

Thursday 14th February 2008

No little scandal to god and Man: the extraordinary story of town-gown relations in Oxford - Chris Day

Members who came to the February meeting were treated to a superb analysis of how the relationship between town and gown in Oxford has evolved. In particular they were enabled to appreciate the way in which the university grew up within and at the centre of an established town.

It was not always a case of peaceful co-existence. During the 13th and 14th centuries fights between townspeople and scholars were commonplace. The greatest of all riots of which we have records occurred in the early 1450s. It started when some university men questioned the quality of the wine in the *Swindlestock Tavern*. The situation escalated into what became known as the ‘St Scholastica’s Day’ riot, which persisted for several days with more blood being spilt than on some battlefields. As a result, both the town and the University were required to surrender their charters to the king. In the new charters the University’s powers were increased at the expense of the town, giving it power to regulate markets and the price and quality of bread, ale and wine. By the sixteenth century the university had further developed its own courts and its police force patrolled the town by night whilst urban police held sway by day. Some two hundred years later and the association was more collaborative over matters such as paving, lighting and drainage.

During the Middle Ages Oxford emerged as a cloth-making centre but output migrated away from the centre and colleges seized the opportunity to grab land and property at a time when both were cheap. A consequence of this for the present day landscape is that New College gardens incorporate the best-preserved stretch of 13th century city walls. At the outset of the 16th century the town had become more dependent economically upon the University even to the extent that it was content to derive a living from supplying the student population.

Sadly this history of relationships still has one more period of major disturbances – the 19th century food riots with the University at the centre of aggravation. Boats were burned in college quadrangles (1879) and targets such as Salvationists and Socialists were attacked both by citizens and students.

Despite this background of occasional town/gown brawls on such occasions as Guy Fawkes Night and May Day, the last century saw the development of opportunities for city locals to secure casual employment within the University. The reliance on the University for employment faded as William Morris shaped his industrial quarter at Cowley. Significantly in the 1960s a sign near Oxford railway station conveyed the message ‘Welcome to Oxford – home to Pressed Steel’.

Today although some tension still exists between students and city residents the two elements have evolved their own niches. Town is synonymous with a more retail orientated and outward looking approach (the Oxford region) whilst gown stands for a knowledge economy within which scientific research is a proud component.