

THE CAMBRIDGE BACKS IN WINTER.

BY ALAN ST. AUBYN, AUTHOR OF "A FELLOW OF TRINITY."



THE ARMS OF CAMBRIDGE, 1575.

THE beautiful shady walks at the back of the colleges, familiarly known as "The Backs," leafy in June, allowing only peeps,

delightful peeps, here and there of the buildings on the other side of the river, are seen in winter at their best.

The rich foliage of summer is gone, and the old college elms and stately avenues, and the willows drooping over the river, are clothed now with a frosty rime, or bending beneath a weight of feathery snow. Through the white laden branches the old grey walls of the colleges may be seen with their pinnacles and battlements fringing the blue sky, and their cupolas and towers gleaming white in the sunshine.

This view of the "Backs" in winter is one of the special beauties of Cambridge. The venerable buildings, round which linger the hallowed associations of a storied past, the sloping lawns and noble avenues, the beautiful college bridges, the groves and gardens, and the slow dark river winding silently between the white banks, form a picture that one cannot easily forget.

There is nothing like it in its combination of human interest with natural beauty.

After all, we are creatures of association. The natural beauties that appeal most powerfully to the emotions are associated with human needs and human joys and sorrows. The grey old walls of the colleges, the long dim avenues and groves, the courts and cloisters, and the shady, secluded walks beneath the trees are connected—inseparably connected—with the generations of scholars who have lived and worked here in the centuries that are past.

Even now, with the spell of all this natural beauty upon us, standing in a dream-landscape, as it were, with lovely lights and shadows falling down between the white branches of the trees, and the grey walls

rising clear between the white-sheeted lawns, and the softest tint of blue in the sky, the dark outlines of the bridges, the lonely droop of the willows, and the pale gleam of the water, with all this appealing to the senses, we cannot get rid of the human element.

A great storied past looks down upon us from the lichen-covered walls, from the old, narrow, mullioned windows, which the western sun is touching with his flaming pencil; historic shades troop out upon us through dusky avenues and college gateways, and over every college bridge. Every foot of ground here is associated with some hallowed memory.

With the rooks cawing in the elm-trees above, and the doves cooing in the Old Fellows' Gardens, and the pigeons flying home to roost in these wonderful towers of King's that rise into the blue, and the windy drone of the organ coming to us across the river, we are still busy with the human element. All the empty spaces about us are peopled with great memories, and about us we seem to hear the tread of silent footsteps. Here Erasmus once walked, there Chaucer meditated, up that long avenue of limes Tennyson passed to the rooms where Hallam dwelt. The old and the new meet here; we cannot separate them if we would; it is a long, long chain, and every link is a memory.

The old elm-trees, beneath which Erasmus walked nearly four centuries ago, have no doubt disappeared, and others have taken their place, but the turret chamber at Queen's, where he lived and worked, is still in existence, high up in the tower at the south-west angle of the court, and the old cloisters which he must have often trod. There are fewer changes here at Queen's, by which we begin our walk through the Backs, than at any of the other colleges. The old red-brick building that extends along the river bank, with the picturesque oriel overlooking the Fellows' Garden, is coeval with the rest of the structure, about the middle of the fifteenth century. The curious wooden bridge, leading from the cloisters to the Grove, is of more recent date. There were three bridges between Queen's and the opposite bank in the sixteenth century. The present bridge, which is known in Cambridge as the Mathematical Bridge, from its scientific and skilful construction, was put up in 1749. The design of it has been erroneously ascribed to Sir Isaac Newton. The architect was a Mr. Etheridge, and his model of it is still preserved in the

College Lodge. It is built entirely of timber, resting on stone piers. It is certainly the most picturesque bridge over the Cam.

There are a great many entries relating to the planting of trees in the college accounts. In 1630, 72 ash-trees were planted, and four years later 28 elms, and a century later still 40 limes, which are still growing on the river bank. Mention is also made of an orchard and a bowling green, and the erection of a

the *Granta*. Milton, in "Lycidas" (1638), personifies it as a river-god—

"Next Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow,
His mantle hairy and his bonnet sedge."

On a map of Cambridge, published in 1688 by Loggan, the name "River Cam" appears for the first time in full without any other designation. It is now generally understood that the stream below Queen's Bridge is



QUEEN'S COLLEGE BRIDGE.

(From a photograph by Mr. E. Clennett, Cambridge.)

"dovehouse." The grounds belonging to Queen's College were originally very extensive. Besides the Grove, which was laid out with walks, and the orchards and archery grounds, fields were planted with saffron. No mention is made as to whether the saffron was sold or used medicinally by the students. It was reputed the best saffron in Europe, and was worth 30s. a pound. A walk on the west side of the river, called "The Queen's Walk," was planted in 1686.

Passing under Queen's Bridge, the Cam skirts the meadows of King's College. The name Cam does not appear in the earlier maps of Cambridge. The river is spoken of as the *Granta* or *Gaunt*. Spenser speaks of it in his "Faëry Queene" (1590) under the name of "Gaunt." Camden, writing four years before, recognises both the *Camus* and

known as the *Cam*, and the stream above, which winds through Grantchester, as the *Granta*.

Until the construction of railways the river was the principal highway, along which provender and fuel and heavy merchandise of all sorts were brought to the town. When the college bridges blocked the way and the towing-paths disappeared, the horses that drew the barges walked in the stream by the bank. Fuel and bricks are still brought from Lynn by barges on the lower river.

The goods were unloaded at places called "Hythes," one of these was at the back of Trinity College. A very considerable trade was carried on by means of boats. The marine features of mediæval Cambridge are preserved in the old arms of the town, which were granted in 1575. The fleur-de-lys and

roses are emblems of royal charters granted to the town. The supporters are hippocampi, Neptune's horses. The bridge with the ships beneath formed part of a seal of much earlier date. The castle represented above has long disappeared.

Dyer, writing in 1814, before the erection of King's new bridge, thus speaks of the view from Queen's Grove:—"Let no one leave these grounds without going to the end of the walk by the side of the river, and let him look thence to the view on the opposite side; nor let him say it is the best in Cambridge; though it has not hill and dale, perhaps of the kind it is one of the best anywhere, for it has grand objects which amply compensate for the want of other beauties, with the accompaniment of magnificent edifices and agreeable scenery. The west front of King's College Chapel with its south perspective, the west and south perspective of Clare Hall, the elegant bridge over the Cam, Clare Piece with its plantation of venerable elms, King's Meadow on one side of the river, with the Queen's Close on the other, form a most delightful picture."

The first mention of the "Backs" occurs

in a bird's-eye map by Hammond, dated 1592, where they are described as "Kynges College backe sides." The whole of the ground adjoining the river on the right bank, behind the chapel and the Fellows' buildings, was then known as "the Chapple-yard." The view of King's College Chapel from the river, with all its many pinnacles piercing the sky, its bright gleams of stained windows, its buttresses and towers, its wonderful harmony and regularity, is, as the old critic expresses it, "not only the best in Cambridge, but the best anywhere." Through the soft silver of the trees in the glow of sunset, with the pigeons wheeling above, it is seen to advantage. People rave about King's by moonlight; a poem in stone, some have called it who have seen it thus, but, whether seen in summer or winter, amid the leafy greenery of June or the snows of December, by sunset or moonlight, all will agree that it is the noblest structure ever raised for collegiate worship.

Well might Wordsworth exclaim:

"Tax not the royal saint with vain expense,
With ill-matched aims the architect who planned,
Albeit labouring for a scanty band,
Of white-robed scholars only—this immense
And glorious work of fine intelligence!"

The name of the architect who planned this noble building is unknown. It is even surmised that King Henry VI. himself may have planned the whole scheme, and



KING'S COLLEGE BRIDGE.

(From a photograph by Mr. E. Clennett, Cambridge.)



CLARE COLLEGE AVENUE.

(From a photograph by Mr. E. Clennett, Cambridge.)

that in the arrangement of details he was assisted by a practical architect. William Waynflete, the Provost of Eton, was entrusted with the carrying out of his wishes. In his will, which was signed in 1448, he left the most exact instructions and measurements, and ample funds were provided out of the revenues of the Duchy of Lancaster. The first stone of the chapel was laid by the king in person.

The disasters that befel him prevented his pious intentions being carried out, and it was not until nearly a century later that the building was finished. The arms of the founders may be seen on various parts of the structure—roses, crowns, portcullises, dragons, greyhounds, antelopes. The rose was the

emblem of England, the portcullis was the badge of the house of Beaufort and Tudor, the antelopes were the supporters of Henry VI.

The windows of the chapel were not glazed until 1531. They are considered the most important specimens of glass painting of the Middle Ages that have been preserved to us. They were executed with few exceptions by English workmen, and were a reproduction of the windows in Henry VII.'s Chapel at Westminster, which perished years ago. How they escaped the iconoclastic visitation of the county of Cambridge in 1643 is not exactly known. There is a story that they were taken out and hidden in the river, but this may be only a fabrication. At any rate, there was the river handy.

The Fellows' Buildings, one side of a noble quadrangle designed by Gibbs in 1724, face the river as we stand on the western bank. It is built in the classical style of the period, and has nothing in common with the rest of the college. The Rev. Charles Simeon, who was a Fellow of King's, had rooms over the central archway, and contributed largely to the expense of the new bridge over the river, which was erected in 1819. Over this bridge every day during term, in sunshine or storm, the choir boys march in procession to the service in the college chapel. It is curious to watch the little black-robed procession winding through the snow. Whatever stress of weather, the boys have never failed in their attendance at the chapel service since the choir school was founded. During the great wind storm of the spring of 1895, the choir boys were passing through the avenue on their way to the chapel while the trees were crashing around them.

The choir school, the Fellows' gardens, and bowling-green, are on the west side of the river. The Fellows' gardens are first mentioned in 1658, when the courts were planted and the walks laid out. The site of the present garden was a hop-yard, and it also contains the "pigeon-house," or, as it was called in the Munden-Book of the college, "the dovehouse." There are several entries in the accounts which show the trouble the rooks gave building in the trees about the courts. The rooks are building there still, and the doves have not forsaken their old haunts. You can hear them still "coo-cooing," and the rooks cawing overhead, as they cooed and cawed hundreds of years ago. Perhaps they are the same rooks—who can tell? It would not be the College Backs without them.

Beyond King's lawn extends "the fair front of Clare," the south front facing King's Bridge, and the west the river. It was built some time between 1642 and 1669, and is in the Renaissance style of the period, with pilasters of the Tuscan and Ionic order.

From the picturesque bridge of Clare the finest river view in the Backs is to be obtained. The tower of St. John's may be seen rising among the trees, a lovely vista of lawns and gardens, and lofty trees, and willows dropping down to the river. With every white twig and branch outlined against the blue sky, the effect is very striking. The fairy network of branches rising like coral reefs, the white lawns, the grey bailements of college walls frowning darkly down, and the slow sluggish river flowing silently beneath the arches, seem almost unreal in

this white misty glamour. But here the human element comes in. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote his notes of Cambridge life sitting beside that low garden wall of Trinity Hall. The wall beneath the chestnut-tree, with the flat top—an undergraduate was lying on the wall as he wrote, dropping chestnuts on the men as they glided by on the river below. There is no undergraduate there now, and the wall is heaped high with snow, and the chestnuts have long ago dropped into the river.

Clare Bridge is very quaint and picturesque with its stone balls and balustrades and drop in the middle. It is one of the oldest of the college bridges: it was built in 1642. The three-arched bridge of Trinity, built in 1766, also affords a lovely view of the Backs. It is approached by a noble avenue of limes which was planted after the Restoration.

The stone balls on Clare Bridge have suffered at different times at the hands of undergraduates. There is a story about one of the balls. A bet was made between two undergraduates that one of them could not count the balls on the bridge. As there are only fourteen to count, the bet was readily accepted. The next morning there were only thirteen and a half balls! Half of one of them had been chipped off during the night.

During the last May Week one of the balls disappeared bodily. Clare boat had beaten St. John's in the races, and the Johnnians in revenge dislodged one of the balls on the bridge and let it fall into the river. It has since been dredged for, but it was sunk too deeply in the mud of the river to be recovered, and another stone ball has been substituted; it was well for the perpetrators of the outrage that they were not discovered. They would certainly have been "sent down."

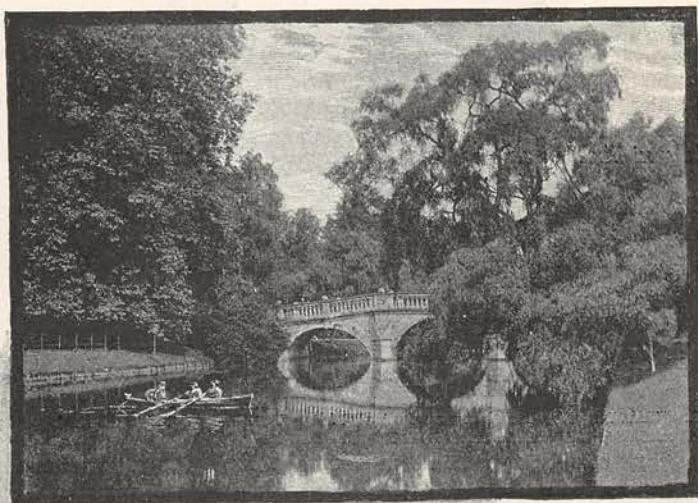
The library, which is the most prominent building of Trinity College visible from the river, was designed by Sir Christopher Wren, who borrowed the design, it is said, from the library of St. Mark's at Venice. It was built in 1676—at least, the foundation-stone was laid, but it took twelve years in building. Sir Isaac Newton contributed £40 towards the cost; it was begun during the mastership of Isaac Barrow.

So many great names meet us at Trinity—Bacon, Newton, Dryden, Thackeray, Macaulay, Byron, Tennyson—names that are household words. It is something to have seen where they have lived, and trod the stones their feet have worn. Trevelyan, in his biography of Macaulay, points out the spot in the Great Court near the Chapel where, as a Bachelor of Arts, he used to walk morning after morning, book in hand, "reading with

the same eagerness, and the same rapidity, whether the volume was the most abstruse of treatises, the loftiest of poems, or the flimsiest of novels. There are some," he adds, "who can never revisit this spot without the fancy that here, if anywhere, his dear shade must linger."

Dr. Whewell, the great Master of Trinity, was very particular about the men attending chapel. Meeting an undergraduate one day escaping through the Backs as the chapel bell was ringing, he asked him severely if that was the way to chapel. "Yes, sir," the undergraduate replied readily, "if you keep on taking the first turning to the right."

John's, and the famous Wilderness (what would St. John be without a wilderness?) Here all the year round wild flowers flourish. The Wilderness was enclosed in 1688; the trees were planted to represent the ground plan of a church. There was a bowling-green, of course, in it—the old college Fellows were always addicted to bowls—and a swans'-



CLARE
BRIDGE
IN
SUMMER
AND
WINTER.

(From photographs
by Mr. E. Clennett,
Cambridge.)

Leaving Trinity regretfully, we pass on to St. John's. In retracing our steps across the bridge, we pass through the avenue of lime-trees. The distant spire of a village church is visible at the end of this long vista, in a wondrous frame of white foliage. It is pointed out as a type of an undergraduate's career—a long, not unpleasant road, with a church at the end of it.

In following the course of the river from Trinity, we skirt the lovely grounds of St.

house. The swans are there still, but alas! like Diogenes, they live in a tub.

The many waterways bounding the college grounds were made, in the first instance, by the excavation of the raised causeways on which the avenues were planted. These raised paths were necessary in the days when the land about the colleges was undrained, for the convenience of foot passengers in wet weather, or in time of floods.

Dr. Harvey, the Master of Trinity Hall,



TRINITY COLLEGE AVENUE.
(From a photograph by Mr. E. Clennett, Cambridge.)

made at great expense, at his own cost, a raised causeway in the Backs near his college. While the work was in progress a noble academic met the Master one morning over-seeing his workmen, and thinking it a good opportunity for a reflection on the learned doctor's supposed Popish views, "Doctor," said he, "you think that this causeway is the highroad to heaven, don't you?"

"No," replied the doctor, "not so, sir; for then I should not have met you there."

A very fine stone bridge of three arches leads from St. John's College to an avenue of lofty elms, at the end of which is the Fellows' gardens. The gateway is ornamented with shields, roses, and portcullis—one cannot go a step in Cambridge without meeting with these devices.

The red-brick buildings on the opposite bank of the river bear their own dates, 1624 and 1671 respectively. The building on the north side of the bridge, the foundations of which are laid in the river, is the Library. It is a singularly picturesque structure; the range of buildings on the south side, which

was built later, has a fine gabled west front. The approach to the court and cloister from the Backs is by the covered bridge known as the Bridge of Sighs, from a resemblance to the bridge of that name in Venice.

We have reached now the limit of the College Backs, though there is still an old-world monument we should not miss hidden away near the college walks, by the river. "The School of Pythagoras" is reputed to have been one of the first Halls founded in Cambridge in the thirteenth century, where the monks from Croyland came over to read lectures. It is used as a barn now, but two windows remain of late Norman work. It belongs to Merton College, Oxford, and is said to have been the dwelling-place of Merton the founder.

It is time now to retrace our steps; but lo! the fairy scene we have just left is vanished. The sun has set, dropped suddenly down over the edge of the Fen, and the grey stone walls, the stately avenues, the college bridges, and the paled skies, are all swallowed up in a mist that has risen from the river.