



Happy 120th Birthday, Westminster College!

120 years ago, at 11.30 am on the 17th October 1899, the Presbyterian Church of England's brand new college was opened: Westminster College, Cambridge.



WB4/3/7,9,10 Newspaper coverage, 1899

Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson, the Sisters of Sinai, were present on the platform, with other dignitaries and honoured guests, as Rev. Dr. James Watson, the Convenor of the College Committee, presented the keys of the College to Rev. Charles Moinet, the Moderator of Synod. Moinet then placed the keys into the hands of Rev. Dr. James Oswald Dykes, the Principal, who promised on behalf of all the Senatus that “we shall do our best in our high and sacred office to serve the Church whose ministers we have the honour to be.”

The College had been founded back in 1844 in London, by the Presbyterian Church in England, and had rented several premises over the previous fifty years. However, in 1892, Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson offered to buy land in Cambridge for a new college to be built, and also offered to make a donation to the cost of such a building. In 1895, the General Synod of the of the Presbyterian Church of England voted (narrowly!) in favour of such a move, and work on the Cambridge college began.

The sisters laid the foundation stone in 1897, and the Church, its benefactors, and its congregations began raising money for the Building Fund. And by 1899, the College had been – as Dr Watson said in his speech in the ceremony – “completed in all good workmanship and without loss of life, according to the designs of the architect and the plans approved by the Church.”

After the ceremony and speeches in the morning at the College, lunch for 665 people(!) was served in the Guildhall and the Red Lion Hotel. *The Presbyterian* newspaper, reporting on the event in its issue of Oct 19th 1899, commented that “the most prominent feature of the day’s proceedings was the absolute unanimity of welcome expressed” by the guests – who included Alderman George Kett, the Mayor of Cambridge; Sir Richard Jebb, MP for the University of Cambridge; and the Vice-Chancellor of the University (and Master of Emmanuel), Mr Chawner.

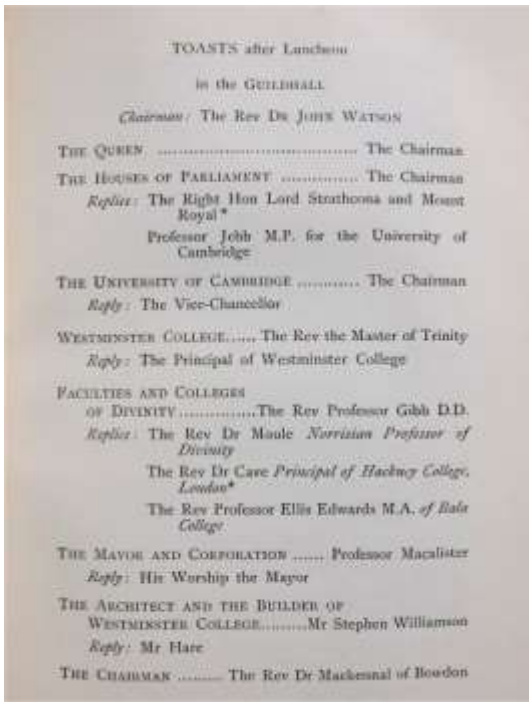


WR5/5 Photograph of the College gates, by William Butcher, 1899

As well as these representatives of the City and the University, the Masters of Trinity, Trinity Hall, St John’s, Queen’s, Christ’s, and Sidney Sussex Colleges were all present; and so were representatives of the Scottish Synod in England, the United Presbyterian Church, the Free Church of Scotland, The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Welsh Presbyterian Church, and the Free Church Council. The Principals or Presidents of several Independent colleges – Mansfield College, New College Edinburgh, Hackney College, and Bala College - were also present to offer congratulations and speeches. *The*



WB4/3/4 Invitation to the Opening Ceremony



WR5/5 the Toast List

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Presbyterian notes that the toast list “took about two hours to get through”, but says “the finest speech of the day” was that by the Master of Trinity, the Very Revd Dr Butler.

Following lunch and the speeches, the new College was thrown open to visitors, with afternoon tea served in the student common room; and finally, the Principal and Senatus welcomed guests to an evening reception in the Library. There was a performance of ‘sacred music’; an ode written by Mrs Lewis written to mark the occasion was sung by the choir; and *The Presbyterian* remarked that “the boy pipers of the Royal Caledonian Asylum gave a selection of Scotch music on the lawn in front of the College”. And as an extra considerate thought by the hosts, a special train was even laid on to take guests home to London that evening.

And now, 120 years on – as Dr Butler’s lauded speech of the day in 1899 said – “I [...] beg to join most heartily in every birthday felicitation.” Many happy returns, Westminster College!

Helen Weller, Archivist
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