

The events of 3 June 1846

On 3 June 1846, the day started with an excellent breakfast. The great and the good of the Free Church gathered at 8.45am in the Saloon of Gibb's Royal Hotel, 53 Princes Street. Tickets had gone on sale the previous evening, in the hotel bar, priced at 2s 6d (about £15 in today's money). On prominent display at the breakfast was a large water-colour painting of William Playfair's design for 'The New College' of the Free Church on The Mound. Many of those present had donated generously to fund the project, and taking the chair at this special breakfast was the visionary who drove the project, the Reverend Dr Thomas Chalmers.

53 Princes Street is still a hotel – nowadays known as the Mount Royal Hotel. As in its Victorian heyday the hotel starts on the first floor above shops: today it sits above Marks and Spencer's. The old building was demolished and rebuilt in the 1960s, but pride of place in the Mount Royal still goes to the dining room on the first floor, with its picture windows overlooking Princes Street and the Old Town. Chalmers, and those with him at breakfast, started the day with a grand view from Princes Street of where 'the New College' was to be built.

After breakfast the assembled company set off in procession to the top of the Mound. A high wooden barrier surrounded the building site. About a thousand people crammed inside, and more looked down from outside, occupying every vantage point. Where New College stands now, a great pit for the foundations had been dug, right down to the bare rock of the Castle ridge. Rough platforms of scaffolding and planks had been erected for people to stand on.

The Reverend Dr Robert Gordon opened the ceremony with a prayer of dedication: Gordon was minister of the Free High Kirk that was to be built adjoining New College (this is the church building converted in the 1930s into New College Library).

Then Thomas Chalmers climbed down into the excavations and laid the foundation stone. Underneath the stone a time capsule had already been

placed – a glass jar, containing documents about the Disruption and the foundation of the Free Church, newspapers from 3 June 1846, Free Church journals, coins of the realm, and a special silver commemorative plate. Alas, we don't know the spot where the foundation stone and time capsule are located. But we *do* have a relic from that day: in the New College Library strong-room is a glass container with a broken neck and chipped base labelled 'JAR BROKEN BY DR CHALMERS WHEN LAYING NEW COLLEGE FOUNDATION STONE'.¹ So when the time capsule was discretely re-housed in a new glass jar the next day, the damaged original was kept.

At the close of the ceremony, the crowd of a thousand plus joined together to sing Psalm 100, 'All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice'.

But before that, Thomas Chalmers spoke to all present about his vision for theological education at the New College.

And at this point I'm going to hand over to Professor Stewart Jay Brown, author of the definitive biography of Chalmers: Professor Brown.

Rev Professor Susan Hardman Moore
Principal of New College
3 June 2021

Information taken from Hugh Watt's *New College, Edinburgh: A centenary history* (1946).
The damaged glass jar is catalogued as New College Library Strongroom Object LC30.

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