

# Old Postcards of Wadham

(2004)

## Robert JC Young

Working in a four hundred year old building doubtless gives you a false sense of security, of living in an unchanging world. Wars and revolutions come and go, but Wadham always looks the same. Come back after ten weeks, ten years, and there it is, still resting peacefully in immortal stone. How has it looked though, through different times? Over the past few years, I have been picking up old postcards of Wadham whenever I have found them. The pictures date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and at first seem only to reinforce a sense of timelessness. The College's main front, taken from Parks Road, never seems to change. Nor does the front quad.



This afternoon I stood by the chapel with this old postcard of the front quad, taken looking across towards the main gate. Looking around me, there was absolutely nothing that I could see that was any different from the photograph taken fifty or sixty years ago. Apart from the antiquing effect of the now paved paths instead of loose gravel, or the darker, slightly flakier stone in the postcard. And then I noticed that in the card there were some strange pipes coming up out of the front chimneys. And something I could not quite make out hanging beneath the large bay window of the tower room over the main gate. More and more differences gradually revealed themselves, rather as they do when you scrutinise the 'Spot the Difference' pictures in a Rupert annual.

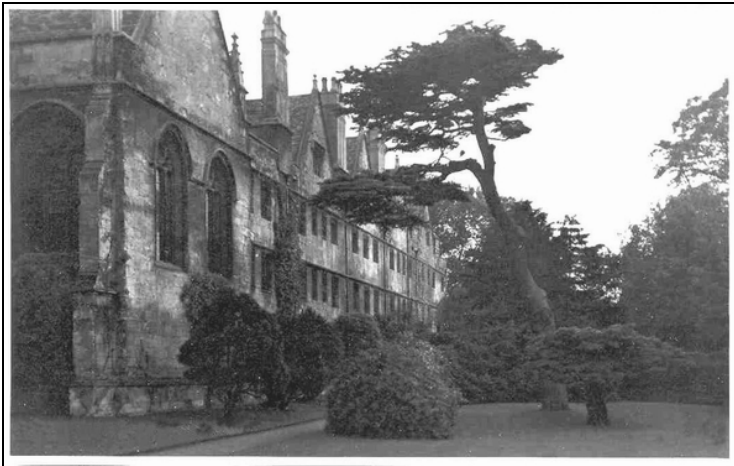
A late 'Real Photograph' card, which looks through the main gate towards the front quad, reveals that indistinguishable something as an old lamp, dangling precariously from the arch. This curious contraption was probably removed, one hopes before it fell down on someone, at the time flood lighting was installed on the main gate fan-vault ceiling. If you look up at the ceiling now, though, you can see a hole in the stonework that has been filled in, marking the spot from which that lamp swung for so many years.



For the most part these sepia toned images keep their own secrets, telling us nothing of the everyday life of the people who lived in Wadham at that time. Yet much of the charm of these old postcards can be found in the small inadvertent details that the photographs of the College unwittingly display. Despite themselves, they reveal a passing life, the touch of a humanity that is in other ways entirely missing from the monumental images. What makes any postcard, of any age, different from other forms of photography is that pictures of buildings avoid representing all the people who inhabit them. So, postcards of Wadham generally portray it as completely unpopulated: increasing its sense of timeless

majesty, but by the same token giving it a strange disembodied air. What makes the buildings real are the people who inhabit them at any particular moment, and it is in this way that those who work there share their different memories of the College. By and large, though, it is only the tourists who take pictures of themselves in Wadham. Those who actually live in College would never think of standing under the main gate, posing for a picture. 'What are you doing?' asked one fellow incredulously who was passing as I tried to persuade another to stand there for his picture.

Close inspection of the secreted details in other old postcards reveals different ways in which Wadham changes over time. This is particularly evident in the manner in which trees come and go. Pictures of the Fellows' Garden show the magnificent cedar tree that used to greet visitors as they came into the garden through the passageway by the chapel.



The gardens are, as always empty here, but in the following postcard a wheelbarrow on the path reveals the invisible presence of the College gardener, whose image has not survived but who chose to mark his loving work in the garden with this small metonymic gesture. I discovered that the College archives keep no copies of postcards of Wadham. When I talked about them to Andrew Little, the Head Gardener, however, he immediately disappeared into his cottage and reappeared with a picture frame in which four of these postcards were mounted. So I was pleased to find that while there was no official interest in these commercial productions, it was the gardeners themselves who today were keeping the photographic archive of the minute changes which the College, and the trees and shrubs growing round it, had undergone.

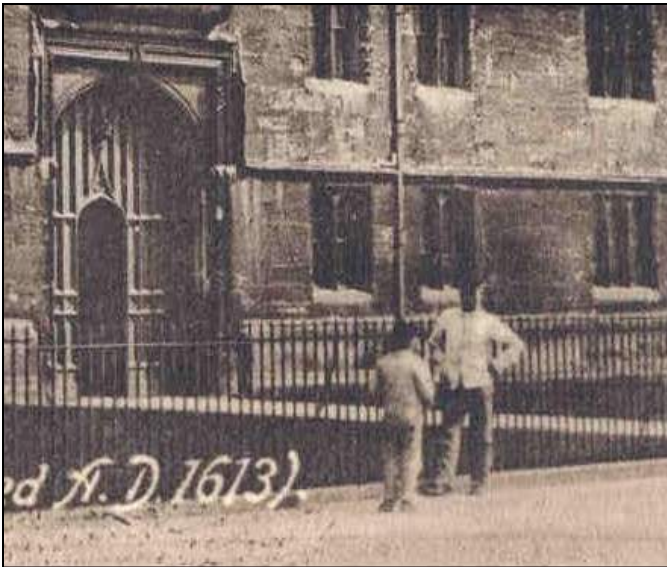




*The wheelbarrow (detail)*

Most postcards of Wadham are, of course, of the main front of the College that faces Parks Road. The different views are hard to date—even if the card has been stamped and posted, it is no indication that that is how the College looked at that date. Broadly though, images of the front divide up as either those with or without the railings. It is generally assumed that the railings, put up in 1822, were taken down during the First World to be turned into bullets. This violent end for the metalwork has been redeemed every day since by the small children who find an irresistible pleasure in walking along the boundary stones that remain.

What may be the oldest image is taken from the North, showing a man and a boy (College servants perhaps?) standing in front of the railings.



The railings come up to the man's shoulders, which gives us some idea of the extent of Matthew Arnold's famous

feat of jumping over them. To the left, you can see the large plane tree that used to grow in front of the Warden's lodgings. On both sides of the main gate, the traditional drainpipes that used to fall downwards to the front lawns are clearly visible, now replaced by no doubt more 'authentic' and certainly discrete short gargoyle gutters from which the rain drops directly to the ground. Parks Road here appears to be uniformly gravelled, with no separation between road and pavement. The most curious feature of this card, however, are the windows on the two story building that has been drawn in by hand to the right. Did the photographer feel that the large tree that grew at the other end was messing up the view? Or did the eye of the viewer, as it moves inexorably to the right of the picture, move too swiftly from the main front to come to rest on the side of the building that is now staircase 9?

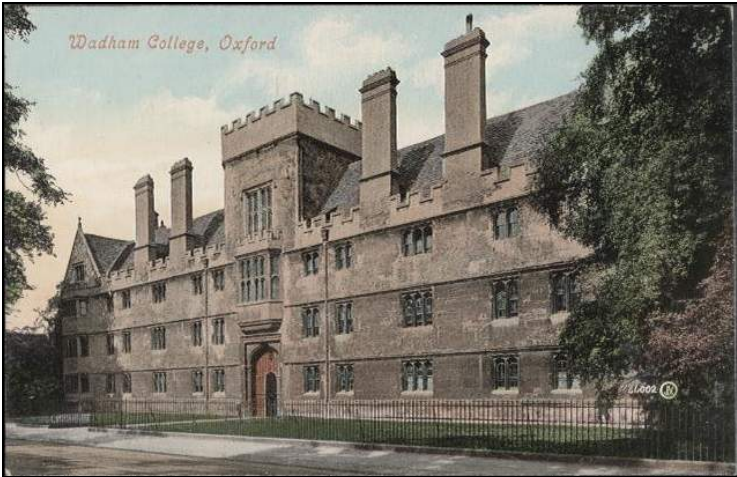
A charming, slightly later, card is taken from a little further up Parks Road, showing the ivy-covered old stables (a parking meter machine now stands beneath that small first floor window), the vast size of the plane tree, and a traditional gas lamp now placed strategically nearby. Under the lamp, the side edge of the road has been cobbled, no doubt protecting the gas pipe, and the kerbstone beneath the railings seems to have been raised. The first of the additional chimney pipes (all now removed) for a modern, perhaps gas fire, is here visible on the last chimney to the right.



This seems to have been the last of the cards showing the College taken from the North. There are a number of views looking Northwards, some of which have been coloured, taken with what here looks like a huge beech tree in full leaf to the right of the shot, with a wide footpath now visibly separated from the road. In one, posted in July 1923, a small choirboy has managed to sneak into the picture to the far right, unaware that his image would remain forever as a human counterpart to the majesty of the buildings and the magnificent trees.



In the hand coloured version, this intrusive, human boy has gone. The tree on the right has grown even larger, and the College returned to the dignity of its unpeopled majesty.



After this card, the stonework looks darker and flakier each time, partly because the picture has no longer been cleaned up in the studio, but no doubt also the result of ever increasing pollution. Those who remember the way that Oxford looked up until the 1970s, will recognise the familiar, comfortable blackened stone that now survives in only a few places, such as New College Lane.



The last view, another Real Photograph, dates perhaps from the late 1940s. The buildings have become a bit dishevelled: the stonework is even sootier, two iron S bars have appeared to keep the walls of the tower over the main gate steady, and by now several new chimney pipes are thrusting irreverently out of the old chimney stacks. The large tree to the right has been replaced by a smaller wild service tree (*sorbus torminalis*) that is in flower. Here, for the first time, the inhabitants are no longer completely invisible: everywhere, there are marks

of their presence. A flagpole has appeared at the top of the tower, from which a union jack hangs limply. Notices have sprouted on the front lawns, in some ground floor windows and even on the main gate, while a child's pushchair has been left outside the entrance by the bicycle racks. It is, however, another harbinger of modernity that makes this view so distinctive: the appearance for the first time of motor cars parked outside on the kerbside, a stylish MG, made nearby in Abingdon, a small Vauxhall saloon, and a black Austin (or is it a Riley?), now frame the foreground of the College instead of the railings and the trees. The cars sit there easily, free of all restrictions, casually assuming their right to be there at rest as they wait for their owners to wander out of the main gate and drive off with their friends to the suddenly accessible Perch or Trout.



Well, not quite free of all restrictions. Those who

remember the buildings of Oxford as charcoal black rather than golden, may recall that according to the Proctor's rules of the day, undergraduates who kept cars in the city were supposed to identify them by installing a green light on the car's front grille. This postcard, at least, cunningly cropped at the level of the engine grille, keeps its secret, and does not reveal whether this rule was ever obeyed.



*Michael O'Day, with his wheelbarrow, 2004*

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