CARVINGS AND INSCRIPTIONS ON BALLIOL BUILDINGS

Michael Groser at work in Balliol, c. 1960
INTRODUCTION

The buildings on Balliol’s Broad Street site are embellished externally with many carvings and a few inscriptions. The carvings are very varied – realistic busts, caricatures, grotesques, heraldic shields and devices, and decorative flourishes. Very little has ever been recorded about any of them.

This is an attempt to compile a catalogue, starting just inside Trinity Front Quadrangle and proceeding along Broad Street and Magdalen Street to our Back Gate, entering the College there, working round the Garden Quadrangle, into the Fellows’ Garden, going through the Chapel passage and finishing in our Front Quadrangle.

Minor decorative flourishes, of which there are many, especially on the Brackenbury Buildings, are not included but otherwise I hope, without complete confidence, that nothing has been missed.

The masons who carved the heraldic shields usually used conventional hatchings to indicate colours and metals. The commonest are shown in the following key:

In the language of heraldry, the sinister side of a shield is on the right hand side when viewed from the front, and the dexter side is seen on the left. If two coats of arms are displayed on a shield divided down the middle, they are said to be impaled. When the arms of a man and wife are impaled, his arms are normally placed on the dexter side with hers on the sinister side. When the arms of an office are impaled with those of an office-holder, his are placed on the sinister side. I hope that is sufficient for most readers to understand the essence of my notes, but reference to heraldic textbooks may be necessary. The language and conventions of blazon are convenient for experts, but somewhat baffling for others.
A plan of the Broad Street site showing locations follows.
The plan also gives the dates of the various buildings. There is evidence from such early images as we have that those which have carvings now probably always had them. But many have been renewed or replaced without records being kept, and some have been relocated, so the dates of the buildings only give earliest dates for the carvings. Few are likely to be original. Furthermore, renewal will only have taken place when prompted by gross erosion of the originals, so the sculptor-masons would have had little to guide them, and perforce used their imagination. In the only case where we know anything about the sculptor (Michael Groser, 1918-2009) he was given a free hand, with wonderful results.

Some details of the alterations to the Old Hall, which is now the main Library building, are relevant and call for explanation. In 1695, and no doubt from long before that, there was a Screens Passage at the south end of the Hall. It had a decorated entrance arch in the Front Quadrangle. This was still the situation forty years later (William Williams, Oxonia Depicta .... , 1733).

James Wyatt made radical changes in 1792. He moved the Screens Passage to the north end of the Hall and its entrance arch decoration across the Quadrangle to the Chapel Passage entrance. The arch near the west end of the Screens Passage was left in place and survives just inside the College Office door. What is now the Library window next to the Oriel Window was created at this time, and the windows at the
north end of the Old Hall were cut off halfway down to allow the new Screens Passage to pass through.

1830-1850. The location and entrance to the Screens Passage which was created in 1792.

In 1853 Anthony Salvin built the Library Tower, and enlarged the Old Hall by taking in the Screens Passage and creating the Library Passage, restoring the two windows at the north end to their pre-1792 length.

About 1860. The layout is as it is now. The Old Hall became the main Library building when the present Hall was built in 1877.
CATALOGUE

A. The Brackenbury Building, Trinity façade

1. Above a high window near the east end of Balliol Chapel are the arms of Sir Edward Turner Bt (Argent, a pierced mill-rind Sable), impaled with those of the Leigh family (Gules, a cross engrailed Argent with a lozenge Argent in the top dexter corner) into which his wife Cassandra was born. The same arms appear on their joint monument in St Edburg’s Church in Bicester. Note also the dragon label stop.

Turner, who was admitted to Balliol as a Nobleman Fellow Commoner in 1735, married Cassandra Leigh, a niece of Theophilus Leigh (Master 1726-1785). He was very wealthy, and in the 1740s funded buildings which stood where Staircases I-IV now are. According to James Ingram (Memorials of Oxford vol I, 1837, Balliol, p9), his escutcheon appeared on them. Turner’s buildings were demolished in 1867, but his association with the site was preserved by displaying his impaled arms on the Brackenbury Buildings which replaced them.

Turner’s mill-rind (otherwise “fer de moline”) device also appears in the initial letter of his entry in the Archives Benefaction Book. The hand is the badge of a baronet.
2. Near the corner is what was probably intended initially to be a small window. In the event, the space was filled with three shields hanging on an oak branch. The largest shows the arms of Dervorguilla of Galloway (Azure, a lion rampant Argent crowned Or) impaled with those of John Balliol (Gules, an orle Argent), ie the arms adopted by the College as its own around 1900. The two smaller shields are allusions to her noble ancestry: three garbs for the Earldom of Chester and two piles meeting at the base for the Earldom of Huntingdon. The design is derived very closely from her reverse seal, but the designer missed a point; on her seal the shields hang on a thistle in bud, pointing to her position as mother of a potential ruler of Scotland.

B. The Brackenbury Building, Broad Street façade

1. The so-called Brackenbury lion sits in a niche high up near Trinity. He must be associated with Hannah Brackenbury (see the next entry). But, sitting on his haunches facing the world (like a typical gatepost lion), he is not in fact the lion of Hannah Brackenbury’s crest: that lion is lying down with his head erect and facing. The original lion, much eroded, was removed from his niche in about 2009 when part fell off, narrowly missing a passerby. He was partially restored by Wells Cathedral Stonemasons, and reinstated in 2018, secured with a central dowel and tethered to the wall with a steel strap so that there is no danger of another disaster.
2. The arms adopted by Hannah Brackenbury appear under the window near the Main Gate, complete with crest and motto.

These arms are identical with those in a window in the Brackenbury Chapel at St Nicolas Church Portslade, and with those in *Visitations of the County Palatine of Durham .... 1575 .... 1615 .... and 1666....*, ed. J Foster, 1887, p. 45.

Hannah Brackenbury (1795-1873) was massively generous to Balliol, and not only paid for the Brackenbury Buildings but also endowed the Brackenbury Scholarships.
She was a very wealthy unmarried philanthropist on whom family money, which was mainly derived from nineteenth century railway profiteering, had converged. The last of her immediate branch of the Brackenbury family, she believed herself to be the last in lineal descent from a Brackenbury who had been associated with the Balliol family before the foundation of the College. Evidence for this belief, which may have been fanciful, is lacking.

Foster (op. cit.) gives the full blazon. The top dexter compartment (Argent, three chevronells interlaced Sable) is for Brackenbury. The remaining compartments show marriages into other armigerous families.

The motto recorded by the Heralds was “Sans reculla jamais”; the authority for the additional word “oncques” is unclear. The exact meaning is a bit enigmatic, but the gist must be something like “never retreat”.
C. The Main Gate Tower, Broad Street façade

Over the Gate are Hannah Brackenbury’s arms again, and under the dominant window above are the arms of Dervorguilla and John Balliol, both separately and impaled. But the most interesting features are the wyverns (bipedal dragons) biting their tails which flank the entrance.

These are perhaps animated versions of the ouroboros (Greek: tail-eater), an ancient mystical symbol meaning infinity or continual renewal.
D. The Master’s Lodgings, Broad Street façade

1. To the right of the Master’s front door are the arms adopted by Robert Scott, Master 1854-1870. Below them is a plaque carved by the late Heather Howes which records the burning nearby of the Protestant Bishops in 1555-1556. A cross set in the road marks what is believed to be the exact site of the martyrdom.

The juxtaposition of the plaque and Scott’s arms has sometimes caused confusion: they have nothing to do with each other. His arms are there because he was responsible for generally directing the Brackenbury Buildings project. The first and third quarters (Or, two mullets above a crescent Azure) are identical with the same quarters of the arms of Sir Walter Scott. The second and fourth quarters (Argent, a saltire engrailed Sable, and on a chief Gules three cushions Or) are for Johnston of Warriston.

Scott’s parents were the Revd. Alexander Scott and Agnes née Johnston. If there was a relationship between Robert Scott and Sir Walter Scott, it was very distant.

Robert Scott’s arms also appear at the apex of Hall window sII, impaled with the Balliol orle, a unique instance of a Master impaling with the College.
2. High up above a window of the Master’s Lodgings is the most elaborate of the many decorative flourishes on the Brackenbury Buildings. At first glance these flourishes appear symmetrical and uniform, but in fact all are unique; the same is true of Waterhouse’s column heads and roundels.

![Image of decorative flourish](image1.jpg)

E. The Fisher Building, Broad Street façade

Waterhouse refaced the Fisher Building, and made several small changes, but preserved or repeated the original swags.

![Image of Fisher Building façade](image2.jpg)  
2019  
As built, 1769 (Archives, Benefactions Book)
**F. Staircase XVI, Magdalen Street façade**

The window of the Russell Room on the first floor has a reasonably well preserved head on its south side; the corresponding position on its north side has only a masonry scar.

![Photo of the window and head](image)

**G. The Back Gate Tower Building, St Giles façade**

1. The stonework above the gate of Salvin’s Back Gate Tower (1853) matches what would have been over the Front Gate then, which is now preserved in the Fellows’ Garden (see p25).

![Photo of the gate and stonework](image)
2&3. The heads by the second floor window are probably original.

4&5. The grotesques high up on the corners may have been recarved.

6. The twin heads by the iron Back Gate are probably original.
H. Staircase XXI, St Giles façade

Just below the balustrade at the left and right extremes of this building by Warren (1907) are elaborate cartouches which frame the Balliol orle and lion of Galloway.

I. The Hall

Above the Hall steps we see again the Balliol orle and lion of Galloway in plain form.
**J. The Back Gate Tower Building**

Salvin’s Back Gate Tower (1853) had no building placed against it originally, and the details would have been easier to see than they are now.

![Image of the Back Gate Tower Building with numbered points](image)

2010 (Ade Clark, Archives, Accn. 19/019)

1. The turret string course has six heads which are difficult to see and photograph from ground level. They are very eroded; the central pair is shown below.

![Image of the turret string course heads](image)

2. The grotesque on the NW corner, like those on the SE and NE corners, is, despite being exposed to the weather, in good condition. This is in sharp contrast to those
on the Library Tower, although both towers are the same age. It therefore seems likely that those on the Back Gate Tower have been renewed at some point.

3. This shield (below left) shows the arms of Richard Jenkyns, Master 1819-1854 and Dean of Wells 1845-1854 (see p28) impaled with arms for the Deanery of Wells (Azure, two keys addorsed in bend sinister and a pastoral staff in bend dexter). On the validity of the latter, see AJ Jewers, *Wells Cathedral. Its monuments* .... 1892, 107.

4. This shield (above right) shows the arms of John Parsons (Azure, three crosses on a chevron between three oak leaves) impaled with those of the Diocese of Peterborough. He was both Master of Balliol 1798-1819 and Bishop of
Peterborough 1813-1819. The same impaled arms appear on his striking monument in the College Chapel, where he is buried.

5. The head and shoulders of a man struggling with the weight of the turret on his back is carved at its base. It has been concealed by creeper for much of the last 150 years, and seems likely to be obscured again soon.

![Image](image1.jpg) ![Image](image2.jpg)

2010 (Ade Clark, Archives, Accn. 19/019) 2019

K. The Development Office, Staircase XIV

There is an incised caricature of WE Gladstone at ground level between two Development Office windows. In August 2019 it was partly hidden by vegetation, which was held aside to take the photograph. The caption “No more Jabuba “ is a thinly veiled or mistaken reference to the Battle of Majuba Hill, the decisive battle of the brief First Boer war (1880-1881), a humiliating rout of trained British troops by Boer farmers. Gladstone’s government’s controversial response was to make
peace. In the Second Boer War (1899-1902) there was vengeance in the air, and “Remember Majuba” was a rallying cry.

L. The Fisher Building

Henry Fisher (c. 1683-1773), an ex-Fellow, gave £3000 in his lifetime for the building named after him. Under the central first floor window is a tablet with the inscription, now starting to fade, “VERBUM NON AMPLIUS FISHER”. This translates “A word no more Fisher”. The same enigmatic words appear on his memorial in Bere Regis Church (a Balliol living), where he was Vicar for 48 years.

M. The College Office, just inside the entrance

The blocked arch on the left is a remnant of the Screens Passage which was closed off in 1792, and the dragon shown may be the only piece of ancient carving in stone which survives uneroded.
N. The Library Passage and Tower

This is the work of Anthony Salvin about 1853, ie carried out at the same time as he built Staircases XVI-XIX and the Back Gate Tower.

1 & 2. These now badly eroded heads were recorded by chance in an early Boat Club group photograph (Torpids 1866: Archives PHOT 26.08A).
What remains of the decoration round the arch is similar to what was over the east end of the Screens Passage until 1792 (see p4) and is not in keeping with the rest of Salvin’s work; it was probably originally at the west end of the Screens Passage.

3. There is an isolated head to the left of the Old Dean’s Room windows.

4. The central, and most eye-catching, decoration on the Library Tower shows the royal arms of Scotland (Or, a lion rampant in a double tressure flory counterflory Gules). In the summer of 2019 it was not possible to get a good shot of it because of the trees, so a file photograph (JM Orr, Archives, PHOT 53.9) taken in 1989 is given below.

The College has never had any reasonable claim to the royal arms of Scotland. Its only connection with Scottish monarchs is that John Balliol the younger, failed King of Scotland 1292-1296, was the son of the College’s Founders Dervorguilla of Galloway and John Balliol the elder.
The only arms to which the College has a defensible claim are those of Dervorguilla (Azure, a lion rampant Argent crowned Or) and John Balliol the elder (Gules an orle Argent). These arms appear both separately (on the obverse, below left) and impaled (on the reverse; see p7) on her two-sided seal. At various times the College has used as its logo the orle alone, the two shields combined variously, and variants of the impaled arms. The inappropriate (as I believe it) use of the royal arms of Scotland probably originated in an ancient mistake. A clumsy icon of Dervorguilla painted on panel now hangs in the Hall.

Its age is unknown, but it was already an antique puzzle in 1668 (Henry Savage, *Baliofergus*, 4). It is based on the obverse of her seal, where she holds the Balliol orle in her right hand and the crowned lion of Galloway in her left. But Savage noted that “Her picture in the Master’s Hall holds a Lion Gules in a Field Argent, neither has the lion a crown, and therefore the Painter who drew it was mistaken .... “

The mistake was repeated in the above 1714 print of an imaginary portrait of Dervorguilla which is in the Bodleian. This went the whole hog, completing the royal arms of Scotland by giving the uncrowned lion a field Or, adding the double
tressure flory counterflory, and impaling with the Balliol orle. This is an heraldic
gaffe twice over; not only does it use the wrong lion, but the impalement is the
wrong way round for Dervorguilla. She was of much more noble blood than John
Balliol the elder. Her father, whose joint heiress she was, was Lord of Galloway, and
on her mother’s side she was descended from several Earls and King David I of
Scotland. The ancestors of John Balliol the elder were, on the other hand, although
powerful land owners in Picardy and England, of mere baronial rank. Accordingly
Dervorguilla placed her lion of Galloway on the dominant dexter side (normally the
husband’s side) and his orle on the sinister side.

By the late 18th century, the College had convinced itself that the royal arms of
Scotland were its right; an elegant bookplate was in use.
The earliest Balliol Boat Club Journal (1837) in the Archives has both the Balliol orle and royal arms of Scotland drawn on its cover, and they appear linked in the style of the 18th century bookplate on rowing trophies right up to the 1950s.

But by around 1900 the College itself seems to have cast the approach aside and settled on the current arms, which give Dervorguilla her rightful pride of place.

The Balliol orle and royal arms of Scotland appear together on the great seal of King John Balliol. It seems very unlikely indeed that the College ever really intended to identify itself with a humiliated failure.

5-7. There are grotesques at three corners of the string course just below the crenellations. All are very eroded. Number 6 still had its head in 1989.
O. The Fellows’ Garden

1.”Dervorguilla’s tomb”.

2019

1994 (Archives, PHOT61w).
The assembly of ancient masonry known as Dervorguilla’s tomb stands in the middle of the Fellows’ Garden. It was put together between 1906 and 1911, on the evidence of FF Urquhart’s photograph albums, which are in the Library. It was made up from pieces which had been saved from the Broad Street gateway when Waterhouse reconstructed it in 1867. Ingram (*op. cit.*) recorded in 1837 that the gateway and tower had been left alone during 18th century rebuilding works, noting that “the interior is very beautifully executed” and ”is in high preservation”. What we see here are remnants from the late 15th century.

Facing south at ground level is the stonework which was over the gate; on the other side and at the ends of both levels are roof bosses. All have deteriorated greatly since they were exposed to the elements, but during WWI Urquhart took many photographs of his friends in uniform posed around the tomb. Some of the lost detail can be seen in the backgrounds. For example, the dominant feature facing south is now a headless lump. In 1994 (see p25) it still had a head, but we can see from Urquhart’s photographs that it was a female angel with flowing hair and folded wings standing on the back of a smaller crouching figure.

Similarly, the eroded bosses are now completely unrecognisable. But in 1916 the Balliol orle was visible at the west end, and at the other, peeping through the legs
of a soldier sitting on the tomb, are what appear to be arms of an Archbishop of Canterbury whose personal arms could be conjoined mascles 3-3-3-1.

2. The windows on the north side of the Old Library never had any decorative label stops like the other side. There are no stone shields on this building now either, but in 1912 there was a pair displaying the lion of Galloway and Balliol orle separately above the central doorway.
**P. The Front Quadrangle: Staircase II**

High up are the arms of Richard Jenkyns: Azure, a saltire engrailed Sable with a cross pattée fitchy Argent pointed inwards on each arm. See also p17.

**Q. The Front Quadrangle SE corner: Staircase III**

The arms of Hannah Brackenbury (see p8) appear above the entrance door.

**R. The Front Quadrangle: the Porters’ Lodge and Gate Tower**

1. The arch is flanked by small wyverns, like the arch which looks outwards, but this pair seem to be eating grapes.
2. Just below the window which is immediately above the entrance are three shields displaying left to right a catherine wheel, the arms of John Jackson as Bishop of Lincoln, and a bell.

The catherine wheel icon of St Catherine of Alexandria (the College’s patron saint) appears in several other places - the Old Common Room ceiling, the apex of the Hall east window and on some college silver.

John Jackson (1811-1885), was Visitor of the College and Bishop of Lincoln when the Brackenbury Buildings were built. Shortly afterwards he became Bishop of London. The arms shown centrally are his (Sable, a cross and three pheons Or) impaled with those of the Diocese of Lincoln.

Ingram (op. cit.) recorded in 1837 that there were three bells “over the central niche” of the tower “in commemoration of William Bell, master of the college in the reign of Henry VII, in whose time this part of the south front appears to have been finished”. This agrees near enough with Anthony Wood, writing about 1688 (The History and Antiquities ... ed. John Gutch, 1786, 88): ” ... over the gate carved in stone under the ridge which parts the upper chamber and roof are two bells, and another at the top of the tabernacular works over the pedestal”. William Bell was Master 1483-1495. The prominent display of his rebus might signify that he was the
principal benefactor for the tower which Waterhouse replaced, but either way it is appropriate that the bell rebus was repeated, albeit displaced from prominence by Hannah Brackenbury’s arms.

3. The walls of the entrance passage have the impaled arms of three Archbishops of Canterbury, and a crested shield for John Wycliffe. It is unlikely that John Wycliffe was armigerous, although the shield (a chevron between three cross crosslets) and crest (a buck’s head and a cross crosslet) are indeed associated with the name Wycliffe. The personal sides of the archepiscopal shields are

Cardinal John Morton (c. 1420-1500): quarters 1&2 a goat’s head; 3&4 ermine.

George Abbot (1562-1633): a mullet on a chevron between three pears.

Archibald Campbell Tait (1811-1882): quarters 1&2 a chief and saltire both engrailed; 3&4 two birds transfixed at the neck by an arrow.
Waterhouse’s entrance passage is vaulted like its predecessor, but has flowerlike bosses. No two are identical. Some of the 15th century bosses were incorporated into Devorguilla’s Tomb (see p25).

S. The Front Quadrangle SW corner: Staircase VI

The arms of Hannah Brackenbury (see p8) appear again above the entrance door.

T. The Front Quadrangle west side: the Oriel Window

1. The five grotesques above the Oriel Window were renewed by Michael Groser in 1959-1960. The cover illustration shows him at work on one which is gorgonesque.
In the case of the Oriel Window a detailed drawing made about 1820 (F Mackenzie and AC Pugin, *Specimens of Gothic Architecture ... in Oxford*, c. 1820) shows that Groser used his imagination while following what remained of the originals.

2. The arms of William Gray Bishop of Ely (c. 1414-1478) appear at the base of the support to the window. He was a major benefactor to the fabric, including this famous window.
But he is best remembered as a humanist bibliophile who gave many manuscript books to the College Library, over 150 of which survive. His arms (Gules a lion rampant in a bordure engrailed Argent) appear in an Old Library window and several illuminated initials of books copied for him.

*U. The Library (the Old Hall): Front Quadrangle west side*

Each of the four windows has flanking label stop grotesques and two string course stops lower down. In the photographs (taken in 2019) which follow they are numbered left to right lower row first, continuing similarly with the upper row. All except numbers 7 & 8 were carved by Michael Groser about 1959-60. No image sufficiently detailed to show what was there before is known. He used his imagination freely, but it is known that number 2 was modelled on AB Rodger, who was Senior Fellow when the work was done.
V. The Front Quadrangle NW corner: the Library Passage entrance

1. The entrance arch has rather eroded label stop heads on each side.
2. In the Library Passage itself is a plaque listing Major Benefactors since the College’s foundation. It was designed by me, funded by Peter Scott, made in Nabresina stone by Wells Masonry under the supervision of Jeremy Wells, and unveiled during the College’s 750th Anniversary celebrations in 2013.

2013 (Ian Taylor)

_W. The Old Library: Front Quadrangle north side_

The eleven windows shown above all have flanking label stop heads. The photographs which follow (Archives, PHOT.70.1) were taken in 1997 when
convenient scaffolding happened to be in place. They are numbered below from the right. Numbers 5-9, 13-15, 20 and 22 have the still just legible incised date 1906 below them. Numbers 3, 4, 10, 12, 16-18 and 21 are definitely by Michael Groser, and the rest are most likely by him too.
Of those renewed in 1906, number 5 is obviously Dervorguilla’s image, taken from her seal; and number 7 looks meant to be Adam Smith, or at any rate 18th century.

Groser understood that the badly eroded heads he had to renew were benefactors, but he had no images to go on. So he used his imagination, and in one case mentioned to the *Baltimore Sun* in 1994 that he had modelled the head on his own father, the distinguished socialist cleric St John Beverley Groser (1890-1966), giving him a mitre as quiet joke - his father had starred as Becket in the 1951 film of TS Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. The freshly carved (1960) head is shown below.
X. The Chapel Passage entrance

The elaborate decorative carving around the Chapel Passage entrance was largely hidden by creeper in 2019. It was completely renewed by Michael Groser in 1959-60, in this case closely following what was there before, which had been moved here from the entrance to the Screens Passage in 1792.

1820 1960 2019

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I took all the photographs myself except where otherwise credited, in 2019 unless otherwise dated or undated. Stephen Groser kindly provided some photographs of c.1960 from his father’s records: these helped with identifications, and the three so dated are reproduced with his permission. The digitised Balliol Archive and Library manuscript images are mostly by Anna Sander. The photograph of the Brackenbury window at Portslade is Judy Middleton’s copyright, reproduced by kind permission from her book *St Nicolas Church Portslade A History* (1983, revised 2018), which is currently available online.

I drew heavily on LK Hindmarsh’s notes on Balliol heraldry (Library, Hindmarsh Papers 5).

JHJ, 7 September 2019