

# The architecture of the Museum

The building of the Oxford Museum was significant in the development of nineteenth century architecture, the history of Oxford University, and in the study of science in England. The result is as spectacular today as when it was first opened in 1860.



The Museum building is a striking example of Victorian neo-Gothic architecture. Its style was strongly influenced by the ideas of John Ruskin, who believed that architecture should be shaped by the energies of the natural world. It brought together virtually all the scientific studies carried out in the University. Within a year of completion it hosted the famous debate on Darwin's *Origin of Species* between Bishop Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley.

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This leaflet focuses on the architecture of the Museum, its inception and design. An account of John Ruskin's influence can be found in a further 'Learning more' article, as can details of the columns, capitals and corbels carved by the O'Shea brothers, and the statues that surround the court.

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## Henry Acland's competition

The Museum owes its existence, in the main, to the foresight and determination of one man, Henry Acland. Acland had been appointed as Reader in Anatomy at Christ Church in 1845, where he worked in the college's Anatomy Museum. He believed that every educated man should learn something of the sciences. He campaigned for a new museum to house research and teaching facilities, and to bring together the collections that were dispersed across the University. Finally, in December 1853, four acres at the south end of University Parks were purchased from Merton College and an additional four acres were added the following year.



The Museum was designed as a neo-Gothic cathedral to science; its frontage is as spectacular today (left), as it was when it was first opened in 1860 (above).

The design for the new Museum was an open competition with prizes offered for the three best designs within a cost limit of £30,000. Of the 32 schemes received, two were selected to be voted on by Convocation (a body consisting of certain members of the University). The two schemes were a classical design by E. M. Barry and a neo-Gothic design by the firm of Deane & Woodward, Dublin. Acland favoured the winning design of Deane and Woodward, the team who had designed the Trinity College Museum in Dublin in 1853. Like the Oxford Museum, the design of this building was influenced by the ideas of John Ruskin, particularly in its use of materials and decoration. Benjamin Woodward was the prime designer in the firm and was largely responsible both for the design and for the building of the Museum.

### *Glass and iron*

The most striking thing about the Museum is the glass and iron roof of the central court. The use of glass and cast iron had been commonplace since the mid-1840s, in galleries and greenhouses and, of course, the Crystal Palace of 1851. The novel aspect of the Museum was the use of structural iron, but sadly the first design of the roof using mainly wrought iron, proved disastrous; the structure was incapable of supporting its own weight, and had to be taken down before it was completed. The second version was produced by E. A. Skidmore, an experienced ironmaster who had been involved with Woodward in the development of the first design. The cast iron columns are ornamented with wrought ironwork in the spandrels representing branches of species including sycamore, walnut and palm.



The cast iron columns supporting the glass roof in the court.

### *What is 'Learning more'?*

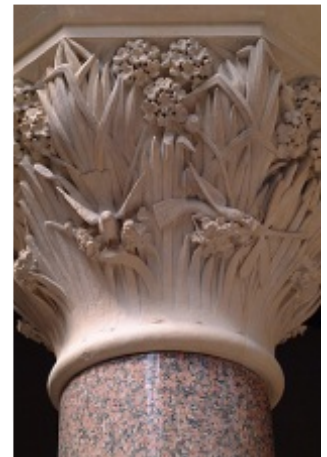
'Learning more' presents a series of articles about the Museum and its collections. It is designed for older students, teachers, researchers, and anyone who wants to find out more about particular aspects of the Museum's work and its history.

This article introduces the beauty, history and style of the Museum and its architecture.

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### Columns, capitals and corbels

The columns surrounding the court were planned by John Phillips, first Keeper of the Museum. Each column is made of a different British decorative rock, whilst the capitals and corbels are carved into plants representing all the botanical orders. Each column was to be labelled with the name of the stone and its source, and also with the botanical name of the plant. However only the geological inscriptions were executed.



James O'Shea (left) was a skilled stonemason who carved the intricate floral and faunal motifs throughout the Museum (right).

The carvings were to be paid for by public subscription and forty six were completed between 1858 and 1860. These were done by the Irish brothers, James and John O'Shea, and their nephew Edward Whelan. They were exceptionally talented stonemasons and produced work of the highest quality and originality; the carvings were made from life with plants being brought up from the Botanic Garden. The other capitals were completed by 1910, although none to the standard of workmanship of the O'Sheas.

Statues around the court commemorate a number of eminent men from Aristotle, Galileo and Roger Bacon to Newton, Darwin and Linnaeus. Several busts celebrate Oxford men of science. Further information on the statues and the stonework can be found in further 'Learning more' articles.



Charles Darwin

### *Funds run out*

The O'Sheas also began the carvings around the outer windows, but a lack of funds dogged the project and eventually it had to be abandoned. When asked to stop work, legend has it, that O'Shea was so upset that he proceeded to carve parrots and owls taken at the time to be a parody of Convocation and he was promptly sacked. These unfinished carvings are visible over the main entrance.



The main entrance  
The carving around the doors to the Museum remain unfinished, with the inner archway showing the roughly hewn stone work where the O'Shea brothers are said to have walked off the job. The outer archway is complete, its apex is decorated with an angel holding a dividing cell in its left hand.

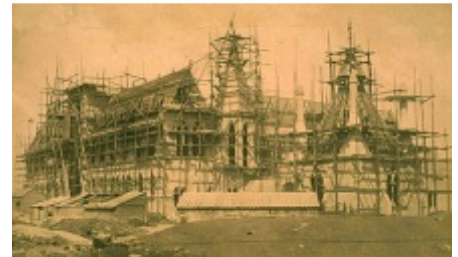
A different view of this event comes from Ruskin, who was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the project, and wrote that the O'Sheas had been sacked because of 'the unnecessary introduction of cats' around the celebrated 'cat window' on the first floor of the Museum. Sadly, this was not the only sign that all was not well with the building of the Museum. Woodward was becoming increasingly ill and died in May 1861. Lack of funds and the constant interference of University officials meant that the project was never completed. This is most noticeable in the window carvings on the west front of the Museum, but inside the decoration around the court was also left incomplete. Although the original tender to build the Museum was £29,041, by 1867 over £87,000 had been spent.



The cat window

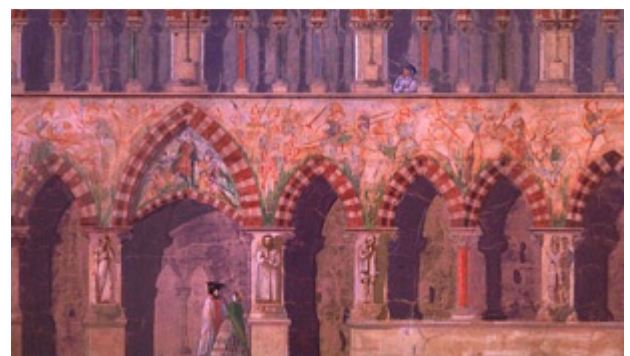
### The official opening

The Museum was officially opened in 1860. The first occupants of the building were the science departments of the day: Astronomy, Geometry, Experimental Philosophy, Mineralogy, Chemistry, Geology, Zoology, Anatomy, Physiology and Medicine. These departmental names can still be seen painted above the doors leading off the arcades.



The roof of the 'Abbot's kitchen' today (top left); attached to the building during construction (top right) and at its opening (below).

A chemistry laboratory occupied the small building at the south west corner of the Museum which was designed to look like the Abbot's Kitchen at Glastonbury and was kept separate, as Acland commented, so that 'all noxious operations are removed from the principal pile'. As the departments grew in size they removed to buildings around the Museum and the science area grew. In 1885 a new building, abutting to the east of the Museum, was built to house the ethnological collections of General Pitt-Rivers.



A painting on display in the court shows what the Museum might have looked like, had funds not run out.