

New Buildings for the University of London

FRIENDS of university education throughout the world will welcome the announcement contained in an official publication of the University of London entitled, "New Buildings on the Bloomsbury Site" (pp. 18, illustrations and map), that the architect, Mr. Charles Holden, selected and appointed by the Court of the University, has completed a model of the proposed University buildings. We reproduce a photograph of the model (Fig. 1), kindly supplied by the University, and of the air photograph of the site (Fig. 2), which forms the frontispiece of T. Ll. Humberstone's "University Reform in London" (Allen and Unwin, 1926). The pamphlet is designed to give "a short account of the work of the University, of its present location and of its aims and aspirations". Not an appeal

societies; but in 1835 the Senate were deprived of these and housed in what was described as a 'miserable garret in Marlborough House'. This accommodation was of a temporary nature only, and in the spring of 1855 the University again removed this time to Burlington House."

Powerful influences were brought to bear on the Senate of the emancipated University—it was reconstituted as a teaching university under the Act of 1898—to induce it to agree to the removal of the University headquarters to the partially derelict building of the Imperial Institute at South Kensington. Without any question the accommodation offered in that beautiful building was in many ways superior, especially for examinations. H. G. Wells used his caustic pen to denounce the old

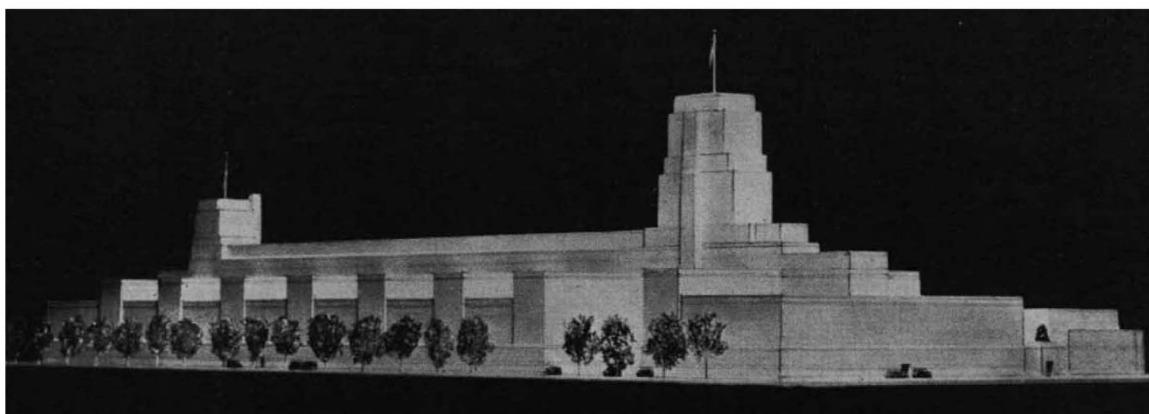


FIG. 1.—View of a model of the proposed buildings in Bloomsbury for the University of London, showing the main features of the general design.

for funds! That will come later, and the University is confident, we are told in a "Foreword" signed by the Chancellor, the Earl of Athlone, and the other high officers of the University, "that in due time money will be forthcoming from its friends and from all who esteem learning and scholarship".

How peculiarly Victorian is the early history of the University of London! Founded in 1836 by Royal Charter, the University was in one sense a Government bureau, accommodated, rent free, in quarters provided by the Government. "For some thirty years", the writer of the pamphlet states, "it discharged its modest duties in modest apartments in Somerset House. From 1870 to 1900, it had a home of its own when it was housed in a building erected at the expense of the Government in Burlington Gardens, now occupied by the Civil Service Commission." The point is not of essential importance, but this account of the early migrations of the University does not tally with that given in the Calendar (1928-29). "From the beginning", we are there informed, "the Government accepted the responsibility for housing the University, and at first apartments were provided in Somerset House, which were also occupied by various learned

University building, dusty, desolate and empty, the thin permanent odour of dogfish and rabbits pervading the library, in which practical examinations were held; and to express his surprise that any person should oppose any sort of reform for the University of London. Moreover, the accommodation in the Imperial Institute was much more extensive, and this no doubt explains the famous Treasury minute of Feb. 16, 1899, giving a guarantee that the accommodation to be provided would include "such provision as may hereafter be needed for the full extension and development of the University under the Statutes and Regulations made by the Commissioners appointed by the Act". This carelessly worded minute proved troublesome in later years. As a fact, when immediate administrative needs were satisfied, there remained a whole floor, and this was used, not very appropriately, as a research laboratory for physiology, directed for many years by Prof. A. D. Waller. When the accommodation problem became acute, the laboratory was abolished *sans phrase*, the staff pensioned, and the valuable apparatus given away. Perhaps it was well that Dr. Waller did not survive to see this *débâcle*! The point to be emphasised is that

the University always held the Government to its obligation to provide adequate accommodation for its administrative work.

Of course, the real question was not one of providing comfortable rooms for a number of University officials and their clerks, for meetings of committees, and for the examination of candidates. This was recognised by the Royal Commission on University Education in London, appointed in 1910, generally known as the Haldane Commission. So impressed was the Commission by the inadequacy of the administrative headquarters of the University in the Imperial Institute that this question was made the subject of a special pre-

mend the Bloomsbury site. Apparently a friend of Lord Haldane's made investigations, and was able to convince him that this was the most suitable site—at this time it was the $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres forming the southern part of the site—whereupon, having secured the personal approval of Lord Rosebery, Chancellor of the University, he began to collect money for the purchase of the site. These proceedings caused much dissension within the University. On Presentation Day (May 7, 1912) the Principal, Sir Henry Miers, was able to announce that £355,000 had been offered towards site and buildings. Alas! those golden sovereigns have been used for other purposes. Many alternative sites were considered, notwithstanding the view expressed by the Haldane Commission in its Final Report dated March 27, 1913, that the most suitable and convenient quarters for the central University buildings would be found in Bloomsbury. Guerrilla warfare was maintained until the outbreak of the War of 1914–18.

We do not question the wisdom of the writer of the pamphlet in scattering the poppies of oblivion over the period 1911–1932, years of controversy, of war, of reconstruction—assuredly years of great progress in university education in London. Twenty have passed before the Royal Commission's dream has taken form and substance in an architect's model; and Lord Haldane and most

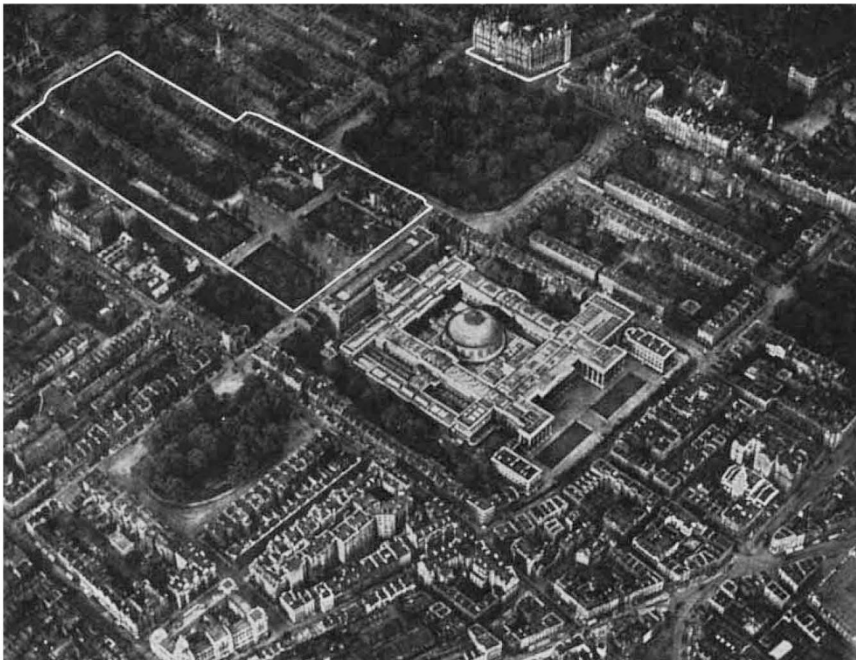


FIG. 2.—British Museum and the site (enclosed in a white line) of the University of London. From "University Reform in London".

Central Aerophoto Co., Ltd.

liminary report dated Dec. 15, 1911. One would have expected that on the sound principle enunciated by the cookery book author, "First catch your hare", it would have appeared expedient to the Commissioners to ensure the reconstitution of the University, and to define its new duties, before considering the question of accommodation, a matter not directly within their terms of reference.

The Haldane Commission in its preliminary report strongly urged that a site should be secured of sufficient size to allow a large measure of freedom in determining the nature of the buildings to be erected, including such scientific institutes as had been referred to earlier in the Report, if these should be found to be necessary or desirable. Both in the public interest and in the interest of the University, the Commission said, buildings should be erected for a reconstituted University, "which would be a visible sign of its recognition as a great public institution". Be it understood, however, that the Commission at this stage did not recom-

mend the Bloomsbury site. Apparently a friend of Lord Haldane's made investigations, and was able to convince him that this was the most suitable site—at this time it was the $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres forming the southern part of the site—whereupon, having secured the personal approval of Lord Rosebery, Chancellor of the University, he began to collect money for the purchase of the site. These proceedings caused much dissension within the University. On Presentation Day (May 7, 1912) the Principal, Sir Henry Miers, was able to announce that £355,000 had been offered towards site and buildings. Alas! those golden sovereigns have been used for other purposes. Many alternative sites were considered, notwithstanding the view expressed by the Haldane Commission in its Final Report dated March 27, 1913, that the most suitable and convenient quarters for the central University buildings would be found in Bloomsbury. Guerrilla warfare was maintained until the outbreak of the War of 1914–18.

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of his colleagues, including Lord Milner, Sir Robert Morant, and Sir William McCormick, have not survived to see this Pisgah-view. If we lift the veil, it is to honour those to whom they handed the torch—particularly Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, who in 1920, while president of the Board of Education, moved the Government to offer the site to the University. "The Government", he wrote on April 7 of that year, "are now in a position to acquire a site of about $11\frac{1}{2}$ acres behind the British Museum, and they offer to devote it gratis and in perpetuity to the provision of a site for new headquarters of the University and for colleges and institutions connected with it, including King's College, whose premises in the Strand are now inadequate for its needs." After the five years' grace allowed by the Government, the University found it could not satisfy the conditions attached to the gift, particularly in regard to the removal of King's College, and therefore refused the site, which was re-sold to the Duke of Bedford. It was a black

day for the University, perhaps the blackest in its history. But as Mr. H. V. Lanchester wrote (*New Troy*, June 3, 1926) :

"So our Site has gone back to the Duke of Bedford. This does not mean that it might not yet be reclaimed if the will to do it were there. The Duke is in no way antagonistic to the scheme, and the only difference in the position is that the Government offer, to the value of half-a-million or so, is in abeyance, for it seems inconceivable that were a reasonable programme put forward, any Government would fail to offer substantial assistance."

The position soon became desperate. The Duke had signed a few long leases of houses on the site, some of which, we believe, still remain in alien hands, and was on the point of signing building leases. Victory was snatched from a stricken field by the Vice-Chancellor, Sir William Beveridge, who secured a most generous benefaction from the Rockefeller Foundation for the purchase of the site. In addition, a substantial contribution was made by the Government, which thus gained release from its putative obligation to provide for the housing of the University; and the London County Council, after coquetting with alternative sites, including Somerset House and Holland Park, offered open-handed co-operation for the Bloomsbury policy. On May 11, 1927, at the annual graduates' dinner, Lord Eustace Percy, president of the Board of Education, announced the purchase of the site. Let us remember with gratitude those who saw the vision—Gregory Foster, Haldane, Rosebery, Morant, McCormick—and congratulate those whose privilege it will be to transmute the vision into perdurable stone.

The dust of the site controversy has settled. The University is reconciled to Bloomsbury, even when it is described by the official historian of King's College as "an obscure and decaying suburb, off all the main lines of traffic and difficult of access"! But controversy follows controversy. For what purposes are these vast buildings to be used? We turn for information to the official pamphlet, not without misgiving. In addition to the administrative accommodation, there is to be a spacious and well-equipped library building, worthy of the treasures it will hold; and adjacent, but forming a part of the whole design, will be brought together a number of other University institutions. These include the Institute of Historical Research, the Courtauld Institute of Art, the School of Oriental Languages when it leaves its present building in Finsbury Circus, the School of Slavonic Studies, the Institute of Education (formerly the London Day Training College), and Birkbeck College. There will be a Great Hall, facing Russell Square, and accommodation for the Officers Training Corps and the University Union.

An ambitious programme—but the reader of NATURE will at once ask, what provision is to be made for scientific research? We have seen that the Haldane Commission in its preliminary report contemplated the possibility of scientific institutes. Before reaching the stage of the final report, other counsels prevailed. "Special research institutes",

it declared, "should not form part of the University organisation." In the opinion of the Commission, the proposal supported by the Medical Committee of the British Science Guild for the establishment of post-graduate laboratories "would be full of danger to the development of the University". In a letter to the *Times* (Nov. 1, 1913), not long after the publication of the Final Report, Dr. A. D. Waller expressed an opinion which we believe will be generally shared by readers of NATURE. "My own opinion," he wrote, "confirmed by the experience of my last 12 years of work at the University—agrees with the opinion expressed in the report of Lord Cowper's Commission to the effect that the establishment of institutions for research was the only way in which existing defects could be supplied . . . and would not in any degree affect injuriously the course of ordinary teaching or discourage the spirit of research in the university schools, but would, on the contrary, promote throughout the university and its other institutions that zeal for the advancement of knowledge which is the highest mark and aim of university training." Nor are we told in the official pamphlet whether suitable and well-equipped lecture theatres are to be provided in the new buildings, where professors could give their inaugural lectures and foreign scholars could communicate the results of their researches. The Haldane Commission expressed a definite view on this question—"We are of opinion that several, though not a large number, of commodious lecture halls should be provided in the central buildings to be first erected". A school of law, a school of music, and a school of journalism are a few of the other institutions which might stake claims on the site.

Of the architectural merits of Mr. Holden's design, we cannot claim to express an expert view. Certain questions the layman, the *homme moyen sensuel*, may be allowed to ask. First, what reasons caused the University to abandon its declared policy of holding a world-wide competition for the best design—a graceful compliment to the most generous donor for the purchase of the site—followed by a competition limited to architects of selected designs and to a small number of architects specially invited to compete? That the Court of the University should take upon itself the selection of an architect is a procedure contrary to all the traditions of the University. Secondly, ought not the members of the University, and the public generally, to insist that the building shall express its idealistic purpose—that long tradition of the search for knowledge, Abelard drawing seekers after truth to Paris, *alma mater* of our universities; Roger Bacon in his tower on the Isis; Newton on the Cam "voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone"; Michael Faraday, London's own man of science, an original member of the Senate of the University of London, who could not afford to get rich, but added untold millions to the wealth of the world; Lister, a graduate of the University, of whom it has been said that no man has done more to relieve human suffering; Ramsay, a professor

of the University, discovering argon and helium in his laboratory at University College; Jeans, a member of the present Senate, peering over the edge of the universe. . . .

We do not suggest that the architect of the new University building should attempt to recapture—in Bloomsbury—the last enchantments of the Middle Age. If he succeeds in capturing the spirit of the present age, he will deserve his niche in the Pantheon of architects. Questions of style apart, air, sunlight, and accessibility are crucial in considering the design. Is it wise, from these viewpoints, to build a single huge building, possibly the largest in London, a break-air, if the word may be coined? Science has not yet discovered any effective method of ventilating a great building with numerous wings—witness the Houses of Parliament. On this question it is possible to appeal to expert opinion. Three distinguished architects in their lay-outs for the site have provided a forecourt and abundant internal air space.

Mr. H. V. Lanchester's sketch of "the University of the Future" showed a forecourt flanked by offices and library and facing the hall and institutes with a dome and two graceful towers. Prof. A. E. Richardson, professor of architecture in the Uni-

versity, adopted a somewhat similar lay-out in a brilliant impromptu sketch, the forecourt facing the Great Hall, not crowned with a dome or tower, a feature he regarded as wasteful and unnecessary. Prof. S. D. Adshead, professor of town planning in the University, prepared a sketch showing an open space running through the site north and south, broken only by arches. He did not consider there was sufficient space for a Great Hall. "Should a great hall ever be built in the neighbourhood," he said in a paper read to the Town Planning Institute (April 29, 1927), "I think it should occupy one of the adjoining residential blocks." This view has been endorsed by Mr. Holden, who has sited the Hall on the part of the site facing Russell Square. All these architects have recognised the importance of Sir John Burnet's columned northern extension of the British Museum in relation to the University building. Mr. Holden's design presents to this frontage of the Museum the least dignified part of its anatomy, as will be seen from the photograph. Whatever else may happen, this should be rectified. We should prefer, however, that the idea of a single great building should be abandoned and an alternative design adopted treating the problem in a more free and characteristic way. T. LL. H.

News and Views

Sir Joseph Larmor, F.R.S.

SIR JOSEPH LARMOR, whose resignation of the Lucasian professorship of mathematics in the University of Cambridge is announced, succeeded Sir George Gabriel Stokes in the chair in 1903. Stokes had been elected so long ago as 1849, and one of the early acts of his successor was to edit his "Scientific Correspondence" (2 volumes, 1907). After being Senior Wrangler in 1880 and first Smith's Prizeman, Mr. Larmor (he was knighted in 1909) was elected to a fellowship in St. John's College and was appointed professor of mathematics at Galway, but in 1885 he returned to Cambridge as College and University lecturer in mathematics. "Æther and Matter" appeared in 1900, and his election as secretary of the Royal Society in 1901 (he had been a fellow since 1892) was a recognition of his eminence as a mathematical physicist. Scientific papers have continued to flow from his pen since 1881 or before, but the long-hoped-for treatise on electrodynamic theory did not materialise. The works of many younger men, however, clearly show the inspiration which they derived from his lectures. In 1929 the Cambridge University Press published two handsome volumes of "Mathematical and Physical Papers", with Sir Joseph's own comments in the form of notes and appendices; a glance at the table of contents will give an idea of his enormous range of interests. In addition, his frequent letters in NATURE and elsewhere, though as a rule not easy to understand, have always been worth serious consideration.

THOSE who were privileged to be present will not readily forget the inimitable, racy address which

Sir Joseph gave in the Arts School in Cambridge at the Clerk Maxwell Celebration in October 1931; it was quite different from the paper, "The Scientific Environment of Clerk Maxwell", published in the Commemoration Volume, and this in turn is only an extract from a more extended investigation into the historical origins of thermodynamics and the kinetic theory which, it is hoped, will soon be published. One of the duties of the Lucasian professor, as of the other professors of mathematics in Cambridge, is the reading of the essays submitted year by year for the Smith's Prizes; and thus Sir Joseph has kept constantly in touch with the best of the younger Cambridge mathematicians. Perhaps he has occasionally been a little out of sympathy with some of the recent developments in pure mathematics, but he has always been ready with advice and encouragement; in particular, the succession of Isaac Newton Students have reason to bless his name. From 1911 until 1922, Sir Joseph sat as member of Parliament for the University of Cambridge, and other administrative duties, in the University and elsewhere, have been thrust upon him and conscientiously discharged. A congenial office has been his chairmanship, in the absence of the Vice-Chancellor, of the Observatory Syndicate and the Solar Physics Committee in Cambridge; he always seems thoroughly to enjoy presiding over the body of distinguished men of science who assemble once a year to lunch with the professor of astrophysics and discuss the affairs of the Solar Physics Observatory. It is to be hoped that Sir Joseph's retirement from his professorship will not mean his leaving Cambridge, for his College and the University can still profit by his services.