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GEORGIAN  
GROUP

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Robert Neild, 'Nevile and his Court: The turbulent history of Nevile's Court, Trinity College, Cambridge', *The Georgian Group Journal*, Vol. XXII, 2014, pp. 67–76

# NEVILE AND HIS COURT: THE TURBULENT HISTORY OF NEVILE'S COURT, TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

ROBERT NEILD

*Trinity College's remarkably complete archives show that Nevile's Court, which adjoins the college's magnificent Wren Library, acquired its classical uniformity only because Thomas Nevile, master of the college from 1593 to 1615, built the original Jacobean court so cheaply that it began to fall down in the 1750s. It was then rebuilt by James Essex in a classical style akin to that of the Library. Fortunately the upsurge in agricultural rents in the mid eighteenth century permitted Trinity, a substantial landowner, swiftly to undertake this major reconstruction and produce the court we know today.*

## INTRODUCTION

When in the middle of the war I came up to Trinity and first looked into Nevile's Court, I was captivated by its classical harmony (Fig. 1). It seemed majestic and serene. I stood in awe. I did not sense that it had not always been like that: that it had in fact had a strangely disturbed architectural life. Only now, seventy years on, have I discovered how disturbed.

In brief the story is this. When Nevile, Master from 1593 to 1615, first created the court in the early seventeenth century, he built its two sides in the Jacobean style, rather like the Hall. But he had the

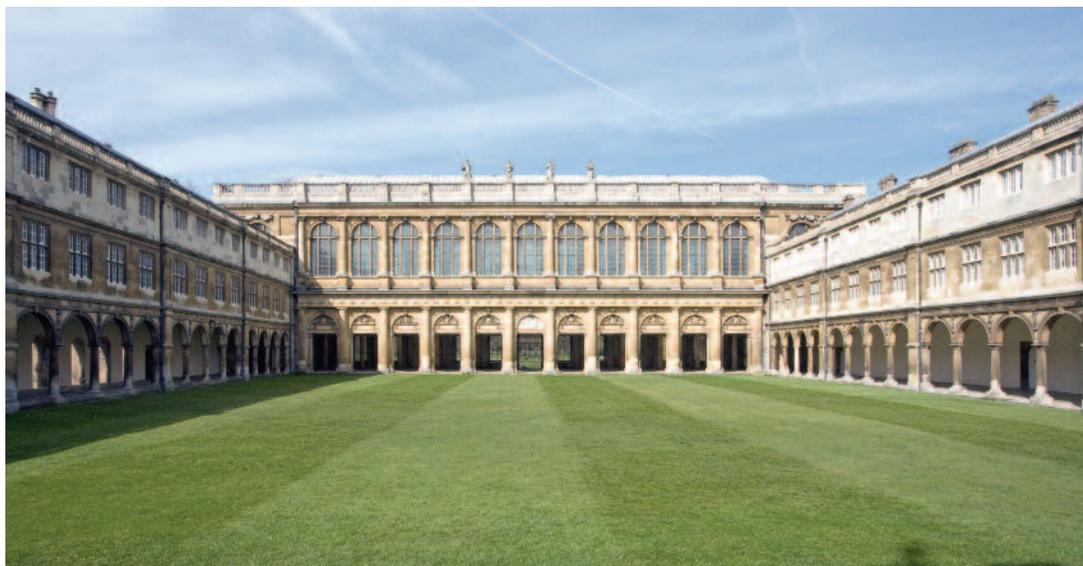


Fig. 1: Nevile's Court today (*Ranald Lawrence*)

work done so cheaply that what he built had to be rebuilt in the middle of the eighteenth century. The opportunity was then taken to rebuild in a classical style, akin to the Wren Library that had been erected meanwhile. The rebuilding and transformation of the court was a major and costly undertaking, but the college immediately found money for it, apparently without controversy, and the work was done quickly.

The ease of financing stands in sharp contrast to the severe difficulties the college had experienced earlier when raising money to build the Wren Library, and was to experience later when raising money to build New Court. In short, the reconstruction of Neville's Court is a remarkable episode in the evolution of Trinity's buildings and finances, a major transformation of part of the college swiftly undertaken. I have investigated the nature and the cost of what was done, and how it was financed, by delving into the college's historical accounts and other records with which I became acquainted some years ago when I wrote the financial history of the college.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION OF THE COURT

Neville's Court was created in about 1610.<sup>2</sup> Because it was financed personally by Neville, who did not preserve his accounts and records, we lack evidence as to what it cost and the precise date of its construction. Since its creation, the court has had three architectural incarnations:

**1610 to c.1680:** Under Neville, an arched cloister (or 'arcade'), surmounted by rooms, was built out westwards from each end of the Hall so as to form the sides of an open-ended court. Each side was subdivided into units that are four arches long, comprising a grand set of rooms on the first floor and lesser rooms above. Access was by staircases in the Oxford and Cambridge manner. This pattern, and the external dimensions of the units, was adhered to later when the court was extended and when it was rebuilt. Those first Jacobean buildings had gables on top and were adorned with decorative stonework. Across the end of the court was a wall, in the centre of which stood the richly decorated Neville



Fig. 2: The Court as Neville created it (*Photo-image by Ranald Lawrence*)

Gate that now guards the entrance to the college at the bottom of Trinity Lane. Beyond the wall grass sloped down to the river. The college possesses no picture of the court as it looked at that time, but one has been constructed by Ranald Lawrence, who, using modern photo-imaging technique, has cut the end off the court as it was depicted later by Loggan (Fig. 3) and introduced instead an image of the Nevile Gate, a wall and the view beyond (Fig. 2)

**c.1690 to 1755:** While the Wren Library was slowly being built between 1676 and 1695, each side of the court was lengthened by two units, each four arches long, so as to abut onto the new library. They were in the same Jacobean style as those built by Nevile; but they were well built of good stone (Fig. 3). The junction of the sides of the court with the Wren Library looks clumsy today, but it is not conspicuous. It must have looked clumsier when the sides were Jacobean and clashed stylistically with Wren's classical library. The disharmony of styles in the court was softened by the addition to the side of the Hall facing the court of the elegant sweep of classical steps,

crowned by three stone niches under a classical pediment that we know as the Tribunal or Tribune (both are correct). (Fig. 4) The design of the Tribunal, of which there is no record, is attributed to Wren or his mason Robert Grumbold. The result of these innovations was the grand enclosed court shown in Fig. 3. Stylistically one might call it 'a court in transition', part classical, part Jacobean. Since the college was struggling to pay for the building of the Library, it could not have paid to have Nevile's units of the court rebuilt in the classical style at this time.

I have also included a picture of what Nevile's Court would have looked like if the design for a round library that Wren first offered to Trinity had been adopted (Fig. 5). Ranald Lawrence has constructed this picture by using Wren's drawings to obtain an image of the planned building that he has introduced into the truncated Loggan print.<sup>3</sup> The college is fortunate that Wren, a friend of Isaac Barrow, the Master, was persuaded to try again and that he produced the glorious library we now possess. The rejected design is remarkable for being the first known architectural scheme for a round



Fig. 3: The Court after the Wren Library was added (Loggan, *Cantabrigia Illustrata*, Trinity College Library, X.18.39)

library, and for having inspired the shape of the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford.<sup>4</sup> I wonder if Wren was not led to this free-standing, round design by an urge to avoid direct contact between what he would design in his classical style and the Jacobean style of the existing court. As we have seen, he built that clash into his second design and it was manifest in stone until the sides of the court were reconstructed long after his death (Fig. 3). I wonder if in making his second design so grand, he did not say to himself, ‘Well, if I have to attach my building to those Jacobean sides, I shall make sure mine is dominant’.

**1758 to today:** It was in 1755 that the part of the court built by Neville was found to be in urgent need of rebuilding. The first evidence of the crisis is an entry in the junior bursar’s accounts for 1754–55 of a

payment ‘For shoring up the Building in the North Cloyster from the Ground to the Roof with large timbers and other materials.’ There follows an entry in the Conclusion Book, in which the Master and eight Seniors who ruled the college used to record their major decisions, which read:

‘April 7 1755, Whereas the Workmen employed to survey the North side of Neville’s Court have reported, that all the Columns with their Bases and Capitals and all the Windows must be new; that the Spandrels of the Arches, the Friezes and upper Pedestals are all Clunch and must be taken out; that the Stone Work to the Bottom of the Upper Windows must be taken down; and in general, that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to make the Wall sound and good without taking down the Front and rebuilding it; It is agreed by the Master and Seniors that the said wall be taken down and rebuilt in a substantial manner.’



Fig. 4: The Tribunal (*Ronald Lawrence*).



Fig. 5: How Wren's first plan would have looked (Photo-image by Randal Lawrence)

In the following year an entry in the Junior Bursar's accounts tells us that 'The old Stone on the south side of Neviles Court proved in general much worse than the North Side . . .'. The cause of the trouble was that inferior material had been used to support a raised building. The columns and front wall of the raised cloister had been built of poor stone and clunch, a building material of hardened chalk that is better suited to interior than to exterior use, and other poor stone.<sup>5</sup> It had crumbled. Consequently the front wall and all that it supported – the floors, the roof and the interior, except those parts that were supported by the back wall alone – had to come down.

The occupants of the condemned rooms were moved out and the rooms were largely demolished and rebuilt, this time in classical style and with good stone. The design was by James Essex, a talented local architect who designed the building in Great Court that bears his name and the bridge adjacent to the Wren Library. There was no need to rebuild the

new units that linked the court to the library, but they were modified so as to look classical, like the rest of the court.

Fig. 6 illustrates the appearance of the sides of the court before and after rebuilding. The main change was at the top, where the gables were replaced by a balustrade. That was a decorative change, a frill, but it rode on a substantial change in the configuration of the second floor. The upper windows and wall were heightened, a change that makes the appearance of the court more generous and that enhances the internal space on the second floor.

The other significant change was the removal of Jacobean decorative features from the face of the stonework, notably the engaged columns that rested on decorative plinths, serving no structural purpose. The Jacobean stone decoration may be seen as an echo of the voluptuous decorative wood-carving at the south end of the Hall. The classical stonework by comparison is simple.

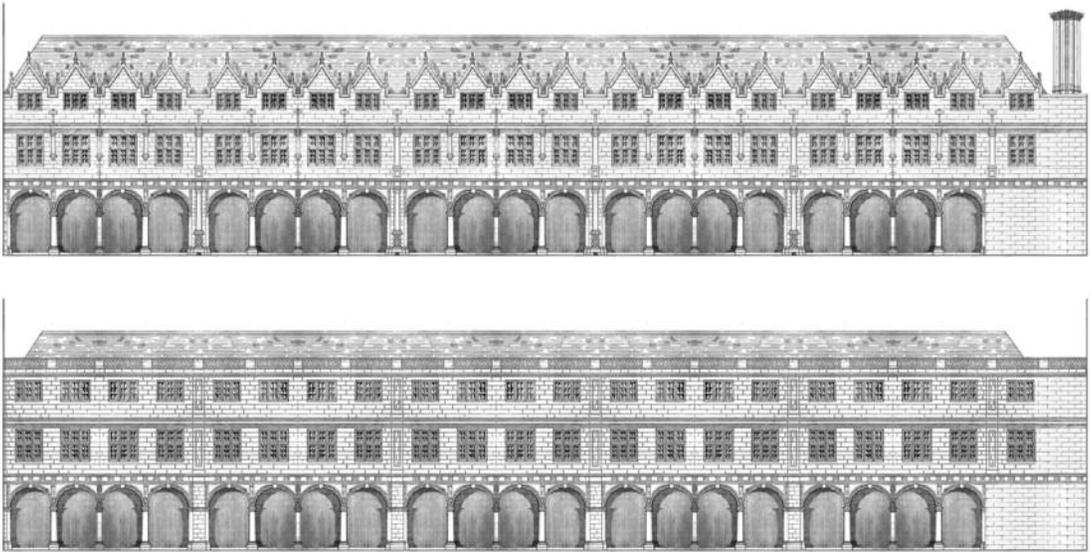


Fig. 6: The sides of the Court before and after rebuilding (*Photo-image by Randal Lawrence*).

#### THE COST AND NATURE OF THE WORK

In a summary paper the Junior Bursar recorded the cost of rebuilding Nevile's six units as having been £5,486, as follows:

TABLE 1:	£
1755	707
1756	2,511
1757	1,250
1758	844
1759	174
TOTAL	5,486

In a second paper he put the cost of giving a classical appearance to the four recently-built units at £578, bringing the total cost to just over £6000. The Junior Bursar's annual accounts and other documents record details of the expenditure:

1. The work was done fast, most of it in the two year 1756 and 1757.
2. About sixty per cent of the money was paid to bricklayers and stonemasons, an indication of how far structural defects were the problem. Much was also spent on carpenters and other trades, and on carting away rubbish.
3. The average cost of rebuilding one of Nevile's units was £914 (£5,486 divided by six). That is slightly more than was spent by Sir Thomas Sclater, a private benefactor and former fellow, on building and fitting out with grand wainscoting one of the new units that was added to the court rather more than fifty years earlier (£896).<sup>6</sup>
4. The accounts include payments for re-paving part of the Tribunal, thus ruling out the idea – should anyone have entertained it – that Essex might have built it. I cannot see any reason to doubt that it was designed by Wren, or his mason Grumbold, who received payments in 1682 and 1683.

5. Payments were made to Fellows under the heading 'Rents of Chambers taken down', to compensate them for the temporary loss of their rooms, but there is no evidence where they went.

#### THE COMMON NEED FOR REPAIRS

The need to repair buildings that had been built largely of clunch was common in Cambridge colleges, and was not confined to Neville's Court or to Trinity.

Clunch, which was soft, easy to cut and obtainable from nearby quarries, was cheap.<sup>7</sup> Sound building stone was expensive; it was harder to cut and it had to be transported from afar. The nearest was limestone from the east Midlands, where amongst several quarries the two most prominent in the records of stone purchases by Cambridge colleges are those at Weldon, near Corby, and at Ketton, near Stamford. Stone from these quarries was usually taken by water down the Nene, out into the Wash for a short journey south to King's Lynn, then up the Ouse and the Cam to Cambridge. In the sixteenth century it was first carted from the quarries to Gunwade Ferry, just to the west of Peterborough, where the river Nene became navigable. Later, the Nene may have been navigable higher up; and other rivers and waterways in this low-lying area were used too. Earlier still, some stone had been carried by cart all the way to Cambridge.<sup>8</sup>

The choice that builders of colleges made between clunch and limestone will have depended on the money at their disposal and on the structural demands of the building they planned. For example, King's Chapel is so tall and so nicely structured that good stone must have been a necessity. At first King's obtained limestone from Yorkshire, whence it was shipped at high cost by sea to King's Lynn, where it was transferred to barges to be brought up to Cambridge. Later, stone for the chapel came from Weldon and other quarries in the East Midlands.

What is extraordinary about Neville is that he used

clunch and other cheap stone to build the structurally demanding raised cloisters of Neville's Court, as well as to build much of Great Court where the buildings were structurally undemanding. In both cases repair was needed by the mid eighteenth century.

The south side of Great Court, including the Queen's Gate, was repaired in 1754 at a cost of nearly £800; and £300 was spent in that year on re-facing and repairing the east face of the Hall. Willis and Clark describe the work on the south side of the court as 'a repair so extensive as almost to amount to a rebuilding', but the work required in Great Court was nothing like as extensive as that in Neville's Court.<sup>9</sup> The south side of Great Court, (apart from the Queen's Gate) was a crudely built range of rooms with small windows and a low centre of gravity. Defective blocks of clunch or other material could be removed from its walls without risk of collapse and replaced: Great Court could be patched up cheaply. Much of it was rendered to provide a smooth appearance and some protection from the weather.

From Trinity Lane one can today get a marvellous impression of how the wall on the outside of the Great Court, some of which may derive from Michaelhouse, one of Trinity's precursor colleges, was over time built out of a chaotic variety of cheap materials – brick, clunch and stone of various shapes and sizes – to produce in places a patchwork that could not have been tolerated in the interior of the court where uniformity and smoothness were sought. Outside, cheapness was evidently paramount. Between the Queen's Gate and the Neville Gate the patchwork is delightful to look at. It has some of the qualities of a mellow oriental carpet.

Neville's Court presented a quite different challenge from Great Court. The builders faced a raised building that would collapse if defective parts of its load-bearing arches and wall failed or were removed. It therefore had to be evacuated and largely demolished. And the rebuilding required the installation of precisely cut articulated stonework.

**TABLE 2: THE FINANCING OF THE RECONSTRUCTION (£ THOUSANDS)**

	1751	1752	1753	1754	1755	1756	1757	1758
Total receipts	7,386	6,724	8,651	18,157	12,120	10,886	13,420	11,873
Dividends	1,747	1,747	1,771	1,782	2,734	2,734	2,600	2,671
Transfers to junior bursar	899	1,114	1,193	1,470	1,723	3,305	2,786	1,791

**THE FINANCING OF THE REBUILDING**

The figures in Table 2 come from the historical accounts of the Senior Bursar which, computerised, are accessible in the Wren Library.

What I read into the figures is this. We are looking at the third quarter of the eighteenth century, a period when there was a healthy rise in agricultural rents, which were the predominant source of the college's income.<sup>10</sup> Further, in 1753 Stephen Whisson, a mathematician, took office as Senior Bursar and was the first to hold office for more than a few years: he served till 1782. From the accounts it looks as if he may have been a new broom who quickly seized the new opportunity to gather in higher rents from the college's lands. Moreover he may have known that costly repair work was in the offing. That is surmise. What we can see in the top line of the table is that in 1754 he produced a one-year surge in receipts of nearly £10,000. The detailed records show that half of this sum came from two college estates, Enfield (Middlesex) and Hatfield Broad Oak (Essex). Whisson had these estates surveyed and then negotiated renewal leases with the tenants that were more demanding than before and also longer than was usual. The normal practice was to renew leases every seven years for a capital sum known as a fine and an unchanged annual rent.<sup>11</sup> Whisson renewed for seventeen years at Hatfield and thirteen and a half years at Enfield. Moreover, he obtained a

sufficient growth in the college's rents in the following years for the college's future total receipts not to be dented by his pre-emption of future fines at Enfield and Hatfield.

The next two lines indicate that the upsurge in receipts was enough for the Master and Fellows richly to satisfy their appetite for dividends and at the same time provide the money needed for rebuilding: dividends were increased by fifty per cent as money was allocated to the junior bursar to meet the building costs.

When money had been needed for the Wren Library and, later, when it was needed for New Court, the financing was nothing like as easy as this. Since the size of the dividend was an important consideration in the allocation of the college's income, it is worth recalling its history. In 1630 Trinity followed other Oxford and Cambridge colleges and adopted the dividend system, whereby the Master and Fellows divided amongst themselves surplus income above the amount they were obliged by statute to spend on stipends, commons (board and lodging) and similar items, plus the amount they found it prudent to spend on necessities such as maintaining buildings. After some skirmishing, a formula was adopted in 1660 for the level and division of the dividend between the Master and different categories of Fellow that was adhered to for many years.<sup>12</sup> The problem with the formula was that the payments were set so high relative to the income of the college that, until the

middle of the eighteenth century, there was often insufficient money to pay a 'whole dividend', meaning the amounts set in the formula. Sometimes a half dividend was paid, sometimes none.

The Wren Library was built at a time of lean years when the dividend was squeezed. A building appeal was launched which yielded just under £12,000. The cost, which overshot the estimates, came out at nearly £16,500. Because of the shortfall, the work was slowed down and took twenty years, from 1676 to 1695. Money was scraped together, partly from loans that were paid off later, partly from college income and partly by selling plate to the value of £1,325. In those twenty years a whole dividend was paid in only nine years, a half dividend in seven, and none in four years. The zero dividends and the half dividends were concentrated in the later years when money was being scraped together for the Library.

By the time New Court came to be built between 1823 and 1825, the college's income had grown handsomely and big dividends had come to be taken for granted. In order to raise money for the new court, the college's immediate income and dividends were not touched. Rather it was decided that money should be raised partly by an appeal and partly by issuing bonds. Since the repayment of these would be spread over a long period, the cost would impinge only gradually on the college's disposable income and dividends. When the response to the appeal was disappointing, the reaction of the college was to cut the costs of the building. The interior of the court was rendered instead of being faced in stone, and corners were cut. Another court was poorly built.

### CONCLUSION

I draw two main conclusions.

First, it was most fortunate that the urgent need to demolish and rebuild most of Nevile's Court occurred at a time of rising agricultural rents, with

the consequence that the new senior bursar could immediately produce the money needed to pay for the work and also satisfy the Master's and Fellows' appetite for higher dividends.

Second, Nevile's conduct exemplifies the unscrupulous methods by which he built Trinity. Elsewhere I have described how, by spending without restraint on building Great Court with its grand Hall and grand Master's Lodge, and the beginnings of Nevile's Court, he ran the college into debt so deeply that in 1621, six years after his death, the college, after struggling with the debt, became insolvent and would have been unable pay its bills had it not been for the generosity of an ex-Fellow who gave it a large interest-free loan.<sup>13</sup> Here one sees him building so cheaply that expensive rebuilding was needed later. I previously took the view that our gratitude for the beauty of what Nevile left to us should outweigh our criticism of his financial misdemeanours. I wrote:

'Think what Nevile created – Great Court and the beginnings of Nevile's Court and, round them, the master's lodge, the hall and kitchen and many sets of rooms, some grand, some modest, all tranquil, each blessed by the harmony of the court beyond its windows. It was he who had the vision to conceive of those buildings and the persuasive power to bring them into being.'<sup>14</sup>

I now see a further reason for feeling gratitude to Nevile: it was because he built Nevile's Court so badly that it had to be rebuilt in the classical style by Essex. If his buildings had been more durable the court might still be half Jacobean. Who can say?<sup>15</sup> From Trinity today I see Nevile as a great creative rogue, a Tudor thruster who knew how to get his way leaving financial debris behind him.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Willis and Clark's encyclopaedic architectural history of Cambridge has been an invaluable source of information, and so has Jonathan Smith, the college's ever helpful and resourceful chief archivist. The illustrations are all the work of Ranald Lawrence, who has brilliantly brought to bear his skills as a trained architect, a photographer, and an expert at photo-imaging, not to mention his sensitive eye.

## NOTES

- 1 Robert Neild, *Riches and Responsibility: the Financial History of Trinity College, Cambridge* (Cambridge, 2008).
- 2 Robert Willis and Robert Willis Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, (Cambridge, 1886), Vol II p.518, offer evidence that the court was completed by the end of 1614.
- 3 The drawings include a site plan from which Ranald Lawrence has been able to derive the scale and positioning of the building.
- 4 I am grateful to Dr James Campbell for this point, which is expounded in his recent book, J.W.P.Campbell, *The Library: a World History* (London, 2013), pp. 143-7.
- 5 From the entry of 7 April, 1775 in the Conclusion Book it is not clear what the columns and windows were thought to be made of. Since it was reported that they must all be replaced they must have been made of a soft material akin to clunch, if not of clunch as the term was here used. (The term can be used narrowly or widely to describe chalky stone of various quality.) The wonderfully delicate but much mutilated carvings in the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral are of clunch.
- 6 Willis and Clark, *op. cit.*, p.522. In the interval there was no significant inflation, judging by the price of wheat. See Neild, *op.cit.*, p.26.
- 7 Quarries at Barrington, Burwell, Eversden, Haslingfield, Hinton and Reach are mentioned in the records. See Donovan Purcell, *Cambridge Stone* (London, 1967), pp.26-7.
- 8 See W.J. Arkell, 'Stones of Trinity', *The Trinity Magazine*, May Term, 1952, pp. 6-8; Donovan Purcell, *op.cit.*; and Jennifer S. Alexander, 'Building Stone from the East Midlands Quarries: Sources, Transportation and Usage', *Journal of the Society for Medieval Archaeology*, 39 (1995) pp. 107-135.
- 9 Willis and Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 495.
- 10 Eric Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (New York, 1967), p. 347.
- 11 See Neild, *op. cit.*, p. 21
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 13 It had valuable foundation land but was forbidden by statute to sell it.
- 14 Neild, *op. cit.*, p. 37
- 15 It is remarkable that the radical nature of the rebuilding of Nevile's Court is not recognised in the two most commonly consulted guides to our buildings. G.M. Trevelyan (*Trinity College: an Historical Sketch*, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 69-70) describes the repairs to Great Court and then adds, almost casually: 'Similarly, Nevile's Court itself required attention. The Cloisters were decaying, because the spandrels of the arches and other parts of the front walls had been built of chalky local clunch that easily crumbled away. They were therefore rebuilt in better stone in 1755-6. The fashionable architect Essex, in accordance with the taste of the day, took the occasion to remove some Jacobean ornament from the face of the walls, and to abolish the gables above the upper windows, in favour of the present balustrade, similar to that which Wren had placed along the top of the neighbouring Library.' Nikolaus Pevsner (*Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire* (1970), p.172), having described with exhausting thoroughness the appearance and dimensions of the court and the Nevile Gate, and having given their date as 1612, says that the two sides of the court '... appear remarkably chaste and classical for their date. But it must be remembered that they were tidied up in 1755 by Essex.' Tidied up! It seems that Pevsner and his team did not explore history as thoroughly as they explored appearances, and even there they slipped: the Tribunal does not lie 'exactly in line with the centre of the Library.' (p. 174).