of the Palace of Westminster and the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand. Invitations to speak, though couched in the politest of terms, are like a summons: it seems improper to refuse.

The fact that little of significance has happened in the Union since the famous King and Country debate of 1935 helped to launch future prime minister Neville Chamberlain in the direction of appeasement hardly seems to matter.

Today's society is as packed with ambition as a Hollywood agent's in-tray and still manages to attract political leaders and other celebrities from Britain and around the world.

Not everyone, of course, can be a celebrity. Some of those called merely claim to a particular expertise. Thus it was that I, as the author of *The Oxbridge Conspiracy*, a modest tract against the dominance of the ancient universities, found myself at London's Paddington station earlier this term awaiting the 18 minutes past four flyer to Oxford.

The motion for debate was: "This house believes that students must pay their way." I, apparently, was in favour and I had only a couple of hours left in which to pick up my black tie and accoutrements and get myself to Frewin Court in time for drinks.

The announcement at the station that services to Oxford had been suspended pending inspection of a damaged bridge made me think I had been let off the hook. A quick call to madam president, however, soon changed that. Now, it transpired, students were to pay my way – a taxi from Paddington to Frewin Court, no less. The cab driver looked at me unblinkingly. "You realise it's a cash job, guv? Fair enough. Jump in."

The meter registered £114.60 as we drew up, which I paid. Meanwhile, there was the business of the hired suit. A Union officer had been dispatched to pick it up and lurched through the door just as the shop was closing. Sadly, the same officer was unable to reimburse me for the cab fare – there wasn't enough money in the kitty.

So I retired, virtually penniless, to the Randolph Hotel to check in and change, only to discover that the university's finest had neglected to book me a room. Not to worry, the receptionist assured me, a cramped single was still available somewhere in the bowels of the hotel. I hurried upstairs, at my own expense, to wrestle with my bow tie.

With dress-suit trousers on, I was making progress, only to be detained again by the phone in my room ringing. It was my friend, the journalist Peter Millar, who had agreed to accompany me to the pre-debate dinner, my wife being otherwise engaged. Had I got £1.20 for a parking meter?

> But as the speakers droned on, interest quickly waned

Only just, I said.

In Frewin Court, drinks were not served as advertised because someone had forgotten to tell the bar. But by now, Helen Eastman, the Union president, resplendent in emerald green evening dress and long white gloves, had arrived.

She seemed genuinely pleased that we had taken so much trouble and moved among us like a minor member of royalty, engaging in lively pre-dinner – indeed, pre-drinks – conversation. Fear not, she said, the champagne would arrive, the Randolph would be squared and my taxi money would be forwarded. My fairy godmother had arrived.

And so to dinner. Watercress cream soup, grilled salmon, brandy snap basket with ginger ice-cream and a selection of cheese and fruit, with wine and port. On my left sat the Union treasurer, Nick Donovan (Eton and Brasenose); to my right, an executive of Andersen Consulting, the debate's sponsor, who explained that his company always preferred to recruit from Oxbridge.

One of the other speakers, Labour MP Tom McNulty, introduced himself cheerily, but his Liberal Democrat colleague, Evan Harris, was too busy making notes for his speech.

The debate, when we finally got round to it, was well attended, at first. But as the various speakers, myself included, droned on, interest quickly waned, so by the time McNulty and Harris got their chance to rage at each other more than half the audience had drifted away.

Debates on education are like that. Not even the dramatic intervention of Eastman, opposing the motion as if it were an invitation to invade Poland, could rescue the evening.

By the time we got back to the president's office and her (by now) plenitude of refreshments, there seemed little left to say.

And the result? We lost. Oxford wants it for free. Let Tony Blair and education secretary David Blunkett beware.