

Do you remember...

Westminster College?

Westminster College at the top of Harcourt Hill, was originally a Victorian Methodist foundation. It first opened in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition. Its job was teacher training from a basis of strong Christian conviction, and its mission was to the poor. So Horseferry Road in Westminster was chosen for the original site because it was surrounded by slums packed with needy children. At first the college was co-educational, but demand for places was so high after the 1870 Education Act hugely increased the number of schools, that a separate college was opened for women. Westminster college retained a strong male identity through all the changes in schools and society for the next hundred years, including two world wars, and conscientiously devoted itself (as the College Song declared) to moulding the manhood of the race.

By the end of the Second World War, during which the chapel had been bombed out, and all the best furniture and paintings destroyed, a new building was an urgent necessity. Quite how it found itself on the edge of Oxford is unclear. But by 1957 work was well under way.

In this year Clifford Gower was taken on as Clerk of Works. Up at the site things were not going smoothly. He had no idea what he was in for: "I entered the Clerk of Works office, which was to be my home for the next few years, opened one of the plan drawers to inspect the plans and got the shock of my life! The plans were not all flattened out or in any sequence of order as one would expect, but were still in their envelopes, folded and in many cases unopened. These were the drawings from the architect for the construction of the buildings and for the drainage etc, drawings from the structural engineer, and drawings for the electrical and heating systems. I found, to my horror, approaching 1500 drawings that had not been catalogued or even opened!" The project was already behind schedule, but some of the buildings were so badly built that they had to be torn down and started again.

Come the summer of 1959 this long and complex project was drawing to a close. It was a race against time. Kitchen, dining halls, staff accommodation needed to be up and running before the first intake of students. There were last minute problems with the wiring, which, on testing, wasn't working in 40% of the students' rooms. "During this time I was receiving daily telephone messages from the old college in London, in particular Charles Prebble, the Bursar. One morning he informed me that 8 pantechnicon lorries would be leaving for Oxford that day, and that 17 would be leaving at dawn the next day. This went on day after day after day. Bear in mind that each of these pantechnicons can hold the contents of three average semi-detached houses! They arrived on site in a long convoy and we had large marquees on the playing fields to accommodate all the furniture and effects from the old college. What complicated matters still further was that there was a national strike on at that time by removal men, and so the companies were using labour that was not used to this type of work, which obviously made it much more difficult for us on site."

Somehow it all was finished in time and the first intake of students – both men and women by now – were just settling in when the Department of Education threw a fresh spanner into the works, by requesting the College to double its size. Mr Gower stayed with the College till he retired in 1989, during which time it had undergone so many changes it was hardly recognizable as the place which had been such a challenge 30 years earlier.

Michael Baston arrived at the college in 1975 as the new Assistant Works Superintendent, specializing in electrics. He stayed there until he retired in 1996. The main things Botley people will have noticed during this time would have been the demolition of the mighty water tower, which had been a local landmark since the late 1920s, and the swimming pool. The water tower, built by the City Works, was already obsolete when the College arrived, but it proved a handy stable for the Senior Resident Tutor's horses. It came down towards the end of the 80s. The photo shows the fallen dinosaur on its side. The swimming pool, built, according to Martin Groves, with funds raised by the students, was fitfully warmed by primitive solar panels on the roof. These were torn off by the huge storm in 1987, and the pool was closed for a while. It was always intended to be shared with the local community, as it still is. Many of the local primary school children learned to swim there.

What is so noticeable about the history of Westminster College is the high morale of the staff. They came, they were welcomed and given a real part to play, and they stayed. When they left, their contribution was celebrated with a tremendous party. The pictures show Clifford Gower cutting a cake in the shape of the college chapel, and Michael Baston being chaired round the campus. I don't doubt this spirit came in large part from the high principles of the original foundation. It also owed something to the continuity of the staff. It appears strangely old fashioned in these secular times, when there is just one resident staff member, and the buildings are home to first year Brookes students from all disciplines who may or may not become the teachers of the future.