

The Origins of the Harlaxton Symposium

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At 2.30 pm on 30 September 1983 Dr Jonathan Alexander convened at the Royal Academy in Burlington House the first formal meeting of the steering committee of the *Age of Chivalry* exhibition. This endeavour would take four years to bring to its highly successful outcome, as one of the five classic exhibitions covering the British Middle Ages that have done so much to enrich the understanding of our cultural past. *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art* at the British Museum and *English Romanesque Art* at the Hayward Gallery were both held in 1984. *The Age of Chivalry* at the Royal Academy followed in 1987, and *The Work of Angels* at the British Museum in 1989. The sequence was completed in 2003 by *Gothic Art for England* at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

On that September afternoon in 1983 Jonathan Alexander appealed to the company assembled to generate literature on the period 1200–1400 in this country in the four years leading up to the opening of the proposed exhibition. I looked at the group of mighty medievalists sitting round that table and cast my thoughts to Harlaxton, the palatial house built by Anthony Salvin where I was then teaching the Middle Ages to American students from Evansville, Indiana. During the summer vacations Harlaxton was playing host to a number of social events, but it had never acted host to an academic conference. With its spacious accommodation, country setting and eccentric architecture it might well prove apt to the purpose. Interdisciplinary studies have always been one of my greatest interests, spurred on by an encounter with an English historian who had studied for a doctorate on the subject of St Thomas Becket but had never, either before or since, visited Canterbury Cathedral.

I counted, and count, among my friends the then President of the Campus of our University at Evansville, Dr Wallace Graves, the Principal of Harlaxton, the most encouraging of leaders, Dr Graddon Rowlands, and Dr William Ridgway, the most generous and modest of benefactors, who had purchased the astonishing pile of Harlaxton for his own University. Most propitiously we happened to have on the staff the very young but quite clearly brilliant medieval historian, Mark Ormrod. I was a veteran of conferences at Kalamazoo and in Europe. The omens were favourable. In the event the support for my project of three symposia at Harlaxton covering the three Gothic centuries of British art, was heart warming.

The only hurdle was persuading the shy Mark Ormrod to invite the most distinguished medieval historians, as I would the art historians. He eventually agreed, and, more, became our first editor. In those days there was no mighty Leeds to rival Kalamazoo. The response to our invitation to a small, more focussed, one-lecture-at-a-time symposium was almost universally positive, from scholars, both mature and developing.

On 5 November 1983 at Harlaxton itself we held a committee meeting to advance our plans. Present then, and while he remained in the Chair of Medieval Art History at the University of Cambridge, a wise and mighty support, was George Henderson. On his retirement he and Isabel were enticed by Pictish stones into Celtic fastness, but the latest rumour is that they are thinking of coming south again, at least as near as Edinburgh. May we hope to see them again at Harlaxton, where they have been much missed. Dr Antonia Gransden from Cambridge and Dr Daniel Williams from Leicester put their shoulders to the wheel. Dr Daniel Williams went on to edit three volumes of our Proceedings, the most any editor had achieved until recently, and his early death was among our first losses.

Two days later we held a luncheon meeting in London for academics who could not reach Harlaxton itself in term time. On 13 March following I discussed our lists with Dr Paul Williamson at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Three days later Professor Henderson gave a luncheon for our first steering committee at Downing College. So foundations were carefully laid.

The first Harlaxton Symposium was held from 7 to 11 July 1984. The sun shone steadily, as it has for most of the succeeding years. Janet Backhouse, to be a brilliant contributor both to the volumes, and with her zest for the whole enterprise, to the venture as a whole, called it Harlaxton weather. On the first evening Jonathan Alexander found the mallets and led a somewhat eccentric game of croquet on the lawn in the dark. A similarly quixotic game was played in the summer of 2009.

It was ambitious to plan three volumes to be published within four years. However, the first volume, originally a paperback printed for us by a printer at Nottingham University, came out within the year, a feat not easily repeated. I timidly took a copy to the Warburg Library, the Mecca, in my view, of medieval scholarship, and was immediately given a £10 note by Professor Trapp, who would subsequently speak at Harlaxton, and entice us to visit delectable Compton Winyates on our outing day, with Haddon Hall more recently perhaps the most far-flung of our many destinations. Among happy memories of Harlaxton excursions, Tattershall Castle led by Arnold Taylor is very vivid.

Our volumes have grown in size and the quality of our illustrations has improved since that first paperback, but in three ways we have not excelled our first attempt: in the modesty of the cost, in the speed of publication, and in the number of times the essays have been cited elsewhere.

THE ORIGINS OF THE HARLAXTON SYMPOSIUM

The first Symposium fulfilled many dreams. The volume of papers contained four relatively straight history papers by Michael Clanchy, David Carpenter, Michael Prestwich and Daniel Williams. There was one on natural science by John Glenn, one on drama, accompanied by an unforgettable demonstration, by Martin Walsh. There were ten on art history. A further dimension of the first Symposium cannot be recalled by looking through the volume. Our first outing was to Southwell Minster, closest of the three Cathedrals (the others being Peterborough and Lincoln) and within an afternoon's range. With the full co-operation and under the presidency of the then Provost, Dr Murray Irvine, we attended a full sung Sarum Mass complete with processional antiphons, all in Latin. The music was organised with immaculate scholarship and equal musicianship by the great Clive Wearing. It must have been one of his last public performances before his disastrous illness. It was an event of startling beauty: as though the stones were listening again to the sung prayer they had lost 450 years before. So the first ideal, of an inter-disciplinary Symposium, was, as it continues to be, abundantly fulfilled.

In view of the twin flags that fly from the battlements of Harlaxton, it is always especially fitting that a number of our participants should come from the United States. Six of our first speakers did so, though William Wixom, then Keeper of the Cloisters and Director of Medieval Art at the Metropolitan Museum, did not let us publish his paper because he wanted to pursue further the claim, expounded to us, that a lovely ivory he had just acquired for the Cloisters was, as it is still, labelled an English piece. No two speakers in 1984 came from the same institution. A broad base within academia was always an aspiration. Opportunities for postgraduate students have been fostered over the years, with a number of bursaries for young participants. It would be interesting to discover how many scholars have published their first papers with us.

The third ambition was that the Harlaxton Symposium, in sharing the best of current scholarship, should do so in a less tense and fraught atmosphere than is almost inevitable in marathon events. To that end we have always stood against having more than one paper running at a time, and no one was to feel guilty if they skipped a session in favour of a stroll in the garden or round one of the lakes. We hope there is a sense of house party, an opportunity to get to know our colleagues better, a feeling of holiday. Michael Clanchy wrote on the occasion of our twenty-fifth-celebratory Harlaxton Symposium:

... what a remarkable occasion the first one was in 1984 on the Thirteenth Century. There I met for the first time Michael Camille, Paul Binski, Jonathan Alexander and many others ... Your range of speakers, never before assembled like that, showed what History and the Middle Ages were really about. Deservedly, the Symposia have then continued year on year in the extraordinary setting of Harlaxton.

Janet Backhouse came later to be an inspiring leader in that fraternal respect, and

Harlaxton will long remember her infectious sense of humour and her wardrobe of festive jerseys. That same aspect attracted Professor Andrew Martindale of the University of East Anglia, who, when George Henderson left Cambridge for northern Scotland, took over the steering wheel of the Symposium to splendid effect. At his tragic death in 1995 Andrew Martindale bequeathed to us the involvement of his widow Jane, and, with her, two of their closest friends who became central to our endeavours, the Professors John and Caroline Barron. That sad circumstance also brought us thirteen years of the steady and wise leadership of Professor Barrie Dobson, now, in 2009 succeeded by Professor Caroline Barron. 1995 also initiated a new dimension of the Harlaxton Symposium. Our Symposium, in the year Andrew Martindale died, was to have been convened by him, and the volume of papers naturally became a memorial to him. The flexibility of the Harlaxton Symposium has made it possible for further volumes to become *Festschriften*. This has been true of several subsequent issues, and may it continue. There is no more wonderful 'present' for a scholar.

Richard Barber of Boydell and Brewer, who took over the publication in the second year, had always advised us to abandon chronological subjects in favour of themes. After the particularly successful Symposium on *The Reign of Henry VII* in 1993 we began the thematic series with *Monasteries and Society in Medieval Britain*. Since 1989 we have published with the loyal Shaun Tyas.

The Symposium has been nurtured by a succession of Principals of the College who have recognised the value of holding on an annual basis and within these remarkable walls a gathering of the keenest academic minds. They have responded by giving us their hospitality at a modest price. On that account we are able to offer discounts to students and to subsidise our proud publications. In Dr Gordon Kingsley and his wife Suzanne and in his vice-principal, Jan Becket, as under their predecessors, we have always been assured of a warm and sympathetic reception.

What happened to the three-year plan leading to the highly successful Age of Chivalry Exhibition? At the close of the third year it was made plain that no one was prepared to stop. The Harlaxton Symposium had gathered its own momentum.

The initiative for this conference and its publications came in the first place from art history, and we may hope that this colourful discipline will always furnish a goodly proportion of the material. Most speakers, of whatever discipline, whether it be theology, medicine, drama, economics, straight history, literature or art, have brought topics with a relevance to those in other fields. Let us hope we continue to welcome here scholars from America, where our objectives are so widely shared, and to attract contributors from the rest of the world.

One of the joys of the twenty-fifth anniversary conference was the return of ten or more speakers who were with us in the earlier years. As Paul Binski

THE ORIGINS OF THE HARLAXTON SYMPOSIUM

expounded, the study of the British Middle Ages has grown beyond recognition during the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. That gleaming row of the Harlaxton Symposia volumes has contributed its mite to this expanded field of enquiry. Long may the shared exploration, and its fruits, continue.