

£25,000 for insider access: The private world of Oxbridge admissions tutoring



- Programme prices range between £6,000-£25,590
- Firms advertise access to admissions tutors
- Colleges declared only two conflicts of interest

NOAH ROBSON

For a price that rivals tuition fees, a small but lucrative group of private consultancies promises expert guidance for students applying to Oxford and Cambridge. Bespoke packages costing up to £25,590 offer everything from interview preparation to subject-specific mentoring through the increasingly competitive application process.

The real draw for many, however, is the promise of insider access, with some firms openly advertising direct connections to current tutors who sit on the universities' admissions panels. To investigate these claims, *Cherwell* posed as a prospective client and obtained prospectus documents from several companies, revealing their full scope and cost.

Cherwell has found that oversight of these services appears to be almost non-existent. Freedom of Information (FOI)

requests to all Oxford undergraduate colleges revealed only two tutors declared paid work with admissions consultancies over the past three academic years.

This tiny number stands in stark contrast to the extensive access firms advertise, with the discrepancy exposing a grey area in accountability. Whether fault lies on the part of companies or colleges, both possibilities undermine confidence in the equity of admissions – one by selling the illusion of access, the other by directly risking the reality of it.

Inside the programmes

Much of the work these firms do has been hidden from public view because of their exclusive nature. But internal prospectuses obtained by *Cherwell* reveal just how extensive – and expensive – these programmes can be.

Most begin with an initial consultation involving the student and their parents, followed by a long-term plan that can run for over a year. In some cases, companies advise starting this process as early as 14 or 15 years old, framing early preparation as a competitive advantage.

A growing number of firms now operate in the market, with services ranging from preparation for admissions tests, through to mock interviews, and even assistance with super-curricular activities.

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University indicates support for tuition fee increase

CHARLIE GOLDBERG

Oxford University students will pay higher tuition fees next year after Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson announced a suite of education reforms last month. Under the reforms, the price of tuition in English universities will rise yearly in line with inflation, as will the value of maintenance loans available to students. Maintenance grants will also be reintroduced for students from lower-income households. A University spokesperson indicated support for these changes.

The government has said that, eventually, tuition fee increases will only be allowed at universities that perform well on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the official system for assessing university performance. TEF ratings are assigned based upon evidence submitted to an independent panel of academics and students, as well as numerical data including student satisfaction and achievement scores. University fees increased this academic year for the first time since 2017 – they were previously frozen.

Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive

of the Russell Group, an association of 24 public research universities, including Oxford, described the announcement and accompanying white paper as a “milestone”, adding that the indexing of fees to inflation was a “first step in putting the sector on a more financially stable footing”.

Bradshaw also spoke out against the government's proposed 6% levy on international student fees, which he said would “seriously hamper universities' ability to invest in students and communities”. Phillipson had previously stated that the levy on international fees would be used to fund the new targeted maintenance grants.

An Oxford University spokesperson told *Cherwell* that they had nothing to add to Bradshaw's statement. The University has long supported increases in tuition fees, arguing that the real cost of educating an undergraduate was far greater than the cost of tuition.

Oxford has the largest endowment of any university in Europe, when the financial assets of its colleges are included. For several years, Oxford has reported annual surpluses of over £100 million. However, elsewhere in the UK, four in ten higher education institutions are believed to be in financial deficit.

The General Secretary of the University and College Union, Jo Grady, spoke out against the announcement. She said that the policy “doubled down on the tuition-fees funding model” that she credited

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Oxford Union October membership intake fell by over 25%

An Oxford Union budget draft reveals that membership intake has fallen by over a quarter since October last year. The document also highlights that expenses for committee dinners have exceeded the budget by 122% this October, and notes that membership revenue has fallen by over £78,000 – this is 22% short of what was budgeted for the period.

Cherwell obtained the budget, drafted by the Union's Bursar, after it was shared with the Union's Standing Committee (TSC).

GASPARD ROUFFIN and
ARINA MAKARINA

Membership revenue this October amounted to £267,000, down from £361,000 for the same period last year. Based on the 2024/25 accounts, *Cherwell* estimates that membership revenue in Michaelmas 2023 was approximately £627,000. This represents a consistent decrease over the last two years.

Cherwell used income breakdown from the draft budget and publicly

available membership fees to calculate the decrease in member intake in October 2025 relative to the previous year.

The estimated drop in the new sign ups is over 25%.

The leaked budget shows that the actual income from life memberships, which accounts for around 80% of memberships sold, was 20% short of the forecast.

Revenue from other membership

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Lord Peter Mandelson resigns as honorary fellow of St Catherine's College

ARINA MAKARINA

Lord Peter Mandelson has resigned from his honorary fellowship at St Catherine's College. A College

spokesperson confirmed Lord Mandelson's resignation, telling *Cherwell* he resigned because “he has decided to step back from public life”.

The resignation follows Mandelson's dismissal as the UK ambassador to the US by Sir Keir Starmer in September, which was triggered by the revelation of supportive emails from Mandelson to Jeffrey Epstein after the latter's conviction as a sex offender in 2008. Mandelson has said he deeply regrets the friendship.

The 238-page book of birthday messages to Epstein, released by the US congressional panel in September, contained entries from Mandelson. One of the documents is a letter, in which Mandelson called Epstein “my best pal”. The book also includes several photographs of Lord Mandelson and Epstein in various of the latter's properties.

Acknowledging the news of Mandelson's resignation, St Catherine's JCR President told *Cherwell*: “The JCR feel that certain activities and associations of Lord Mandelson do not align with their values as a student body.”

Mandelson ran for the position of

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Lord Peter Mandelson resigns as honorary fellow of St Catherine’s College

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Chancellor at Oxford University last year, but was knocked out in the first round of preference voting.

During his campaign for Chancellor, Mandelson was questioned about his ties to Epstein. Answering a question at the Oxford Union about whether he knew of the sexual abuse allegations against Epstein, he said: “I’m not, I’m afraid, going to go into further detail about this. I’ve said publicly that I regret meeting him in the first place. Everything that needs to be known about him is now known. There’s nothing further I can add.”

Jeffrey Epstein was an American financier and convicted child sex offender. He was found dead by suicide in 2019 in prison where he was awaiting trial for sex trafficking.

Speaking at the time of Mandelson’s appointment as the UK ambassador to the US and before the birthday book was released, St Catherine’s College Pro-Master Professor Bart van Es said: “We are proud and delighted to hear of Peter’s appointment and know he will do an excellent job in the role. St Catherine’s is lucky to have Lord Mandelson as an Honorary Fellow and hope, in the near future, to host him again for an event in College.”

Peter Mandelson graduated from St Catherine’s in 1976 with a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE).

Mandelson was approached for comment.

Image credit: Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



Trials for Oxford-Cambridge electric air taxi launched

MATT DONNELLY

A six month project has been launched to test and demonstrate an electric air taxi that will operate between Oxford and Cambridge.

The OxCam Advanced Air Mobility Corridor demonstrator project brings together Skyports, Bristow Helicopters, National Air Traffic Services, Vertical Aerospace, and Oxfordshire County Council. The initiative aims to provide a “robust business case” for commercialising electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft (eVTOL).

As part of this project, a piloted demonstration flight of Vertical Aerospace’s VX4 prototype will take place from Skyports’ Bicester Vertiport next year. Data from the flight will support the project by feeding directly into simulations and demonstrations.

The project aims to directly support government ambitions to foster growth and connectivity in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor. It follows the Civil Aviation Authority’s publication of its eVTOL Delivery Model, a framework that sets out how commercial eVTOL flights could operate in the UK by the end of 2028.

Duncan Walker, Chief Executive of Skyports, described the project as “truly innovative in its pragmatic, end to end approach”.

Oxfordshire County Council’s head of innovation Laura Peacock

also said that the project represented “a chance to demonstrate how innovation can be harnessed not just for economic growth, but for real societal and positive environmental impact”.

The initiative aligns with the University of Oxford’s environmental sustainability strategy, which commits to reducing aviation emissions from both staff and student travel. This is part of the wider aim of reaching net zero carbon by 2035. The University has established a £200 million Oxford Sustainability Fund for sustainability initiatives over the next 15 years.

Sophie O’Sullivan, Director of Future Safety and Innovation at the UK Civil Aviation Authority, said: “The emergence of eVTOL offers new opportunities for the aerospace industry and the potential to reshape how people travel and goods are delivered.

“Our eVTOL Delivery Model outlines how we as a regulator are working to enable this new industry to operate with the highest safety standards, and our ambition to put in place the regulatory framework to facilitate commercial eVTOL operations in the UK by the end of 2028 in line with the government’s objectives.”

The technology aims to support the wider decarbonisation of aviation, in addition to boosting the UK’s position as an innovator in the aviation industry.

Former Oxford student acquitted after spraying Stonehenge orange

POPPY GEYMAN

A Just Stop Oil activist and former student at the University of Oxford, Niamh Lynch, was recently cleared of causing criminal damage to Stonehenge, along with two other activists, Rajan Naidu and Luke Watson. The activists sprayed the UNESCO World Heritage site in an act of protest, using fire extinguishers filled with orange powder.

The protest took place in June last year, one day before summer solstice celebrations, which typically attract around 15,000 people to Stonehenge. Although the powder left no permanent damage, the clean-up costs totalled £620. After spraying the 5000-year-old stones, Lynch and Naidu remained at the site and allowed themselves to be arrested.

The activists were charged with damaging a public monument and causing a public nuisance. Their recent acquittal was based on their rights to freedom of speech

and freedom to protest under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Reacting to her acquittal, Lynch told *Cherwell* that her immediate response was “relief”, adding: “The concept of going to prison is scary. But it’s categorically nowhere near as scary as the fact that one person is dying every minute from heat stress as the planet gets ever warmer.”

Discussing her motivations for joining Just Stop Oil, she said: “I just want things to be better...I refuse to believe that billions of living beings should be needlessly suffering and dying to make a few billionaires richer. I might not be able to do much, but I refuse to do nothing. I refuse to stand and watch as our world, our home, burns around us.”

Lynch previously studied Geography at Oxford, and is now pursuing a Master’s in Ecology at the University of Exeter. She attracted attention from several news publications for requesting that her trial didn’t coincide with her final exams.

Just Stop Oil is a direct action climate activist group founded in 2022 and focused on ending new fossil fuel projects in the UK. Direct action involves physical and disruptive protests: in the past, activists have made the news by throwing soup at Vincent Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, disrupting the M25 for four days, and interrupting a West End performance of *The Tempest*.

In 2024, Just Stop Oil achieved its principal aim when the UK government agreed to halt licences for all new oil and gas projects in 2025. As a result, Just Stop Oil announced that it was “hanging up the hi vis” in March 2025 after three years of protest, meaning it would no longer be organising direct action or mass protests. However, some Just Stop Oil members have told the BBC that new governmental powers such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act and the Public Order Act have also made it easier to arrest and prosecute activists.

Oxford comes together to mark Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day

ANISHA MOHAMMED

The city of Oxford came together to mark Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day this week, with a service at the Oxford War Memorial on St Giles’ and a ceremony outside Oxford’s Town Hall.

Speaking ahead of the city’s commemorations, Oxford’s Lord Mayor Louise Upton, said: “As we stand together in silence, we honour the courage and selflessness of those who choose to serve, to protect the freedoms we hold dear. I encourage everyone to take a moment, wherever they are, to remember those who have died in the past, to thank those who serve in our armed forces today, and to hope for a peaceful future.”

On Remembrance Sunday, a procession through the city centre concluded with a service led by local religious and civic leaders, as well as

a two-minute silence. The Salvation Army Band, Oxford University Officers’ Training Corps, and the RAF Reserve Squadron took part in the procession. Local community groups and leaders also laid wreaths during the ceremony, including the University’s Vice-Chancellor Irene Tracey.

In the week leading up to Armistice Day, which fell on Tuesday 11th November, the Royal British Legion Flag was flown outside Oxford Town Hall as a sign of remembrance. On the day itself, a short ceremony took place outside the Town Hall, led by the Lord Mayor. This was followed by the traditional two-minute silence at 11am – the exact time the guns fell silent at the end of the First World War in 1918.

There was no official Oxford University service commemorating Armistice Day, however a University spokesperson told *Cherwell* that individual colleges tend to hold

their own memorials, and that the University Church of St Mary held a service to mark the occasion.

Armistice Day marks the anniversary of the armistice signed between the Allies and Germany in 1918, bringing an end to the First World War. It is a day to remember all those who lost their lives in that conflict and in the wars that have followed since.

Remembrance Sunday, held on the second Sunday of November, is the United Kingdom’s national day of remembrance. It extends the commemoration to all servicemen and women who have fought, died, or served in conflicts since 1914. Ceremonies across the country, including in Oxford, feature wreath-laying, prayers, and the observance of a two-minute silence to reflect on the cost of war and the value of peace.

Image credit: Ed Nix with permission.



University to support tuition fee increase

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with causing a crisis in the university sector.

Grady did, however, agree with Bradshaw's opposition to the international tuition fee levy, saying that the government should "stop attacking international students, who contribute so much to the sector, the economy, and Britain's soft power".

The Oxford University Student Union (SU) told *Cherwell* that the current funding model for higher education is unsustainable, but said that "passing that pressure on to students is not a long term solution".

The SU spokesperson also said that increasing tuition fees will have a disproportionate impact on international students, as the international student tuition levy will likely lead to an increase in international fees. In relation to linking tuition fees to the TEF, the SU told *Cherwell* that quality should only be incentivised in a way which does not limit access to higher education.

The changes to fee structures will have a significant effect on Oxford students. More than two-thirds of the £412 million that Oxford receives each year in course fees comes from international students. Estimates by the Higher Education Policy Institute predict that the proposed fee levy for international students will cost Oxford around £17 million each year, with the total yearly cost to English higher education institutions standing at over £620 million.

University to introduce new graduate-level course in Creative Translation

OSKAR DOEPKE

Oxford University is set to launch a new Master's in Creative Translation next year. Housed in the recently opened Schwarzman Centre, the course differs from academic translation by emphasising voice, tone, rhythm, and emotion alongside literal meaning.

Led by Professor Karen Leeder, a prize-winning translator in the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, the course was developed following a survey of graduate students conducted last year. As a result, Leeder said there is "considerable creative reservoir and appetite" for the programme as translation is "increasingly recognised as a literary art form".

The course will expose students to a range of materials – from ancient texts to performances – and will examine how translations differ, focusing on topics such as interpretation and cultural sensitivity. The programme will provide students with flexible assessments, including traditional essays, critical analyses, and an extended independent translation project.

As part of the course, students will also receive specialised instruction in another language and take part in sessions with industry professionals and creatives, offering students first-hand opportunities to connect with leading voices in the field.

A modern languages undergraduate student told *Cherwell*: "The introduction of this course is really exciting. Previously, I would not have considered a Master's here since most language programmes are very literature-focused. But the

opportunity to explore translation, especially in this creative way and with Oxford's resources, is interesting and needed."

The new course comes at a critical time for translation, as generative artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT can process and translate most languages in an instant. Reflecting this shift, the University itself has, for instance, begun providing ChatGPT-5 to all its staff and students.

Leeder told *Cherwell*: "AI is a reality in the professional world of translation. Students will learn about what LLMs [large language models] can bring to this world and how to work with them, but the course as a whole places a premium on the role

of human creativity. Students will hone their sense of what makes 'good' translation over and above the simple meaning of the words."

Leeder said there "needs to be a re-evaluation of the role of the human translator", explaining that "human translators...will always bring something that machines cannot replicate...AI can't deal with metaphor, idiom, or the stresses of word order and how this can change meaning. This is where the value of human translation lies".

Cherwell understands that the University will welcome the first cohort of creative translation students in October 2026.

Image credit: Arina Makarina for Cherwell.



Oxford Union October membership intake fell by over 25%

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types, including Access and Termly memberships, also fell by around 50%.

The documents consulted by *Cherwell* do not maintain consistent accounting periods across the years. This assumes that the proportion of memberships bought with freshers' discount has remained consistent since 2023.

"The primary reason is the international media scandal we had due to the President-Elect comments and the whole saga that ensued"

Cherwell can also reveal that the expenses for Standing Committee debate dinners were 122% over the budget this October. The black-tie debate dinners are attended by the eight members of the Standing Committee, speakers at the debates and other guests. More than £4,800 was spent on the dinners, £2,600 over what was planned. An additional £1,500 was spent on debate drinks, which the budget did not include any provisions for.

Other Standing Committee expenses included the printing and delivery of the Michaelmas term card, which totalled £7,836 and was 23% over budget. Membership operating expenses, including software licenses, salaries, pensions, and national insurance, also fell short of the

forecast by over £80,000, representing an overall loss of 24% in October 2025.

The income from the Union's social events fell 71% short of the expected revenue of £23,600. Total operating expenses for socials this October amounted to £15,200, amounting to an overall loss of almost £8,500.

The reduction in membership revenue particularly affected the Union's access scheme, with the number of memberships purchased by students with household incomes of less than £42,785, falling short of the budgeted revenue by over 50%. The access life membership is priced between £206 and £297, as opposed to the £343 for regular membership.

The decrease in the membership intake continues for the second year in a row. January commentary to the balance sheets noted that the Bursar and Head of Finance "are not sure if the decline in membership enrolment in MT24 is a trend, a result of Union activity in MT24, or lack of effective marketing for MT24". Additionally, February 2025 commentary from the Bursar stated: "If we do not achieve the revenue in MT[25] it is highly unlikely that we will recover it through the remaining terms. We all must work together to achieve the goal of a financially successful MT25."

A senior Union official told *Cherwell*: "The membership in the first two weeks of October fell: the primary reason is the international media scandal we had due to the President-Elect comments and the whole saga that ensued, the disruption of the debate in week 1 in the chamber, and the two votes of no-confidence in the first two weeks of term."

This follows recent controversies with Oxford Union membership, including the loss of a no-confidence

vote by the President-Elect following his comments on the shooting of Charlie Kirk, and more recently an Oxford Union election tribunal finding several senior officials guilty of electoral malpractice.

A balance sheet and accompanying commentary for the 2024/25 financial year authored by the Union's employed bursar was investigated by *Cherwell* in Hilary Term 2025. The documents stated that the society has "two years of operation remaining" until it is "no longer a going concern". A company is a "going concern" if it can continue operating and meeting its financial obligations in the foreseeable future.

The Oxford Union's Bursar projection that the organisation may only have two years of operational funding left was based on the rate of operational losses at the time.

The Union's budget for the 2024/25 financial year forecasts a deficit of more than £358,000, driven by declining membership numbers, reduced income from other sources, and persistent overspending.

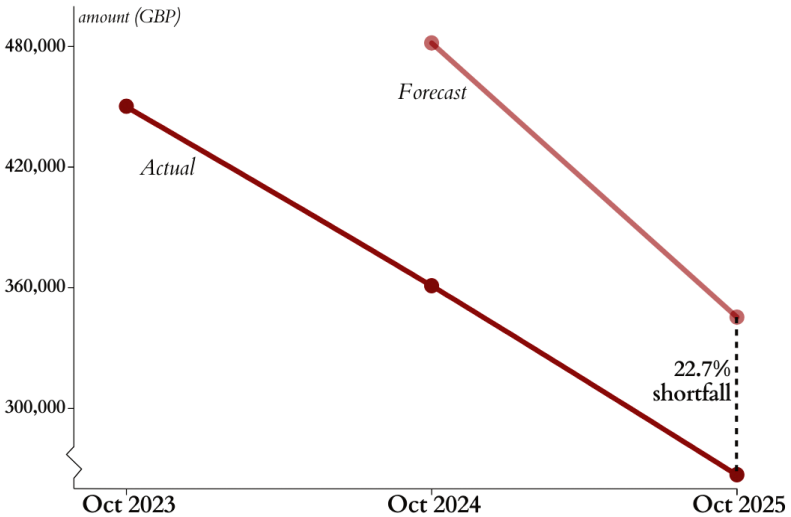
The drop in membership intake has raised concerns about the Union's financial sustainability. A senior source told *Cherwell* that "the membership drive is the most significant source of our revenue." They added that, despite a strong termcard, international media coverage has harmed public perception of the society.

Cherwell approached the Oxford Union for comment.

Graph credit: Oscar Reynolds.

Oxford Union membership income, 2023–25

Decline in actual and forecasted income for October



NEWS SHORTS

Loos of the world: Second gold bog for sale

A gold toilet up for auction at Sotheby's in New York City has a surprising Oxfordshire connection. The artwork is a second casting of Maurizio Cattelan's piece *America*, first created in 2016. The luxury lavatory hit the headlines in 2019 when it was stolen from Blenheim Palace in rural Oxfordshire, where it was on display. Two men from Oxford were convicted of the burglary and jailed.

Christmas comes (early?) to Oxford

The Oxford Christmas Light Festival is taking place this weekend, from Friday 14th to Sunday 16th November. The city's annual festive tradition will include parades, a performance, and a Christmas light bus. The events are organised by Oxford's City Council, who have also organised other events such as the Cutteslowe light trail.

Yes queue can!

The new branch of Sephora, a French beauty brand, which opened in Westgate this month has seen large queues, approximately hundreds of people long. A specially designated area was cordoned off for those waiting to enter the store. Sephora's popularity comes amid fears of the future of high street, in-person shopping in the UK.

Roblox offers virtual Oxford experience

A Roblox game offering people the chance to role-play as a police officer, medic, or criminal in a realistic recreation of Oxford has blown up online. With at least 2 million plays so far, as well as a dedicated Discord server, people are evidently keen for a taste of Oxford.

CROSS CAMPUS

MIT holds annual Pumpkin Drop event

MIT's annual Pumpkin Drop, a fall celebration event, saw 153 pumpkins dropped from the roof of Tang Hall, a height of 248 ft. The pumpkins were sourced from northern Massachusetts on the day of the Drop and were carried by volunteers up the stairs of the building. The drops were coordinated in order to produce the maximum visual effect, with organiser Lucy Gray telling *The Tech*: "There is something so deeply satisfying about a pumpkin exploding."

Imperial goes crazy for 'dAIsy'

Imperial College London has gone one step further than Oxford's access to Chat GPT-5, launching "dAIsy", a platform which comprises multiple generative AI assistants, including ChatGPT and DeepSeek. Perhaps those STEM students need all the essay help that they can get.



Oxford University launches equitable innovation partnership

ARINA MAKARINA AND GASPARD ROUFFIN

A regional partnership, Equinox, launched at Rhodes House on Monday. Equinox stands for Equitable Innovation Oxford and includes the University of Oxford, the Ellison Institute of Technology (EIT), and Oxfordshire County Council. Vice-Chancellor Irene Tracey, Anneliese Dodds, MP for Oxford East, and Chair of Oxford Growth Commission Neale Coleman were among the speakers at the launch.

Speaking at the launch, Lord Patrick Vallance, Minister for Science, Research, and Innovation described Oxfordshire’s innovation ecosystem’s success as “vital for [the UK’s] national missions of growth”.

One of the flagship measures of the new initiative is to dynamise the local economy, particularly through the development of local transport infrastructure. Keynote speakers emphasised the reopening of the Cowley branch line, the construction of the East-West rail line to Cambridge via Milton Keynes, as well as the synchronisation of bus schedules and train arrivals to avoid long wait times at the station.

Neale Coleman OBE, Chair of the Oxford Growth Commission, also highlighted the need to transform the Oxford railway station, including plans to “build two new platforms” and “two new station buildings”. He added that there was a “need to transform the entrance to the city”, describing it as “not worthy of Oxford”, particularly given the popularity of its touristic activity.

A recurring theme underscored by the various speakers was the “equitable” aspect of the Equinox initiative, each eager to ensure the interests of all actors and communities were represented. A senior official speaking to *Cherwell* said they took

particular attention to “think about who wasn’t at the table”.

The Oxford-Cambridge Arc, initially announced in February 2025, was described as playing a key role in the Equinox initiative. The Vice-Chancellor particularly stressed the creation of a “super-cluster” of competitiveness in the two university towns, that others would struggle to rival with.

The Ellison Institute of Technology (EIT) is an Oxford-based commercial research institution, housing departments focusing on artificial intelligence (AI), clinical medicine, generative biology, and sustainable energy. EIT was founded by the Chief Technology Officer of Oracle Larry Ellison, who recently earned the title of the “world’s richest man”, and is reported to be a close ally of Donald Trump. EIT has recently launched a number of projects, including a £118 million investment in Oxford AI vaccine research.

The Chief Operations Officer of the EIT stated: “By connecting leading universities, businesses, and government, this partnership addresses a critical investment gap and will help groundbreaking ideas reach their full potential.”

Another initiative announced at the Equinox event was the launch of the NatWest Accelerator for early-stage ventures. This aims to encourage entrepreneurship in the region, particularly among those graduating from Oxford University, and to provide “tailored growth support with specialist banking expertise to help start-ups”, in order to access funding and scale their businesses.

Tracey said: “Oxford University has always been a place where great and ground-breaking ideas begin – but our responsibility is to ensure they can develop, thrive and have impact here in our region.”

Image credit: Stanley Smith for Cherwell.

Royal Mail consults Oxford professor on Christmas stamps

OSKAR DOEPKE

Professor Andrew Davison, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, advised Royal Mail on the theological and artistic interpretation of its 2025 Christmas stamps, which feature scenes of the Nativity. Professor Ben Quash, Professor of Christianity and the Arts at King’s College London, also contributed, having written the accompanying text for the issue.

Designed by illustrator Paula Doherty, the stamps – which commemorate the artistry of surface and texture – depict an angel for the second-class, Mary and Joseph for the second-class large letter, Mary and the Baby Jesus for the first-class, shepherds for the first-class large letter, and the three wise men for the £3.40 stamp. Drawing on inlaid marble, enamelling, marquetry, and collage, the stamp set combines an artisanal aesthetic with a contemporary retelling of the Nativity story.

Discussing his involvement with the 2025 stamps, Davison told *Cherwell*:

“For six or seven years, Royal Mail have asked me to comment on their designs for Christmas stamps and the text that goes in the presentation pack. I’ve never been involved with the design... I’ve been more like quality control, helping make sure that the Christmas stories or theological traditions around Christmas are handled well, and having an eye to whether something might reasonably but unintentionally cause offence.”

Davison added that he is “thoroughly impressed by how carefully and considerately this part of the company goes about its work”. He added that Royal Mail “have also always been responsive” to his suggestions.

Davison has previously collaborated with Royal Mail, writing the booklet notes for the 2021 Christmas stamps and contributing an article on the depictions of animals in the Nativity.

The Christmas 2025 stamp set is available for purchase from 4th November.

With cosmic ‘fireballs’, Oxford-led scientists achieve a breakthrough in plasma physics

OSKAR DOEPKE

In a world-first, an international team of researchers, led by the University of Oxford, has created plasma ‘fireballs’ using CERN’s Super Proton Synchrotron in Geneva. Involving scientists from the University of Rochester and Atomic Weapons Establishment, among other institutions, the experiment sought to investigate a long-standing mystery about missing low-energy gamma rays emanating from blazars. The experiment was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Blazars, which are active galaxies powered by supermassive black holes, emit plasma jets travelling close to the speed of light. The jets accelerate charged particles, thereby producing high-energy gamma rays – a form of electromagnetic radiation.

As these high-energy gamma rays travel through the universe, they collide with extragalactic background light, producing cascades of electron-positron pairs. In theory, these pairs should then, in turn, generate

lower-energy gamma rays. However, such emissions – unlike their high-energy counterparts – have not been detected, resulting in the ‘mystery of missing gamma rays’.

There are two prevailing hypotheses to explain the puzzle. The first theory posits that intergalactic magnetic fields deflect or disperse the lower-energy gamma rays beyond detection. The second theory proposes that instabilities within the electron-positron pairs generate magnetic fields and turbulence, causing the beam to dissipate energy.

To evaluate the hypotheses, the researchers used CERN’s equipment to send beams of electron-positron pairs through a one-metre-long plasma, replicating aspects of real-life physical phenomena. By measuring the beam’s shape and magnetic fields, the researchers examined whether plasmic instabilities could disrupt the jet.

The pair beam, however, remained remarkably stable and narrow, showing little deviation or magnetic activity. Applied to cosmic scales, this result

suggests that instabilities are too weak to account for the missing gamma rays. Instead, the findings support the alternative hypothesis – interference from intergalactic magnetic fields.

Speaking about the experiment, Professor Gianluca Gregori, the lead researcher from Oxford University’s Department of Physics, said: “Our study demonstrates how laboratory experiments can help bridge the gap between theory and observation, enhancing our understanding of astrophysical objects from satellite and ground-based telescopes. It also highlights the importance of collaboration between experimental facilities around the world, especially in breaking new ground in accessing increasingly extreme physical regimes.”

Professor Subir Sarkar, a co-investigator from the Department of Physics, said he hoped the experiment would continue to “arouse interest in the plasma (astro)physics community to the possibilities for probing fundamental cosmic questions in a terrestrial high energy physics laboratory”.

Oxford Theologian John Henry Newman honoured by Pope Leo XIV

JOSEPH RODGERS

The 19th-century Catholic theologian and Oriel College fellow Cardinal John Henry Newman has been conferred a series of honours by Pope Leo XIV.

Cardinal Newman was named “a patron of the church’s educational mission” last week, and was elevated to the status of Doctor of the Church over the following weekend. This title is given by the Catholic Church to saints deemed to have made a significant contribution to theology. Newman joins St Thomas Aquinas as a patron of education, and he is one of only 38 saints to be named a Doctor of the Church. He was further named Patron Saint of the Pontifical Urban University in Rome.

Newman was central to the Oxford Movement, a 19th century theological movement, which began in the 1830s. Originally an Anglican, he converted to Catholicism in 1845, after which he was forced to resign his Oriel fellowship. He was subsequently elected to an honorary fellowship at his alma mater, Trinity College, Oxford, in 1877.

One of Newman’s most influential texts was ‘The Idea of a University’, first delivered as a set of lectures at the

Catholic University of Ireland (now University College Dublin). The work defends a liberal education, where knowledge is pursued for its own sake rather than for professional training.

Lord Mendoza, Provost of Oriel College, said: “[Newman’s] emphasis on the tutorial system of teaching and on the personal, moral, and social development of students was adopted by every other college. It is in part to his credit and his ‘The Idea of a University’ that Oxford is an exceptional place to study.”

Oxford University’s Newman Society, a student Catholic Society, is named after the theologian. It was founded in 1878 as the “Catholic Club”, and renamed with Newman’s permission in 1888. Adam Gardner, president of the society, told *Cherwell* that the society was “ecstatic” about Newman’s elevation. He added: “It goes to show that [Newman’s] contribution as an academic in the University is recognised beyond the bounds of academia, and that he is on par with (arguably) the greatest Catholic theologian of all time, St. Thomas Aquinas.”

He also reflected on Newman’s position in English Catholicism: “With the memory of the penal times

still in the minds of Catholics in England today, it is most wonderful to have a Saint so highly revered by the Universal Church being from England; that England has not been forgotten and is a land where Saints are born.”

Newman’s contribution to education goes beyond Oxford. He served as rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, and founded the Oratory School in Birmingham. But he continued to view Oxford as the best model for education, and is said to have chosen the Oratorians when joining a religious order because their organisation most resembled an Oxford college.

Samuel Troy, the Newman Society’s publicity officer, told *Cherwell*: “Among a lot of members of the society, there is a real sense that Newman is our friend. There aren’t many other saints who write about essay crises and finals stress, and it’s amazing that someone who feels so like a modern-day student has been declared a Doctor of the Church. In some ways, the proclamation of Newman as co-patron of Catholic Education makes the ‘Oxford system’ the educational ideal of the Catholic Church.”

Image credit: Arina Makarina for Cherwell.



INVESTIGATIONS

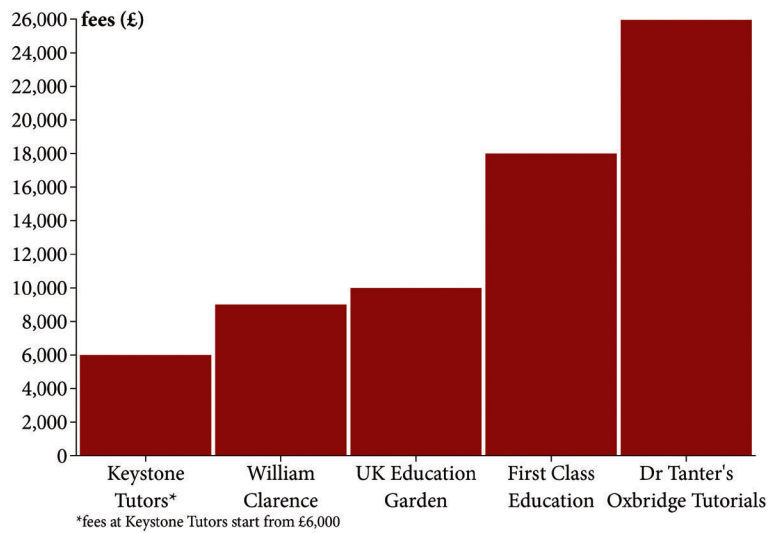
£25,000 for insider access: The private world of Oxbridge admissions tutoring

Continued from Page 1

Dr Tranter’s Oxbridge Tutorials, for example, includes support “with sourcing work experience and other relevant preparation”, as well as a “comprehensive review of the full UCAS application, with ongoing feedback and support throughout the process”. Another firm, First Class Education, offers weekly one-to-one tutorials and termly strategic reviews with parents, while also covering personal statement drafting and mock interviews.

further, with Dr Tranter’s explicitly promising access to tutors who currently sit on Oxford and Cambridge admissions panels – the very bodies that decide which applicants receive offers each year. *Cherwell* contacted Dr Tranter’s, but the firm did not respond to requests for comment. Claims of disproportionate success rates are also prevalent, with First Class Education proudly boasting: “100% of our Oxbridge applicants received an interview last year, and 24 out of 50 secured offers.”

Fees charged by private Oxford-Cambridge admissions consultancies



One parent told *Cherwell* she turned to a private consultancy after her son’s state school – rated “inadequate” by Ofsted – provided no support for his Cambridge application. She said the “several thousand pound” programme “helped him improve his personal statement and he had about six mock interviews”. Reflecting on the process, she said: “To be honest, they were amazing – he got a place and has just graduated with a high 2:1.”

“The fees these firms charge are neither reasonable nor justified by the quality of the service provided”

Not everyone views the industry as a benign force, however. One former tutor who has previously worked for elite firms told *Cherwell*: “The fees these firms charge are neither reasonable nor justified by the quality of the service provided. Much of their material is produced by students who lack teaching credentials and are inadequately compensated, which undermines the quality of their work.” Firms repeatedly invoke the idea of ‘insider knowledge’, usually coming from tutors who are Oxbridge graduates. Some firms, however, go

This equates to an acceptance rate of 48% – over triple the average among all Oxford undergraduate applicants in 2024. The company told *Cherwell* that these figures came from internal data, but acknowledged they were not independently verified, as “not all clients disclose final outcomes”.

The former tutor said the lack of regulation of the industry allows “some companies to misrepresent their success rates and, in some cases, their tutors’ qualifications”.

They added: “Parents are paying thousands for a service that often adds little value, with no professional body to ensure standards or quality assurance.”

Whether through success statistics or promises of exclusive access, these claims capture the image of privileged insight that these firms seek to cultivate. Applicants are offered a potentially crucial advantage unavailable to those unwilling or unable to pay for similar opportunities.

Five-figure packages

This promise of insider guidance comes at a hefty premium, with fees regularly reaching the five-figure mark. In a prospectus document usually reserved for interested families, Dr Tranter’s prices its Gold Tier package at £19,950, with the Elite Tier reaching £25,590. The firm also offers a “6 hour tour of Oxford colleges” for an additional £950.

Internal documents obtained by *Cherwell* show First Class Education’s Oxford PPE programme is spread over two successive periods. The £8,000

“Phase 1: Profile-Building” stage focuses on developing an applicant’s academic background, while “Phase 2: Application Preparation” comes in at an additional £10,000, covering the full UCAS process, up to and including interviews.

First Class Education told *Cherwell* that its packages provide “highly tailored, long-term support”, with each student offered “sustained mentorship and skill development rather than short-term tutoring”. They stressed that “no current Oxford or Cambridge admissions officers are employed” by the firm, and that all tutors must “disclose any current university employment” to ensure compliance with conflict of interest policies.

Other firms operate under slightly different models, but demand similar fees. Keystone Tutors offers a modular “University Advisory Service”, costing over £6,000. Whilst initially appearing to be a cheaper option, this is tempered by the fact that it encourages customers to sign up for additional modules available at rates of up to £177 per hour, depending on the tutors’ experience.

Cherwell found many other such examples of high-cost programmes, including William Clarence (starting at £9,000) and UK Education Garden (from £9,999), as shown in Graph 1, both of which point to the Oxbridge-specific insights and subject expertise that they provide. Keystone Tutors, William Clarence, and UK Education Garden were all approached for comment.

Taken together, the high fees and the manner in which the programmes are presented create a sense of exclusivity both in the nature of the personalised plans and the promised access. Yet despite these bold claims and premium fees, there is little transparency over how such companies operate, bringing the issues of fairness and conflict into focus.

College oversight

All Oxford colleges maintain formal conflict of interest policies, requiring any staff involved in admissions to declare paid work they have completed that could create either real or perceived conflicts, including in tutoring or consultancy. The policies are intended to ensure that no applicant receives an unfair advantage through personal connections or monetary incentives.

Of the colleges that responded to *Cherwell*’s FOI request – only Christ Church failed to reply despite repeated attempts to contact them – nearly all reported that there had been no declared involvement with admissions consultancies by tutors.

Hertford College referred to a single private tutoring arrangement,

explicitly structured to avoid conflicts, whilst Lincoln College also reported one conflict, though stressed that the candidate in question was not applying to the College, nor for a course that they offer. Both cases demonstrate the lengths to which colleges aim to track even minimal external work.

Most colleges referred to policies that prohibited conflicts relating to pecuniary interests. Exeter College, for instance, warns that situations should be declared if “the assessor ... has received remuneration for advice given on Oxford University admissions to any individual or organisation”.

All Oxford colleges maintain formal conflict of interest policies, requiring any staff involved in admissions to declare paid work

Wadham College, meanwhile, explicitly addresses the potential for commercial tutoring schemes to create conflicts of interest: as their policy states, such programmes grant “privileged access” to applicants, which may conflict “with the College’s stated aim of supporting academically able students, regardless of their background, in applying to Oxford”.

However, the conflict of interest policies of several colleges also apply across the entire university, not just within individual colleges. For instance, Mansfield College specifies that a conflict relating to such paid work should be declared “whether the candidates advised have applied to the College or not”.

In addition to this, Oxford University’s Conflict of Interest Policy requires staff to “recognise and disclose activities that might give rise to actual or perceived conflicts of interest”, highlighting admissions as an area where such conflicts may arise. Cambridge University has a similar policy in place, but did not respond to a request for comment.

The gap between the tiny number of declared conflicts and firms’ advertised practices exposes a serious discrepancy. While companies continue to market “current tutors” as a key selling point, Oxford colleges report almost no such involvement.

Whether this is due to companies overstating their access or tutors providing paid guidance without declaring it, the result is legal and ethical ambiguity in a sector which forms part of the UK’s £7.5 billion tutoring industry.

Minimal regulation, maximum cost

Despite the high fees and the bold marketing claims, the private Oxbridge consultancy market remains almost entirely unregulated. No authority – whether at national or university level – directly oversees the claims these companies make about success rates, tutor credentials, or insider knowledge.

This absence of oversight is not unique to university admissions consultancy, with the broader private tutoring industry also operating with minimal regulation. Firms are governed only by general consumer protection and advertising standards, with the lack of an official regulator leaving a gap in an industry shaping access to elite universities.

The Tutors’ Association (TTA) – the UK’s only professional body for private tutors – told *Cherwell* that “all tutors and tutoring organisations (including education consultancies and Oxbridge admissions specialists) should meet minimum standards of professionalism and ethical conduct, ensuring transparency, integrity, and accountability in their work”.

In the absence of government regulation, the TTA maintains a voluntary Code of Practice, runs an independent disciplinary committee, and supports safeguarding measures, such as “mandatory criminal record checks for all tutors working with children and young people”.

Unclear regulation and unchecked advertising claims have led to a sector where five-figure packages have become the norm and firms operate largely without accountability. Companies publicly tout their ability to provide access to current admissions tutors, yet this is directly at odds with data showing almost no such arrangements have been formally declared.

Until this inconsistency is addressed, the equity of Oxford’s admissions system will remain an open question.

For now though, the promise of insider access remains a powerful incentive for families willing and able to pay tens of thousands of pounds – even if, as university and college policies make clear, that knowledge should never be for sale.

Credits: Oscar Reynolds [graph], Grace Greaves [image], Archie Johnston [illustration] for *Cherwell*.



OPINION

The Rhodes exhibition is not enough

TI-JEAN MARTIN

I have two connections to Cecil Rhodes and the controversy surrounding institutions’ memorialisation of colonial figures. My grandfather won a Rhodes Scholarship almost 70 years ago, and it was at Oxford University that he met and married my grandmother. More recently, my last years of secondary education saw controversy over my school’s statue of its founder and benefactor Royal African Company shareholder Robert Aske.

What to make, then, of Oriel College’s recent attempts to contextualise Rhodes’ legacy? An exhibition, first shown at the College and now at the University Church, features sculptures by Zimbabwean artists of the Chitungwiza Arts Centre representing “a figurative or semi-abstract reflection on the impact of Rhodes’ colonial wars on the people of Zimbabwe”. The works are thought-provoking examinations of the past, centred around competition winner Wallace Mkhanka’s *Blindfolded Justice*.

Yet *The Rhodes Legacy Through the Eyes of Zimbabwean Sculptors* disappoints. It fails to address both Rhodes’ crimes and the influence of his money over modern Oxford, trivialising previous efforts to do so. Colonial figures’ names are immortalised across the city in buildings, statues, and portraits, ignoring their bloody legacies. Oriel, and the University, must act further against this culture of

convenient forgetfulness.

Rhodes graduated from Oriel in 1881, later leaving some £300 million in today’s money for the establishment of scholarships that facilitated the study of Bill Clinton, Edwin Hubble, and Kris Kristofferson, amongst others. His money also shapes Oxford’s modern identity through his memorialisation at Oriel, Rhodes House, and beyond.

As founder of the British South Africa Company and chairman of the De Beers diamond company, Rhodes spearheaded ruthless and exploitative colonisation of southern Africa. The 1893 and 1896-7 wars against the Ndebele and Shona peoples, which the exhibition discusses, killed an estimated 20,000-25,000 people. The Battle of Shangani alone killed 1,500 Ndebele – Rhodes’ response to this was: “The shooting must have been excellent.”

The wealth that helps fund the University is inextricable from these atrocities. Beginning in Cape Town in 2015, the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement sought to address Rhodes’ memorialisation by campaigning for the global removal of his statues. RMF soon gained solidarity in Oxford but, after a “listening exercise”, a commission decided to retain the High Street statue. In 2020, a crowd of over 1,000 protested outside Oriel, and the college initially voted for relocation. The college then changed course, citing difficulties altering the Grade I listed building amidst threats by alumni to withdraw a potential £100 million in donations and gifts.

Instead, Oriel adopted a policy of “retain and explain”. Contextualisation, supported by public figures such as historian Mary Beard, to avoid the supposed erasure of the past, was a compromise preferable to continued ignorance. But it has produced only a small sign outside Oriel’s High Street entrance, mentioning “exploitation of minerals, land and peoples” as the source of Rhodes’ vast wealth.

Oriel’s exhibition is cited as the continuation of

this policy, but its portrayal of Rhodes’ actions and the RMF movement are trivialising and disrespectful. Appearing to present itself as the closing act of discussion around Oxford’s involvement in Empire, it discourages the bitterly needed conversation about the continued use of Rhodes’ name and wealth.

This is not to belittle the work of the sculptors, which Chitungwiza Arts Centre chairman Tendai Gwarazava described as a “crucial step towards healing and reconciliation”. The four pieces are poignant reflections on imperial oppression and the silencing of Zimbabwean voices.

By contrast, the exhibition’s attempts at contextualisation are symbolic rather than critical; the gravity of Rhodes’ crimes is defined in vague terms. The posters supposedly explaining RMF accuse student activists of naivety, “unnerving the University”, and “[failing] to recognise the extent to which the institution was changing” through an increasingly diverse student body.

But diversity does not absolve Oxford of colonial complicity. Cecil Rhodes’ legacy is an issue that needs to be addressed through participatory discussions on his influence over the University. These must centre the voices of nations that suffered under the Empire. They must plainly expose the harm Rhodes caused, and end the exclusion of those opposed to his glorification.

As the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall petition stated, this memorialisation is “an open glorification of the racist and bloody project of British colonialism” – one that must be addressed through properly historicised contextualisation. Critical evaluations of Rhodes’ legacy with the placement of the statue in a museum, for example, would be infinitely preferable to this exhibition’s unwillingness to address the uncomfortable legacies of Oxford’s imperial past.

Even if Rhodes’ statue does not fall, the University must confront who he was, what he did, and where his money came from.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Have an opinion on something we’ve published? Email editors@cherwell.org

We need dubious donors

The idea that the University shouldn’t financially and reputationally tie itself to dubious figures (‘What’s in a name? The donors shaping Oxford’s streets’, Week 1) comes from a place of good intentions. And I won’t defend the University’s penchant for conciliating controversial individuals to avoid bruised egos, such as the Sacklers.

But, as the author acknowledges, the university sector is cash-strapped. If we want to avoid Oxford reverting to its pre-1990s role as a bastion of and entitlement for a narrow elite, telling the University to reject willing donations from the rich is regressive. What moral victory over the distasteful elements of capitalism is worth pulling up the ladder of justice? Rejecting willing donors – who students see and interact with little, if at all – would mean people from non-traditional backgrounds can’t fight for a fairer share of the UK’s wealth and privilege with the help of an Oxbridge education.

Arun Lewis, *History and Politics, University College*

Principle over partisanship

Cooke’s article (‘We must fight the Right’s narrative about Oxford’, Week 3) rightly points out the growing need to resist the reactionary portrayal of Oxford as a so-called ‘fallen’ institution. However, in defending Oxford from such disingenuous attacks, we must also acknowledge that internal controversies have recently clouded its reputation. For instance, the Oxford Union’s current president, Moosa Harraj, and President-Elect, George Abaronye, have both found themselves at the centre of troubling headlines.

Condemning Oxford as a whole for the actions of a few individuals is intellectually lazy and ethically unfair. Institutions as vast and historic as Oxford are neither monoliths of virtue nor corruption; they are living communities, constantly evolving. The nuanced truth is that progress, conflict, and self-reflection have always been part of its DNA.

As someone who is neither a current student nor an alumnus of the University, I recognise that I may not speak from within Oxford’s walls. But the University I have admired from afar is not one that bows to ideology, whether left or right. It is an Oxford of relentless curiosity, of argument grounded in respect, and of reform guided by principle, rather than partisanship. If we lose sight of that, we risk turning one of humanity’s greatest centres of thought into a mere pawn in the culture wars.

Amlan Ghosh, *Cherwell reader*

THE COMMENTS SECTION

See what our readers make of our social media posts

Oxford is a place for the cleverest wokes and also the cleverest un-wokes (‘We must fight the Right’s narrative about Oxford’, Week 3).

Ian Fletcher via *Facebook*

Soap dodgers (‘Police ban Oxford asylum hotel protest under public order act’, Week 3).

no.surrender.f.ever via *Instagram*

Oxford as soon as they’re not #1 in a ranking (‘It’s time we stopped fussing over university rankings’, Week 1).

xd.yellowhamza via *Instagram*

Thought it was a clash of clans article (‘A call to action: Oxford’s clash of real and reel’, Week 0).

reuben_ox via *Instagram*

Atik closing will have that effect (‘It’s time we stopped fussing over university rankings’, Week 1).

Alex Cavell via *Facebook*

Follow *Cherwell* on Instagram and Facebook and comment on our posts to see yourself in the next print!



Illustration credit: ‘University supports tuition fee increase’ by Archie Johnston.

International student levies won’t level up higher education

ZAHARA AGARWAL

Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen once observed that “we are heading into a world where a flat screen TV that covers your entire wall costs \$100, and a four-year college degree costs \$1 million, and nobody has anything even resembling a proposal on how to systematically fix this”. This stark contrast is increasingly relevant in the face of a proposed 6% government levy on international student tuition fees, which currently range from £37,380 to £62,820 annually, to supposedly increase funds for maintenance grants. We need to ask: is this the right mechanism for supporting domestic students? Or is it a more palatable xenophobia under the guise of helping home students?

English higher-education institutions currently receive over £10 billion a year in international-student fees income, meaning this levy could cost universities in the region of £620 million annually, with Oxford alone owing around £17 million each year. These substantial numbers mean that the University must choose either to absorb the tax or to pass it onto students, the latter being frequently criticised as an unsustainable solution. As someone already subject to the whims of international tuition prices, behind the rhetoric of helping home students lies a deeper issue – one that exposes the corruption baked into tuition-based university funding itself.

International students, who already pay triple what

their domestic peers do, are being cast as convenient cash cows. The government claims the levy will strengthen the “skills system” and widen access. Yet, as the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) notes, there’s no clear mechanism ensuring that the funds will ever return to universities or benefit students directly. It’s a familiar sleight of hand: siphon from higher education, promise reform, deliver austerity.

The UK is, in effect, inching toward the American model, one that I sought to escape because of how it commodifies learning and rewards compliance over inquiry. Even as an American in Oxford, my tuition costs significantly less than it would have had I attended a comparable private university in the US. There, decades of tuition inflation have created an education market where universities increasingly serve donors and political interests, rather than students. When American campuses faced pressure over the Gaza conflict, several capitulated to congressional threats, disciplining students and staff for pro-Palestine speech to preserve federal funding. The corrosion is moral as well as financial. Once education depends on market logic, intellectual freedom becomes a negotiable asset.

Oxford, for all its prestige, is not immune. The University’s cautious statements around Palestine have surely been at least partly influenced by financial pressures. If this levy passes, it will not be the well-heeled international student truly paying the

price, however, but those who seek refuge through education and are now being priced out. Not only may the University feel compelled to admit more international students to cope with the levy, but they will be needing to admit a certain *kind* of international student – one who can comfortably pay their way through these new fees.

There is an even more uncomfortable part of this to grapple with, namely that many of these students hailing from less prosperous countries are coming for the famed Oxford Education because their own universities were stripped of prestige and money as a result of centuries of colonial enterprise. To then continue to profit from their past exploitation in the form of skyrocketing tuition is doubly ironic.

Across the UK, 19% of university students are international, and at Oxford, that figure jumps to around 43%. Instead of siphoning from the very students keeping universities afloat, the government should establish a contribution system where domestic and international graduates alike pay back through earnings rather than upfront fees. This approach would protect the international character that defines universities like Oxford.

Instead, the government’s proposed levy sends the opposite message: that global students are little more than cash cows, to be taxed when convenient and thanked when silent. It’s a move that imperils not only financial stability, but also moral credibility.

This is Oxford’s real free speech problem

The Sheldonian Series reveals a university that does not want to listen its students

STANLEY SMITH

I realised I had too much time on my hands when I decided to watch all of the Sheldonian Series in one go. Laid up in bed with the new strain of the plague freshers brought with them this year, my mind cast back to Michaelmas last year when I attended the inaugural event of the Vice-Chancellor’s pet project. Curious to see how the subsequent editions had gone, I found myself binging all four of the hour-long recordings. Who needs *Derry Girls* when the University provides such unparalleled comfort telly to nurse you back to health? What is the Sheldonian Series, you ask? Taking place each term in the Sheldonian Theatre, the event sees a panel of experts and academics answer questions on the ‘big issues’ of today, from “democracy” to “life”. The discussions range from the eye-roll-inducing to genuinely stimulating, but that’s not what compelled me to write this. The Sheldonian Series, purportedly existing to model to undergraduates how to disagree agreeably, instead reveals a university that does not want to listen to what its students have to say.

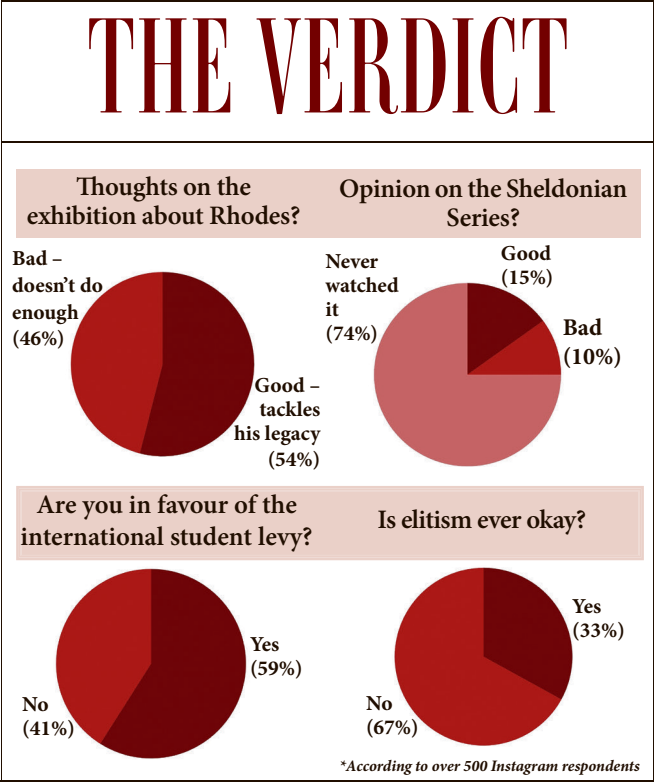
As an evening’s worth of intellectual entertainment, it’s perfectly fine. Kicking off the topic of ‘democracy’, the panelists of journalists and politics professors made cogent, if obvious, arguments. Donald Trump’s election is bad for American democracy? Wow, I never knew! The contrast between a physicist’s, a theologian’s, and computer scientist’s view on the topic of ‘life’ in Hilary term made for an interesting dynamic. As were director of the Reuters Institute Mitali Mukherjee’s insights on the difficulties of journalism in the age of social media, during Trinity term’s edition on ‘truth’. The only real failure was this Michaelmas’ attempt to tackle the done-to-death topic of “cancel culture”. The evening quickly turned into an increasingly acrimonious debate between Conservative peer Lord Young and director of the think tank British Future Sunder Katwala, who both routinely failed to answer the questions of the audience and instead spent the evening taking pot shots at each other. This tiresome back-and-forth unfortunately overshadowed the far more intelligent remarks of *Guardian* columnist Zoe Williams and Helen Mountfield, Principal of Mansfield.

But my issue isn’t so much with the content of the evenings themselves, but the fanfare the University presents it with. Introducing the series on the behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, Chief Diversity Officer Tim Southommasane explained that “we hope to model what free speech...can and should look like within our collegiate university community”. Combined with other initiatives such as the patronising “tips for free speech”, the Sheldonian Series is the University’s attempt to challenge the illiberal attitude towards free speech that supposedly plagues Oxford.

Maybe I’m just an unenlightened undergraduate, but I struggle to see how inviting semi-famous Gen-Xers who already have massive platforms to repeat the same talking points we hear everyday in our media is somehow a win for freedom of speech at this university. The most obvious problem is the total absence of actual students from the proceedings. Sat at the very back of the Sheldonian in Michaelmas last year, all I could see before me was a sea of grey hair. This skewed age demographic gave rise to several truly bizarre conversations in which, at an event supposedly *for* students, the panellists talked about undergraduates as if we were strange and unknowable creatures. They professed their fear that young people no longer cared about democracy, and declared that undergrads are not interested in marshalling evidence in essays. The fact that no-one under the age of 30 was on any of the panels gave the event the feel of a David Attenborough-style commentary on the lesser-spotted undergraduate.

The University harks on about the importance of free speech, whilst ignoring the issues students actually want to speak about

Equally odd was the choice of topics for discussion. The prevailing debates between students today centre around issues such as the University’s investments, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and how to make prestigious institutions more inclusive. If Irene Tracey and Co. truly wanted to “model free and inclusive speech” as they profess, the Sheldonian Series could tackle these topics head on, yielding a likely fascinating set of conversations. But, of course, the University doesn’t want to talk about such issues for fear that someone might criticise its handling of them, so we get an hour’s worth of pontificating on palatable concepts such as ‘life’ and ‘truth’. As a result, these evenings are less a good faith effort to engage young people in respectful dialogue on the most controversial topics, and more an attempt to steer the conversation away into ‘safer’ waters. There is something very ‘the grown-ups will take it from here’ about it all. The Sheldonian Series perfectly encapsulates the University’s tendency to hark on about the importance of free speech, all the while ignoring the issues students actually want to speak about. Time and time again, we have seen the administration’s reluctance to enter into a dialogue with students on subjects such as its investments, be those links to fossil fuels or to the Israeli military. If there is an issue with discourse in Oxford,



this is it. This is frustrating because the format has real potential. With a few tweaks, it could be a winning one. Start with finding more ways to incorporate students, rather than confining them to asking one or two questions at the end. Where it’s relevant, have us on the panels. If the University wants to discuss access to higher education, get an undergraduate representative from the 93% Club. I, for one, would be more inclined to listen to a discussion about universities if it included someone who actually had to pay tuition fees. Most importantly, bringing students, faculty, and alumni together to talk about difficult topics would send a powerful message that the administration values what everyone at this University has to say, not just the famous faces that once studied here. If Professor Irene Tracey just wants to host a chat between successful professionals each term, that’s great. But save us the sanctimony about how this is supposedly great for free speech at Oxford. Next time I’m ill, I think I’ll just watch *Derry Girls* instead.

What Britain needs is meritocratic elitism

Want to improve social mobility? Look to our primary and secondary education, not Oxford University

ALEXANDRE GUILLOTEAU

Elites have a bad name. Conjuring up images of toffs in top-hats and Eton collars, they are almost invariably paired with the adjective ‘out-of-touch’. But that need not be so. We must be careful to distinguish elitism of social background and elitism of the intellect. Any society requires its share of talented people, driven and nurtured to produce the best work that they can, and we all benefit from this. In the world of competitive sport this is uncontroversial, yet the educational institutions which nurture our intellectual elite are under constant attack for their exclusivity. While I have not seen many Eton collars at Oxbridge, places like Oxford certainly accept a disproportionate share of people from a privileged background. This produces not only an unpleasantly stratified society, but waters down the intellectual elite by missing out on potential from large swathes of society. The way to open up this talent pool, however, cannot be for Oxford and its peers to reduce their standards. Instead, we must turn our focus to improving primary and secondary education.

Those who like to scorn elitism would presumably rather elite scientists develop their vaccines, elite surgeons operate on them, and elite engineers design the bridges they drive over. These people have reached the heights of their ability by the rigorous process of selective and intensive education. We are all better off if these functions are performed by the most qualified people. It is simply the case that there are tasks requiring technical skill, which should be carried out by those whose education has qualified them to do so. At the same time as acknowledging the need for an educated elite, we must admit that there is a problem with who gets the opportunity to develop these skills. Though Oxford is ostensibly open to anyone, there can be no doubt that attending certain schools that charge large sums of money puts applicants at a significant advantage. And so it is likely that applicants of innate ability are being disadvantaged by their social background. This is not only unfair, but, by reducing the pool from

which our intellectual elite is selected, diminishes the quality of that elite. So what can Oxford do to solve this problem? One option is to lower the standard of entry. This is the worst option. In theory, people might overcome their disadvantages and reach the same level as their more fortunate peers. But they are fighting against all the odds. The resulting downward pressure not only would reduce the capacity of that vital elite (and make it lose out to foreign competition), but would remove a significant lifeline for those from disadvantaged social backgrounds who *do* get in. If the academic qualification is less meaningful, inevitably the connections and social capital more readily accessible to the wealthy will become more

The disadvantages of bad schooling have been baked in by the time of university admissions

influential in their future careers. In reality, there is only so much that Oxford can do: most of the disadvantage of bad schooling has been baked in by the time of university admissions. But I have two suggestions. Oxford could involve itself in schools by focusing outreach work not simply on persuading pupils to apply, but helping teachers prepare children for academic rigour. Secondly, we could look at France. Upon leaving school, children set on the academic path move to an *école préparatoire* for a year or more, before taking the entrance exams of the *grandes écoles*. Rather than rejecting those with genuine potential who have been failed by poor education – or letting them in with a lower standard – could we not run something similar aimed at those who, with the right education, have a good shot at getting in? These might be run at Oxford, a sort of transitional year, or instead as a form of extended secondary education provided by the state. Programmes such as UNIQ, though no



doubt valuable, does not come close to this in length or scope. There does exist a foundation year, but it only has 68 places. Nevertheless, the impetus must lie with improving primary and secondary education. There is precedent for this: the rise of academically selective state education after the 1944 Education Act led to significantly increased Oxford admissions from state schools. As Adrian Wooldridge notes, the percentage of the privately educated at Oxford fell from 55% in 1959 to 39% in 1969. One Eton headmaster is cited as believing that 60% of private schools would have gone under if most grammar schools had remained (obviously there are still a few). Of course, there were flaws in the 1944 settlement, and we need not copy the model exactly (for example, there could be more

opportunities to move to a selective school than the all-or-nothing eleven-plus), but the key point is that selective state education can be tremendously beneficial. Why should academic selection be the preserve of private schools? Oxford cannot alone make up for the failure of schooling without compromising its own academic standards. To do so would disadvantage everyone who relies on the research that it produces, and would work against the disadvantaged who do make it here. We are right to decry the fact that access to the intellectual elite is so much easier for the social elite. Unfortunately, Oxford can only play so much of a role in changing that. Image credit: Julian Herzog, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

FEATURES

An offer is only half the story: The challenges facing college and University outreach



LEO JONES AND FIN DINNEN

Admissions outreach is essential to ensuring Oxford continues to receive the best applicants. Colleges, the University, and students all play a role in this effort. But is it enough?

Microsoft Forms and student satisfaction polls mark our email inboxes each year as the University-wide drive for tour guides, alumni testimonials, and the best college-branded pens and tote bags begins. From TikTok trends to residential programmes, all these bureaucratic efforts play a part in the race to lure in the best selection of prospective students. But state-school intake continues to fall. Can we be sure that Oxford's colleges' efforts to achieve diversity and variation in their student body are working? On top of the responsibility of maintaining regional affiliations, in the dynamic, modern Oxford of 2025, which should be prioritised: the historic or the holistic?

Annually receiving over 23,000 applications for the past five years for around 3,500 places, the concept of outreach at a university like Oxford is not about getting more people to apply, but ensuring that those people are a broad cross section of prospective undergraduates. Concentration of applicants and offer-holders, in one school, one region, or one socioeconomic class, risks losing equally capable applicants

from other backgrounds. This balance is easier said than done.

One reason for this is the various college cultures. Some of the older colleges have maintained connections with certain private schools, usually through alumni grants. Wadham College had a specific scholarship for alumni of Manchester Grammar School (an independent private boys' school).

On the other hand, colleges like Mansfield have made a different kind of outreach their brand. The College takes on double the students from areas of low progression to higher education and double the students on Free School Meals (FSM).

This contributes to the wide differences between college cultures, which may attract more applicants from one socioeconomic background versus another, as such stark social differences ultimately lead people to approach colleges and their members with certain preconceptions.

Regional outreach

Albeit significant, socioeconomic background is only one category that defines the concept

of outreach. Regionally, the Oxford circle is small – the South East and London make up 46% of domestic students, despite holding only 37% of the country's AAA+ students. This is where, for outreach, engagement means not only convincing the prospective student that a college is a place they want to be, but also somewhere they can access.

Scotland and Northern Ireland are both significantly underrepresented. Despite making up a combined 9.1% of UK students scoring AAA+, they together represent just 2.7% of applications and 2.3% of admitted students. Of course, students may prefer not to make the long trip to Oxford and attend other excellent universities closer to home. But contrast this with Wales, which has 3.4% of Oxford-admitted students between 2022-2024, and 4.4% of the UK's AAA+ students. So, what is being done differently?

Firstly, historical connections to the region seem to have retained their strength much more effectively, with Jesus College standing head and shoulders above the rest. Lovingly referred to as “Coleg Iesu”, almost 1 in 5 of its applications came from Wales, and in the 2022-

2024 period it welcomed 41 of the University's 259 Welsh undergraduate students. The College has strong connections with the Seren scheme, led by the Welsh government, running annual summer schools and publishing a Welsh-language version of their prospectus on their website, which is visited almost as frequently as its English counterpart.

Jesus College also boasts an unusually strong social media presence, reporting ten million views across social media platforms in the last twelve months. Dr Matt Williams, Access Fellow at the College, is the face of the campaign – making him somewhat of a celebrity. Jesus College's content goes further than the usual ‘Day in My Life as an Oxford Student’, or moody edits of college buildings set to a trending audio. Williams instead challenges prospective applicants to think critically in preparation for an Oxford interview, with the hope of “nurturing curiosity” and “helping you make informed decisions about your future”.

As for the lack of a set standard for college outreach, “for the most part the collegiate system offers the sort of fizzing laboratory of policy ideas you see in different American

states,” Williams told *Cherwell*. “The obvious downside is to scalability and coherence. But we are able and willing to work across colleges and with UAO [Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach] on bigger projects. Oxford has an unusually ambitious outreach agenda when compared to most UK unis. We are expected to focus on pretty much the entirety of the UK, where many unis have a more local focus. As such, splitting up the UK amongst the colleges does, for the most part, work.”

Jesus College’s efforts clearly work. Nearly double the proportion of UK applicants to Oxford hailed from Wales in comparison to Scotland from 2022-24, who have no regional college counterpart. In terms of turning outreach into applications, the visibility provided by specialised online resources is paramount. “Social media puts us where young people around the country are”, says Williams.

For the most part the collegiate system offers the sort of fizzing laboratory of policy ideas you see in different American states

Central programmes

In 2019, the University launched its Oxford for UK programme, which aimed to ensure that potential students from all corners would be encouraged to apply and be supported in the process. It marked a reorganisation of college outreach that both leaned on old ties and looked to forge new ones. Outreach in different regions was dedicated to specific colleges in order to extend reach and bolster regional diversity not just at Oxford, but university in general.

Visit The Queen’s College over the Easter vacation, for example, and you would find the North West Science Residential, where year 12 students from Cumbria, Lancashire, Blackburn, and Blackpool have the unique opportunity to taste what a science-related degree at Oxford might be like. Or see St John’s College’s Inspire Programme, which, in addition to partnership with Sussex, Southampton, Ealing, and Harrow, acknowledges the importance of encouraging “all pupils with exceptional promise to aim high, to stretch themselves academically and to be confident in making well-founded applications

to a top university like Oxford”.

The role of college outreach is also crucial in bridging what for many looms as the daunting gap between clicking “submit” on UCAS, and the possibility of an offer. Particularly in areas in which higher education is neither common nor considered accessible to most, schemes, such as the Catalyst programme run by St Catherine’s College, play a big role in supporting applicants throughout the process. It operates as a sustained contact programme, providing additional friendly communication to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and reaching 1,200 school pupils per year on average. This can be measured by POLAR, which classifies areas based on the proportion of young people participating in higher education, with quantiles 1-5 representing lowest-highest rates. As a result of Catalyst, whilst Catz has only slightly above the average proportion of applicants from POLAR quintile 1 areas, it delivers the second-highest number of accepted offers for these students – behind only Worcester College.

Nor does the importance of such communication diminish even after offers are sent out, as the most recent admissions report reflects. Despite issuing just 15 fewer offers to ACORN 4 and 5 (postcodes with the most socioeconomic disadvantage) students in 2024 compared to 2021, 85 fewer students were admitted last year, and 95 fewer the year before: a worrying trend potentially reflecting the feeling amongst disadvantaged applicants that Oxford is not somewhere they want to be.

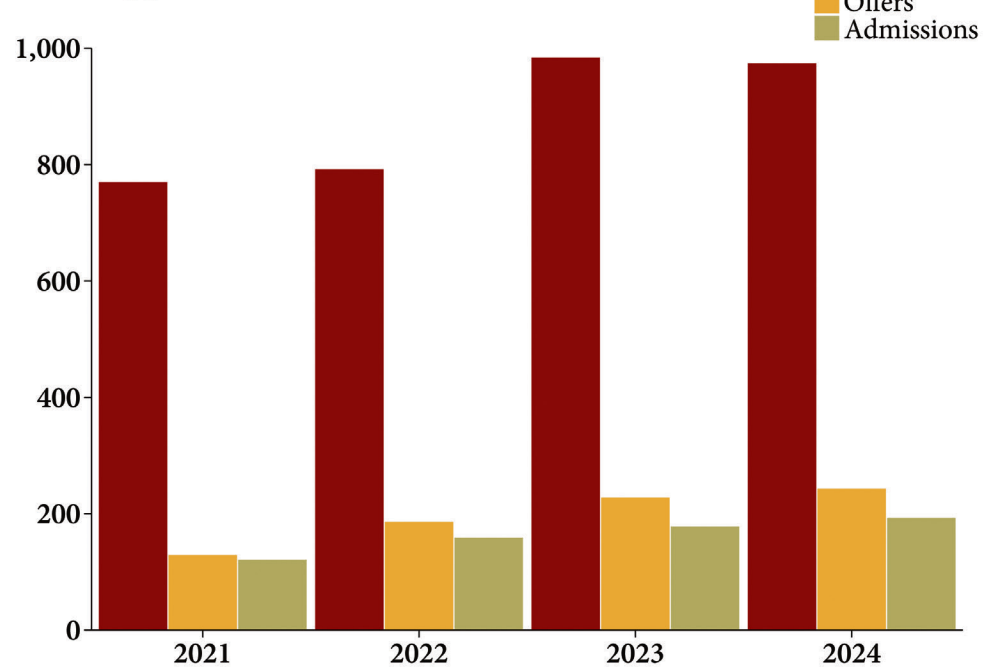
A worrying trend

The intake from both of the lowest two ACORN and POLAR categories has fallen since 2020. Regional data shows the link between this and the most underrepresented areas at Oxford; those with the lowest rates of acceptance relative to offers extended include Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the North West.

The consistent fall in applications from disadvantaged backgrounds has led to more University-wide efforts. In 2010, the UNIQ programme was born. A free summer access residential for state-school students, UNIQ gives prospective applicants a taste of Oxford life, with academic and application skills sessions providing invaluable support that is otherwise inaccessible for those from areas of lower progression to Oxbridge.

But was this enough? 2019 saw the announcement of Opportunity Oxford, with the initial aim of “increasing significantly the number of most promising students from groups who are currently under-represented

FSM application results over time



in Oxford”. The fortnight-long, mandatory residential gives underrepresented students the chance to familiarise themselves with Oxford’s libraries, cafes, and pubs before the arrival of the rest of the University, even fitting in time for practice formals at various colleges.

Pomfret emphasises not only the importance of the likes of Opportunity Oxford, but consistent support as you begin

While some extra weeks to get your head around the concept of Park End may sound appealing, it remains unclear whether this separation of students based on income/background does more harm than good. The programme has been praised by Class Act President, Chloe Pomfret, who told *Cherwell* it gave her “a sense of belonging, a chance to settle into Oxford, to see that I did deserve my offer” and that it is “one of the best things the University has done to support students from underrepresented backgrounds”.

However, the mandatory nature of the programme has also been described by second-year participating students from 2024’s cohort as “patronising”, with two extra, compulsory weeks of an intense Oxford workload feeling like “a punishment” despite “us being assured by programme staff that we were just as if not even more capable than the rest of our year group”. With 2024 also seeing the lowest intake of state-school students since pre-2019, the current efforts of the University are undoubtedly positive, but recent discontent reaffirms the importance of consistent student input to outreach efforts.

Student-led efforts

Campaigns like Class Act seek to level the playing field, in the meantime. Without the affiliation of an individual college, it focuses on integration during as well as before study. Pomfret described the campaign to *Cherwell* as an attempt “to bring people together so they don’t feel alone, providing a safe space to ask questions and share their experiences with other students from similar backgrounds”. Pomfret emphasises not only the importance of the likes of Opportunity Oxford, but consistent support as you begin your degree. “You don’t know where to buy sub fusc, or you’re struggling with the class divide, or you don’t know how to apply for bursaries when you can’t afford your rent, it feels scary and isolating. Having somewhere you can ask these questions makes a world of difference.”

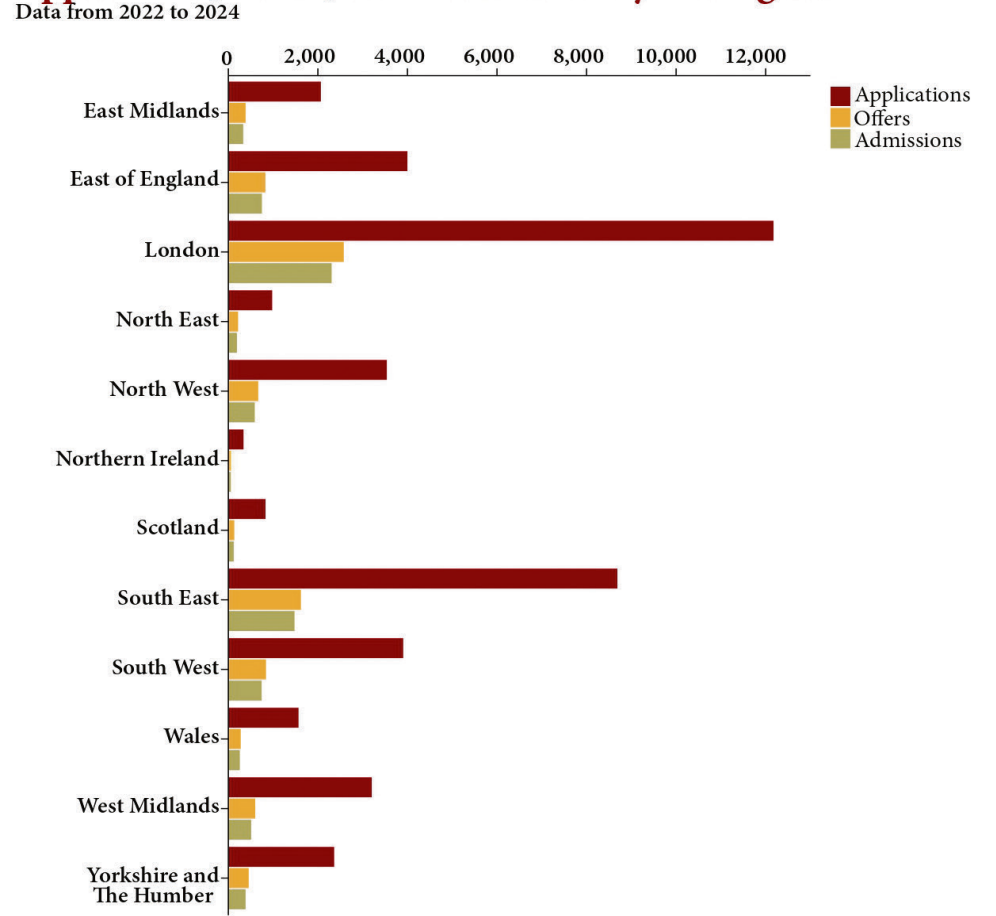
Now considered a society, alongside Oxford’s 93% Club, the passionate outreach action of current students during the already chaotic Oxford term suggests it is a hot-button topic. Encompassing three tiers: the University, the colleges, and the students, it clearly takes a village to accurately portray the many faces of such a large-scale, hyper-represented institution. Each branch differs socially, culturally, and financially – as Pomfret adds, “when a prospective applicant asks me for college recommendations, I ask what matters to them. For example, if they’re estranged or care experienced, I recommend colleges I’ve worked with and seen consistently focus on supporting students from this background”. Given this complexity, it would be wrong to suggest outreach should take just one avenue of holistic or historical: a constantly developing relationship, as the city’s blend of old and new, tradition and modernity is ultimately what sets Oxford apart.

The role of college outreach is also crucial in bridging what for many looms as the daunting gap between clicking “submit” on UCAS, and the possibility of an offer – particularly in areas in which higher education is neither common nor considered accessible to most

However, data-backed regional inconsistencies show us that there is certainly more to be done to level the playing field amongst UK admitted students, especially those from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Yes, the individuality of college outreach allows for close, applied work. However, the system relies on all colleges pulling their respective weight at all times and in all departments: unfortunately, a hopeful ideal, as continuous data disparities suggest. Sometimes a tote bag and biro are just not going to cut it...

Image credit: Indiana Sharp for Cherwell.
Graph credit: Oscar Reynolds.

Application, offers, and admissions by UK region



American academics are finding a new home at Oxford

Differences in politics and governance are pushing American academics out of the United States. With global academia looking to gain, will Oxford be competitive?

ANISH VEDANTHAM

As political and financial pressures mount across American higher education, a quiet migration is underway. A growing number of US academics are relocating elsewhere, and Oxford, with its collegiate community, institutional stability, and research reputation, stands to benefit. Is it doing enough to attract this new talent?

The current crisis

Amid funding cuts and political interference, US universities have seen a rising number of scholars, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, seeking positions abroad.

One of these academics is Luke Jennings, now a DPhil candidate in Ancient Philosophy at Somerville College, who began his postgraduate journey in the United States. After studying at Bard College and Tufts University, he completed his Master's (MSt) at Oxford. Later, he started a PhD at the University of California, San Diego, before deciding to return to Oxford to complete his doctoral work.

Initially, Jennings' move was motivated by intellectual rather than political reasons. "I came to the MSt because Oxford is a centre for ancient philosophy," he said. "At my previous institution, there wasn't a lot of opportunity to study ancient philosophy specifically."

Yet his later decision to leave the US was shaped by growing unease about the direction of American academia. "It wasn't originally motivated by political concerns," he explained, "but as things changed at the beginning of the Trump administration, there were a number of very visible changes...There's concern about what academia in the US is going to look like in the next couple of years, and a lot of uncertainty."

Jennings described friends who had begun taking precautionary steps – some deleting social media accounts or preparing to move departments – amid fears over research scrutiny and visa insecurity.

"It does kind of feel like you're a frog in a boiling pot of water," he said. "And then it's a question of, well, when do you jump? A lot of people have different thresholds for that kind of thing. But the peace of mind that would come from moving to a place which isn't as clearly teetering in a politically alarming direction would be appealing for a lot of people."

For Oxford, the turbulence in the US has created an opening. I spoke to Professor Dale Dorsey, formerly the Dean's Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the University of Kansas, who joined Somerville College earlier this year. He noted that European universities could strategically capitalise on the American system's instability. "If UK universities and European universities were to get their act together, this sort of upheaval of American universities presents them with an extraordinary opportunity to hire and retain some of the best minds in every field," he said. "If they were to make a concerted effort to recruit the best minds...it would not be so difficult to do so at this point in time. It's just the question of political will."

There's a concern about what academia in the US is going to look like in the next couple of years, and a lot of uncertainty

He suggested that the British government's recent efforts are positive steps, though more could be done. The Global Talent Visa scheme allows leaders in their respective fields to work in the UK for five years and the UK Research Innovation's "Horizon Europe" provides funding for innovation in key areas like climate change and food security, or research of a groundbreaking nature. "There is low-hanging fruit," Dorsey said, "and they just have to reach up and pick it". Still, the current steps are geared either to the entire world, or to Europe. There are few initiatives directly targeted at US academics looking to relocate.

Dorsey suggested that the government and universities could "put together a fund...and get the top 100 minds from the US that are looking to move," a vision that would require coordination among the Home Office, the research councils, and university development offices.

For Oxford specifically, the challenge lies in converting individual hires into a coherent

institutional strategy. The University already benefits from global reputation, but could go further. This could be done by expanding visa-cost reimbursement to all academic hires, partnering with UKRI to create targeted fellowships for scholars relocating from the US, and further reporting staff nationality data to demonstrate transparency and institutional commitment to international recruitment.

These measures would turn a reactive opportunity into deliberate policy, ensuring that the influx of talent strengthens Oxford's long-term research base rather than remaining a temporary by-product of foreign instability.

The long-term picture

Aside from the short-term political impetus, there is a deeper difference between the UK and the US driving some academics to relocate. Professor Dorsey was one such academic. For him, the contrast between university governance in the United States and at Oxford was immediate and striking.

"What has happened in the US is that the administrators have grown in size not commensurate with the size of the faculty," he explained. "They've started to determine things that have always been in the faculty's purview, and the notion that there is shared governance between faculty and administrators isn't really true."

By contrast, Dorsey said, Oxford's decision-making remains notably democratic. "Every major decision has to go before the governing body," he said. "Every member of the faculty has a say in what happens to the University. If you have an idea, that's not something to just be ignored, but something that we can deliberate about and think about. That's such a freeing feeling."

While governance was not the sole reason for his move, Dorsey described the experience of joining Oxford as unexpectedly revitalising. "It's helped me become more invested in the place," he added. "This is a community where I want to be and do work."

This sense of community is not incidental, but structurally embedded in Oxford's collegiate system. Oxford's colleges serve as both academic and social anchors. New academic staff become members of a college and a university department, with plenty of ways to meet new people from different areas. This stands in stark contrast to most American universities, where departments function as relatively independent administrative units.

This can be seen also with the University's pay policy, where salaries are split proportionally according to duties to the college and to the department. This dual structure fosters cross-disciplinary interaction and a shared sense of identity that many US academics may find unfamiliar. As Dorsey observed, it creates an environment where "every member of the faculty has a say" – a sharp departure from the hierarchical, administrator-dominated governance that characterises much of American academia.

Oxford's intellectual pull also remains a major factor. Jennings emphasised that the University offers unique intellectual conditions. "As far as ancient philosophy is concerned, I just have a wealth of opportunities to do certain things here," he said. "Oxford has something like eight faculty members working in different areas of ancient philosophy."

Additionally, the collegiate system remains a strong pull factor. For incoming academics, it offers more than just employment. Fellows get access to membership in an interdisciplinary community, where they are able to have conversations with faculty across departments, whether that's in the dining hall or in the Senior Common Room. Not every academic will be a fellow. New postgraduates, particularly DPhil students, face high teaching workloads for little reward. But the collegiate system may help ensure that they have resources and other staff members they can consult for advice. In this respect, Oxford's culture of academic intimacy and autonomy serves as a direct counterpoint to the bureaucratic alienation many American academics describe.

The density of expertise, combined with the collegiate system, gives Oxford an edge in attracting postgraduate talent. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports that non-UK and non-EU nationals now make up 18% of all university staff across Britain – a record high. While the number of Americans hasn't been broken down, it's likely that their numbers are rising as well. In Oxford specifically, around 17% of staff are non-UK, non-EU nationals, according to figures published by the University's HR Analytics Team. Notably, that number rises to 20% in the social sciences and 23% in Maths, Physical, & Life Sciences.



With Nigel Farage and certain developments in the UK too there's the question of whether there really is a best place

Impacts on global academia

The presence of more US-trained academics could have visible effects on Oxford's teaching and postgraduate environment. For Oxford students, this convergence of systems could enrich tutorials with new methodological perspectives. From an institutional viewpoint, the arrival of more international scholars can further enrich the Oxford system.

Oxford can benefit from US-based research grants and networks being 'transplanted' into Oxford, thereby strengthening bilateral collaboration. At the moment, exchange programs demonstrate the value the University already draws from bilateral collaboration, particularly at undergraduate level. The Williams-Exeter program offers undergraduates a chance to study at Exeter College for a year, while the Stanford in Oxford programme provides exchanges with Brasenose College. Globally, the Rhodes Scholarship highlights the importance of this collaboration, funding postgraduate study at Oxford for international scholars. The fact that prominent US scholars consider Oxford a viable option bolsters its pull to global talent, reinforcing Oxford's position in the 'global talent' marketplace.

However, the implications are not wholly benign or straightforward. Oxford's systems of promotion, teaching loads, and fellowship structure differ significantly from US norms. Further, differences in the college and tutorial systems may hinder US-based academics' integration into Oxford. What's more, Oxford does already draw heavily on international talent. It is not guaranteed that the institutions will be able to absorb more academics, and the need to pay more staff members, without existing imbalances in teaching, funding, and infrastructure being exacerbated.

And, of course, both academics note that this will also depend heavily on funding. "Funding is a very difficult thing to come by," Jennings said. "As a DPhil student, I'm fully funded, but that's not the case for many. If the UK has funds, I think it would be great – for the health of the profession."

It is vital to recognise that while Oxford may benefit from US-academic 'exports', the phenomenon is contingent and fragile.

Although a global academic workforce may be desirable for different perspectives and bilateral collaboration, visa regimes and immigration policy complicate the reality. One briefing from the Migration Observatory shows that while large

numbers of non-EU study-visa arrivals remain, transitions to long-term stay have only recently increased. If visa uncertainty dissuades scholars, the pipeline may narrow.

It's also worth noting the UK's visa and immigration system, notably the Global Talent and Skilled Worker routes, remains expensive and administratively burdensome. "It was wildly expensive for the NHS surcharge," Dorsey admitted, "but apart from that, the visa process was much smoother than I expected it to be. The people at Oxford really helped".

But integration into Oxford life is not uniform. While many colleges offer structured induction programmes, relocation support, and mentoring, there is no standardised or University-wide framework. Some colleges provide housing assistance, spousal employment advice, or childcare guidance, whereas others rely on informal mentorship networks. The variability reflects the autonomy of individual colleges within the wider University structure. This system offers flexibility but can leave newcomers navigating complex administrative layers.

Additionally, colleges also vary in how much funding they provide for relocation and other related fees. Combined with Oxford's higher living costs and lower average salaries relative to elite American institutions, these factors could constrain the University's ability to retain transatlantic talent long-term.

More importantly, the UK now has to compete with other global academic powers to court US talent. Other countries, such as Germany and Canada, are also actively recruiting global scholars. Aix-Marseille University offers "scientific asylum" for US-based academics, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel opened 12 new postdoctoral positions with a focus on America, and The European Research Council, the bloc's funding arm for fundamental research, announced this past spring it would double the additional amount available for researchers who wanted to relocate from the U.S. from €1 million to €2 million. Oxford and the UK must therefore remain nimble.

Neither academic I spoke to expressed an intention to return to the United States soon. Dorsey was unambiguous: "I don't really see any need to move on from Oxford," he said. "I'm perfectly happy to stay here as long as I can – as long as they'll let me."

Yet both acknowledged that no system is immune to political risk. "With Nigel Farage and certain developments in the UK too," Jennings noted, "there's the question of whether there really is a best place".

Still, for now, Oxford appears to be a beneficiary of a shifting academic order. The same political uncertainty that has made life difficult for scholars in the US could further reinforce the allure of the British model.

Whether this becomes a long-term trend or merely a momentary reaction will depend on the ability of British universities to sustain openness, funding, and institutional autonomy. As Dorsey put it: "This upheaval presents an opportunity." The question, then, is whether Oxford will seize it.

Image credit: Pjposullivan, CC BY 2.0, via Flickr.

PROFILES

“I’ve always wanted to understand the past through the past’s own eyes.”

Dominic Sandbrook on Balliol, war, and *The Rest is History*

SOPHIE PRICE

Few historians can claim household-name status. Fewer still can boast of podcast audiences rivalling chart-topping musicians. However, typing “The rest is...” into Spotify now summons a miniature empire of spin-offs, politics, money, and film, all descendants of the original *The Rest Is History*, which Dominic Sandbrook co-presents with Tom Holland.

However, before diving into the podcast itself, we began with the question at the heart of the show’s success: what does it mean, in the 21st century, to study history?

“I’m of a generation”, he says, “where most people did humanities subjects at A-level and then went on to do humanities degrees. They were the high-status subjects, highly prestigious and very desirable. I think part of that was because, in the pre-internet world, university was your gateway to these things.”

He remembers his undergraduate years at Balliol College vividly: “If you were interested in English or history, by going to university to do it, especially at a university like Oxford, you would feel that the sort of great doors were opening, and you were being ushered into this exciting new world where you could read up on things that interested you. It would be hard to access that world if you weren’t at university.”

Now, he admits, those gates have widened. “I think one of the things that’s happened now that contributes to the decline of humanities subjects is that people question, rightly or wrongly, whether they need to go to university if they’re still interested in those things. You can listen to podcasts, you can watch YouTube videos, you can do all these things without necessarily having to commit yourself to formal study.” Despite dismay at the decline of humanities study in recent decades, Sandbrook has identified a way to turn this cultural shift into an opportunity. He admits: “The weird thing is, in some ways, that’s probably good for me, because it means people can listen to our podcast.”

The numbers tell the story of a public that can fall in love with learning, as *The Rest Is History* now yields over 11 million monthly downloads since its launch in 2020. Yet Sandbrooke is cautious not to oversell what the medium can do. “I’m not so vain as to think it’s equivalent to studying it properly”, he continues. “I just think in a world that’s very digital and much more visual than it used to be, the old humanities subjects are struggling for airtime.” Still, he sees the enthusiasm from younger listeners as proof that curiosity about the past is far from fading. “I hope”, Sandbrook says, “that we’ve restored some of that appeal. We were astonished by how many of our listeners are under 35, teens, twenties, and early thirties. It’s heartening, because it shows there’s still a massive appetite for history, and that people are invested in the study of the past, of what it means to be human.”

Part of that connection comes from the comedic narrative style of the show, which Sandbrook describes using the same plain enthusiasm that has made the podcast so accessible for regular listeners. “We tell history as a story, as a narrative. We’re always thinking, how do we bring people in? Our producers are great at saying, ‘Think about the ordinary listener who’s listening for the first time.’” “We actually think it’s fun”, he insists. “I’m not always convinced that every academic specialist thinks of it that way. They sometimes think of it as worthy, which we tend not to do.”

Underneath the wit lies a principled commitment to the past as it was lived, not as modern readers might want it to be

Putting the humour into history is something Sandbrook shares with his younger audience as well in his bestselling *Adventures in Time*. “Children”, he says, “have an inexhaustible



appetite for good stories”. His recent titles transform great historical moments, from Alfred and the Vikings to Dunkirk, into vivid, fast-paced adventures. When I ask how writing for young readers compares to his adult audience, Sandbrook stands up for his child readers and refutes the assumption that writing for children means diluting the material. “You don’t have to dumb it down, necessarily, but basically, treating the stories of history as being good as the greatest stories of literature or pop culture. So I thought, why not write a history book for children? There’s a straight narrative.”

He recalls a striking comment from an editor: “I’ve edited many books in the Second World War, but I’ve never, ever seen one before where I knew that the reader wouldn’t know who’s going to win.” Sandbrook explains how the joy of writing for children is refreshingly pure, from seeing children’s historically themed Halloween costumes on social media to the passion for historical books at World Book Day. “Writing for children is much more satisfying because an adult generally writes to you when they spot a mistake or they want to take issue with something, whereas the child will write to you and just tell you which bit they loved.”

While the show thrives on entertainment and humour, underneath the wit lies a principled commitment to the past as it was lived, not as modern readers might want it to be. “For me,

history always comes first, and I don’t believe in using history. I mean, there are two ways that people use history when they write, I think: either as a window looking out at something else, or as a mirror, to look back at yourself and your own society, and using it as a mirror has always struck me as a very boring thing to do.”

He elaborates carefully, conscious of how charged this terrain can be in academia: “I don’t want to hear about a writer’s prejudices or the concerns of his own time, particularly. I know those are inescapable to some degree, but as much as possible, I want to understand the past through the past’s own eyes, and that’s definitely what I try to do.”

“If somebody said, ‘Oh, you’re a politically biased writer’, I would be gutted, because I definitely don’t see myself that way.” For Sandbrook, history may be about the fun and the facts, but the pull of the story itself is what matters most, not the spectacles that the present day might try to slip onto it.

One detail that frequently catches listeners off guard is the depth to which Sandbrook and Holland immerse themselves in the material, undertaking all their own research to craft narratives that unfold across multiple episodes. His weekly research routine, he jokes, would be familiar to any Oxford undergraduate, laughing about “fifty-two essay crises a year”, finding the podcast not so different to the research he did

OXFORD SPOTLIGHT

James Vowles spoke to *Cherwell* about rebuilding the ‘Sleeping Giant’ of Williams F1

Cherwell’s Sophie Price spoke to James Vowles, motorsport engineer and principal for Williams Racing



James Vowles doesn’t believe in “bad luck”. It’s a surprising stance from the leader of a Formula 1 team with nine constructors’ and seven drivers’ titles to its name, that spent the last two decades treading water behind the new top dogs. However, just down the road from Oxford exists an unmistakable sense of forward motion. Williams Racing is looking to make a return to the front of the F1 field, building on the foundations of historic accolades, but looking forward to a new era of success. As team principal, James Vowles stands at the helm of their fight back to the front.

When I speak to Vowles, heading into the last quarter of the 2025 Formula 1 season, the schedule seems impossibly full: “We’re going to be racing our 2025 car, whilst building our 2026 car, and we’re having our 2027 meetings in the background as well. It gets a little bit hectic.”

Amid the chaos of the 2025 season, his priorities are far more structural, focusing on changes back at HQ in Grove to support the long-term vision of William’s comeback. “We didn’t put the focus on this year’s car. What we were doing, and still doing, is just fixing some foundational ways of working. What I’m happy about is just doing the basics right and producing a reasonable, competitive car.”

The back-to-basics approach has paid off. So far, in 2025, Williams has earned more points than in the previous two seasons combined, and currently sits P5 in the constructors’ championship, leading a tight midfield battle into the final races of the season.

This upward momentum is, as Vowles insists, not the result of one silver bullet but of shared belief. Though no longer family-operated, the culture of an independent family business remains strong at Grove, where 1,100 employees come together under a single goal. “The amount of passion in Williams is extraordinary, and it’s what drives the team”, Vowles says. Using an apt motoring metaphor, he explains: “It’s a little bit like an engine. Once you’ve introduced a little bit of fuel, air, and some spark, it drives itself. That’s the same within Williams. It’s now self-propelling.”

Williams’ driver lineup embodies that same spirit in Alex Albon and Carlos Sainz. “Drivers are fascinating individuals”, Vowles says. “The driver is the most expensive, but also the best sensor that we have in the car, and they’re very good at directing a team, so trust them and their

voice.”

The data-driven philosophy relies on a handy rule of three. He explains: “Number one is the car itself. Number two is the driver – they’re the best sensor we have. And number three is the data, the lap times. If two of those sources align, that’s the truth.”

As Team Principal, Vowles recognises his role as both strategist and communicator. “My job is to create a North Star that we can all look and point at, and if you’re unsure where we’re going, it’s always in the sky.” That North Star extends beyond the Oxfordshire factory, with William’s media presence involving debriefs and team statements to provide clarity following race weekends. For Vowles, media responsibility is an opportunity rather than a burden. “Transparency is really important to me. It’s who I am as a character.”

“It doesn’t matter if there is a camera in front of my face, or whether we’re chatting on the street. I’m here to go racing, make a fast racing car, win championships and to do it in the most sportsmanlike manner”. This approach, he argues, has strengthened Williams’ relationship with its supporters and opened its doors to the next generation of team members. “For Williams to be successful, we need people to be behind us on a journey. We are sports and entertainment. We have to remember that at our core.”

Beyond the social media spotlight and pressures of managing the season, there is constant attention to Williams’ future. For Vowles, the long-term plan to champion success in motorsport naturally gravitates to the role of students and graduates. “I really believe in investing in our future generations”, he says, acknowledging the importance of continuity in leadership. “I’m here to bring this team to a much better place, but then take the shirt and hand it over to the next generation so that I can watch from the sidelines and be incredibly proud of what I’ve been able to develop.”

For Williams, that mission begins close to home. “We’re an Oxford-based team. And so what makes more sense to me than anything in my mind is taking one of the top-tier universities and presenting an opportunity and a pathway that we will take the brightest and best.”

[Read the full article at cherwell.org](#)

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as a history student. “I loved doing my degree, I loved the fact that having written my essay, the tutor would say next week we’re doing X, here’s the reading list, off you go.” And I genuinely like going to the library to get the books out, because I’d be like, ‘I can’t wait to find out about this. I’m looking forward to it.’”

“I’m telling the story in my way, and getting somebody else to do that for me would never work. The result is that I think the show feels fresher and more authentic because we’ve genuinely done our own reading.”

Curious about whether the podcast’s trademark camaraderie ever masks classic academic dispute, I ask about the trickiest kinds of historical mysteries: the ones that can only end with “we’ll never know”. He shakes his head. “Not so much the controversial ones where nobody knows what happened, but sometimes we definitely disagree about bad characters, because we generally try to follow the most recent scholarship on something, and we generally tend to agree.”

Narrative confidence, however, does not shield him from the unpredictability of the present. Of *The Rest is History – The Rest is Politics* 2024 US election crossover, where he alone guessed the outcome correctly, he remains matter-of-fact. “It was 50-50 in the polls. So it wasn’t exactly like it was going to take great insight to pull that one off. I think some of

the people on that panel were thinking with their hearts rather than their heads. And I just thought, I didn’t want him to win, I was gutted that he won, but I didn’t think Kamala Harris would, you know, inspire as much enthusiasm as my fellow panellists did.”

Discussing recent events in politics can be a reminder of how challenging it is to write about the recent past. Sandbrook’s speciality as an academic historian lies in the late 20th century, with books such as *Never Had It So Good* on British history in the 1950s-1960s and more recently *White Heat*, which takes readers through the 1970s. As the decades inch closer to recent memory, he describes how “it’s much harder to stand back and be reflective about it. You don’t quite know how the story will play out in the end. You’re very invested in it, personally, in a sort of partisan way, often. I think it’s hard sometimes to see the wood for the trees. The closer you get to the periods where you were kind of politically mature, where you could vote, for example, it becomes very hard to divorce”. He reflects on this quietly for a moment before adding: “I don’t think historians can ever be objective, but I think any claim to neutrality would be...well, it becomes much harder.”

[Read the full article at cherwell.org](#)

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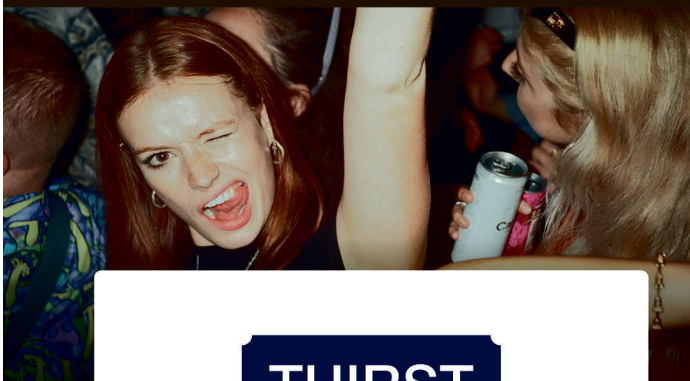


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‘You will kill my children!’: *A View from the Bridge*

Incorporating both maximalist and minimalist elements with considerable success, this production could not be more timely

CHARLIE BAILEY



The stellar cast of Labyrinth Productions’ *A View from the Bridge* delivered a layered, spellbindingly emotional interpretation of a classic. Director Rosie Morgan-Males told *Cherwell* that she was inspired to put on the play because she likes “doing theatre that [contributes to] a pertinent conversation”. She certainly delivered: the interactions between disgruntled patriarch Eddie (Nate Wintraub) and the Italian immigrants he took into his home (Rob Wolfrey and Gilon Fox), related the play’s interest in immigrant stereotyping to current political discourse, such as the rhetoric of Reform UK.

From the outset it was clear that these actors were top class. Nate Wintraub delivered the standout performance as Eddie: every mannerism amounted to a volatile, insecure patriarch desperate to assert his superior masculinity. He was able to switch between aggressive, gravelly outbursts and a disturbing velvety tone, directed towards Catherine in lines such as “you look like the Madonna type”, that revealed his twisted passions. Catherine Claire was the perfect choice for the character of Catherine, nailing the portrayal of a fragile, hopelessly naïve adolescent girl, unable to understand the sinister nature of Eddie’s feelings towards her.

The differences between relaxed Rodolpho (Rob Wolfreys) and his emotionally sombre older brother Marco (Gilon Fox) were clearly defined by the juxtaposed performances of the actors: Fox began with an authentic portrayal of Marco’s sadness at leaving his wife and sick children back in Italy, and ably escalated his performance into raw, powerful anger at the ways in which Eddie had wronged him. In one strikingly memorable line at the climax of his rage, he screamed: “You will kill my children!”

Masculinity, and the undermining of it, was central to the play, and Wintraub, Wolfreys, and Fox delivered three contrasting renderings of it which were fantastic to watch. Wintraub’s fixation on control over the women around him was shown



in the possessive choreography, as he frequently placed a hand on Catherine’s neck while speaking to her. The less toxically masculine nature of Rodolpho’s character was portrayed by Wolfrey with a bouncy, relaxed physicality, and action towards Catherine that conveyed kindness and warmth rather than aggression.

The increasingly tense interactions between Fox and Wintraub created a competition for masculine honour which Fox inevitably and violently won. The production chose to emphasise this part of the storyline, with a musical crescendo and dramatic shift in lighting at the point where Marco demonstrated his superior strength by lifting a chair up from the ground. This was effective, if unsubtle.

My critique of the music arises not from the score itself (proficiently composed by Louis Benneyworth, Peter Hardisty, and Tabby Hopper) but its constant presence. Given the raw talent of the actors, I felt some more conversational scenes would have carried equal impact without the musical backdrop. Yet, having said this, student

theatre is the place for experimentation; the intersection between classic and electronic music was a novel way of approaching an underscore, a bold choice which was certainly memorable.

Euan Elliot’s multi-leveled set was well-designed to accommodate more abstract as well as realistic moments. He expressed this intention to *Cherwell*: “On the one hand the structures are the fire escapes and tenement buildings surrounding the flat. On the other it’s just spaces and levels.” He credits inspiration for the design to a 2014 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that used similar suggestions of tenement buildings as well as LEDs and an open-walled house around the outside of the stage. Balconies behind the action provided a means of locating Alfieri (Alice Wyles) as a spotlit, godlike narrator, alluding to his authorial voice within the narrative. They also served as a device to convey the sense of an overcrowded New York community in which no family drama went undetected.

In general, the use of set, graphics and music fed into each other well, but the onstage action

became overly chaotic towards the end: the dramatic entrance of two black-clad immigration officers had a slightly 007-esque tone that worked against the more subtle performances of the rest of the production. Some of these choices are put in context by Morgan-Males’ interpretation of the script. She told *Cherwell*: “The play is often viewed as naturalistic, but it’s not. It has this whole narrator framing device to it and a Greek tragic structure.” She described her directorial style as a blend of “maximalist” and “minimalist” approaches – this addition of melodrama to the naturalistic was evident in the intense lighting choices and bright-coloured background screen projections.

Whether or not the use of dramatic graphic tableaux in connection with a highly naturalistic script was to the audience’s taste, the Playhouse is indeed known for spectacle, and Labyrinth Productions did not fail to deliver that.

Interviews by Georgia Campbell.

Image credit: Freddie Houlaha, with permission.

[Read the full article at cherwell.org](#)

Did the most anticipated play of the term deliver?

MAIR ANDREWS

Rivalling professional quality, Fennec Fox Production’s *Uncle Vanya* is doubtless one of the strongest performances to grace the O’Reilly this term

It is a privilege to attend the most anticipated production of the term, and even more so when that production is a triumph. As a piece of student theatre rivalling professional quality, Fennec Fox Production’s *Uncle Vanya* is doubtless one of the strongest performances to grace the O’Reilly this term.

This production of Anton Chekhov’s classic is brought to life through the contemporary translation by Robert Icke. Set in the Russian countryside, everything stems from the visit of old professor Alexander (Giles MacDonald) and his younger wife Elena (Laura Boyd) to the country estate left to him by his first wife. John (Ezana Betru), brother of the professor’s

first wife, and the local doctor Micheal (Rufus Shutter), both become enamoured by Elena while Sonya (Lucía Mayorga), the professor’s daughter, develops unrequited feelings for the doctor.

The general overview: it is quickly established that almost all characters want something they should not. Their feelings, connections, and worldviews are tugged and tangled like strings throughout the play, and by the end are tense to the point of irreparable rupture.

Like any play with such a large line-up of core cast members, it is constantly a riddle to work out what connects the characters. In this play, it is the past which is both perpetually present and unspoken: the death of Faith, Alexander’s first wife, looms over the house, as Faith lingers

onstage throughout the entire performance. Never speaking a word, she (Elektra Voulgari Cleare) simply watches the action of the play unfold, truly haunting the narrative. As the relationships between characters boil over, the play manages to maintain its sense of melancholy without being drowned in tension.

But the first wife is not the only constant onstage presence: the set design, featuring a grand forest, ensures that the importance of the natural world becomes an undeniable feature as the play progresses. The destruction of these forests, which occupies Michael’s troubled thoughts, is mirrored by the gradual collapse of the relationships within the house.

[Read the full article at cherwell.org](#)

‘Like the edge of a knife’: Lubomyr Melnyk’s ‘Continuous Music’

Lilia Goldstein on the self-proclaimed hippie and renowned Ukrainian pianist at Magdalen Chapel

Ukrainian pianist Lubomyr Melnyk took the stage in Magdalen College Chapel and the Holywell Music Room last Monday and Tuesday to showcase his unique style, called ‘Continuous Music’. In an informal lecture at Balliol College’s Hall, Melnyk spoke in detail about the origins and philosophy of his craft, as well as giving a dazzling, partially improvised performance.

True to its name, ‘Continuous Music’ is a style that flows in an “unbroken line of sound” and is unbelievably fast – Melnyk is considered to be the fastest pianist in the world, with the ability to play 19 notes per second with each hand. His music is not just about speed, though, but also a different relationship to the instrument than in classical piano, which Melnyk greatly admires. He describes ‘Continuous Music’ as a “completely new world of the piano and of the pianist”, where there is a unity between the two, which he compares to the roots of a tree. Amusingly, he describes how the style was born “through philosophy, through mathematics, through religion and, yes, because I was a hippie”.

With his long beard and philosophical musings, Melnyk definitely looks the part of a 21st century spiritual leader with hippie roots, but his practice is also rooted in political realities – he speaks of how his Ukrainian identity greatly informs the music he makes. According to him, Ukrainians are the only people “spiritually crazy” enough and who have gone through enough to create ‘Continuous Music’.

Melnyk claims that he can make the piano

‘sing’, and this certainly rings true after hearing him perform – when the piano is played that quickly, melodies and rhythms that aren’t actually in the score can be heard, as resonant overtones overlap and add themselves to the already rich texture. Unfortunately, this beautiful effect is lost in the process of recording, making this a music that has to be experienced live.

In terms of harmonic structure, the music adheres to the familiar traditions of Western functional harmony, and in this sense is unremarkable. If it wasn’t for its incredible speed and continuity, its gradually built-up textures and repetitive chordal structures could be likened to Ludovico Einaudi’s easy-listening instrumental music. Einaudi is a popular classical composer who, like Melnyk, has been inspired by minimalism.

Melnyk has experimented with atonalism in the past, but found that it merely provided aesthetic beauty and could not evoke the same level of emotion that functional harmony could. He describes moving over to a mostly functional harmonic language as the music being ‘purified’, a view that could be questioned because of the Eurocentrism that it implies – there’s an underlying sense here that standard Western harmonic structures drawn from classical music are spiritually superior to other harmonies. Rather than through harmony, his music is set apart from other contemporary classical music through the virtuosity of his style, and the spiritual inclinations of his work.

The talk had a tragic air – this is a music that only reaches its full potential when performed

live, and Melnyk only has a few students, none able to perform this music to as high a standard as him.

Whilst I did not agree with all of Lubomyr’s philosophical musings about music (he de-

scribed jazz as “spiritually revolting”, for example), *Continuous Music* made for an enthralling listening experience.

Image credit: Angela Signorastrì with permission.



Alternative Oxford: Stereotypes and body modifications

CIENNA JENNINGS

Surrounded by black-tie and subfusc, body modifications are not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Oxford University. However, as someone who attends the University and has 14 piercings, 5 of which are on my face and very visible, I have not had many negative experiences because of them. As to be expected, the standard piercings, such as earlobes and nose, are quite popular among the student population, but I have also met many other individuals with visible piercings.

The reasons for getting body modifications vary from cultural or aesthetic to self-expression. My decision to get most of my piercings was simply

because I thought they ‘looked cool’ and would help emphasise my individuality and represent my personal style.

The history of body modifications is long and varied. From the culture of ear stretching in pre-Roman Britain to nose rings that originated in the Middle East, body modifications have a culturally rich past. Body modifications were relatively acceptable before Christianity spread in Britain. However, they later became associated with paganism and were therefore deemed unacceptable. Later, during the Elizabethan period, piercings, specifically lobes, became a symbol of wealth among the upper-class, with Queen Elizabeth II often wearing them herself.



In the 1970’s the punk subculture made body modifications loud again. From spiked hair to visible tattoos and piercings, these acted as symbols of protest against the political system and social norms. Now, the same visible body modifications are almost everywhere: from mainstream television to your local barista, they have become more of a symbol of fashion and self-expression than one of rebellion.

Wanting to find out more about the culture of body modifications in Oxford, I took a trip down to Oxford’s most well-known tattoo and piercing studio, Tigerlilly. There I interviewed the owner, Mick Durham, about his experiences. He told *Cherwell* he has been working in Oxford since 1991, after he and his wife moved here.

When asked what inspired him to enter this line of work, he responded: “I always say that I did not choose tattoo and piercings, it chose me and it has been very kind to me.” Mick explained that he originally began by selling clothes and gifts from Guatemala. As customers started asking for jewellery, he began selling that too, eventually expanding to body jewellery. When people asked if he could fit the jewellery himself, he decided to learn how and later even taught his son – Brendan – to pierce.

I asked Mick whether he felt as if the culture of body modifications had changed over time in Oxford. He said it has become more popular, and credits much of this increase to David Beckham, stating how “as soon as we had a gorgeous, respected man who had tattoos, it became more acceptable to get them. David Beckham

is a working-class hero who made tattoos and piercings more respectable”.

It was clear from this interaction and my own research that there has been an upsurge in body modifications, especially in young people as they are becoming increasingly visible. However, there is still a stigma surrounding body modifications.

From mainstream TV to your local barista, body modifications have become more of a symbol of fashion and self-expression than one of rebellion

Visible tattoos and piercings are sometimes banned in professional workplaces, which may consciously or subconsciously stereotype against those who have them, as they are seen as affecting their ability to perform a job or get clients. But hopefully one day, as we continue to move towards being a progressive society, the judgement of people based on their appearances and how they choose to express themselves, body modifications and all, will no longer be an issue.

Image credit: Mick Durham with permission.

What's Oxford watching?



Frankenstein

Archie Johnston at Wadham College recommends *Frankenstein* (2025): "A gorgeous romantic reinterpretation of a classic." You can catch Guillermo del Toro's remake at the Ultimate Picture Palace.



Urchin

Toby Bowes Lyon at Christ Church recommends *Urchin* (2025): "A film that will change how you view the homelessness crisis, it's moving, brutal, and provocative, and an incredible directorial debut from Harris Dickinson." You can catch *Urchin* at the Ultimate Picture Palace.

Image credits: Harald Krichel, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons and Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Cinema in the Letterboxd age

EVE THOMAS

While watching Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another* (2025) a few weeks ago, I found myself asking a rather disturbing question: "I wonder what people on Letterboxd are saying about this?" The thought led me to wonder about my own viewing habits: my tendency to search out reviews before I've watched a film, to be naturally more laudatory towards films generally considered 'great' or seminal, and my tendency to, unfortunately, denigrate films based solely on some sort of received wisdom that they are bad. This in turn led me to consider whether the whole culture of cinema is changing, becoming increasingly commodified, so that films turn into just another way of 'performing', of distilling a part of ourselves for public consumption.

Letterboxd presents the most attractive – and addictive – means of performing the act of watching, allowing users to log, rate, and review every film they watch in a public forum. Unlike a legacy review website like Rotten Tomatoes, which gives more credence and airtime to professional critics or film journalists, Letterboxd democratises reviewing. A review of Todd Haynes' *Carol* (2015) which reads "all i want for Christmas is a milf", has the same chance of being seen by thousands of eyes as a 2000-word review which discusses the influence of the Freudian death drive on the protagonists of the film, replete with references to Beauvoir and Friedan. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with this: I am a Letterboxd user myself and can acknowledge that as a concept it is certainly a successful one. It is also an inevitable one. Goodreads has existed as a means of logging

books read since at least 2007, and Spotify wrapped day has attained the status of national holiday as a means of categorising, ranking and, crucially, publicising one's 'taste' or consumption of music.

Letterboxd presents the most attractive means of performing the act of watching

So what is the particular fascination with categorising and ranking films watched and enjoyed? Organising one's taste in this way, quantifying and gamifying the act of watching films is a means of distilling one's cultural personality into rapid and digestible bites which can serve as representations of the individual. It also allows viewers to establish a strict hierarchy of films; the rating of films forces the user to consider them against each other, to consider the relative 'goodness' of a film on a numerical scale. In other words, it requires the viewer to quantify a qualitative property. Of course, film rankings, and the snobbishness and general desire for esotericism that comes with them, have existed for decades. The *Sight & Sound* poll published every ten years by the BFI since 1952 has long been considered the gold standard of film rankings: 100 films chosen by the foremost directors, producers, and critics in the world. And certainly, I'm not disputing the idea that certain films have long been considered more cerebral, artistic and generally 'better' than others – with less mainstream, less

commercial films usually (unfairly) considered in this former category – yet, what is noticeable is a marked intensification and diffusion of this line of thinking as our taste becomes public to the world. There was some discussion when the 2022 *Sight & Sound* poll was released surrounding director Ti West's 10 film choices, which were deemed by certain internet users to be too basic, too generic. The list included films like *Citizen Kane* (1941), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Jaws* (1975), and *The Godfather* (1975), all films virtually universally considered as masterpieces, yet the Letterboxd generation objected to West's lack of individualism, the subtext being his lack of obscure choices.

This intensified desire to be perceived as esoteric is presumably a product of a number of factors, one being most obviously the increased access to more independent and world cinema driving people to hold 'commercial' cinema to a higher standard. Another is a wider and more societal shift, wherein we are increasingly visible to the outside world and are aware of this visibility. So, we curate our online personas in response to our perceived audience. Letterboxd's 'four favourite', four films which can be chosen to be displayed on one's profile, represents, perhaps, the epitome of this. Choosing four favourites of anything, but especially of something as diverse and complex as films, very quickly becomes an exercise in curating a particular collection of films that one wishes to represent something about oneself rather than a definitive list of the very best films ever. Which is fine, of course, and certainly not a new phenomenon.

[Read the full article at cherwell.org](https://cherwell.org)

Love letters to Oxford: The Pre-Raphaelites

NANCY GITTUS

On dark Michaelmas evenings, the faded grandeur of the Pre-Raphaelite murals in the Oxford Union Old Library, comes, dream-like, to life, returning the vivid colours the movement was so famous for.

It was in 1857, not long after the construction of the Oxford Union, that its architect, Benjamin Woodward, was visited by his close friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It was this very visit that sparked the creation of the second Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Upon deciding to take on the painting of the Oxford Union, Rossetti immediately began to reach out to his contacts in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, men such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Soon, a team of seven artists was assembled: Morris, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Valentine Prinsep, John Hungerford Pollen, Arthur Hughes, and Rodham Spencer Stanthorpe. Over the Long Vacation of 1857, they began to embellish the gothic debating hall in murals inspired by the Arthurian legends of Malory's recently published *Morte d'Arthur*, a book that Burne-Jones had discovered in a bookshop whilst an undergraduate at Oxford. Already, the city had begun to cast its spell, and they were eager to stay.

Working for free board, lodgings, and unlimited supplies of soda water, their work was perhaps not of the greatest quality. Having failed to adequately prepare the walls before painting, the result is that today the art is much faded, only clearly visible in the more subdued lighting of a winter's evening. Indeed, the group that Rossetti brought together were not hugely experienced, the whole process was somewhat disorganised, and had been abandoned by the end of the summer vacation. William Riviere and his son had to finish the last three panels. Nevertheless, as Prinsep later remembered: "What fun we had in that Union! What jokes! What roars of laughter!" It is clear to see that the project brought the young artists together, in many different ways, from forming a second Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and modelling for

each other, to even meeting their wives.

Jane Burden was the daughter of a stableman in Oxford, but was spotted by the artists during their project at the Union, and was asked to model for them. The murals being based on Arthurian legends, Burden was often used as a model for Queen Guinevere. Today, the best remaining example of Jane's modelling in the Oxford Union is Rossetti's Lancelot and the Queen Guinevere panel. Jane Burden went on to marry William Morris in 1859, although, in true Pre-Raphaelite fashion, she simultaneously conducted an affair with Rossetti. Burden became both Rossetti's and Morris' most desired model, and she continued to pose for them in many other paintings such as *The Day Dream* and *Reverie* (both by Rossetti).

Today, there is much pre-Raphaelite work around the city, from the Ashmolean to the Museum of Oxford and that isn't by accident. It was here in Oxford that the Pre-Raphaelites found support and encouragement. One couple in particular, The Combes, gave great support to the movement. Thomas Combe was a wealthy superintendent of the University, and he, and his wife Martha, were a great aid to young Pre-Raphaelite artists such as William Holman Hunt, Charles Collins, and John Everett Millais. The couple commissioned and bought paintings from the young artists, and even allowed them to stay in their Oxford home whilst they worked on commissions. The great friendship between the Combes and the Pre-Raphaelites, can be seen in paintings such as Collins' *Convent Thoughts*, which was painted in the Combes' garden, and is now on display in the Ashmolean. There is a beauty in seeing paintings that started in the city, remain here, centuries later.

However, it is not only painters of the movement who have a close connection to the city: they were influenced by others, who had fallen under the charm of Oxford too. The celebrated contemporary art critic John Ruskin is just one such example. After studying at Christ Church College from 1836 to 1842, Ruskin lived on High Street, publishing famous books such as his *Modern Painters*. Ruskin's philosophy focused on "truth to nature". He appreciated

highly detailed, intricate paintings, which accurately reflected the natural landscape. The Pre-Raphaelites took this philosophy very much to heart.

Ruskin returned the appreciation, speaking out in favour of the movement in 1851 by writing a series of letters to *The Times* defending the movement from fierce critics, such as Charles Dickens. This created permanent ties between him and the brotherhood. A portrait of Ruskin composed by Millais, and still hanging in the Ashmolean today, reflects this bond of mutual appreciation between artist and art critic. In Millais' painting Ruskin stands proudly amidst a wild Scottish landscape, leaning confidently against the rocks as an almost photorealistic river rushes by in the background.

However, Ruskin's influence on contemporary artists was much more than merely the direction to paint accurately and closely to the object they observe. In 1871 Ruskin founded the Ruskin School of Drawing; today the name also includes Fine Art. It is in this school that the teachings of anatomy, history, and theory of art and visual culture are shaping the next generation of fine artists.

From murals to museums, the Pre-Raphaelites have left their marks all over this city. Sometimes discreet and obscure, yet ever present, the Pre-Raphaelites decorated, taught, and enlivened Oxford in so many ways and in the remainder of their work we have a lot to be grateful for.

Image credit: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, CC0 1.0, via rawpixel.



John le Carré at the Weston

Nancy Gittus reviews the latest literary exhibition at the Weston Library

At the back of the Weston Library, in a small room off to one side, a stunning wealth of material is laid out in neatly organised cabinets and containers. Starting with David Cornwell’s childhood (John le Carré was his pen name) the visitor is guided through each of the great man’s novels, before confronting his love life, passion for art, and his broader views on the post-Cold War political climate. The exhibition is detailed enough to be of interest even to le Carré superfans (containing a wealth of letters, plots and plans written out in le Carré’s loopy, sprawling hand), but it is not overwhelming. The neat presentation of items, and select few displays, gets each point across without drowning the visitor.

The exhibition is well ordered; the first wall takes you through the chronological order of le Carré’s key novels. It explores the author’s contribution to the literary canon of spy novels, with *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* one of the first accurate depictions of espionage and life in MI5. A sort of realist’s reply to James Bond, the exhibition emphasises that le Carré’s aim was to present a much more truthful image of what working in the Secret Service was like. The exhibition gave insight, not only into this aspect of le Carré’s life, but also into the impact he has left on the literary world, championing realism in an age where the disillusionment had led to increasing surrealism and absurdist work.

However, not all of le Carré’s novels were based on his own experience in MI5. I must admit I had only known him for his spy novels, but, in fact, I learned le Carré produced a wealth of material combating many different forms of illegal, underground activity. From *The Night Manager*, where le Carré investigates illegal arms smuggling, to *The Constant Gardener*, where he exposes the major lack of ethics in medical trials in the Global South, this exhibition highlights le Carré’s incredible contribution to raising awareness on some of the biggest criminal enterprises.

The main takeaway was just how much work went into each of le Carré’s novels. Every cabinet was stuffed. There

were photos of le Carré’s travels to Israel or Hong Kong for location research. His records of interviews with individuals such as Mai Mai, a colonel in the Democratic Republic of Congo militia, Frederico Vardese, a professor of criminology, or Israeli journalist Yuval Eliza, were spread across the desks, revealing just how invested le Carré was in discovering the real inner workings of whatever criminal world he was delving into next. Naturally, copious character notes, profiles, and maps fit in wherever there was space left, demonstrating the painstaking effort the author went to in visualising the exact appearance of each character, precise locations, and intricate timelines. A particularly heart-warming source was an email typed to Herr Bühler, the manager of the Bellevue Palace Hotel, asking for permission to depict the real hotel and descriptive details in *Our Kind of Traitor*.

However, the exhibition did not just explore le Carré’s literary life. In the middle of the room and down the second wall, tables and cabinets delved into his hobbies, interests and personal life. His passion for illustration resulted in several cabinets dedicated to the author’s doodles and caricatures. le Carré’s humorous satire of the Oxford Union, both in illustrative and literary form, made for very amusing reading. However, the exhibition also pointed to the importance of this style for the rest of his career. Satire of the Union developed into satire of the hypocritical West and its criminal underworld. Indeed, the exhibition hinted that this satire might have stemmed from a deeper anguish over the unremarked fall out of the Cold War. It reminded me of how each and every one of an author’s life experiences can contribute to the novelist that they turn about to be.

Whether you are a John le Carré fan, want to get an insight into some of the dark, gritty, underworld networks that govern the globe, or are interested in how an author composes a novel, this moving, inspiring, and yet infinitely human exhibition is for you, and it’s free!

[Read the full article at cherwell.org](#)

What’s Oxford reading?

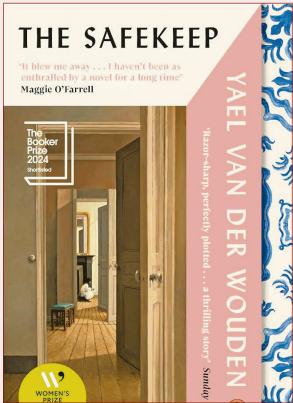


Image credit: 'The Safekeep' via Penguin Books.

Hannah (Queen’s) recommends this recent publication by Yael Van Der Wouden: “A beautifully written and desperately needed book about the aftermath of the Second World War and the way we as human beings cling to our possessions in times of crises. A powerful debut novel!”



Alex (St Hugh’s) recommends this 1987 novel, which blends fiction and non-fiction: “Examines the intricate relationship that Aboriginal Australians have with the land. However, he frames songlines as an ancient GPS system when the reality is more complex.”



Image credit: 'The Songlines' via Penguin Books.

WHAT’S ON

STAGE

The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui
The Michael Pilch Studio
12th-15th November

Launa
Burton Taylor Studio
18th-22nd November

MUSIC

Kleio String Quartet With Helene Clement
Holywell Music Room
16th November 11am

FILM

90 Years of Arvo Pärt: About Time
The Ultimate Picture Palace
16th November 2pm

Come and See Me in the Good Light
Oxford Picturehouse
18th November 5:45pm

LITERATURE

Theodor Meron: Poems on Being, Love and on Grief
Trinty College
19th November, 5-6pm

INTERDISCIPLINARY

The Anatomy of Affection: A Creative Exploration of Love
St Edmund Hall
18th November, 6pm



THE SOURCE

And She Woke Up...

Yesterday I thought I saw you
between blinks of an eye:
a lecture together and notes
left behind for curls and a sharp jawline;

the same old eyes exchanged.
Your profile rather than Descartes’
in my mind, your smile more to me
than any meditation: I exist

only in the rouge of autumn. Street lamp, tree.
Lecture over, we swapped colleges for a while
and there was you, perfectly framed in my window seat,
memories like skeleton leaves shivering against the door.

The only reason I knew it was a dream
is that you talked to me.

NAT CONBOY

Girlhood will not save you

Lilly Law reflects on the artificial construction of “girlhood” through online trends, and its harmful implications

I spent a good deal of time last summer trying to work out why bows made me so irrationally angry. Twice, walking while on the phone to my mum, I burst into a rant after just seeing one. To have one bow-induced word vomit on Cornmarket Street is a tragedy, but by the second, I started to feel a little careless. I struggled to get to the bottom of it – bows seemed to be fashion shorthand for femininity, for pink, for friendship bracelets, and heels. Did my hatred make me a misogynist?

Then I opened Instagram Reels, and it all became clear. I saw pink frilly everything proliferating, and “girl” prefixed onto every single trend. Girl math. Girl dinner. Pink jobs. And, of course: “I’m just a girl.” These memes, suggesting women were frivolous and incapable of strenuous thinking, that they ate next to nothing because of “disorganisation”, and that their careers were meaningless compared to their boyfriends’ “big boy job”, really got under my skin. But the most malicious aspect of such trends is the way they purport to define ‘girlhood’.

This certainly wasn’t my experience of growing up female. In the top sets, girls outnumbered boys in all of my classes, and consistently got the highest results. In primary school, at least, we ate ravenously. My friends all had their own plans for their lives: vets, police officers, West End dancers, speech therapists, psychologists, lawyers. None of us were ‘just’ girls.

The highlight reel of ‘girlhood’ in these posts characterises it in terms of shopping, TV shows, and Taylor Swift concerts. It’s fascinatingly consumerist. The aesthetics recall adverts: the oversaturated, sparkly world of Barbie, Hello Kitty, and Lelli Kelly. It feels artificial, constructed, and corporate. The closest analogy I can draw from my actual life are the costumes I wore in

competitive dance. But with tutus and pointe shoes, we knew we were going on stage. No-one was going to pretend that this was real life. Certainly, no-one was going to pretend that it was a desirable way to be a woman.

Is it sisterhood? Security before the big bad world has a look in? I don’t really buy that. I was catcalled more at 14 than I ever have been at 21. And there wasn’t exactly safety in numbers. My early teenage years were defined by competition – the girls in my year six class would compare breast sizes while we got changed for PE, and those who had already started their periods formed a group, whispering and giving the rest knowing glances. I knew of three girls, in my year eight classes, who were ‘dating’ boys above the age of consent. I still cannot eat in front of the girls from my dance class.

A trend built on women being stupid and infantile, all tied up in a pretty bow of powerlessness, is simply dangerous

The only throughline I can find is control. The online construction of girlhood and the reality dovetail perfectly in how much freedom a girl has: none. When I searched for “pink jobs”, a caption to a reel came up: “Knowing things is a blue job not a pink job.” Mindlessness is a hallmark of girl dinner and girl maths – we’re just so busy thinking about shopping and boys, how

could we remember to eat? Around the same time the ‘girlhood’ conversation came up, I saw women discussing how they loved switching their brains off around their boyfriend, letting him do the thinking. The top post on “pink jobs” had over 300,000 views. A woman explained the “pink jobs and blue jobs” in her relationship – her boyfriend expressed derisive surprise that she “even knew” they had certain bills.

I didn’t realise how little freedom I had as a child until I left home. Being able to plan my own day, choose my meals, work out my goals, have been some of the best parts of being independent. I know everything about my life because no-one else is going to know it for me. The small girl confused at being pulled this way, pushed that way, in an endlessly baffling world, would be thrilled to see her capable, determined future self. That requires thinking, yes. But I wouldn’t trade my independence for anything. Yet the woman-child, with frivolous interests and little real freedom, is somehow trendy. It goes without saying that current body standards evoke childishness, and “thin being in” has been shouted from the rooftops. Hairlessness, doe eyes, helplessness. What’s so attractive about that? What’s wrong with being a woman?

To begin with, it’s incredibly

frightening. Being a woman means you have power, and that can be taken away. It means you may have a reproductive system that can invalidate your right to live. It means you’re likely to be mocked, to be stereotyped, to be harassed. I remember having an existential crisis at 18, because I realised I could no longer call catcallers creeps: I wasn’t underage, so I was officially fair game. At least with the idea of girlhood, you can cling to a pretence of safety. But that facade comes at the cost of independence. If you give up your freedom, your power, and pretend that ‘girlhood’ is all you ever wanted, as the world becomes more dangerous for women, there’s a sense in which you’re not losing anything. That’s a lie.

You can say it’s not that deep, that my entire take is too chronically online, that Instagram is not reality. But trivialisation is the problem. Abortion is illegal in 12 of the 50 US states. A woman or a girl is killed every ten minutes by a partner or family member. 62% of the women killed by men in the UK were killed by their partner. In this climate, a trend built on women being stupid and infantile, all tied up in a pretty bow of powerlessness, is simply dangerous. There is no such thing as ‘just’ a girl. Get up.

Image credit: Edgar Degas, PDM 1.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



Grieving in Oxford: Tips from a bereaved student

EVE RYDER

Grief touches all of us, and yet none of us in quite the same way. My grief is different to yours, to his, to hers, and to theirs. This can make it feel isolating at times. At Oxford, the relentless pace of academic output, the churning mill of essays and tutorial work, allows little time for indulging in sadness. Not feeling up to it is no excuse, we are told. For me, grief is inseparable from the geography of the city itself. It’s in the cobbled streets that I’ve cried along on the way to class; it’s in the reflection of the river, the stillness of the meadow, the library. After multiple bereavements during my time here, memories of my own distress overlay one another in an unsettling repetition.

Grief has fundamentally altered my university experience. It has led me to miss important emails, struggle to concentrate for extended periods, lose a sense of purposeful organisation. My academic life has become a constant test of self-forgiveness and self-compassion. It’s difficult to watch others completing in just a few hours an assignment that took me several days. At the same time, bereavement has taught me crucial perspective – sometimes there are more important things in life than Prelims.

The stifling effects of grief haven’t inhibited my productivity alone, but also my ability to socialise. My increased anxiety levels leave me feeling overwhelmed by the smallest of tasks, and I often zone out of social

situations. My friends and I laugh about how long I spend staring into space, but the blank look is less a sign of disinterest than a reflection of my lack of presence. The rapid swings of my emotions have become uncontrollable and unpredictable. It happens at the most inconvenient moments – a ball, a formal, a musical performance – but I’m lucky to have friends at hand to offer a tissue.

Beyond my fluctuating moods, I have come to realise the extent to which seasons can affect the intensity of grief. I found summer time particularly difficult, characterised by listless days and sleepless nights. Everyone seemed to be enjoying their Trinity, punting and picnicking in the sun. Yet for me the sunshine felt much heavier and melancholic. Instead, I spent a lot of time inside, burying myself in my work. Certain dates brought painful anniversaries. It can be difficult to know how to spend the time, whether to memorialise the day with others or simply get through it. I found myself collating commemorative Instagram posts, but while meaningful, this never feels enough.

The title of this article is ironic because, in my experience, there is nothing more frustrating than advice on how to deal with grief. How can I regulate something so omnipresent, so bound up with my existence? The assumption that it is resolvable is absurd; the attempt, though well-intentioned, is audacious. But perhaps there is something to be gained from sharing our experiences. Hope? Or maybe a sense of unity and

empathy. After all, the prerequisite for grief is, in fact, love. Could it be that the desired result isn’t resolution, but simply understanding?

First and foremost, my advice would be to accept support from your loved ones. It may help if you communicate how they can be there for you. This can mean a phone call, a sweet treat, or simply leaving you to your own devices for a while. For some, professional support can be extremely beneficial. Counselling, although awkward at first, as I struggled to open up fully, became fundamental to my healing process, and I still contact my counsellor from time to time. Likewise, I would suggest reaching out to your College Welfare services. I used to book a weekly appointment and would always leave feeling much lighter thanks to their support and encouragement.

For me, grief is inseparable from the geography of the city itself

Believe it or not, your support network also includes your tutors. It may help to let them know you’re feeling overwhelmed, and at the very least, it gives them context for potential underperformance. Giving yourself grace academically is important: unsurprisingly, I began my second year

feeling completely unprepared. Try to absolve your mind of self-judgement. It may take time, but there is nothing you cannot bounce back from.

It helps to observe the little things, a drink or a sweet treat, that brighten your day, and indulge in them (my blueberry matcha latte obsession grew exponentially). This can also include hobbies and activities. I reconnected with my life-long love of tap dance, and this became the only time of the week I could completely switch off. At Oxford, I’ve also found escape in the cinema. Even if *Moana 2* didn’t quite live up to my expectations, it did distract me from the stresses of university life. As time passes, you might also find relief in creativity, be it writing, poetry, singing, or art.

Finally, know that grief comes in waves. The intensity can wax and wane over time, even if it always stays with you. My dog passed away while I was editing this article and I’ve strangely found myself consulting my own words, grounding myself once again. Throughout university I have often felt that things will never get better. Yet, despite my pessimistic disposition, I find myself surprised by how, in time, life changes in ways I never anticipated. When the time comes, and it will, lean into moments of lightness and laughter. Oxford is far from easy, even without the echo of grief. I hope you find solace in the knowledge that you are not alone and take pride in your strength in persisting, in spite of it all.

Sending warmth and my condolences this Michaelmas.

HOROSCOPES



Aries

Half-arse this one, it’s not that deep.



Taurus

You’re neglecting your inner film bro, watch a movie.



Gemini

Careful, your privilege is showing.



Cancer

Don’t let the fifth week blues get you down.



Leo

Life it too short to spend your nights in the glink.



Virgo

You’re far too excited about *Wicked* part two.

HOROSCOPES



Libra

It's not alcoholism, it's research for the Intoxigation.



Scorpio

Vogue was right: your boyfriend is cringe.



Sagittarius

The devil does not need an advocate. Relax.



Capricorn

Oxford is small: false rumours always come to light.



Aquarius

Answer those emails you've been avoiding.



Pisces

You're too good to be double-texting. Stand up.

Demystifying PMDD: The missing conversation

AMY LAWSON

Women's health is a curious thing. It's not unusual to come home from a GP appointment with an unshakeable sense of disappointment, and often more questions and frustrations than you had in the first place. Symptoms are often diminished or disregarded altogether; women are consistently treated as inadequate authorities on their own health. It was only in the 90s that it became common practice to include women in clinical trials, meaning that the very metrics by which we determine physical health are inherently flawed. What this has caused is a profound sense of mysticism when it comes to problems relating to women's health, and particularly hormonal problems.

For as long as I can remember, women older – and, I thought, wiser – than me would laugh and sigh knowingly whenever I brought up feeling tired or unhappy, citing “hormones” as the culprit. They were right, as I later discovered, but not in any specific way. This uncertain rhetoric that I and many others grew up with around the way hormones work meant that they became shrouded in mystery, and assumed the status of a kind of hazy force, a grim reaper which hovered above, ready to descend and wreak havoc at a moment's notice.

This was in the days before cycle tracking, made popular by aesthetically pleasing apps and memes about the luteal phase, in which every month felt a bit lawless. Of course, everyone knew the basics: you could expect, in the days leading up to your period, to well up at seemingly trivial things like TV adverts about life insurance for the over-60s, or catching your jumper on a doorknob; to crave chocolate and bread and have a higher propensity than usual for snapping at your parents. These confusing but often amusing side effects of changing hormone levels would disappear with the start of your period, and could be neatly pathologised by the label ‘PMS’. But what wasn't clear was what you should do when these symptoms didn't disappear right away, but lingered for longer, and manifested themselves in more serious ways than crying over daytime television. Or even whether there was a name for it.

Not a lot of people know what PMDD is. I didn't for quite a long time, and it was only after extensive googling, often in the middle of the night, that I discovered what it was. It's frequently described as a more severe type of PMS, which can have a greater negative impact on your daily life. Feelings of panic, hopelessness, and a general lack of emotional equilibrium are amplified in the week leading up to menstruation, and often

persist for longer afterwards. Clinical definitions, as is often the case, don't exactly capture the iron grip PMDD can have on your life, the extent to which it gets inside of your head and takes firm hold. It looks different for every person who experiences it: for me, it can feel a lot like being underwater one day, smothered by a kind of muffled, static silence, and resurfacing the next, to bright light and sharp sensations, where everything feels intense and overwhelming. It can cause sufferers to feel sensitive to rejection, lack self-esteem, and generally just feel like they're losing control of their emotions. And then, gradually, it subsides, slipping out of view – almost as if it was never there.

Women are consistently treated as inadequate authorities on their own health

This is part of the problem with the condition: it can make you second-guess your emotions and instincts *ad infinitum*. During moments of happiness, where life feels like it normally should – where the ups and downs are there, but manageable – it's hard to believe that you ever felt what you felt at all.

This kind of self-gaslighting wasn't necessarily helped by GPs who, even though they were (hopefully) well-meaning, seemed all too eager to consign my symptoms to general anxiety, and recommend going for a walk and doing some breathing exercises; or, that favourite catch-all solution, the pill.

Thankfully, there is a side of me that is quite determined (read: stubborn), and I eventually found a doctor who seemed to understand my attempts at explaining the extremity of my mood swings and the places my brain often led me to. She sent me a 15-page document about PMDD (which I'm fairly sure was aimed at medical professionals, but there's nothing an Oxford student loves more than a bit of extended reading) and prescribed me medication to help stabilise my mood.

The experience reminded me that one of the most powerful tools at your disposal is being able to do your own research. This is something that, as Oxford students, we perhaps take for granted: we regularly tackle essay crises and in-depth discussion, embracing our curiosity and trusting our own instincts. But this doesn't have to be confined to the academic world – it can help de-mystify whatever you're dealing with, and that can only be a good thing.

CHERWELL-FED

The best Quod in Oxford: Dining on the High Street



— BEATRIX ARNOLD —

A landmark of the High Street, Quod boasts an opulent facade, its name reminding me of my doom on the way to my Latin lectures. And so, when they extended an invitation to review the restaurant, I welcomed the chance to dispel its previous negative associations. On a gloomy November evening, its warm lighting was appealing, and through its glass doors and tall windows, an atmosphere of upmarket ease, simultaneously intimate and spacious, promised a luxurious dining experience. From the moment we were received into the restaurant's ambient interior, it was clear that we were the youngest ones there by at least 20 years.

Quod offers a range of European dishes, priding itself on the quality and freshness of its ingredients. The wine list was extensive, and rendered null and void the few pretensions at sommeliership I thought I'd picked up through college formals. I chose a red wine (at random) to pair with my starter. The menu was reassuringly seasonal, with dishes showcasing autumnal vegetables and fruits. We ordered the goat's cheese and beetroot salad and the roasted red pepper soup, each of which showed thoughtful curation in their flavour profiles.

For our mains, we both chose the ricotta and squash ravioli, swimming in a rich sauce of sage butter, and topped with pine nuts. The pasta was undoubtedly fresh, and texturally perfect. It had just enough bite to counteract the soft filling, avoiding the all-too-common mistake of mushy squash. The dessert menu similarly did not disappoint. We ordered the vanilla cheesecake with roasted plums, and the chocolate pot with orange creme fraiche. The cheesecake had a brulée topping, providing the perfect contrast to the

creamy texture. The pairing of chocolate and orange is classic for a reason, and the crunch from the hazelnut praline complemented it well. The cocktail menu covers all bases, from dessert cocktails like an espresso martini, to lighter, champagne-based drinks. We seized the opportunity to try such ostentatiously chic drinks, choosing a French 75 and a Manhattan – they came complete with citrus twists which would have made Tom Cruise proud.

Menu

Roasted red pepper soup (£8.95)
Goat's cheese & beetroot (£10.95)
Ricotta & squash ravioli (£18.95)
Vanilla cheesecake & plums (£10.95)
Chocolate pot & orange cream (£10.50)
Cocktails (£15.50 each)
Red wine (£10.50 a glass)

Quod, OX1 4BJ, 92-94 High Street

The display of fresh oysters, the pristinely uniformed waiters, and the candlelit table setting, imposed an atmosphere of haute cuisine that was, admittedly, rather undercut as we gossiped over our cocktails. When we propped up our phones to take a picture, two drinks down, I suspect that we were met with a few disapproving glances. I felt I couldn't quite live up to the role of the refined gourmet which the setting seemed to demand. Quod is, by virtue of its elevated quality and even more elevated price point, an occasional restaurant. By that I mean I would only go if someone else is paying. But should the opportunity arise, I'd be more than happy to cosplay once again as a fine-dining connoisseur.

Image credit: Quod with permission.

AGONY AUNT

A close friend had a fling with my college dad. Some of my other friends think it changes our friendship, but I don't think it's relevant to anything as college parents don't matter that much. Am I under thinking it?

Sincerely,
The problem child

Dear problem child,

The friend to step-mother pipeline is real, and Oxford's collective silence on it is deafening. It is a phenomenon that won't be covered in your first college family meet-up, and there is no HR provision to resolve the ethical grey area of it all. Remember: even fictitious families can inflict very real generational trauma.

We attach a lot of meaning to a tradition that is largely tongue-in-cheek. Our college mothers are our spiritual guides, our siblings close confidants, and our college fathers are occasionally the subject of college scandals. Still, in moments of stress and uncertainty, it's nice to have a support network, however loosely defined. I think this is the origin of your friends' concern; it is all too easy to blur the lines between sincerity and satire. One minute, your friend is simply flirting with a guy, the next you're playing family, and you've been cast in the unfortunate role of the moody step child. We understand that if things go south, choosing a side in the divorce will probably not be a highlight of your year.

If you ask me, biological dads might be off limits, but we risk becoming puritanical moral absolutists if we extend this to college dads. Tell your friends to calm down and stop policing harmless fun – or fight fire with fire and kindle a romance with a parent of your new step-mother.

Lots of love,
Agony Aunt

Never safe again: Consent and the college campus

ANONYMOUS

CW: Sexual assault; discussion of suicide

When you walk into college on the first day of university, you experience community, a sense of stepping into belonging. Consent talks are delivered between icebreakers, and there’s a seemingly endless cycle of club nights and coffee trips for people to get to know each other. Everyone is a fresh-faced student still caught up in the thrill of introductions and discovering the people who will shape the next few years of their lives.

Fast-forward to week three: a Saturday night where I had my consent treated as a non-factor and I came frighteningly close to taking my own life. In the days and weeks afterwards, the world of Oxford seemed to warp. Sleep, when it came, brought nightmares. Waking up felt like being thrown back into a body that I no longer trusted, a body with new scars, both mental and physical, that no longer felt like mine.

The harm was not isolated to one night. It seeped into every day after, into the silences, into the laughs, growing into a cacophony of unbearable levels. In Oxford, where history is preserved in stone, my own life felt shattered beyond repair.

I don’t know how many times I said the word “no” that night. All I know is that 2 is too many, and the 40 repetitions recorded in my diary entry are a testament to the desperate rhythm of a voice that was never heard. The power, or impotence, of words was laid bare for me that night. I managed to text the three letters of ‘SOS’ to one of my best friends, in the drunken, misguided hope that she could come in guns blazing and save the day.

Someone I had previously called a friend characterised my response as regret. That word stuck with me. I did not regret saying no, I regretted the world that allowed my “no” to be ignored, the system that treated my voice and consent as negotiable. To refer to this as regret is to twist the story, denying reality, agency, and accountability.

I remember the realisation: someone is having sex with me. Yes, I was there, but I felt detached, like a bystander to something awful. I thought about running, but I was confused – how could someone I trusted, someone I called a friend, be doing this? Surely if I just played along,

everything would be okay? I blamed myself, and whether right or wrong, part of me always will. Should I have said no differently? Should I have stopped them with force? These are questions that will always haunt me.

In my case, as in that of many others, alcohol was never the villain; to blame actions on it is to deny agency and responsibility. With a word as simple as no, and with an issue as fundamental as consent, intoxication cannot be used as an excuse. Drinking culture does not make consent harder to navigate, only easier to ignore. In the Oxford bubble, alcohol is a strong character, flowing through every social, every formal, every predrinks. It fuels many connections, friendships, and memories. But it also allows people to hide behind it. To shrug off what they have done. To pretend that crossing a line was out of their hands. For me alcohol was in the room but was not the reason. The reason was someone that chose not to listen. That’s not intoxication; it’s indifference to humanity.

The next morning brought yet more confusion. I had been sworn to secrecy the night before, yet rumours soon spread amongst our friends. Something as fundamental as the negation of my consent cannot be treated as a casual story to fill the gaps in conversation. So, I did the only thing I could: I stood there, silent, shaking.

Even now, I sometimes get a question, a message, a half-knowing look. And still, I cannot properly answer. So here, in this article, lies my answer, the one that words over a pint could never express. Sex without consent is never acceptable, and the knowledge that some can see it otherwise, even within the same four walls as me, repulses me.

I’ve heard the experience compared to being locked in a cage with a wild animal. Even if you know you are likely safe, once someone has shown they are capable of such harm, life in college becomes precarious. You know they are not hunting you. But they have proved that they can damage you. Every day becomes a highly emotive game of unintentional cat and mouse, in which every corner you walk around, however beautiful, and however much you are enjoying the moment, turns into an alien land, associated with violence, not positivity. Every familiar face blurs into association: those who know and those who don’t. I understand now, as I understood then, that opening up to others, even if it breaks me to speak, is at the same time



one of the hardest and most important things that I will ever do.

The fundamental significance of this article, however, is not about me. It is about all the Oxford students who have experienced sexual harassment, as many as half according to a 2023 survey. Living life as a statistic is strange, but each of those people are far more than that. A large proportion of our university population lives under the inescapable hold of fear and unease, knowing that safety here is conditional, fragile, and often dismissed. We are told that this place is built on tradition and excellence. But behind the gowns and Latin phrases lies a reality far less romantic. When so many students know what it is to have their boundaries ignored, it is not an isolated issue, a single story, but a culture, a rot we cannot ignore.

If the University insists on taking pride in its

historic facades and dreaming spires, it must also face the nightmares endured in their long shadow. Here I want an Oxford that I am proud of, and that I can love. But that cannot happen until it is an Oxford that can feel safe again for me, and most importantly be safe for everyone.

I must end with a very simple message. That help is there if you seek it out. The first step is always the hardest, but please take it. Have the conversation. Send the message. Life does get better, and however long it takes there is a way through. Please, if you are on the fence, grasp the hands reaching out to you – there are good people around that will help. I wouldn’t be here today without the support of incredible friends and professionals, and I never want anyone to reach the point where they feel they’ll never be safe again.

Image credit: David Hays for Cherwell.

OXFORD

TINY LOVE STORIES

In her wildest daydream, love is an offered earphone on the tube. It is strawberries bought with her in mind and a used palette of blush. In her wildest daydream, love is a dimly-lit room, a table of friends, a candid photograph. It is the flicker of rainbow light, and the tilting she does to see it better, in fuller bloom across a notebook, across a windowsill. Love’s most riveting form, for her, is a note in the margin of a worn book, a strewn duvet, an unspoken language. In her wildest daydream, love is familiar, a train ticket that kindly reminds her of the safest way home.

Elizabeth Bourn, Balliol

CHERPSE.

Oxford’s blind dating

Drinks at the Harcourt Arms. Will the double date produce double the romance?

Miss Lisbon and Miss New Delhi

- First impression?**
Tweedledum and Tweedledee (you know who you are) rocked up late. Which wasn’t a great start. One was a performative wired-headphones-wearer and the other was basically named after a capital city – to which we introduced ourselves as Lisbon and New Delhi (it went over his head). Our first impressions were that they were oddly normal, and there wasn’t anything obviously wrong with them (they weren’t theatre kids).
- Did it meet your expectations?**
Out of all possible outcomes, with 1 being us getting murdered and 10 being a joint double date wedding, it sat at a solid 6.5.
- What was the highlight?**
The look of genuine and visceral fear on their faces when we revealed that we had found their LinkedIns during our fourth joint bathroom trip of the night (to clarify, the joint bathroom trip was just us girls: Tweedledum and Tweedledee were not included).
- Most embarrassing moment?**
Finding out that one of our dates went to my old school (I tried to avoid them like the plague, Cupid, I can’t believe you’ve done this).
- Describe the date in three words.**
Minions, murder, and runners.
- Will there be a second date?**
Yes, but only on LinkedIn.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee declined to comment.



Inside Oxford's real tennis club

Natalie Tan introduces us to the sport of kings hidden on Merton Street

Real tennis? What, as opposed to fake tennis? No, real as in Real Madrid; as in royal. That's perhaps not the best way to describe it, but it's somewhere to begin explaining what Oxford's real tennis club – or rather, tennis club – is all about. On a Thursday afternoon, professionals Craig Greenhalgh and Nick Jamieson are restitching a batch of real tennis balls by hand when I visit: unlike the fuzzy lawn tennis balls you're probably more used to, real tennis balls are heavier, entirely handmade, and their skins have to be replaced every two to three weeks. I'm supposed to watch their practice session, but I'm early and the group before are still going at it. "There's a couple of 90-year-olds on there right now," Greenhalgh says.

This sounds quite frankly implausible to me: I don't think I've ever seen a 90-year-old do a sport other than tai chi. Jamieson pauses his work to take me through the clubhouse into the court itself so I can witness it with my own two eyes, but what we enter isn't anything at all like what I expect. Imagine, if you will, a much smaller and completely enclosed indoor tennis

court done up in the new colours of Ballyloli bar. Imagine that at one end of the court, at Player A's back, there's netting instead of a wall, behind which there's a little seating gallery for spectators. Now imagine that, on that court, there are four men with completely white hair having a genuine go at this game. "Nasty serve, Nigel", Jamieson calls, and one of them chuckles in acknowledgement.

Veiled by netting – which I learn is called the dedans – I still flinch when a ball comes arcing toward us; unbothered, Jamieson gets up to prepare for his session. "Tea?" he offers.

Plenty of sports today – tennis (real or otherwise), fives, handball, squash – owe their origins to *jeu de paume*. Literally translating to "palm game", it was a game played in France in monastery cloisters around the twelfth century that involved hitting the ball with – you guessed it – your palm. Made popular in England by its monarchs, by the 16th century real tennis had evolved into its modern form: rackets, convoluted rulesets, and all.

Built in 1798, the court in Oxford is the second oldest in the country, behind only the one in Hampton Court Palace,

where Henry VIII played. To my surprise, it's also one of the busiest in the world: "We're booked out every day of every week", Greenhalgh says. "7.30am to 10.30pm, every single day."

Historically both elusive and exclusive, real tennis precedes what we think of as tennis by about 300 years and is, for good reason, considered a gentleman's sport. Mostly the domain of nobility, it started falling out of favour compared to lawn tennis in the 1800s because of its difficulty and inaccessibility: there are now only 45 real tennis courts in the world, as compared to 3,000 tennis courts in London alone. Oxford itself used to be a veritable hub of real tennis: "In the 1450s, colleges used their real tennis courts as a way of attracting people to apply", Sir Neil Mortensen, fellow of Green Templeton and President of the club, tells me. According to Greenhalgh and Jamieson, one of Oriel's buildings used to be a real tennis court. "It's the windows at the top that give it away." They are, of course, correct: Oriel's Harris Building, now used for accommodation, was once home to the Oriel Square tennis court where Charles I played.

With most courts in the UK located near to London, how players across the country get their start is a matter of pure chance. Greenhalgh fell into it twenty-odd years ago, in Manchester, after a friend of his father's let him have a go; Jamieson found it after watching videos of the sport online. The club is unlike others at Oxford in that the majority of the members are non-students: there are just under a 100 students who come and go, but 150 senior members, like the nonagenarians I saw, make up most of the club's activity. One of them helpfully points out his own name – "P Hartmann" – under the runner-up column of the Grant Bates Trophy, a club-wide handicap competition, in 1996. "I've been playing here since the 80s", he tells me in a hoarse voice.

For students, on the other hand, access to the sport is often gated by wealth. Rackets, an equally absurd game that precedes squash and fosters a skillset that translates well to real tennis, is ubiquitous at Eton, Harrow, and St Paul's, among other offenders.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

Image credit: Natalie Tan.

SPORTING SPOTLIGHT

GAVRIELLA EPSTEIN-LIGHTMAN

Many have asked how tennis can hold such a prestigious event – the WTA finals – in Saudi Arabia, a country with a persistently atrocious human rights record. Doing so legitimises the actions of the Saudi regime and does a disservice to the hundreds of women's rights activists imprisoned in the pursuit of equality. Founded in 1973 by Billie Jean King, with a commitment to advancing women's equality and opportunity, the decision to succumb to Saudi deep pockets is one sorely at odds with the values on which the WTA was founded. Let's hope this decision is a short-term misstep, and not the start of a new, worrying status quo.

Going to watch a Varsity or Cuppers match?

Email sportcherwell@gmail.com to write up a match report!

Puzzles

Homophonograms by JADEN LEE

These phrases are all anagrams of two homophones. Can you unscramble them?

TIDED LODINATION

/_____
SLYLY BOMB CAM

/_____
DILL YIELD

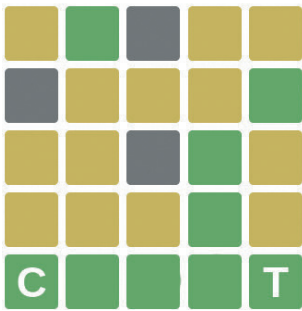
/_____
WRONG ORGAN

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MUSEUMS HOUR HOUR

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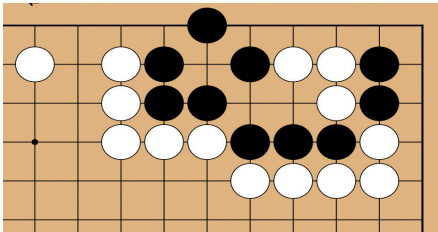
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eldroW by NAT ELDER



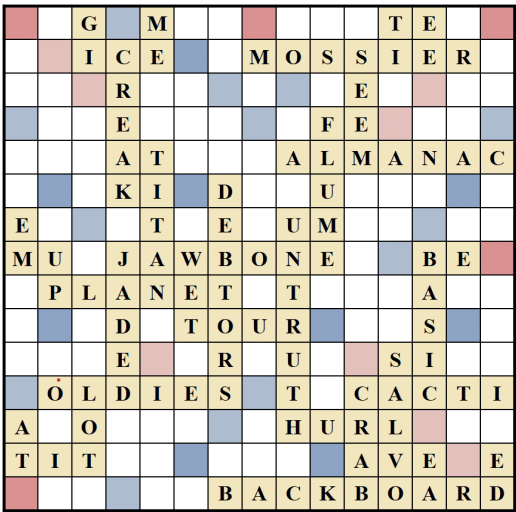
Can you fill this grid with common English words to create a complete and correct Wordle game?

Go by ZOË MCGUIRE



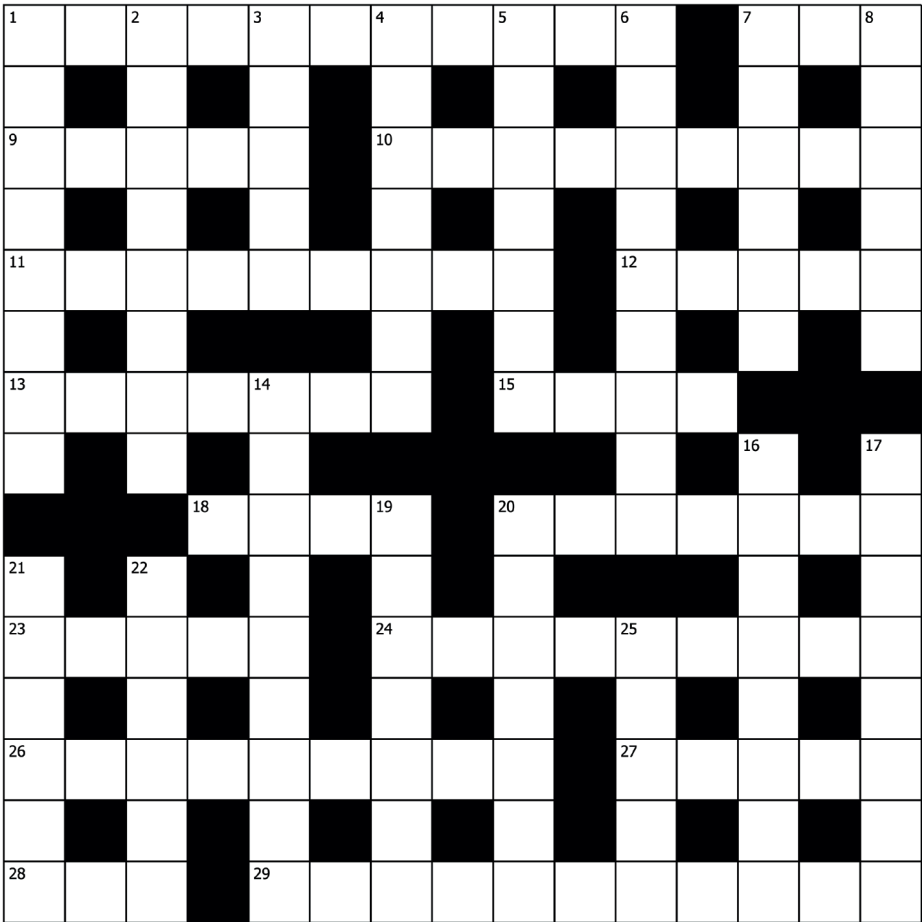
Black to play.

Scrabble by ZOË MCGUIRE



We hold AELNRST. Definitely a rack that’s good for bingos, we hold ANT- LERS or RENTALS as anagrams, but there’s nowhere to play them. Can you find the one legal bingo?

Cryptic Crossword by ALESSANDRA EDWARDS



ACROSS

- 1) Where memory was made of river dweller by university buildings (11)
- 7) Except for drinking establishment (3)
- 9) Twit, in the morning, makes tea (5)
- 10) Corruption of Rishi most unpredictable (3, 2, 4)
- 11) Huge smile, boss! (3, 6)
- 12) Remake commercial featuring guys (5)
- 13) Trudge to cages containing setter with evil origin (7)
- 15) Crazy component of most unique comeback (4)
- 18) Skirt (mediocre one) (4)
- 20) Get annoyed right at the start of match (4, 3)
- 23) Soon, AI “realistic” content to be broadcasted (2, 3)
- 24) Hit of amphetamine drug will slow you down (5, 4)
- 26) Exam covers film, even before current date of publish? (4,5)
- 27) Invents function containing one number (5)
- 28) Small animal in grass (3)
- 29) Response of reasonable force has no hard counter to rebuttal (4-7)

DOWN

- 1) Two body parts to ram into with skull (8)
- 2) Share fantastic drag of masters student perhaps (8)
- 3) 0.0 miles per hour? Give it some welly (5)
- 4) Pull off being first woman to finish dirty chai (7)
- 5) Hearing tap vessel with design (7)
- 6) Biting carcass, it gets messy (9)
- 7) By consuming citrus, express shock (6)
- 8) Frantic desire to live (6)
- 14) Confuse or impress with flowers (9)
- 16) The answer might be salt dissolved in water? (8)
- 17) If poets gets F unexpectedly, not on track (3-5)
- 19) Download social media on Liquor and Liberation (7)
- 20) Joint gaff provides form of protection (7)
- 21) One of the leads in Coffee shop initial rankings (2-4)
- 22) Mike removed principle part of car, it’s yearly check-up discovered rodent (6)
- 25) Faced up to lack of stimulant (5)

Week 3 answers:

Readers’ Digest: “Grate Expat Station”/Great Expectations; “More Beet Ick”/Moby Dick; “Depict Char of Dory In Grey”/The Picture of Dorian Grey; “Frank in Stein”/Frankenstein; “Lard of the Fries”/Lord of the Flies. **Chess:** Nxd5 traps the queen; if Qxd5 Bc3, and if anything else you just take it. **Scrabble:** The only better move scores just 1 more point but is vastly more impressive; we can play SCIENTIFICALLY along the 5th row from the bottom. **Cryptic Crossword:** Across: Smiled, Red Giant, Standard, Resits, Anno Domini, Lore, Repartee, Stifle, Unfair, Wiggler, Spam, Unreliable, Cinema, Obituary, Drill Bit, Leered; Down: Matinee, Lingo, Drag Out, Red Wine, Derbies, Insulting, Natural, Alarm Bell, Nippier, Rhubarb, Workout, Ill Will, Enlarge, Amuse