

WITHERFORD WATSON MANN architects

PRESS ENQUIRIES

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PRESS RELEASE

NEW RIVER WING, CLARE COLLEGE OLD COURT UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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- Witherford Watson Mann Architects has completed a transformative addition to one of Cambridge University's oldest colleges: the River Wing is the first significant new construction at Grade I-listed Clare College Old Court since the 1780s.
- The oak-framed structure was manufactured offsite and carefully assembled in the narrow site between two walls of the building; the techniques combine the modern and ancient, CNC and handcraft. The design was in part a response to the extremely constrained nature of the site – the architects liken building here to making a ship in a bottle.
- The project, which includes a riverfront café and new social and circulation spaces, also addresses longstanding issues of access and escape: access to the Great Hall has been improved and the Senior Combination Room has been made accessible to all for the first time.
- As well as enhancing physical accessibility, the project responds to the College's emphasis on community and inclusivity. The café is a space without hierarchy, shared by all parts of the College: fellows, postgraduates, undergraduates and staff.

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Former Stirling Prize winning studio Witherford Watson Mann Architects has completed a new River Wing for Clare College, Cambridge. The design is an inventive solution to the challenge of finding space within the constraints of the historic College estate. It makes the most of the last remaining site at Old Court: a long, narrow wedge of land leading from Trinity Lane to the river. An oak-framed structure, inserted between two existing garden walls, provides much-needed access, escape and below-ground servicing, and widens into a warm, contemporary River Room café with a terrace at the water's edge.

Clare College Old Court

Clare College Old Court lies to the west of Cambridge's historic core, located between the monumental King's College Chapel and the cluster of ancient colleges along Trinity Lane. Set in gardens both sides of the River Cam, its west front is an emblematic presence on the famous Backs. Old Court occupies an irregular plot, and when the College was reconstructed on a rectilinear plan starting in the mid-17th century, a wedge of land was left unbuilt at the northern edge of the site. This is where Witherford Watson Mann's addition has been built, the first new building at Old Court since the chapel was completed in 1785.

Since this last major addition, significant incremental change has taken place in the margins of Old Court and on College lands across the river and on Castle Hill. With growth in numbers of all College members, the College recognised that Old Court needed more flexible space for the whole community if it was to remain as the heart of collective life. This required new catering and social spaces, associated ancillary spaces, fully accessible shared facilities and refurbished student rooms, as well as significant improvements of access to fire escapes from the historic rooms. There was a need to respond to the College's wider aim of welcoming a more diverse student intake. Yet any expansion within the compact site was constrained by the Grade I-listing of the Old Court buildings and Grade II-listing of the gardens.

The River Wing forms part of a £42 million transformation of Old Court which Witherford Watson Mann led through planning and listed building consent, working with conservation architect Freeland Rees Roberts. The wider Old Court project includes the renewal of more than half an acre of Collyweston stone slates, the installation of two efficient new boilers, new wiring, new insulated pipework, showers and toilets – measures estimated to reduce energy usage by 20 percent a year. Future phases, including roof repairs and the refurbishment of student rooms, are being delivered by Freeland Rees Roberts.

The new River Wing

Witherford Watson Mann explored a number of alternatives before the site on North Passage was agreed on: a wedge 120 metres long, tapering out from 1 metre wide along Trinity Lane to 8 metres wide beside the river. One side is defined by the chimneys and gables of the Kitchens and Master's Lodge, the other by the angled boundary wall to Trinity Hall. The new River Wing occupies this gap, replacing 20th century outbuildings, and navigating the constraints of the historic structures. The brick north wall of Old Court has been stripped of its ad-hoc accretions and carefully repaired and partly restored, with large new openings formed in their historic locations. Behind North Wing, the new three-storey structure provides ancillary spaces that serve the primary rooms: a lift, dumb waiter, toilets and pantry, and an escape stair from the attic rooms. Further west, between the two garden walls of Clare College and neighbouring Trinity Hall, the new building drops to a single storey holding the servery and café, with a small riverside terrace.

Construction within the protected gardens and constrained site was exceptionally challenging; the project had to be carefully phased, and a temporary bridge erected across the River Cam to supply materials and remove waste – the process was a bit like the careful assembly of a wooden ship in a bottle. For reasons of logistics as well as sustainability, the new superstructure was built in a laminated oak frame, independent of the existing walls, precision manufactured off-site with CNC-cut mortise and tenon joints, for rapid assembly on site.

Structural engineers Smith and Wallwork developed the complex logistics with contractors Barnes; they also drew every timber connection, developing the detail of these with specialist sub-contractor Constructional Timber.

A surprising sequence of spaces now unfolds from Old Court: a reconstructed curved stone stair with retractable steps and a cleverly concealed integrated platform lift provides a fully accessible entrance to the North Range, leading to the screens passage between Hall and kitchen; and a Y-shaped stair in steel and Purbeck stone, lit by a clerestory, leads down to the lower ground floor. A generous passage steps between the new lift and the inherited gable, and under the spiral escape stair, and is lit by planted light courts; this leads to the top-lit new servery, and the River Room beyond. On the upper floors, a new glazed gallery connects the lift to the Senior Combination Room, running across its northern edge while maintaining its daylight. A new glazed oak-frame spiral escape stair for the attic rooms runs down the back of the massive brick kitchen chimney.

The River Room

The new 68-seat River Room is an informal café space for the whole College community. The timber-lined room is lit by re-used stone-frame windows on its south wall, by rooflights between the beams, and by stepping bay windows to the north, looking out to a continuous light court. Refectory tables line the straight wall, while the bays incorporate upholstered benches. A generous bay window terminates the room, leading to an intimate waterfront terrace with a pergola – from the river, the new addition appears as a discreet garden pavilion. After its first months of use, it is clear that the informal space of the café is strengthening communal life at Old Court, cutting across its embedded hierarchies: the gardeners eat lunch side-by-side with students relaxing or working quietly on their laptops, while small groups meet or hold academic supervisions.

Sustainability

Throughout, the materials are durable and low-carbon: a palette of timber and stone, with limited areas of new brick and steel. At ground and lower ground floor levels, the Purbeck Grub stone floor and plinths form a continuous ground, binding the complex geometries of the different spaces. The laminated oak frame is an inherently low-carbon choice. The repair of the damaged North Facade has re-used all of the bricks that were able to be reclaimed from the demolition of the previous 20th century outbuildings. The single-storey buildings have green roofs; these are planted with eleven different species of sedum, mosses and grasses to help ensure plant diversity. The roof is edged interne-coated stainless steel which can be recycled at the end of its life. The buttery and kitchen facilities are fitted with mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR) to provide a modern and hygienic working environment.

Beyond its materials and performance, the project demonstrates that even heavily built-up sites can be given a new lease of life by judicious, focused additions.

Stephen Witherford, Director, Witherford Watson Mann, said:

"It was a new challenge for us to add to such a significant historic building, and such a long-lived institution. We had to get under the skin, and really understand both the buildings and the collective personality that inhabits them. This first major addition to Old Court in 250 years offered an opportunity to re-imagine collective life for a modern academic institution. For all their beauty and harmony, the College's buildings expressed a certain hierarchy. Our shared aim was to create new social spaces that are respectful of and responsive to the historic buildings, but step outside their conventions to feel open, inclusive and contemporary. We imagined the River Wing as a garden building: this helps it integrate with Old Court, at the same time differentiating itself, making it of its time. It is warm but luminous, its rooms receive daylight from every angle, they blur and extend into the wider landscape of courts and gardens."

Deborah Hoy, Estates Director, Clare College, said:

"The new River Wing has been an exciting development for the College, a transformational one within Old Court that will ensure it remains the beating heart of College. Witherford Watson Mann have taken a warren of underutilised spaces and provided an impressive social experience for all College members to enjoy. The riverside setting, open all day, is novel, setting Clare apart from other Colleges. The attention to detail is apparent throughout with the laminated oak beams and floor to ceiling windows providing a light, warm and welcoming environment. The reorganisation of the North range of Old Court means Clare's public spaces are fully accessible to all for the first time. The completion of this project means we can provide the best possible experience for current and future students, so that they can benefit from all the opportunities of a Clare education."

Speaking about the atmosphere in the cafe, Dr Patricia Fara, Emeritus Fellow, Clare College, said: *'You can take people to the SCR (Senior Combination Room), but they like it here because it's more like the real world - it's less alienating. It is a place people come as equals.'*

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Notes to editors

Address:	Clare College, Trinity Lane, Cambridge CB2 1TL
Site in sqm:	1,060m ²
GIA:	1,742m ²
Project Value:	£25.5million for this phase incl. the river room café, temporary kitchen and temporary bridge/crane, works to existing kitchens and fees.
	Part of a £42 million transformation project delivered in phases
Project schedule:	May 2014 - June 2023
Client:	Clare College
Architects:	Witherford Watson Mann Architects
Design team:	Stephen Witherford, Chris Watson, William Mann, William Burgess, Nadine Schuetz, Anna Tenow, Lucy Paton, Freddie Phillipson, Andrew Lane, Vassia Chatzikonstantinou, Antonia Alexandru, Saya Hakamata, Chris Raven, Benny Chung
Project architects:	William Burgess, Nadine Schuetz, Anna Tenow, Lucy Paton, Freddie Phillipson
Historic Buildings Advisor:	Dr Roland Harris
Conservation Architect:	Freeland Rees Roberts
Building contractor:	Barnes Construction Ltd
Structural engineer:	Smith & Wallwork
Services engineer:	Max Fordham
Civil engineer:	Smith & Wallwork
Quantity surveyor:	Henry Riley
Project management:	Henry Riley
Landscape architects:	Liz Lake Associates
Fire consultants:	The Fire Surgery
Planning consultant:	Turley
Oak glulam frame:	Constructional Timber
Purbeck stone floor:	Stonebuild
Oak staircase:	Lowe & Simpson
Pre-cast concrete:	Cambridge Architectural Precast
Brickwork:	Anglian Brickwork
Photography:	© Philip Vile - @philipvile © Philipp Ebeling - @philippebelingphoto

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Clare College is the second oldest of Cambridge's thirty-one colleges. It was founded in 1326 and endowed a few years later by Lady Elizabeth de Clare, Clare has developed into a forward thinking and inclusive College which remains true to the vision of our foundress, providing a community of students and Fellows where academic excellence flourishes.

Clare students, Fellows, and alumni have many notable, prestigious, and worthwhile achievements to their names. Our Fellows cover a range of fields, from medieval literature to cutting edge cancer treatments, and our alumni include Sir David Attenborough and Sir Henry 'Skip' Gates. Our recent graduates have found success in careers in academia, business, law, civil service, marketing, engineering, medicine, and many more fields.

www.clare.cam.ac.uk
@clarecollege

Witherford Watson Mann Architects was founded in 2002 by Stephen Witherford, Chris Watson and William Mann. The practice has won critical acclaim for imaginative and carefully crafted one-off projects covering social housing, cultural buildings and public spaces, as well as strategies for the renewal of large urban areas. They started their collaboration with a series of walks through the edges of London; since then, they have approached every project as an open-ended enquiry, turning the constraints of inherited situations into surprising opportunities.

Projects to date have included Amnesty International Headquarters (2005), Astley Castle (2012), Gistel social housing in Belgium (2015), Walthamstow Wetlands (2017), Ryle Yard in Eddington (2018), which provides accommodation for post-graduate students of the University of Cambridge. The practice has recently completed Brickfields business centre in Hoxton (2019), the transformation of the Courtauld Institute of Art at Somerset House (Phase I, 2021, Phase II ongoing), and Appleby Blue housing in Southwark (2023), an almshouse reinvented for 21st century urban life. Together with River Wing, Clare College, Cambridge, each of these projects distils the complexities of contemporary collectives, of urban sites and public processes, into durable, economical solutions that remain open to future change.

Witherford Watson Mann won the Stirling Prize in 2013 for Astley Castle in Warwickshire and was shortlisted in 2019 for Nevill Holt Opera theatre, and again in 2023 for their transformation of the Courtauld Institute of Art.

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