

On the British Education System and The State Schools in Cambridge (IV)

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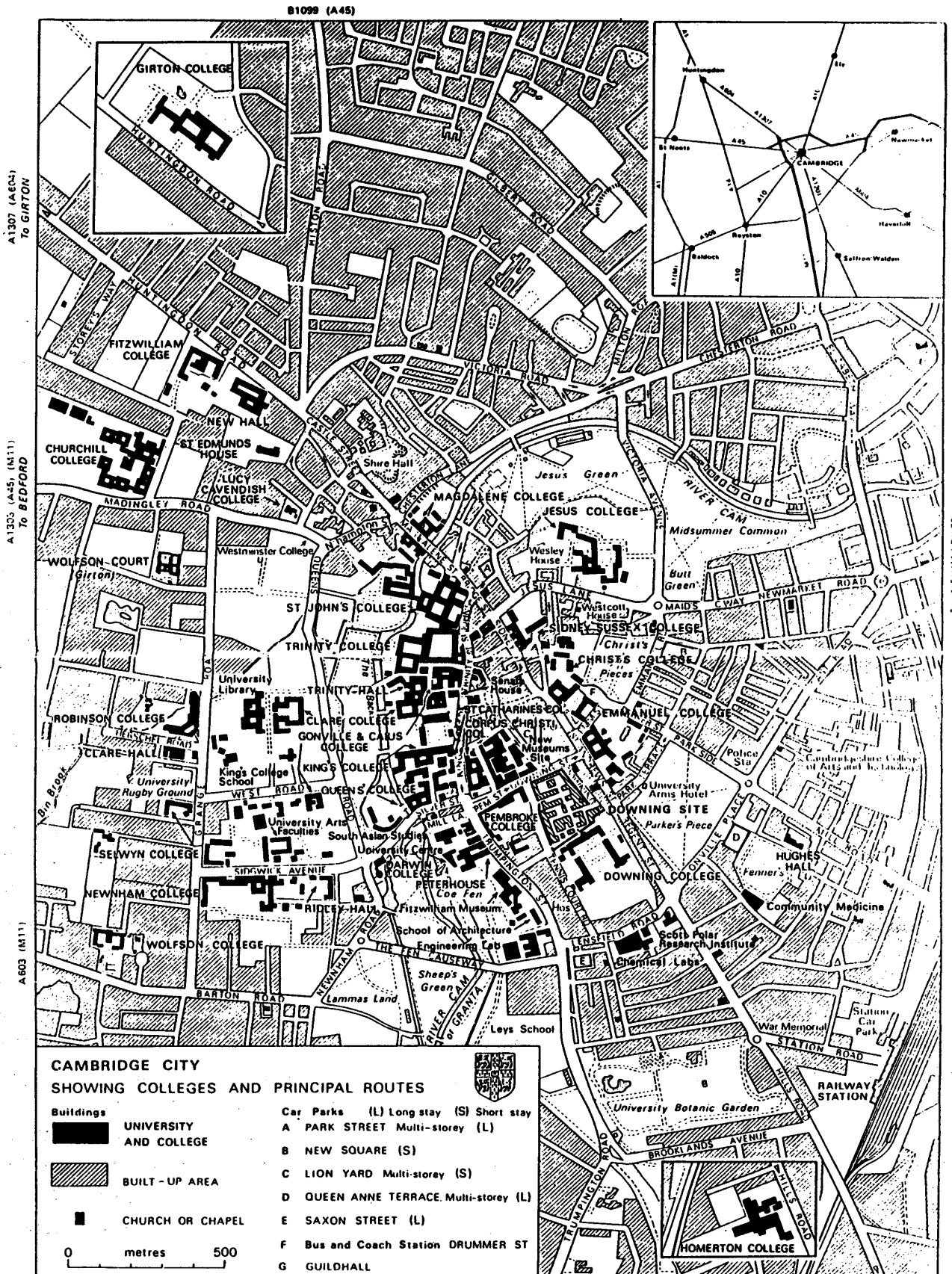
In my preceding essay (Vol.III) with the same title, I mentioned Further Education, the origin of the universities, and the three types of the universities in Britain, and the admission procedure to enter a university. In this essay, I will tell you about the old established universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Especially I will refer to the latter more minutely because I was a Visiting Scholar there and so I am more familiar with the university than the former.

The Old Established Universities: Oxbridge

In order to understand fully about the University of Cambridge or any British universities, we will have to examine the way in which universities first developed in medieval and early Renaissance Europe. “The first universities on the mainland were in Italy (e.g. Bologna, founded at the end of the 11th century) and France (the Sorbonne in Paris, dating from the mid 12th century). In Britain, the first university was Oxford, founded in the latter half of the 12th century on the model of the Sorbonne by dissatisfied English scholars who had migrated from there.”¹ Cambridge originated in the early 13th century “when a group of scholars and students quarrelled with the authorities and left Oxford to found their own university.”² Even today, the medieval origins of Cambridge are apparent, not only in the bricks and mortar, but also in the whole structure of the university community; “college system, the terminology relating to certain aspects of university life (e.g. the Greek word *Tripod*, which literally means a three-legged stool but here means the examinations a student has to sit in order to graduate), and the old-fashioned dress still worn on certain prescribed occasions.”³ They are living reminders of an ancient past.

When people heard I was a visiting scholar of the University of Cambridge during my stay in Cambridge, they used to ask me, “Which college are you at?” Indeed a Cambridge student thinks of himself primarily as a member of a particular college rather than of the University. It is very difficult for the Japanese to understand what a college exactly is; to start with, it is not a faculty nor is it simply a hall of residence, and an Oxbridge college is not like any other of the usages of the word ‘college’ in the English language. In order to understand the college system, we will remember the historical origins of the University more minutely. “Cambridge was founded in the early 13th century as a small number of monastic-style communities of scholars. These communities, which developed into today’s colleges, were places where scholars lived, studied, and taught the students

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who lived with them. The colleges soon amalgamated together to form the University (mid 13th century), but they kept, and indeed still keep, their separate physical existence. Today the University as an institution arranges lectures, holds examinations and confers degrees, but it is the college themselves that admit students in the first place, and provide the accommodation where most of their students study, eat and sleep.”⁴ Therefore an examinee applies for admission to a certain college, such as King’s College and Trinity College, rather than directly to Cambridge University. Then by becoming a member of a college, he automatically becomes a member of the University. In addition, even if one college does not admit a particular applicant, there is a chance that another college will admit him if it so decides.

Thus if a student gains a post at a college, most of his life at Cambridge is centred on his College. The number of the colleges in Cambridge is now 31. The colleges vary in size from about 700 to 150 undergraduates; in total there are about 10,000 undergraduates and 1,900 postgraduates at Cambridge. Each college includes students reading (i.e. studying, an Oxbridge word) almost every subject taught by the University, so they represent the University as a group.

Now I will tell you about the typical daily life in a college. Every college has some bedders who come every morning to clean the students’ sitting rooms and to make their beds and wash up their tea cups, etc. The College authorities’ main aim, it seems, is not to take good care of the students but to keep an eye on their behaviour. If the bedders found a student’s bed unslept in or discovered that a bed has been shared by an overnight visitor as well as its rightful resident, they would have to report misdemeanour to the college authorities, because “according to the University regulations a student must spend 60 nights in each of nine terms, within 3 miles of the city centre, either in college premises or in approved lodgings. Without fulfilling these residence requirements (and passing some exams) it is not possible to graduate.”⁵ Even if a student does have permission to be absent for a night, he has to make it up with an extra night at the end of term.

After getting up in the morning and having a wash in the hand-basin in his little bedroom, a student crosses the college grounds to the dining hall, or “Hall” (another Oxbridge word). Every Hall in the colleges is a lofty awe-inspiring room with portraits of former benefactors, Masters, and great alumni on the walls. As for alumni, I have been reading Christopher Marlowe for many years, and Marlowe was an alumnus of Corpus Christi College in Cambridge. This is the very reason why I went to Cambridge. During my stay in Cambridge, I happened to hear that there was a portrait of Marlowe in the Hall of Corpus Christi College, so I went to the Porter’s Lodge in Corpus Christi at once and asked the porter if I could see the portrait in the Hall, but he said that it was not there because they had sent it to cleaning. I remember being much disappointed at hearing it. Every Hall has long tables with wooden benches, monastery-style. Breakfast is from 7:30 to 8:30 and, like lunch, is a self-service affair.

After breakfast, students have some lectures and a supervision to attend, and some free hours, but it differs a little in each student and according to a day of the week. And all the teaching work of the University is organized in the various faculties, which cut across college lines. So the students at lectures are from all the colleges. It is interesting that all students cycle, because the undergraduates are not allowed to have cars. Moreover, it is very convenient to travel across town between college and faculty buildings, shops and sports grounds. Attendance at lectures is not compulsory, and the lecture is looked on as formal occasion on which academic gown must be worn. This rule

applies to both lecturer and students, but it seems to be often ignored by both. When I attended some lectures at University Arts Faculty in Cambridge, almost all the students including girls wore jumper and jeans with a scarf or a muffler on their neck. Of course some girls put on their skirts. When I attended Dr. Watson's lecture entitled "Ideas and Victorians" during Lent term (i.e. winter term, another Cambridge word), he wore the black academic gown and spoke Queen's English, but in another lecture entitled "Six Stabs at Depravity; Jew of Malta, Volpone, Revenger's Tragedy, Duches of Malfi, Changeling, Sejanus" by Dr. Sanders, he was dressed in a student-like style; jumper and jeans! Moreover, I remember his English was very difficult to understand. In case of lectures, each student selects his favourite lectures by Cambridge University List (It cost £0.95 in 1986.) which contains all the lectures and supervisions given under the auspices of all the colleges, faculties during the academical year. I myself selected some lectures by this list. The duration of every lecture is one hour, and lectures begin at nine o'clock in the morning by the hour at the faculties. There are some lectures from 12 to 13 o'clock. So they continue during the daytime and have no lunch time! Some lectures begin at five or six o'clock in the evening. The students attending a lecture have to look at the lecture board at the entrance of the lecture rooms at each college or faculty and confirm the lecturer's name and the room number. Of course there is an academic hierarchy among the lecturers. They are called assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, reader and professor from the bottom and upward.

On the other hand, the supervision, which is a special feature of the Cambridge teaching system and is called a tutorial at Oxford, is rather more informal and is done in the colleges, but the attendance is compulsory. The supervision "consists of a weekly meeting, of an hour's duration, between an individual student and his supervisor, at which the supervisor will comment critically on some work (e.g. an essay) which the student has submitted. The supervisor is usually a lecturer in one of the student's main subjects of study, and is not necessarily a member of the same college as the student. He will of course report at the end of every term to the student's college tutor, who is responsible for making sure that the student takes his studies seriously, as well as overseeing his general behaviour."⁶ To put it briefly, the tutor is a don (i.e. a teacher, another Oxbridge word), who belongs to the same college as the student and devotes himself to guiding the student in his studies and his daily life during his three-year-college days. The supervisor is a don who guides a student in his specialized subject and does not necessarily belong to the same college as the student, and the student will have another supervisor according to his academical advancement. In this way, a student has the opportunity—usually twice a week or so for an hour, but this depends on his subject—to discuss his work individually, or with one other student, with his supervisor. If, for example, the student reads history, he would probably do an essay topic and hand this in to the supervisor before the supervision. Of course the supervisor gives the student guidance as to the articles, books or chapters in books which will deepen his understanding of the topic he has written about, while the student must read this essay to his supervisor who will discuss it with him. Seeing his supervisor and preparing his essays for him is the student's main work. Indeed the system of supervisions or tutorials is one of the most distinctive features of the Oxbridge system.

As above-mentioned, every student has a supervision to attend and some optional lectures, so if the student makes use of the Faculty Library or the University Library for preparing the supervision during his free hour, he can have lunch in the snack bar in the Faculty or the University Library and

works there during the early part of the afternoon, but science students have to attend practicals then. If not so, he goes back to his College for lunch in Hall, and relaxes for an hour in the students' common room reading the newspapers and chattering to his friends.

Once I was invited to Hughes Hall in Cambridge for lunch by Professor Shino at Kanazawa University in Japan. Hughes Hall is a college mostly for postgraduates, and almost all the staff on duty joined the lunch, including the President, Vice President and, to my great surprise, the secretary of the President and the cook. There was not the High Table, about which I will tell you later. Maybe the total number of those present were seven or so, and President Hurbertson was so friendly as to speak to me and ask me what I was reading, and so on. Therefore, peace and harmony reigned over the dining room.

If the student has no supervision nor lectures, he can go to his sports club, too. Indeed Cambridge's many clubs promote social life. Students can join political clubs or societies specially dedicated to a subject such as philosophy, theology or literature. Other clubs cater for the pursuit of different sports, such as football, rugby football, tennis, cricket and rowing. The annual boat race between Oxford and Cambridge, in which the best rowers of each college combine to beat the rival and row on the Thames in London, attracts national attention. And there are the theatre clubs; supported by interested college teachers they put on yearly productions of plays in which students try their hand at acting. One night in Lent term I went to see "The Jew of Malta" (one of Christopher Marlowe's plays) performed by Marlowe Society, which includes Cambridge's postgraduates and undergraduates, at A.D.C Theatre in Cambridge.

In the summer students take to an activity very characteristic of Cambridge life. They punt on the River Cam. A punt is a flat-bottomed boat propelled by pushing a long pole into the river bed or against the bank. To handle the punt you stand at the back of the boat while your family you have brought with you lie in the front. You can bring a picnic basket with some sandwiches, drinks and sweets for the time when you rest and the boat is moored under an over-hanging willow tree. Of course there is some risk. If the pole gets stuck in the mud or does not reach the bottom the punter may find himself for a second suspended about the pole while the boat departs from under his feet. He will then vanish dishonourably into the River Cam. During my stay in Cambridge, our family tried punting with Maruyama family, our neighbours then at Mulberry Close in Cambridge. One day in June, 1987, we went to the boathouse near Silver Bridge about two o'clock p.m. and found a lot of people in a queue there. At last around 4 o'clock we could borrow two punts. To borrow a punt at the boathouse, you must deposit some money or a credit card there as guaranty money. So we deposited a credit card. This was the first time that my family and I had ever punted, but Doctor Maruyama seemed to have tried two or three times before, so he was a good punter, but I was a terribly bad one! So were my children. To my great surprise, my wife managed to handle the punt. When we passed through Newnham toward Grantchester, beautiful village in the suburbs of Cambridge, it began to rain, so we took shelter from the rain under the hanging willow trees for some time. As it was 5:15 p.m., we decided to go back. All the way back, Dr. Maruyama and my wife punted, and we saw a young woman who punted fall overboard. It was a tremendous sight! At any rate, we returned safe and sound before six o'clock. At the boathouse we paid for the hire of the two punts. I remember it cost £30 or so. Of course they returned the credit card to us.



Punting on the River Cam.

Now we will go back to the original topic; the life in Colleges. If a student has no supervision nor lectures in the afternoon, he can go to his club or his room to relax over a cup of tea and to read through the notes he took at his morning's lectures. After some time, for dinner in Hall, he must be dressed in a jacket and a tie and his black academic gown, which are required by the College rules. At 6:45 a bell is rung in the belfry above the Hall, summoning the students to their dinner sitting. The students file in and choose their places with their friends at the long tables and benches arranged in three rows. At the far end of the Hall is a long table on a raised platform where the President and Fellows of the College eat—the High Table (another Cambridge term). President is the name of a head of a college, but in most cases, each college in Cambridge calls the head a different name. For example, the head of King's College is called Provost, and in Emmanuel College it is called Master. There are other names calling the head; Principal and Warden. In Oxbridge, a Fellow is a salaried don who takes part in the administration and management of each college and at the same time plays an important part in students' education, but some Fellows are honorary posts without pay. Usually the President and Fellows of the College eat later with the third-year students. There is a hush when everyone stands and one of the students reads the Grace in Latin; "BENEDIC, DOMINE, NOS ET DONA TUA, QUAE DE LARGITATE TUA SUMUS SUMPTURI; ET CONCEDE UT ILLIS SALUBRITER NUTRITI TIBI DEBITUM OBSEQUIUM PRAESTARE VALEAMUS, PER CHRISTUM DOMINUM NOSTRUM. (=Bless, O Lord, us and your gifts, which from your goodness we are about to receive; and grant that, wholesomely nourished by them, we may be able to render the service owed to you, through Christ our Lord.)"⁷ Then the place becomes lively, and the waiters set about the task of serving the three-course meal to everybody.

The students exchange the day's news with their friends sitting around them, talking about lectures and supervisions, sports club events, plans for the evening, the latest national or international news. But the waiters serve no ale or wine, so you may think himself in the dining room of a medieval monastery. Indeed "the evening meal is an important and traditional aspect of College life, and to ensure the continuity of the tradition the College makes sure that its undergraduates attend most dinners during each term by the simple expedient of making them pay for all meals in advance."⁸ Maybe the university authorities may think that in this way, the students will not feel like going off to eat in city restaurants or to eat some sandwiches in the solitude of their own rooms.

I myself was invited to the dinner in Darwin College as a guest by Professor Suzuki at Toyama University in Japan. Darwin College is rather a new one and had free and comfortable atmosphere. There were the long tables and benches, but not the High Table. The students attending there were dressed not in the academic gown but in their own way. Professor Suzuki said that Darwin College requires the students to be dressed in a jacket and a tie and a black academic gown, but that the authorities have a free and progressive spirit free from traditions.

After the evening meal, some students go to a nearby pub for a quick after-dinner drink. They often drink some bitter or lager beer, and then spend the evening in their separate ways; if a student has not got any work to study in the evening, he can go to a club open to him. As above-mentioned, there are many clubs, both at university and college level, catering for every kind of interest in fields such as politics, music, drama and hobbies. Most clubs hold their meetings weekly or fortnightly, so a student can be a member of several clubs. But after dark there is another ancient tradition for the students to observe; all students have to wear their gowns, whose object is to make undergradu-



Hall in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.
At the far end is the High Table seen with the red chairs.

ates conspicuous among the townspeople. If one of the two proctors, who are the officials in charge of discipline and are appointed from the Fellows in colleges every year, sees a student gownless on the street after sunset, he tries to stop him and makes him (or her) pay a small fine.

(Continued)

NOTES

- 1 . Michael C. Mobbs, *Universities Observed; Portraits of Four British Universities from a Historical Perspective* (Seibido, Ltd., Tokyo, 1982), p.11.
- 2 . H.P. Rickman, *British Universities* (Nan'un-Do, Ltd., Tokyo, 1987), p.16.
- 3 . Mobbs, *op.cit.* pp.11-12.
- 4 . *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 5 . *Ibid.*, p.17.
- 6 . *Ibid.*, p.19.
- 7 . *Ibid.*, p.85.
- 8 . *Ibid.*, p.23.