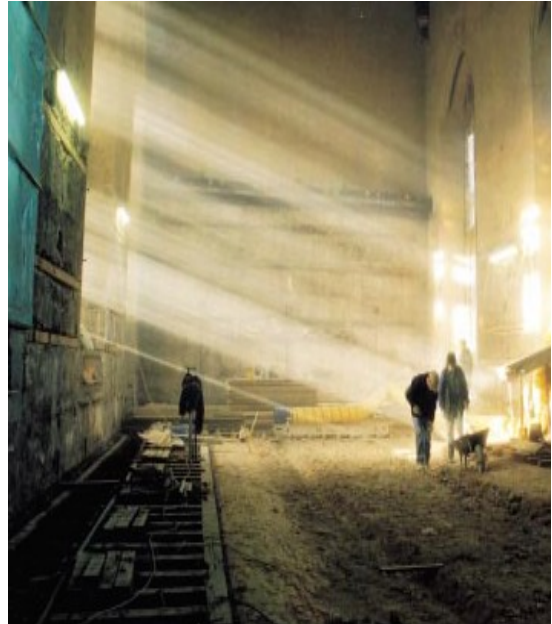


Planning Ahead: The Oak Beams of New College, Oxford

A story originally attributed to Gregory Bateson



Recently restored New College Hall



Restoration under progress

I (Gregory Bateson) owe this story to a man who was I think a New College student and was head of the department of Medicine at the University of Hawaii, where he told it to me.

New College, Oxford, is of rather late foundation, hence the name. It was probably founded around the late 16th century. It has, like other colleges, a great dining hall with big oak beams across the top, yet? These might be eighteen inches square, twenty feet long.

Some five or ten years ago, so I am told, some busy entomologist went up into the roof of the dining hall with a penknife and poked at the beams and found that they were full of beetles. This was reported to the College Council, who met in some dismay, because where would they get beams of that caliber nowadays?

One of the Junior Fellows stuck his neck out and suggested that there might be on College lands an oak. These colleges are endowed with pieces of land scattered across the country. So they called in the College Forrester, who of course had not been near the college itself for some years, and asked him about oaks.

And he pulled his forelock and said, "Well sirs, we was wonderin' when you'd be askin'." Upon further inquiry it was discovered that when the College was founded, a grove of oaks had been planted to replace the beams in the dining hall when they became beetly, because oak beams always become beetly in the end. This plan had been passed down from one Forrester to the next for four hundred years. "You don't cut them oaks. Them's for the College Hall."

Note: We hate to take some of the gloss off of a good story, but, as the above photos show, the interior of the Hall was recently rebuilt. There is no College Forrester and the beetle infested beams were actually replaced in the mid 1800's by 150 yr old oaks (planted specifically for that purpose) and are apparently still beetle free.

However, it's still a good story and illustrates the need to think long term if you're planning for sustainable outcomes.