Christ’s College was first established as ‘God’s-house’ in 1437 by William Byngham, a London parish priest, for training grammar school masters. Shortly after receiving its Royal Licence from Henry VI in 1446, God’s-house was forced to move from its original site, as this was needed for the King’s new project (what was to become King’s College). God’s-house moved to its present site in 1448 where it was re-founded as Christ’s College in 1505 by Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.

Lady Margaret has been honoured ever since as the Foundress.
FIRST COURT

This is the oldest part of the College, dating from the 15th century. It nonetheless forms the heart of the College activities, containing the Chapel, Master’s Lodge, Dining Hall, Buttery and Library. The range of buildings between the Gatehouse and the Chapel formed part of God’s-house, and was built between 1448 and 1452. The other ranges were laid out in the early 16th century in the time of Lady Margaret Beaufort. The buildings in First Court were refaced with stone in the 18th century.

The oak doors in the Gatehouse are original, from the early 16th century. The coat of arms and heraldic badges above the gate are those of the Foundress. The portcullis was a badge of the Beaufort family, the red rose symbolised the house of Lancaster from which the Beauforts descended. The daisies (‘marguerites’ in heraldic parlance) allude to the Foundress’s name. The statue of Lady Margaret in the niche was added in 1888.

The elaborate oriel window over the door to the Master’s Lodge is from the time of Lady Margaret Beaufort. It shows the arms, badges and motto (‘Souvent Me Souvient’ – ‘I often remember’) of the Foundress. The wisteria vine which covers the front of the Lodge is at least 100 years old.

The Chapel dates back to the foundation of God’s-house in the middle of the 15th Century, but was rebuilt under Lady Margaret Beaufort and consecrated in 1510. The three panes of stained glass set in the windows between the organ and the screen are from the original chapel of God’s-house (1448-52), making them some of the oldest stained glass in Cambridge. The window on the other side of the organ is slightly later, dating to the rebuilding of the Chapel in 1510. Other monuments in the Chapel from the time of Lady Margaret include the fine brass lectern and a memorial brass on the floor of the ante-chapel which shows one of the Foundress’s ‘gentelwomen’ and her husband. The portrait of the Foundress above the arch is a late copy, dating to the early 18th century. The twin tombs of Sir John Baines and Sir Thomas Finch, fellows of the College and lifelong friends, were erected in 1681-82. The canopy above the tombs, together with the other panelling in the Chapel, was installed in 1702. The outside staircase-tower and cupola were added between 1717 and 1722. The organ, built by ‘Father’ Smith in 1705, was restored by Bishop & Sons in 1982-83. The projecting window on the south side (installed in 1899 but occupying the site of an earlier window) looks out from the oratory in the Master’s Lodge. Finally, the East Window, showing Christ above a view of the College, was commissioned in 1912 as a memorial to John Peile, 26th Master of the College. The window depicts key figures in the history of the College: on the left, Lady Margaret Beaufort and Bishop John Fisher, her confessor and adviser; on the right, King Henry VI.

DARWIN PORTICO

Features an imposing bronze bust of Charles Darwin, which was donated by the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and some informative panels outlining some principal aspects of Darwin’s life.

OLD LIBRARY

Holds memorabilia associated with Charles Darwin, including personal letters to and from his cousin and life-long friend William Darwin Fox and a remarkable model of HMS Beagle. (Visits: by special arrangement)

DARWIN GARDEN

The iconic image of Charles Darwin is of him in old age after a long illness had taken its toll. This is understandable as Darwin became sufficiently famous for portraits to be required only later in life.

Yet the Darwin that Christ’s College knew was happy, youthful and exuberant, judged by all known reports. A specially commissioned bronze of Charles Darwin as a student aged 22 forms the centrepiece of a memorial garden. The sculptor who created this likeness (Anthony Smith) is a graduate in Natural Sciences (Zoology) at Christ’s College; the connection is as pleasing for the College as it is for Anthony.

The plants in this garden were chosen to echo the countries Darwin visited during his epic voyage aboard HMS Beagle (1831-1836).
The Hall, first constructed in the early 16th century, was rebuilt in 1875-1879, retaining the original roof. The walls were raised in height and the oriel window added (with stained glass panels depicting luminaries of the history of the College). The Hall contains a 16th century portrait of the Foundress, a bust of John Milton (who was a Christ's from 1625 to 1632) and portraits of other College alumni, including Sir Walter Mildmay (founder of Emmanuel College), Jan Smuts (twice Prime Minister of South Africa) and Charles Darwin.

Charles Darwin occupied rooms in First Court, G4, when he came up to the College in 1828. The rooms had previously been occupied by another eminent Christ’s scholar, William Paley, whose *Evidences of Christianity* (1794) remained set reading in Cambridge until the twentieth century.

NEW COURT

The strikingly modern concrete building comprising staircases 1-3 was designed by Sir Denys Lasdun (former president of the Royal Institute of British Architects) and dates from 1969-70. The concept is an ocean liner, with the two towers representing funnels and the windows stepping down to indicate the different deck levels. A refurbishment and modernisation of the building was undertaken between 2006 and 2008 and it now houses the Yusuf Hamied Centre, including the newly refurbished Theatre, as well as an exercise gym and squash court.

SECOND COURT

On either side of the archway leading from First Court there are carved and painted heraldic beasts associated with the Foundress and her son, Henry VII. The two yales (mythical beasts akin to antelopes) on the First Court side were the supporters of the Beaufort coat of arms. On the Second Court side, the red dragon (referring to the Welsh ancestry of the House of Tudor) and the greyhound were the supporters of the Royal Arms in the reign of Henry VII.

The boom in student numbers in the seventeenth century required new accommodation, beyond the original College. The result was the beautiful ‘Fellows’ Building, constructed 1640-1644 and which gives access to the Fellows’ Garden, perhaps the finest college garden in Cambridge. The east range of buildings was built between 1823 and 1867, and faces the wall of the Master’s Garden.

THIRD COURT

The three buildings which form this court date from the 19th and 20th centuries. The Stevenson Buildings (staircases S-V) was erected in 1888-89 with the addition of the end block (staircase R) in 1905 to mark the Quatercentenary of the College’s re-founder. The cupola was added in 1953. The two buildings of yellow Ketton stone were constructed in 1950 and 1953. The earlier of the two, the Blyth Building, was renamed in 2014 after Professor Stephen Blyth, who matriculated at Christ’s in 1985 and is a Lady Margaret Beaufort fellow of the College. The facing block (staircase Y) is called the Memorial Building, in commemoration of those members of the College who lost their lives in the Second World War.

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OTHER COLLEGE BUILDINGS

Behind New Court, facing onto King Street, lies the newest of the College buildings, Staircase 4, completed in 1994. The gatehouse echoes that in First Court, with carved stone panels on the street side depicting the heraldic badges of Lady Margaret Beaufort and Henry VII. The inscription above the gate on the College side is the Foundress’s signature, taken from the College Statutes of 1506. A further allusion to Lady Margaret is the large, wrought iron daisy (‘marguerite’) to the right of the gate on the College side.

The buildings on Hobson Street (staircases P, Q and X) were added to the College’s property in 1882. The old County Hall, built in 1913, was purchased by the College and refurbished (as staircase Z) in 1985-86. It is named the Todd Building in honour of Lord Todd, 32nd Master of the College and Nobel Prize winner. The auditorium at the top of the building is named in honour of another former Mater, Sir John Plumb. Plaques on the exterior of the building depict the portcullis, red rose and daisies of the Foundress.
FELLOWS’ GARDEN

The site of the garden was purchased by Christ’s in 1554; the present layout was established around 1825. One of the highlights of the garden is ‘Milton’s Mulberry Tree’. This is the only survivor of a group of silk industry trees (mulberry leaves form the main diet of silkworms). It still produces a yearly crop of fruit, as does the neighbouring medlar tree, a favourite of Old English gardens. The bathing pool and summerhouse were first recorded in 1763. The pool, originally fed with fresh water from Hobson’s Conduit, is probably the oldest private bathing pool in the country. The busts along the north side of the pool commemorate College alumni: the blind professor of Mathematics, Nicholas Sanderson; John Milton, and Ralph Cudworth, philosopher and 14th Master of the College. A memorial urn on the east side of the pool contains the ashes of the author CP Snow, a fellow of the College from 1930 to 1950.

LADY MARGARET BEAUFORT

Great granddaughter of John of Gaunt, educationalist, scholar and philanthropist, Margaret Beaufort, was the richest woman in English Medieval history and used her wealth to promote education and religion. For a time she was considered heir to the throne by the unfortunate Henry VI and, even when this threat passed, her son Henry Tudor (her only child from the first of three marriages) was seen as the only alternative to the Yorkist King Richard III. After the Tudor victory in 1485, Margaret assumed the title of the King’s Mother and set about supporting and financing a variety of educational, charitable and religious projects. Through her confessor, St. John Fisher, she was drawn into the world of Cambridge University. In 1505 she re-founded Gods-house as Christ’s College, fulfilling the promise of her brother-in-law Henry VI.