THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER: A HISTORY

B. W. Clapp

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by
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Frontispiece: Reed Hall

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FOREWORD

BY THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

'There has been a crisis of some sort almost every year I have been here and we have emerged safely from them all so far' (1900)—A. W. Clayden, Principal, University College of the South West. (see page 33).

When, in this momentous year for all British universities, I came across the above remark from Principal Clayden, I looked across my lawn to the end of the garden where I see the roofs of the practice rooms of the Department of Music. The house is named 'Clayden'. I shall look towards it with even greater affection in the future. Here, from 1900, is a timely reminder that universities are likely to outlive the aberrations of their Governments, even today; though 'slings and arrows' are too often in the air, wise institutions learn to live with them.

Brian Clapp's *History* is not only timely but fills a very definite gap in our records as I can testify from personal experience. When I was appointed Vice-Chancellor, I naturally wished to read the early history of the Albert Memorial College and the University. It did not prove to be easy. Materials were often sketchy and the different authors varied in their aims and coverage of events. Behind the bare outline one sensed there was probably a mirror-like reflection of the nineteenth century's attitude to education; the zeal and energy of a few far-sighted citizens trying to fire the indifference of the majority. Mr Clapp has certainly given life to this early period of Art School and University College and I am immensely grateful to him for the scholarly acumen with which he has revealed so much about our beginnings.

We now have a fascinating educational record that adds another piece to the national jigsaw of nineteenth and early-twentieth century development, but for those of us with a particular interest in this University, it throws light both on our past and on our present. As with other universities that developed from university colleges, our past is an anchor point. The new university did not feel that it had to 'strive officiously' to create a unique image for itself, for as a college it had already existed for many years and had traditions which it followed and respected. Its primary aim was not to make an individual statement

about higher education but to ensure that standards—that sacred word in universities—were maintained. Thus development was within the mould, not outside it. It is, of course, both the strength and the weakness of this kind of university. The detached commentator observes that, though the emerging university follows the tradition of British universities, its individuality is expressed in a combination of many features, few of which are necessarily unique to Exeter, but which together make up a distinctive contribution with its own unmistakable personality. Perhaps in a long-distance race such as creating a university, one lesson is not to set off too quickly—time gives strength.

Again, the University that did evolve after a century of Art School and University College was firmly established in its region with a tradition of support from local residents. This has continued, notably in the work of the Council of the University where lay members have been outstanding in their services. Inevitably the main burden has fallen on our Officers, particularly in the 1970s on the Pro-Chancellor, Mr Kenneth Rowe, and on the Treasurer, the late Mr R. W. Turner, who held office from 1955 to 1979. But so many others have chaired committees and given generously of their time and wisdom that I welcome this opportunity of recording my appreciation of their support and of saying how important it is to the University that it should sustain these ties with its region. Universities are international institutions and this was only too evident when Exeter was host to the Commonwealth Executive Heads Conference in 1973. Some 300 Vice-Chancellors from universities in New Zealand and Australia, Pakistan and India, Africa and Canada enjoyed their residence on our site. The local flavour of the University, particularly as it emerges in the services of our support staff who are local residents, is always appreciated by our visitors, however far they may have travelled.

Town and Gown will always have a lively relationship. They represent different interests and have different outlooks upon life, but both can contribute to each other's well-being. At a time when social life is changing fast, which is one way of saying the future will be different from the present, it is essential for a university to maintain its links with its community. This is especially so for this University, where our geographical position almost requires it of us; our nearest university is eighty miles to the north and our nearest polytechnic is Plymouth, over forty miles to the South West. As national institutions make an increasing contribution to their regions, as I believe is probable, our established local connections will become of greater significance and,

pertinently enough for Exeter, will fulfil many of the aspirations of our founding fathers.

Scanning the whole history of the College and University, there is one delightful anomaly on which I like to reflect. The little College on its one acre site in the middle of the City of Exeter was the inspiration of a few eminent Victorians, trying to rouse the enthusiasm and sense of responsibility of their kinsfolk. Often they dragged along with them some reluctant city fathers and always they were short of money and resources. But out of their efforts emerged the gift of the Streatham estate to provide Exeter with one of the outstanding sites of any university in Britain. Its significance cannot be exaggerated. It transformed both the scale and the amenities, giving the University grounds that are characteristic of the abundant arboreal beauty of Devon and doing so without isolating it on a remote hillside. There was even space enough to meet the unforeseen scale of expansion in the post-1945 period on a site where the fringes still touched the City at several points.

It is always a pleasure to observe the sensitivity and professional skill with which the site has been developed, notably by its first architect, Vincent Harris, and then, to a radically modified plan, by Lord Holford. It is not the distinction of any one building but the manner in which they harmonize with their natural surroundings that is such a feature of our estate. The Barbara Hepworth sculpture, *Mother and Child*, is one of her outstanding works but it gains immeasurably from its setting, where it rests beside our buildings though surrounded by undulating lawn and mature trees. It is my dream that one day, I suppose in a distant future, someone standing in the natural architectural beauty of these grounds and looking across the valley to the twin towers of the Cathedral will appreciate that what is now required is an act of imagination of the same order as that which inspired the founders of the Cathedral. I like to think that in the uniqueness of our estate there will arise one architectural jewel, one building of pure poetry, not large in size but rare in quality, that will be an inspiration to all who work here, to all who live in the region, and especially to the artists and craftsmen, the musicians and writers who work in the South West. The School of Art of 1855 — with its much wider connotations than its title would imply today — will then have come home.

I was reminded recently that it would be in keeping with an early tradition of the University if certain reports were dated 26 December. This Foreword may have been started, but was certainly not completed on that day — but so be it.

26 December 1981 *HARRY KAY*

PREFACE

The outlines of the origins and history of the University of Exeter are well known. A detailed account, except for the important period 1920–1924, is for the first time attempted here. It must always be a delicate task to trace the history of a living institution especially when the historian is himself a member of it. He has to temper mercy with candour and if possible to be inoffensively truthful. It is for the reader to judge whether in the present case the author has succeeded in preserving a just balance between potentially competing loyalties.

If he has failed to do this he has only himself to blame. Over the years a good many colleagues have contributed in conversation, sometimes unwittingly, to the store of anecdotes and impressions on which the work is partly based. Preliminary drafts of the text have been widely read, corrected, and subjected to good-tempered but sometimes trenchant criticism. In particular the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Harry Kay, and successive chairmen of Publications Committee, Mr Malcolm Shaw and Professor Ivan Roots, have shrewdly and firmly pointed out many possible improvements. If not all these suggestions have found their way into the final version the fault lies at the door of an obstinate author. For the remaining errors, omissions or lapses of taste he alone is responsible.

Thanks are due to Council and Senate, who kindly granted the author a year's study leave to enable him to complete the manuscript. The Vice-Chancellor, amidst a press of more urgent business, readily agreed to write a foreword. The Deputy Registrar, Mr R. A. Erskine, has discussed the work with the author on several occasions and has read a preliminary draft. His services do not end there. But for him many of the early records of the University might have been lost or destroyed. He has not only arranged for their preservation, but has acted as an informal, but far from amateurish, archivist. Anyone who uses the University's now

copious records owes him a substantial debt of gratitude. Mrs B. V. Mennell prepared the text for the printer and saw it through the press with her customary efficiency and enthusiasm. Mr D. F. Batty put his wide knowledge of the university's photographic archives at the author's disposal. Mr F. J. Saunders took some splendid photographs specially for the book and artfully improved some old ones to make them good enough for publication. Mr R. E. J. Fry drew the maps. Several secretaries played a part in deciphering a perplexing manuscript. In particular, Miss J. C. Peters produced a clean copy fit for a printer's eyes. Archivists and librarians from outside as well as inside the University of Exeter have given willing assistance: Mrs M. Rowe and the staff of Devon Record Office; Mrs D. Owen, archivist to the University of Cambridge, and her staff; the staff of the Public Records Office, Kew. The author is grateful to all these colleagues, academic, administrative, technical and secretarial, for their help, forbearance and encouragement.

B. W. Clapp

January 1982 Exeter

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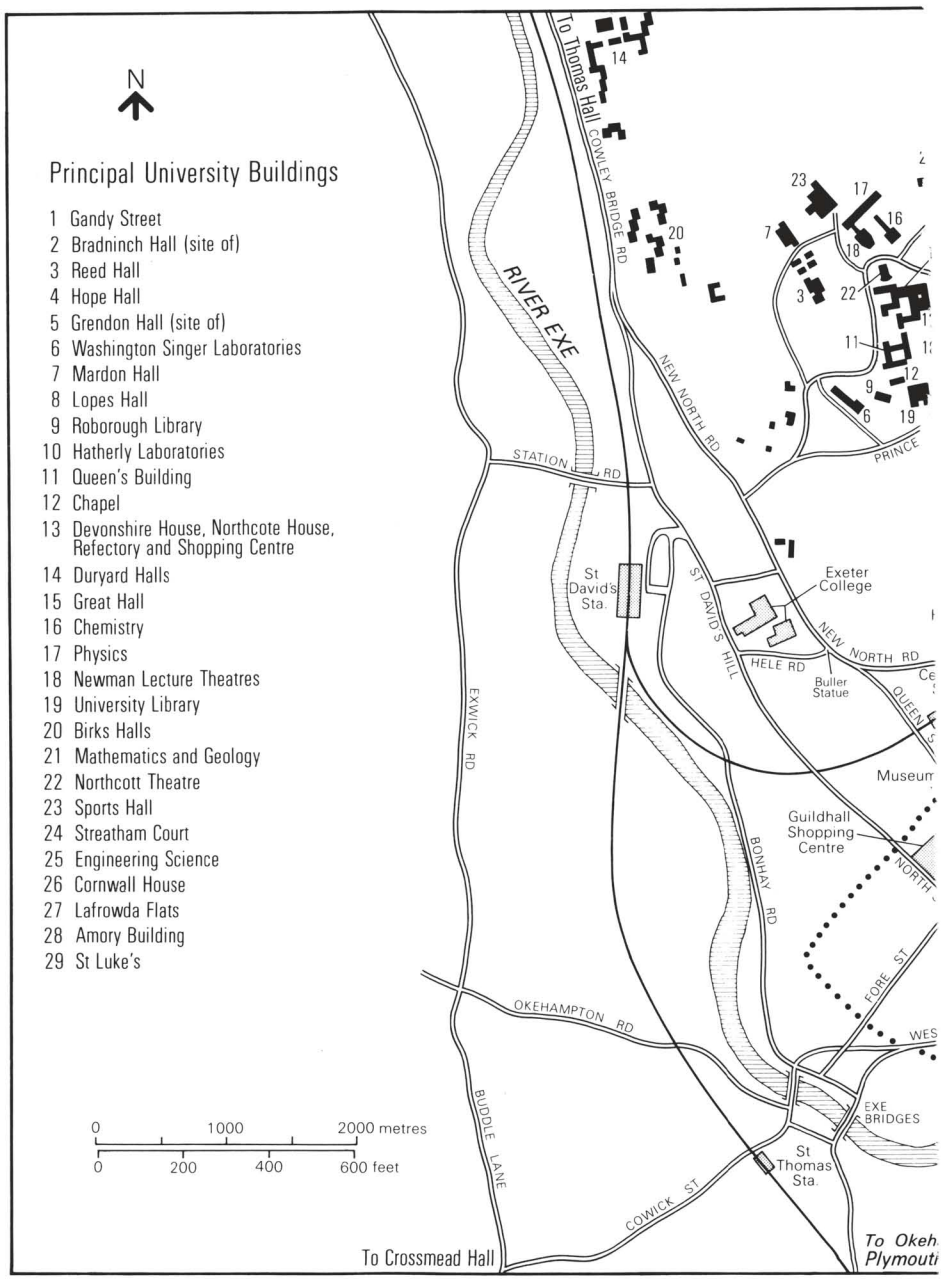
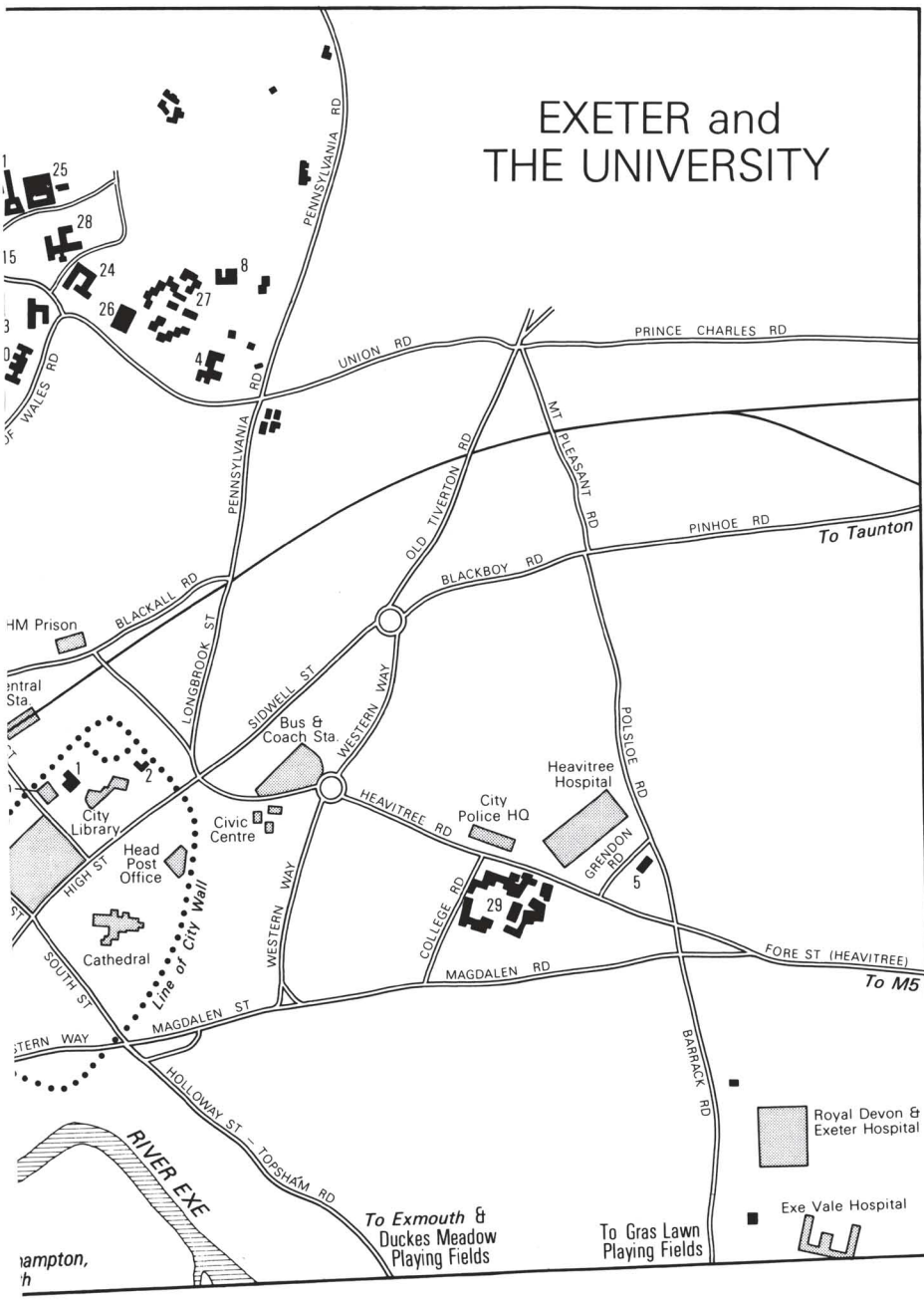

N
Principal University Buildings
1 Gandy Street
2 Bradninch Hall (site of)
3 Reed Hall
4 Hope Hall
5 Grendon Hall (site of)
6 Washington Singer Laboratories
7 Mardon Hall
8 Lopes Hall
9 Roborough Library
10 Hatherly Laboratories
11 Queen's Building
12 Chapel
13 Devonshire House, Northcote House, Refectory and Shopping Centre
14 Duryard Halls
15 Great Hall
16 Chemistry
17 Physics
18 Newman Lecture Theatres
19 University Library
20 Birks Halls
21 Mathematics and Geology
22 Northcott Theatre
23 Sports Hall
24 Streatham Court
25 Engineering Science
26 Cornwall House
27 Lafrowda Flats
28 Amory Building
29 St Luke's
0 1000 2000 metres
0 200 400 600 feet
To Thomas Hall
COWLEY BRIDGE RD
RIVER EXE
NEW NORTH RD
STATION RD
PRINCE
St David's Sta.
ST DAVID'S HILL
Exeter College
NEW NORTH RD
HELE RD
Buller Statue
EXWICK RD
Museum
Guildhall Shopping Centre
BONHAY RD
FORE ST
OKEHAMPTON RD
EXE BRIDGES
St Thomas Sta.
BUDDLE LANE
COWICK ST
To Crossmead Hall
To Okeh
Plymouth


EXETER and
THE UNIVERSITY
PENNSYLVANIA RD
UNION RD
PRINCE CHARLES RD
MT PLEASANT RD
OLD TIVERTON RD
PINHOE RD
To Taunton
BLACKBOY RD
BLACKALL RD
HM Prison
LONGBROOK ST
SIDWELL ST
WESTERN WAY
Bus &
Coach Sta.
POLSLOE RD
Heavitree
Hospital
City
Police HQ
HEAVITREE RD
GRENDON RD
City
Library
Civic
Centre
Head
Post
Office
HIGH ST
Cathedral
Line of City Wall
SOUTH ST
COLLEGE RD
MAGDALEN RD
FORE ST (HEAVITREE)
To M5
MAGDALEN ST
HOLLOWAY ST – TOPSHAM RD
BARRACK RD
RIVER EXE
To Exmouth &
Duckes Meadow
Playing Fields
To Gras Lawn
Playing Fields
Royal Devon &
Exeter Hospital
Exe Vale Hospital

PART I

FROM ART SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

I

ART, SCIENCE AND THE ALBERT MEMORIAL

The known history of higher education in Exeter begins with the enthronement of the first Bishop of Exeter in 1050. Bishop Leofric was a lover of books and at his death in 1072 bequeathed 66 manuscripts or books to the cathedral chapter as a library for the use of his successors. Small as the number may sound to an age accustomed to the mass-production of books, it represented in Leofric's day a substantial benefaction. His good example inspired others to add to the library and by the early fourteenth century the Cathedral Library contained some 300 volumes. Like many other book collectors Leofric knew that books tend to wander from their proper home, and took what precautions he could. In his copy of the Latin poet Prudentius, for example, he wrote 'Leofric . . . gives this book to his cathedral church, for the relief of his soul and the use of his successors. If however anyone shall take it away from thence, let him lie under perpetual malediction.' This particular book has, in fact, long been in the Bodleian Library, Oxford and many other medieval books from Exeter have similarly migrated[1] in bland disregard of Leofric's curse. Despite the periodic loss of books the Cathedral Library continued to exist and to contribute to the education of the clergy of the diocese. For the twelfth century there remains only scattered and tantalising evidence of educational effort in Exeter. It is probable that the Cathedral had a theological school attached to it by 1160, and possibly much earlier, and at a lower level there is evidence of a song school (a first school for clerks and choristers) by 1175, and of a grammar school, probably by 1150 and definitely by 1225. In 1283 it was laid down that the Chancellor of the Cathedral should lecture in theology, and this rule was observed for the next half century and in all

likelihood until the Reformation. From the fourteenth century there is continuous evidence for schooling in Exeter at various levels of attainment.[2] But the early promise of university education hinted at in the school of theology did not materialise. Though a cathedral city and the seat of county government, frequented by clergy and lawyers, Exeter remained until the fifteenth century a small town, apparently too remote to challenge the claims of equally small but more central places of learning like Oxford and Cambridge. The opportunity had passed. When Oliver Cromwell founded a third English university in 1657, he established it at Durham, not Exeter.*

In early modern times Exeter became a prosperous manufacturing town and port. Its population grew to about 12,000 in 1660[3] and to 17,000 by 1801. It was well-endowed with grammar schools and like all towns of any size attracted enterprising, sometimes desperate, men who set up private schools as a modest way to make a living. Other indications of cultural interests in the population of Exeter were a theatre and from 1807 a Public Select Library. This was a subscription and circulating library which claimed to have the most extensive and valuable collection of books in the West of England. For the 'very moderate charges' of 2s. 6d. or 5s. (12½p or 25p) a year, subscribers gained access to this library, which came to number some 7,000 books.[4] Further evidence of organised intellectual activity in Exeter is furnished by the establishment in 1813 of the Devon and Exeter Institution, whose objects were the promotion of science literature and the arts. The Institution soon came to possess more and, indeed, more valuable books than the Public Select Library. Its promoters hoped to found a museum as well as a library and did make a start, but were frustrated by lack of space. Eventually the Institution settled down as a select reading room and lending library for the clergy, gentry and professional classes of Devon and Exeter. Richard Ford, the writer of a celebrated *Handbook of Spain*, has been perhaps its most famous member. If it never had the scientific distinction of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester or of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, it did at least testify to intellectual awareness among the upper classes in and near Exeter.[5] The Exeter Literary Society, founded a generation later in 1842, did with more modest resources for the citizens of Exeter what the Institution did for the clergy and gentry: it provided a library for its members and a forum

*Cromwell's foundation was short-lived. It died with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

for the discussion of a wide variety of topics from literature to natural history.

Similar institutions—calling themselves natural history societies, mechanics institutes, literary and philosophical societies, the Athenaeum —were springing up in the early nineteenth century in all towns with any pretension to wealth or culture. Parliament gave one aspect of the movement its blessing in the Free Libraries Act of 1850. This unassuming measure allowed town councils to spend the proceeds of a halfpenny rate on the purchase or rent of land and buildings for library purposes. The legislators appeared to take it for granted that private benefactors would give the books, maps and specimens of art and science with which to fill the libraries. A further act of 1855 raised the limit of expenditure to a penny rate.[6] These Acts of Parliament like the people of the time did not distinguish between library, museum and art gallery; all might co-exist in the one building, as indeed they did and still do in the British Museum. In similar fashion they did not distinguish too nicely in science between theory and technology, or in art between beauty and utility: the same school might provide a course in fine arts as well as in industrial design. Exeter's Albert Memorial Museum and its schools of art and science were in this respect typical of their age.

Government first provided a grant in aid of schools of design (or schools of art as they came to be called) in 1837. The first school opened in Somerset House in that year and others soon followed in the major industrial towns.[7] The young Stafford Northcote, Devon landowner, civil servant, Conservative Member of Parliament and ultimately Chancellor of the Exchequer, had a hand in the administration of the government's grant to schools of design. In 1850 in an address to Exeter Literary Society he urged the necessity for bodies like the Society to be connected with a museum, an art gallery, with schools of art, with drawing classes and music classes and with a really good library.

> We must seriously apply ourselves to remedy the defect which we have noticed in English education, to cultivate the study of the fine arts not as an end in itself, but as an important auxiliary to other branches of learning and never to rest until we have wiped away the reproach which will most justly attach to us if with our materials and our advantages we come behind the other countries of the world, or any country whatsoever, in the article of National Taste.[8]

The first Free Libraries Act had just been passed, and a public meeting in Exeter by a large majority endorsed a proposal that Exeter should adopt

the act. When opponents of the scheme demanded a poll of the ratepayers the proposal was rejected overwhelmingly—only one-seventh of the votes cast being in favour of a public library. The ratepayers feared for their pockets more than they feared the devils of drink, socialism and pauperism, which (they were assured) a library would help to exorcise.[9]

For the time being the public library movement in Exeter was dead, but there was encouragement for a school of art. The success of the Great Exhibition of 1851 drew renewed attention to the importance of industrial design and in 1852 a Department of Science and Art was set up in the Board of Trade to promote good design and scientific education, by grant, inspection and a system of examinations. In 1857 the Department of Science and Art was transferred to the care of the Committee of Education of the Privy Council and thence in 1900 to the Board of Education, now known as the Department of Education and Science. The decision to establish a school of art in Exeter was taken in 1854. Sir Stafford Northcote was among the founders and became first President of the School. Unlike a public library a school of art made no call on the ratepayers. It relied on subscriptions from patrons and sympathisers, on the fees paid by pupils and on whatever grant it could earn from the Department of Science and Art. Grants depended on satisfactory attendance by pupils and on examination successes. The School of Art, distant ancestor of the University of Exeter, opened its doors on New Year's Day 1855. It had premises over the Lower Market in Milk Street. Both day and evening tuition was offered, organised in six classes lettered from A to F. The subjects taught ranged from freehand drawing, and practical geometry and perspective, to building construction and machine-drawing. The classes for ladies, mostly the young daughters of well-to-do families living in and around Exeter, were held in the daytime. Substantial fees of a guinea or a guinea and a half were charged since government grants were made only when tuition was afforded to the 'industrial classes'. The latter could attend only in the evening after working hours, and paid 2s a month for tuition in class C, which was the recognised artisans' class.* Class D for students, E for beginners and F for teachers completed the range of classes offered.[10]

The artisans' class attracted young men from a wide range of

*2s. (or 10p) a month was a substantial sum c. 1860. An equivalent fee in 1980 would perhaps amount to £6 a month for a skilled worker.

occupations. The building and furniture trades were particularly well represented with carpenters, masons, cabinet-makers and the occasional architect figuring among the members. Patternmakers, engineers and smiths represented the metal-working trades. Other occupations included clerk, letter-carrier (postman), engraver, photographer and trunk maker. The largest single group of members was none of these but schoolboys and other lads under 15 years old. One little boy of nine described himself as a grocer. In every surviving list of occupations, boys under 15 account for over 40 per cent of the total number, chiefly schoolchildren. Most of the others were aged under 20 and no artisan over the age of 40 was either ambitious or prosperous enough to enrol in the School of Art. A somewhat different clientèle attended the students' class (D), which presumably offered more advanced tuition. From the fragmentary information that survives it seems that the class was well suited to architects and their articled pupils, and to teachers. There were fewer young boys under 15, a sprinkling of men in their twenties and thirties; well over half the class were aged 15 to 19.[11]

The School of Art quickly established itself as a flourishing institution. It had adequate financial support from local well-wishers, some of whom made once-for-all donations while others promised a regular subscription. The expenses were moderate, consisting of rent, fuel and light and the purchase of some equipment. The headmaster* received no fixed salary but rather like a Scottish professor took half the fees paid by his students together with the grant earned from the Department of Science and Art. At its most prosperous in the 1870s the school afforded the headmaster, J. B. Birkmyer, a handsome income of some £350 a year with fluctuations that might take it as high as £400 or as low as £320.[12] Numbers attending the classes naturally varied somewhat from week to week, but none of the classes ever suffered the fate not uncommon among evening classes today of cancellation for lack of support. The most popular of the classes was that for artisans with up to 80 enrolments. In all, the school in an average year had about 250 pupils, most of whom would attend twice a week, usually in the evening. In addition the School of Art offered teaching in local schools and in the Diocesan Training College, already better known as Saint Luke's. Through these connections it greatly increased its range of influence, since several hundred pupils a year received tuition in

*The first headmaster was Montague Wigzell. He was succeeded in 1861 by J. B. Birkmyer.

freehand-drawing and geometry from the headmaster and his assistants.*

The success of the art school encouraged Sir Stafford Northcote and his associates to found a parallel school of science. A meeting held in the rooms of the Literary Society at the Athenaeum in Bedford Circus on 17 April 1863 decided on this step. It was a slightly speculative decision since at the time there was not one certificated teacher of science in Devon, and the Department of Science and Art would give grants only when classes were conducted by qualified teachers. The difficulty was soon overcome when W. S. M. D'Urban, later the first curator of the Albert Memorial Museum, was awarded his first-grade teacher's certificate in vegetable physiology. William Sheppard of London University was recruited to teach elementary mathematics, and F. P. Perkins, later also librarian at the Albert Memorial, began his long career in the School of Science, teaching inorganic chemistry, geology, and animal physiology.[13] Science, unlike art, had no great reputation as an accomplishment for young ladies. The Science School therefore lacked the day classes and the useful income that accrued to the School of Art from the daughters of the wealthier inhabitants of Exeter. Nor was it as popular among the young workmen of Exeter as some of the more practical tuition offered in the School of Art. After five years working, the Science School could make no stronger boast than that

> Upwards of 100 individuals have received more or less instruction in the various classes since their formation and between 30 and 40 have obtained Queen's and other prizes [for passing examinations in elementary science]. When the classes meet in the Albert Memorial Building there is every reason to hope that there will be a large accession of pupils.[14]

Sir Stafford Northcote in his address to the Literary Society in 1850 had sketched a design for a cultural centre in Exeter that would include a museum, art gallery, library and school of art.† The rebuff administered by the ratepayers to the project for a library scotched any hope of a major public building to house these institutions for a considerable time to come. But at the end of 1861 Sir Stafford returned to the 'threadbare theme' (his own words) at the annual meeting of the School of Art. 'Nothing' he argued, 'could be more advantageous to a school of art than a museum in which there would naturally be a picture gallery and a

*In 1864 the following schools took part in the scheme: St John's Hospital; Hele's; National; Central; Mint Wesleyan; Episcopal Charity.

†Sir Stafford did not mention a school of science in 1850 because such institutions had not yet appeared in the provinces. It was the Great Exhibition and the establishment of the Department of Science and Art in 1852 that first gave an impetus to schools of science.