

Cherwell

Oxford's oldest independent newspaper, est. 1920

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SATURDAY 30TH MAY 2026

5TH WEEK, TRINITY



The Oxford students who can't read books

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'Genocide – I want you to use that word': Nick Maynard on working in Gaza's healthcare system

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Wadham second-year accommodation rent to rise by 10.63% to £9470

SU to hold referendum on NUS membership

HATTIE SIMPSON

At a Conference of Commons Room (CCR) vote concluding on 20th May, JCR and MCR presidents voted to hold a referendum on the Student Union's (SU) membership of the National Union of Students (NUS). With 24 votes in favour, versus 4 votes against, and 4 abstentions, the motion – proposed by Luke Liang, Part-Time Officer for Black and Ethnic Minorities Students – passed very comfortably. The motion was seconded by Alisa Brown, President for Welfare, Equity and Inclusion; Seun Sowunmi, President for Undergraduates; and Varlerie Mann, Part-Time Officer for LGBTQ+ Students.

Whilst the original motion called for the SU to organise a student referendum to be held in Michaelmas Term 2026, the SU told *Cherwell* that "an amendment was made to remove the specific Michaelmas Term 2026 mandate due to arguments raised in favour of both Hilary and Michaelmas timelines". Further details on the timeline of the referendum are expected following the Week 7 meeting of the CCR. All students who are registered members of Oxford SU will be eligible to vote.

Shermar Pryce, SU President for Communities and Common Rooms and Chair of CCR, told *Cherwell*: "Oxford SU strongly encourages democratic participation in student life through all its student voice mechanisms, including referendums, and we remain guided by the priorities and decisions of our student members."

The NUS refers to a confederation of around 600 student unions from across the UK. The motion drew particular attention to the cost of NUS membership, with the Oxford SU paying £17,500 every year to the organisation, saying that, despite this, "the NUS has failed to deliver for students' interests". It also criticised the NUS' decision to drop opposition to tuition fee increases in 2007, as well as the recent disaffiliation of other universities

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BEATRIX ARNOLD

Proposed rent at Wadham College for the 2026/27 academic year will see the cost of second-year accommodation for Wadham students rise by 10.63% from 2025/26, to a total of £9470 for a nine-month contract. Negotiations between Wadham College Student Union (Wadham SU) and the College, which began in Michaelmas Term, have so far failed to reach an agreement on a rent deal for the next academic year.

In addition to its main site, Wadham offers offsite accommodation at the Dorothy Wadham Building (DWB) on Iffley Road, primarily for second-year students, and at Merifield in Summertown, primarily for third and fourth-year students, as well as visiting students.

The proposed rates, opposed by Wadham SU, will lead to greater rent disparity between the College's various accommodation sites. Whereas rent

agreements in previous years aimed at more even rates across year groups, the new rent scenario will see the price of a nine-month contract in Wadham's second-year accommodation rise disproportionately by 10.63%, in comparison to an increase of 3.5% for main site accommodation, and 3.74% for accommodation at Merifield, available for other year groups at the College.

The rent increases come within the context of a freeze to the graduate repayment threshold, announced in the November budget last year, despite annual increases in tuition fees at English universities. The proposed rent scenario for DWB would reach 87.44% of the maximum student maintenance loan for the 2026/27 academic year, leaving a sum of money insufficient to cover the costs of day-to-day student life. Moreover, the minimum maintenance loan would cover only 53.31% of the proposed yearly rent.

A first-year student at Wadham College told *Cherwell*: "If I had known

[about the proposed rent increase], I would have rented privately for next year. I feel like I've been trapped into an agreement I have no control over. It's ridiculous to demand this much money for student accommodation, especially when everything else is so expensive as well."

The cost of accommodation for Wadham students has long been a subject of controversy. The Oxford University Student Union's College Disparities Report in 2024 showed that Wadham College has the seventh-highest accommodation costs, positioning it in the highest quartile for rent among colleges at the University.

Between the 2015/16 and 2025/26 academic years, the mean rent for a termly contract on the College's main site has increased by 101.2%, 2.6 times faster than the national rate of inflation (CPI) over the same period, which is estimated at 39%.

A student who has previously held a

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New College JCR President loses no-confidence motion four weeks before end of term

NED REMINGTON

The President of New College JCR, Harry Aldridge, was removed from office late on Sunday 24th May in a motion of no-confidence.

The motion received 115 votes in favour, with 71 JCR members voting to keep Aldridge as President and 15 abstaining, out of a total of 421 New College undergraduates. The vote came just four weeks before the end of Aldridge's last term as JCR President after eight months in the role.

The motion, brought to a JCR meeting on Saturday evening by third-year undergraduate Jacob Newby, accused Aldridge of holding "too many officerships across a multiplicity of university societies", and prioritising "Oxford Union and Labour Club elections over the JCR". According to the motion, this led to a "widespread view amongst members of the JCR...that the President has failed to live up to standards expected of the leader of the JCR, and indeed the standards of recent Presidents". The motion claimed that Aldridge had failed to implement any manifesto pledges, and noted vacancies in the JCR's Vice-Presidential positions.

During his term as JCR President, Aldridge has held several senior student society positions, including President of the 93% Club, Co-Chair of the Oxford Labour Club, Associate Editor of *The Oxford Student*, President of Media Society, Secretary of the Oxford Union, and Oxford Union Librarian-Elect. At the same JCR meeting, Aldridge proposed an amendment to the JCR Standing Orders to "bar JCR Officers from Holding Concurrent Positions in the Oxford Union", a motion seconded by Newby. This motion was approved overwhelmingly by JCR members, with 149 votes in favour and

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Oxford reviews policies following EHRC transgender guidance changes

HATTIE SIMPSON

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published its updated draft Code of Practice on Thursday, 21st May, prompting responses from across the University over the potential impact on transgender students and staff. The EHRC is a national public body established by the 2006 Equality Act, which acts as the independent equality and human rights regulator.

The 340-page document follows last year's Supreme Court ruling in *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers*, which ruled that the terms "sex", "woman", and "man" in the Equality Act 2010 refer to "biological sex". The draft guidance states that "a trans man with a GRC [Gender Recognition Certificate] is a woman and a trans woman with a GRC is a man".

The updated Code also states that if a service provider "allows trans people to use the service intended for the opposite sex, the service will no longer be a separate or single-sex service under the Equality Act 2010". The guidance adds that organisations should consider whether "women's safety, privacy and/or dignity would be at risk" from allowing trans men into "single-sex" spaces.

The publication of the Code has raised questions for universities over how facilities such as accommodation, toilets, and changing rooms may be managed once the guidance is formally approved. In a statement shared online, the University of Oxford confirmed it was reviewing its policies and practices in light of both the Supreme Court ruling and the EHRC's updated guidance. The University added that the review includes "existing facilities across our estate".

In a statement to *Cherwell*, a University spokesperson said: "The University is reviewing the updated Code carefully to ensure we conduct our activities within the parameters of the law, and in accordance with our values. We also note that a Code of Practice for employment is still to be released."

"Oxford remains committed to being an inclusive university where everyone belongs and is supported to succeed. We will continue to work to maintain an environment in which the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of all members of our community are respected, including all members of our LGBTQ+ community."

The Oxford Student Union (SU) also shared a statement online, saying the updated guidance had "significant implications for LGBTQ+ people,

particularly those who are TNBI+." Reaffirming commitments made in its recently updated Trans, Non-Binary, Gender Diverse and Intersex Inclusion policy, the SU stated that it remains committed to "protecting the rights, safety, dignity, and health and wellbeing" of TNBI+ students across the University.

The SU added that it was reviewing the guidance "to better understand how this may impact TNBI+ students" and would provide updates on any actions it planned to take. When approached for comment by *Cherwell*, the SU referred back to its existing public statement.

Somerville College has also published its own independent statement – the only college to have currently done so – titled "Including the Excluded". In the statement, it said that "trans rights and women's rights [are] not in opposition to each other, but as part of the same struggle for dignity, equality and human rights". The college added that it would "never tolerate harassment, bullying or discriminatory behaviour towards anyone", noting that discrimination against transgender people remains prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.

The President of Oxford University's LGBTQ+ Society told *Cherwell* that the updated Code reflected "the product of years of hateful campaigning from anti-trans organisations", and cautioned against over-reliance on legal reform, writing that "our current Government does not care about trans people beyond our use as a distraction from other issues". She added that "liberation is the goal, and legal changes can only ever be a part of that", concluding that "having a vibrant and thriving trans community... in spite of current national politics – will always be more important to me".

The publication of the Code comes shortly after controversy surrounding a change to Oxford University Rowing Clubs' (OURCs) Rules of Racing, which now state that only athletes assigned female at birth may compete in women's boats. The rule change has prompted backlash from across student boat clubs, with concerns raised over both privacy and enforcement. LGBTQ+ Soc President made clear to *Cherwell* that they do not view these changes and the updated Code of Practice as "unrelated events".

Oxford for Trans Rights has arranged a "March for Trans Rights" for Saturday, 30th May at Bonn Square in response to the EHRC guidance.

Image credit: Emiliano Compassi, for Cherwell.

Wadham second-year accommodation rent to rise by 10.63% to £9470

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role on Wadham SU told *Cherwell*: "This change to the rent structure reverses the changes fought for by the SU leadership of 2023/24, who sought to make rents across the three Wadham sites more equal. Student representatives have pointed out year after year that these rent rises are the result of a broken funding model, to little avail.

"We need central OUSU action, co-ordinating long-term opposition among the undergraduate and graduate population so that stratospheric rent rises like Wadham's can't happen."

The University of Oxford's estimated living costs for 2026/27, published on their website as a guide for prospective students, lists £8,910 as the upper range total for nine months of accommodation. The proposed rate for DWB will exceed this upper range by £560.

In an email circulated to students at Wadham, the Wadham SU President attached a paper detailing the case against the proposed rent increases. Wadham SU intends to present this document to Wadham's Governing Body and to the Equalities and Liaison Committee on Wednesday, 27th May.

The document condemns the proposed rent scenario, claiming that it "is detrimental to Wadham students, will be unsustainable,

and undermines equal access to education." Wadham SU further asserts that "the rising rents are making Wadham increasingly financially inaccessible", and demands "a fair and reasonable framework for setting the rent rates in the future that will commit to not unfairly increasing the burden on students."

The paper contains information gathered from a survey of current students at Wadham, conducted by Wadham SU, concerning their financial situation, which recorded the responses from 91 students. The survey found that for 38% of these students, expenditure is greater than income. The proponents of the paper argue that increased rent will exacerbate financial challenges faced by students, particularly within the context of the rising cost of living.

A student at Wadham told *Cherwell* that because of increased costs, "I've had to work more hours over the vac, which has really impacted my academic work. Even with the maximum student loan, I've been really struggling with the cost of living in such an expensive city."

The response of Wadham SU after the prolonged period of rent negotiations has incurred disapproval. A student at Wadham told *Cherwell*: "Negotiating rent on behalf of students is arguably the most important duty Wadham SU have. Yet they've been in rent negotiations

for far too long with no tangible results. When they finally produced something, the documents drawn up by the committee were poorly written and contained numerous errors. I no longer have confidence that Wadham SU can represent my interests to the College, and I don't have trust in them as an institution."

The president of Wadham SU, Isaac Gavaghan, told *Cherwell*: "The issue facing students at Wadham is not that the proposed increase negotiated by the hard work of the current SU executive is too high, but that a decade of above-inflation rent increases have resulted in unaffordable living costs at Wadham. Wadham SU would note that the rent increase we have negotiated this year averages out at between three and four percent across Wadham's sites and bursary levels. This increase is below many other colleges rent rises as well as being in line with the rises in University of Oxford's living cost estimates for the 2026/27 academic year."

Wadham SU has urged members of Wadham JCR and MCR to contact their tutors, who form the College's Governing Body, in order to raise awareness around the rent increases and cultivate support for Wadham SU's position in the negotiation process.

Wadham College was contacted for comment.

Image credit: Beatrix Arnold, for Cherwell.



Oxford University developing vaccine for latest Ebola outbreak

MELISSA EDDON

The University's Oxford Vaccine Group (OVG) is leading the development and trialling of a vaccine in response to the recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo).

The team, led by the Head of Vaccine Immunology and the OVG and Pandemic Sciences Institute, Professor Teresa Lambe OBE, is working alongside the University's Clinical BioManufacturing Facility and the Serum Institute Pvt. Ltd, to research, create, and trial the viral-vector vaccine. Estimates suggest a workable vaccine could be available within two to three months.

Depending on its performance at animal trials, a World Health Organisation (WHO) spokesperson said it could be "a promising candidate research vaccine" for the Bundibugyo Ebola strain responsible for the outbreak.

Lambe told *Cherwell*: "OVG has more than 30 years of experience in the development and testing of vaccines, which allows us, alongside our partners, to pivot and apply our expertise in times of outbreak... The ability to move rapidly in situations like this has been built on many years of vaccine research and close collaboration with our global partners."

The May 2026 Bundibugyo Ebola outbreak, originating in the DR Congo, has been rated a "very high" public

health risk by the WHO.

Though the risk is low internationally, the WHO declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), a status that encourages cross-continent co-operation. At the time of publication, there have been an estimated 220 deaths and 900 cases, with 11 countries understood to be at risk.

The specific strain of Ebola, Bundibugyo, is rare and has not been seen for over a decade, with the last two outbreaks occurring in 2007 (in Uganda) and 2012 (in the DR Congo). Naturally occurring in animals and fruit bats, the disease spreads among humans through infected bodily fluids, with research suggesting a mortality rate of between 30 - 50%.

Initial symptoms are similar to the flu, with illness often beginning with a fever and a headache. Symptoms rapidly progress to vomiting, diarrhoea, and, later, internal bleeding and organ failure. At present, there are no approved vaccines for this particular Ebola species.

Treatment for the virus has been hindered by violent conflict in the DR Congo between the Congolese military and the M23 rebel group, which has displaced a quarter of a million people.

Having previously worked on the Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, as well as vaccines for Sudan

Ebolavirus and Marburg Virus, the OVG has utilised the same vector platform (ChAdOx1) used in the COVID-19 vaccine, and adapted it to the Bundibugyo Ebola strain. By altering the genetic code, the vector platform can be tailored to different filoviruses.

The vaccine base relies on a common cold virus, typically found amongst chimpanzees. By altering the viral makeup to ensure it is safe for human beings, the virus can travel around the body, delivering information to cells to target and kill the Bundibugyo virus. However, before trials are completed, the scientists involved cannot guarantee that the vaccine will be effective.

Once the vaccine has been effectively trialled and approved, it will be sent to the Serum Institute of India to be mass-produced. Lambe said in a statement: "Once we get starting [sic] material to them, they can go fast and they can go big."

Lambe told *Cherwell*: "Right now, the focus is on generating the data needed to support development, scaling manufacturing with the Serum Institute of India (SII) Pvt. Ltd, and preparing for clinical trials should they become necessary... My hope is that this outbreak can be brought under control quickly and that vaccines are ultimately not needed."

Image credit: MONUSCO, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Flickr.



SU to hold referendum on NUS membership

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across the country. Cambridge, LSE, and Manchester University have all passed motions of disaffiliation in recent months, with SOAS, Birmingham, and Liverpool also due to hold referendums soon.

The motion also comes amid wider national controversy surrounding the NUS' response to the war in Gaza. Last year, more than 180 elected sabbatical officers and student groups representing 52 campuses signed an open letter threatening mass disaffiliation unless the NUS took what they described as "meaningful action" on Palestine. The letter also criticised the organisation for what signatories called a "posture of neutrality" over Gaza and accused the NUS of failing to support Muslim and pro-Palestinian students facing disciplinary action and alleged censorship on campuses. The letter was not signed by the Oxford SU.

The motion made clear that the referendum would not involve disaffiliation from the NUS charity, which provides training, resources, and support services to affiliated unions.

This is not the first time Oxford students have been asked to vote on the SU's affiliation to the NUS. Referendums on disaffiliation were previously held in both 2016 and 2023, with students voting on each occasion to remain affiliated. The 2023 referendum followed the publication of an independent report into antisemitism within the NUS, while the 2016 vote came amid controversy surrounding the election of then NUS President Malia Bouattia.

Sheldonian series concludes for academic year with panel on the power of satire

STANLEY ARLIDGE and
HATTIE SIMPSON

The 2025-2026 Sheldonian Series ended on Wednesday 20th May with a panel discussion on the power, use, and limits of political satire. Held in the Sheldonian Theatre, the event brought together leading figures from British comedy and public commentary to reflect on satire's role in the current political moment.

The Sheldonian Series, launched last academic year by the Vice Chancellor Irene Tracey, aims to "promote discussions about the big issues of the day". This year's theme focused on different dimensions of power. In Michaelmas term, the series examined the power of speech through debates around "cancel culture", while Hilary Term's discussion focused on activism and protest movements.

Opening the evening in a pre-recorded video message, Tracey described the series as a "powerful reminder of what we stand for as a university community" and "what inclusive inquiry and freedom of speech should look like". Professor William Whyte, the panel moderator, noted that the Sheldonian itself was "an ideal place" to discuss satire because it had effectively been "built for that very purpose". It was built in the mid-17th century to provide a location for the 'Oxford Act', an often disastrous end-of-term event which gave students the chance to poke fun at the University and its members in a satirical oration.

The panel featured three prominent figures in the world of British political satire. It included Jan Ravens, an impressionist known for her work on *Spitting Image* and *Dead Ringers*, who performed multiple impressions throughout the course of the evening.

Alongside her sat Andrew Hunter Murray, a Keble College alumnus turned *Private Eye* journalist and star of Radio 4's *The Naked Week*. Completing the line-up was Ella Baron, cartoonist for the *Guardian*, who started her career drawing for *Cherwell* as an undergraduate at Merton College.

Three broad themes dominated the discussion. The first was satire's ability to reshape how audiences see political events. Barton argued that cartoons can "collapse time and space", creating the "click feeling" where an idea suddenly binds together in a reader's mind, while Hunter Murray described satire as an attempt to "distil" reality into something surprising and funny, categorising his work on *The Naked Week* as an attempt to "express reality" in a surprising manner. Baron also argued that cartoons often work because viewers "see a cartoon before you even get to read the argument", giving satire a unique immediacy within the modern news cycle.

A second theme was the question of whom satire should target. Baron argued that satire should involve "punching up but in all directions", though she also warned that "if we think about punching up as redistribution of power, we can also think about those being crushed by it". Hunter Murray similarly described "groupthink" as "the big enemy".

He also expressed awareness of the often intensely personal character of the work they produce, admitting that he has had sleepless nights after *The Naked Week* airs, worrying they had taken it too far. Ravens reflected on this process of deciding "how far can I go?" when creating satirical impressions, particularly when dealing with recognisable public figures. Together, the panellists repeatedly

defended satire's ability to offend and discomfort audiences, though they also acknowledged the ethical tensions involved. Baron reflected on receiving death threats for some of her work, while Ravens stressed the importance of being "intensely considerate" and not producing satire "thoughtlessly". She also stressed, however, that satirists "need to be able to offend" and "can't be too soft".

The final major theme concerned whether satire remains effective in an era shaped by social media, political extremity, and artificial intelligence. Asked by the audience whether modern politics has become "beyond satire", Hunter Murray argues that satire simply adapts to the culture around it, while Baron suggested that figures such as Donald Trump may be difficult to caricature, as there's "not a lot of headroom", but remain open to satire. The panel also reflected on the threat of AI to their practice, with Ravens arguing that AI-generated comedy doesn't have "any humanity... any warmth... any humour".

The discussion also reflected on the place of satire within contemporary public debate more broadly. Hunter Murray argued that "satire is immensely powerful and important", noting that "if you tried to do this in large parts of the world, they would kill you". Despite the event's focus on the importance of student discussion and free expression, however, relatively few students were present in the audience.

The event culminated with a satirical performance by student comedian Foo, a DPhil student in Management. Foo delivered a presentation on "AI and your satire workflow" delivered in the character of "pre-McKinsey" Brasenose graduate "Jonty".

New College JCR President loses no-confidence motion four weeks before end of term

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28 against.

In emails sent to JCR members before and during the poll, Aldridge acknowledged that "many people feel the JCR has not operated to the best possible standard this year" and "there were periods when communication was not good enough", but said he hoped to have met "the vast majority" of his manifesto pledges by the end of his term. He described serving as JCR President as "the greatest privilege" of his time in Oxford, and said he was "incredibly grateful to everyone who placed their trust in me at the start of the year".

Defending his record, Aldridge told JCR members: "I have never missed a JCR meeting, have consistently made myself available to students and have tried to approach the role with energy and genuine care for the community". He noted progress on accommodation rent negotiations, changes to the JCR website and progress towards free printing for finalists, and urged members to consider the need for "a proper handover to the incoming committee". Following the result, Aldridge told *Cherwell* he was "deeply upset" by the outcome of the vote but "incredibly grateful" to students who had supported him during his presidency. He added that he was saddened that "the college will now lose the opportunity for a proper end-of-term handover and the completion of several ongoing projects".

Aldridge also criticised the way the no-confidence process had unfolded. He told *Cherwell* that, following earlier discussions with the original proposers of the motion, he had believed concerns about his presidency had been resolved, and described the motion being "unexpectedly revived" at the JCR meeting on Saturday evening as "a genuine shock". He also alleged that "the atmosphere surrounding the vote became increasingly personal and politically hostile", and said he had

received "anonymous abusive messages", including some "genuinely threatening in nature".

Jacob Newby, one of the original motion proposers, told *Cherwell*: "Harry and I had agreed to a solution in which he takes responsibility for the failings this past year, and makes changes so that other JCR Presidents do not neglect their responsibilities in favour of the Oxford Union in the future. When presented with this resolution, other JCR members at the meeting felt like it wasn't enough, and they re-proposed the motion." He added, "I condemn the cowardly anonymous abuse sent to Harry and played no part in it".

An unsuccessful no-confidence motion was brought against University College JCR President Robert Mylne held earlier this term, but successful no-confidence motions are rare. In 2023, the Magdalen College JCR President was forced to resign following several resignations of committee members, but avoided a no-confidence motion.

According to the JCR Standing Orders, if the position of President becomes vacant, the Vice-President for Welfare and Equality will perform the duties of President until a by-election is held. However, a spokesperson for New College JCR confirmed to *Cherwell* that the position of Vice-President for Welfare and Equality remained vacant, and that "the responsibilities of President will be distributed across the remaining executive committee for a brief period until a President is elected". In an email to students, the JCR Returning Officer announced a by-election for the position of President to be held on Friday 5th June, with hustings expected to be held the day before.

First-year undergraduate Paarth Goswami was elected New College JCR President for the 2026-2027 academic year earlier this month.

Image Credit: Ned Remington, for Cherwell.



NEWS SHORTS

Bit warm innit?

On Tuesday 26th May, Oxford saw the hottest May day in history at 32°C. The heat sent students running to Hinksey Lake, and forced the *Cherwell* News team to take an emergency ice-lolly break midway through designing this page. The University of Oxford even allowed students to remove their gowns in exams. Students are used to degrees – but not like this!

Shop closes

A shortage of performative males in Oxford has left Riverman Records, the only record shop within walking distance of the city centre, at risk of closure. Revealed planning proposals suggests the shop is likely to be converted to a one bedroom flat. Riverman Records would join multiple other shops which have closed in Oxford in the last decade.

Trini-freed statues?

Trinity College has appealed to the public to help find statues that went missing approximately 200 years ago. Recent analysis of the currently standing statues show that they may not be the originals, and police enquiries have stonewalled at every turn! The case has left historians marble-ing at the mystery, with the originals expected to have vanished to a local garden or public space.

Toffee? I hardly know her!

Sticky Toffee Pudding reviews (STP.Reviews) visited Oxford for a seminar with Instagram personality ChatwSam, proving that even for a city better known for essays than desserts, sticky toffee puddings can still draw a crowd. Hopefully, he found the proof of Oxford's status in the pudding - though students may now start demanding sticky toffee puddings as a category on the Norrington Table.

CROSS CAMPUS

Hard-vard

Harvard will cap A-grades to 20% of students to tackle grade inflation. The measures, which begin in Autumn 2027, were passed in a faculty meeting last Wednesday. These measures are a response to fears about grade inflation at the University where over 60% of students currently receive A grades. The change is opposed by students with a survey showing nearly 85% of the student body disapprove.

Getting their ducks in a row

Cambridge porters have gone viral after helping to guide ducklings to the River Cam in a spring tradition. The porters from St Catherine's and Queens' College stopped traffic on Trumpington Street so that the newly hatched birds could travel between the colleges. The porters also guided the birds up stairs, across the court (the Cambridge word for quad), and up onto the Mathematical Bridge for the jump into the River.

Oxford receives share of £9.24 million for research into rare blood cancers

MELISSA EDDON

Oxford and Ohio Universities received £9.24 million in funding for research into rare blood cancers.

The Oxford-Harrington Rare Disease Centre has received a share of the £9.24 million investment for their research into chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL). The donation, split with the University of Ohio's Seidman Cancer Centre, was given by philanthropists and business founders Susan 'Dee' Haslam, who was diagnosed with CLL in 2021, and her husband, Jimmy Haslam.

The Oxford-Harrington Rare Disease Centre functions as a transatlantic collaboration between the University of Oxford and the Harrington Disease Institute, one of the University of Ohio's teaching and

research hospitals. The centre focuses on formulating treatments and cures for rare diseases, and has devised 214 medicines since 2012.

In a statement, Ms Haslam said: "We hope to increase knowledge of CLL, generate new treatments and give others the confidence and information they need to navigate the disease."

David Cameron, former British Prime Minister and Chair of the Oxford-Harrington Rare Disease Centre Advisory Council, said in a statement: "I am delighted to see this generous support, which can help unlock meaningful advances in areas long overlooked and urgently in need of attention. This investment highlights the importance of international collaboration in accelerating progress for people affected by rare conditions."

A rare type of blood cancer, CLL is a slow-moving disease that typically impacts blood and bone marrow. Abnormal white blood cells develop within the marrow, impacting its ability to make healthy blood cells. Often these abnormal cells move into the blood stream, and build up in the lymph nodes and spleen.

There are around 10 cases of CLL diagnosed in the UK every day, and around 60 a day in the US.

Scientists are uncertain as to the cause of the cancer, but many have theorised that there is some hereditary element. Whilst there is currently no cure, symptoms can be managed through treatments such as chemotherapy, targeted medicines, radiotherapy, and sometimes surgery. The donation will provide the funding to push new therapeutics into clinical trials.

Sexual harassment more widespread at selective universities

BARNABY CARTER

Research recently published as part of the 2025 Office for Students (OFS) sexual misconduct survey has found that sexual harassment is nearly twice as common at more selective universities. The survey found that sexual harassment was reported by 35% of students at 'high tariff' universities, in comparison to 17% at 'low tariff' universities. 'Tariffs' are measures of how selective a university's admissions process is, with Russell Group universities making up most of the 'high tariff' institutions – including Oxford and Cambridge.

The study found that, across all universities, nearly a quarter of students have experienced sexual harassment, with sexually suggestive staring and unwanted sexual comments being the most commonly reported. Female students also reported substantially higher levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence than male students across all universities. LGBTQIA+ students also reported a higher prevalence of sexual harassment and violence, along with less confidence in the reporting and support systems available.

Over 42% of students with a mental health condition also reported having experienced harassment. Students studying certain subjects were also found to have experienced harassment at a level disproportionate to the average, with 42.4% of language and area students reporting some form of sexual harassment, along with 41.3% of veterinary studies and 40.3% of medicine and dentistry students.

The survey also found that 14.1% of the overall student body had experienced sexual assault. Patterns within different sub-sections of the student population found in sexual harassment data generally replicated into sexual assault data, with the most affected group being students with a mental health condition.

The University of Oxford has been accused of systemically mishandling sexual misconduct cases, and has previously faced controversy for using anonymity orders to stop the media reporting on cases of sexual harassment – specifically in the case of Professor Soumitra Dutta, the former Dean of the Saïd Business School. Dutta was found by an inquiry to have sexually harassed a female academic and stepped down from his position. The University of Oxford used and later withdrew a request for anonymity in the employment tribunal.

A recent *Bloomberg* investigation also examined the mishandling of sexual harassment complaints at the University of Oxford. The investigation alleged that the University continually mishandled sexual harassment complaints about senior male academics, taking place over nine months of research and interviewing over 50 people. The report described the University of Oxford as an environment in which sexual harassment allegations were dealt with slowly and ineffectively, with University staff stating that the public status of academics appeared to be prioritised over student welfare. The report also touched on individual colleges, where people from New College told reporters that several academics had a reputation for predatory behaviour towards more junior women.

In 2023, the ongoing project 'OUR SPACE' (Oxford Understanding Relationships, Sex, Power, Abuse, and Consent Experiences) found that 50% of students have experienced sexual harassment during their time at Oxford, of which 18% had experienced sexual violence.

A spokesperson for the University told *Cherwell*: "The University is developing a bespoke, in-house online training programme to strengthen how Oxford prevents and responds to harassment and sexual misconduct. This will replace the existing Consent for Students course and complement the in-person healthy relationships and consent training

delivered by student facilitators.

"There has been a significant expansion of prevention and training activity across the collegiate university, including an almost 80% increase in the number of college staff trained in 2024/25, which has supported greater awareness, including of the routes through which students can seek support, as well as proactive referrals. The Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service continues to expand the in-person Healthy Relationships and Consent Workshop programme, delivering the programme across 18 colleges this academic year (up from 15 colleges in 2024/25), with 118 student facilitators, and trained around 2,000 students."

The OFS sexual misconduct survey strongly emphasised that finding the causes of these variations in the data was beyond the scope of the present analysis, calling for "additional qualitative or longitudinal evidence". The OFS also published condition E6 of the regulations for institutions of higher education on 1st August 2025, which "sets out requirements for universities and colleges to have a comprehensive source of information setting out its policies and procedures on incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct".

The OFS told *Cherwell* that they "would encourage all institutions to learn from their own data", and that they would "publish institutional level data from the 2025 and 2027 surveys together, to support transparency and strengthen the evidence base across the sector".

The OFS used a direct survey system to generate prevalence estimates independent of institutional reporting systems". They also separately researched students' experiences of their respective universities' reporting and support systems, publishing the analysis. It was found that out of those affected by sexual harassment and violence, only 12% had made a formal report to their university.

Image credit: Hattie Simpson for Cherwell.

Physics teaching to relocate amid asbestos concerns

OSKAR DOEPKE

The University of Oxford is relocating its undergraduate physics practical teaching from the Denys Wilkinson Building amid concerns about the presence of asbestos at the ageing site.

From Michaelmas this year, some practical teaching labs will move to the former Biochemistry and Biological Sciences Teaching Centre, with the remainder moving by Michaelmas 2027. The Biochemistry and Biological Sciences Teaching Centre will be adapted for physics practical teaching. Around 600 undergraduates currently take part in compulsory practical coursework in the Denys Wilkinson Building across the first three years of Oxford's physics degrees.

A University spokesperson told *Cherwell* that the decision to relocate had been taken proactively "to avoid the risk of a sudden building failure causing disruption later". The spokesperson added that the Denys Wilkinson Building, built in 1967, "is being carefully managed through the later years of its usable life", adding that the building "has some legacy issues, including asbestos".

'Asbestos' refers to several naturally

occurring fibres that are resistant to heat, water, and chemicals and have been widely used in construction in the past. Asbestos is classified as carcinogenic by the World Health Organisation and has been banned in the UK since 1999.

A 2025 investigation by Confront Powers revealed that the University of Oxford breached asbestos management regulations, failing to audit buildings or complete asbestos management plans. The investigation found that the University identified 4,609 asbestos-containing materials across its buildings, with 21 buildings classified as "high risk".

The University spokesperson told *Cherwell* that the asbestos "is being managed safely, in line with regulations, and we are confident this means no building users have been put at any risk", with regular air monitoring providing "an ongoing assurance" to the University. The spokesperson added that the relocation from the Denys Wilkinson Building "will allow teaching to continue without disruption while we address the building's longer-term issues".

Image Credit: Hattie Simpson for Cherwell.



Facial recognition cameras deployed by police in Oxford

BARNABY CARTER

Thames Valley Police (TVP) deployed live facial recognition cameras on Cornmarket Street last Tuesday, 19th May.

The cameras scan the faces of passers-by in the area and compare them to pre-existing biometric data in a watchlist made specifically for that deployment. Watchlists typically consist of wanted criminals, suspects of crimes, missing people, those vulnerable to harm, people on court orders or bail restrictions, and known violent offenders.

The facial data on these watchlists can come from mugshots, CCTV footage, and arrest photographs. The database can also include people who have not been convicted of a crime, for example, those who have been arrested but not convicted, people of interest recorded on CCTV in relation to crimes, or people associated with crimes or criminal organisations. Watchlists are not publicised by the police.

If the facial data of passers-by matches that of those on the watchlist, TVP told *Cherwell* that "an officer on the ground will verify this, engage with the individual involved, and determine the most appropriate and proportionate course of action to take, which may be an arrest".

Thames Valley Police confirmed to *Cherwell* that facial recognition technology had been used in Cornmarket Street on four separate occasions since its introduction: 19th May 2026, 20th March 2026, 14th January 2026, and 22nd December 2025. TVP has used the technology multiple times throughout the past couple of years at multiple locations across Oxfordshire.

Signs were used to warn passers-by of the live facial recognition cameras in Cornmarket Street, as required by law, and police officers remained present throughout the usage of the technology to answer questions from the public. Data of

people passing by who do not match the watchlist data is deleted immediately.

Thames Valley Police told *Cherwell*: "The Live Facial Recognition technology is deployed, used and managed by specially trained officers who have been through the police vetting system and are subject to Thames Valley Police's standards of professional behaviour, as is the case with any officer or member of police staff".

More than 1,000 arrests were made nationally between 2024 and mid 2025 as a result of live facial recognition technology. The cameras were also recently deployed at a protest for the first time, at the Unite the Kingdom and pro-Palestine marches in London on the 16th May.

The technology has attracted criticism from civil liberties organisations, including Amnesty International UK, Big Brother Watch, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), particularly over usage at political events and protests. In 2025, the EHRC warned that facial recognition technology could have a "chilling effect" when used at protests and public events, citing concerns over a restriction on freedom of protest.

Live facial recognition has also been known to produce false positives, occurring when the technology wrongfully matches a face with data from someone in the database. Police reports emphasise that facial recognition technology has very low rates of false positives, with the 2025 report claiming a false positive rate of 0.0003% after the technology scanned over three million people. Eight out of ten of the people falsely identified in the UK in 2025 were black, with women twice as likely to be affected by false positives as men. Thames Valley Police told *Cherwell* that no false positives occurred in the recent deployment of the technology on Cornmarket Street.



Oxford launches initiative to measure national cohesion and belonging

DANIELA BRAW-SMITH

The University of Oxford has launched ‘The National Conversation’, a new initiative to understand the public attitudes towards community, division, and Britain at large.

The project, led by researchers from Oxford Population Health’s Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science and Nuffield College, will collect data through a ten-minute survey, interactive mapping, postcode-based questions, and voice notes in what is expected to become one of the largest ongoing efforts to map the public’s shared vision for the future of Britain.

The survey will ask contributors questions such as “What unites us?”, “What divides us?”, and “What does it mean to be British (and English, Irish, Scottish, or Welsh)?”, with

the findings directly informing the work of the national Independent Commission on Community Cohesion (ICCC). The National Conversation project also includes facilitating ‘Group Conversations’, in which groups of up to ten people “ready for a conversation” participate in guided discussions on the themes of the survey. Oxford researchers and members of the commission have all pointed to recent riots, attacks against migrant communities, and increased political polarisation as evidence of the current “critical moment for Britain’s social fabric”, necessitating the initiative.

The National Conversation has been backed by a wide variety of groups across the UK, including the NHS, TikTok, the UK Muslim Network, and the Church Urban Fund. The ICCC is also comprised of a diverse coalition of stakeholders. Led

by former Cabinet Minister Sir Sajid Javid and honorary Nuffield fellow and former Labour MP Jon Cruddas, the commission also includes Oxford Theology Regius Professor Luke Bretherton; Dame Sara Khan (former counter-extremism commissioner); Dr Chaand Nagpaul (former Chair of the British Medical Association); and Tim Montgomerie (conservative political commentator and defector to Reform UK).

After the survey concludes in August, the results will be used to establish a new long-term “social barometer” to track feelings of cohesion and division over time, with particular attention to trust in institutions, the impact of media narratives, and changing perceptions of local and national identity.

Image credit: Christine Matthews, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



INVESTIGATIONS

653 sent late: Inside the University of Oxford and its colleges’ FOI responses

CHERWELL INVESTIGATIONS

The Freedom of Information Act (2000) gives anyone in the UK the right to request recorded information held by public authorities – among them, the University of Oxford and its colleges. In April 2024, *Cherwell* investigated colleges’ non-compliance with 310 *Cherwell* Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, finding that one in four received no response.

Now, two years later, *Cherwell* is investigating how colleges handle not just *Cherwell*’s FOI requests but all of them – analysing 1,551 FOI requests received by 35 colleges from 2024 to 2025, alongside 2,389 received by the University.

Christ Church and St Anne’s have not yet responded to *Cherwell*’s FOI requests. Data for Wycliffe is incomplete.

The FOI Act

“Openness is fundamental to the political health of a modern state”, David Clark, the then-Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, wrote in the foreword of the 1997 white paper “Your Right to Know”. “At last there is a government ready to trust the people with a legal right to information”, he added, “the right is central to a mature democracy”.

Passed in 2000 and coming into force

in 2005, the FOI Act entitles all members of the public to request access to recorded information – including documents, files, emails, photographs, and more – from public authorities. Authorities must respond within 20 working days, either supplying the information or refusing under a specific exemption, such as commercial sensitivity or the protection of personal data.

Should a person be dissatisfied with the outcome of an FOI response, they can ask for an internal review from the same public authority or, if necessary, escalate to the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), which oversees data protection and can issue binding decision notices requiring FOI compliance.

Universities are listed as public authorities under Schedule 1 of the FOI Act. The University of Oxford, alongside the Russell Group and Universities UK, attempted to gain an exemption from the FOI Act in 2016; a report from the Independent Commission on the Freedom of Information, however, found “no convincing evidence for the exclusion of universities and higher education institutions”.

Today, members of the public can submit FOI requests to Oxford directly through the relevant FOI officer, the University’s portal, or via websites like WhatDoTheyKnow.

Findings

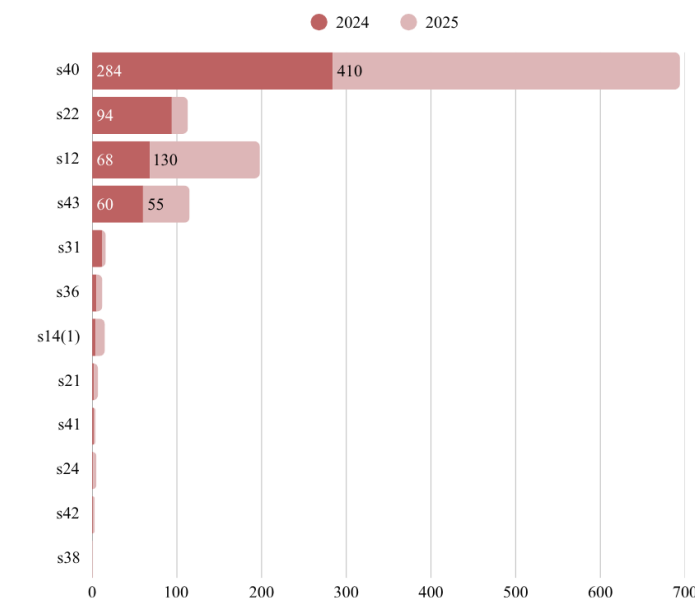
Across the 35 colleges, the number of FOI requests received in 2024 and 2025 varied – from eleven at Mansfield to 87 at Balliol. On average, colleges received 23 FOI requests per year in 2024 and 2025. Meanwhile, the University – which also handles FOI requests on behalf of Reuben and St Cross – received 1,120 “valid” FOI requests in 2024 and 1,269 in 2025, a 13% increase year-on-year.

Excluding FOI requests that were pending, missed, or otherwise unresolved, colleges responded fully to 74% of requests received, partially to 8%, did not hold the requested information for 11%, and applied an exemption for 7%. New College responded fully to all 46 FOI requests received, while St Antony’s had the lowest response rate, answering 15 out of 37 requests in full, or 40%. The University responded fully to 51% of FOI requests in both years. Under Section 10 of the FOI Act, public authorities are required to respond to FOI requests “promptly” and no later than twenty working days after receipt – meaning any day other than the weekend, public holidays, and bank holidays. Public authorities can extend the requirement to consider a public interest test, but there are no exemptions for, as an example, out-of-term time in Oxford.

In 2024, the University responded to

FOI exemptions use by the University

Based on *Cherwell*’s analysis of 618 partially exempt and 372 exempt Freedom of Information responses from 2024-25



193 FOI requests late, compared to 258 in 2024, an increase of 33%. Over the same period, colleges responded to at least 202 FOI requests late. Delays ranged from 1 day to 14 weeks, with colleges citing staffing issues, the need to consult third parties, and FOI requests ending up in a junk folder. Across the 19 colleges that provided sufficient data, the average FOI response time was 14 working days. St Hilda’s had the fastest average response time, averaging two working days, and did not answer any of its 54 FOI requests late.

The ICO rarely, if at all, gets involved with University or college FOI responses. Only St Antony’s and Magdalen reported receiving complaints from the ICO – two and three, respectively – but no complaint resulted in further action or referral to the Information Rights Tribunal (IRT). The University received 13 complaints from the ICO, resulting in two FOI decisions being overturned and one case being referred to the IRT in 2024. *Cherwell* does not hold data on the outcome of the University’s IRT referral.

FOIs in practice

The ICO, under Section 45 of the FOI Act, has published a Code of Practice and guidance hub for managing FOI requests. For its part, the University maintains a centralised FOI team, with a portal and email address to submit requests.

By contrast, many colleges do not have equivalent systems. For instance, at St Hilda’s – which averaged two working days per response – the bursar handles all FOI requests, delegating data collection to other managers or the University, as appropriate. For St Hilda’s, “any impact on time and resources is manageable”, the bursar told *Cherwell*.

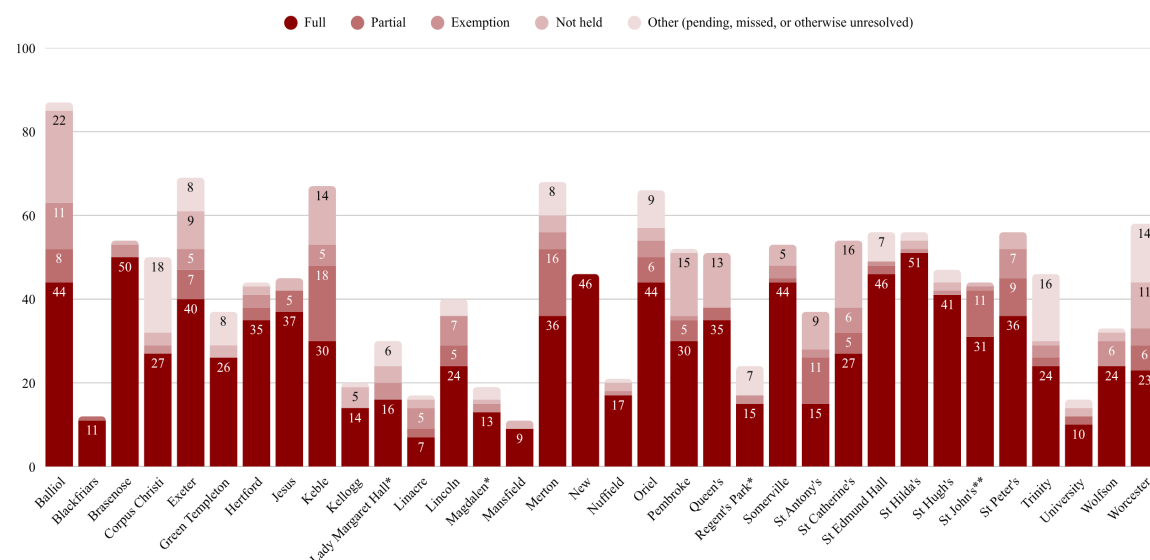
Meanwhile, at St Anne’s – which also does not have a dedicated team – FOI requests are coordinated by the treasurer, who forwards requests to the relevant college department. FOI requests “tend to arrive in term time, which is a busy period for everyone in college”, the treasurer told *Cherwell*, adding that requests can “divert resources from supporting students”.

Unlike the central government, which reports annual FOI statistics, no reporting requirements exist for the University or its colleges. How the University and colleges handle FOI requests, then, remains visible only to those who ask.

Graph credit: Oskar Doepke.

FOI request outcomes by college

Based on *Cherwell*’s analysis of 1,486 Freedom of Information requests from 2024-2025



*Data for 2025 only

**Data excludes at least 15 FOI requests

Gender is what you make of it

MORWENNA STINCHCOMBE

If you ever dare to become an audacious transsexual like me, you may have been confronted with a litany of in-group terminology online: “nonbinary amab”, “birthday boy” (referring to a particularly petulant kind of trans man), “AGP”. Some of these are used with a wry smile, such as “AGP”, which was originally conceived of by someone, Ray Blanchard, attempting to explain trans womanhood in a particularly tasteless manner, and “AGP” was his term for a trans woman attracted to her own femininity. The first term, “nonbinary amab”, elicits deep anger from some, as it implies a real suspicion of non-binary people who seem not to be doing androgyny correctly; labelling them by their sex assigned at birth seems to suggest that they are still fundamentally male in some way. The point is, however, we have these terms because some understand gender to be what one makes of it. It is because gender is so multifaceted, so open to individual manipulation, that gender-segregated colleges would flatten an otherwise multidimensional facet of our lives.

It is for this reason that I am suspicious of the idea of segregating genders from each other, and feel it ought to be reserved for only the most severe and necessary circumstances, such as, arguably, crisis centres for victims of sexual assault. As a trans woman (pulling the card here) who went to an all-boys’ school, I feel especially qualified to tell you: the patriarchy exists, and it affects men too, and people are very good at reinforcing patriarchal standards without any evident bloke in the room to keep the male gaze ticking over. Current dialogues about “single-sex spaces” avoid the hard truth that we are

all responsible for combatting patriarchal standards by rendering the patriarchy into a Thing Men Do.

Many women can attest that they have experienced being silenced by men. History is filled with examples of men stealing women’s ideas; it seems that men underpay and often step in the way of women when possible. But these behaviours are not a rank smell emanating from their genitals. These behaviours are rooted in a complex set of factors which hover around their masculinity. It is possible for women to do all of these things to other women, and some indeed do: some are quite terrible to other women (see: Ellen DeGeneres’ treatment of her staff as one example, or some of my friends have cited the cruelty they experienced, often based on judgements levied at their body, at the hands of other young women during sex-segregated PE lessons). To treat patriarchy as a cut-and-dry problem one can escape by escaping men, or, as the zeitgeist seems to be, anyone with a penis, one refuses the nuances around gender and socialisation.

Let me express an unwoke opinion: the episode of *The IT Crowd* in which Douglas Reynholm dates a trans woman appeals to a part of me. I recognise the argument for it being transphobic: it does portray the one example of a trans woman on the show as a beer-guzzling darts player who can deck a man with a single punch. And there is no doubt that the writer, Graham Linehan, was basing this characterisation on his own prejudices. Yet I love it. I want to be a beer-guzzling trans woman who could, if necessary, deck a full-grown man. This does not make me any less of a woman: in fact, we should celebrate the beer-guzzling, punch-happy women in our lives. We should not treat femininity as divine, meek and mild, governed by what Nietzsche would probably call a ‘slave ideology’. All-women’s colleges suggest otherwise: that women’s existence would be somehow corrupted or threatened by men themselves, rather than being threatened more broadly by patriarchy.

If one therefore treats femininity as tainted by male company, one ends up with a horribly flat image of men based on their gender. In the last year, there has been a flurry of discussion around heterosexual women avoiding dating because men are just so much baggage emotionally. I get it. I dated someone who is probably best described as an incapable manchild (another example of gender’s nuances: we have no better term than ‘manchild’ to describe this dynamic, yet they are undeniably non-binary). I do not begrudge anyone for hating men, disliking them, or actually needing to not be around them, although this latter option implies traumatic circumstances which call for proper attention and care, which is not, per se, best handled by the establishment of women’s colleges alone.

What I do begrudge, though, is believing that a personal preference warrants a donor paying out the wazoo to found a women’s-only college.

Gender- (or, probably, sex-) segregated colleges are the bane of good taste. They will worsen gender relations. They turn the other gender(s) into unidentified other(s) without a face, and by consequence, lead to an inability to treat those who are not women or men as fully-formed humans. They will be treated on the basis of their gender alone. If, for example, you do indeed hate men, which is a fine and fair position to hold, given how awfully some of them dress, or how often some of them go to the gym, then your criticisms should at least be well-founded, and, even better, humorous, which is only achieved – to adapt a T.S Eliot quote – with realism. Men, it is true, can be awful, but they are also awfully varied as a group. You cannot ignore this.

So, no, you don’t deserve a women’s-only college. You don’t deserve a women’s-only college on the basis of an inability to recognise what the rest of us, transsexuals, transgenders, nonbinary amabs, birthday boys, all of us, have long accepted: gender is complex. So do something interesting with it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Navigating home away from home

Neville Lai’s article struck me initially as it prompted me to consider the idea of how one’s experience of home manifests in deeply familiar ways. Aspects from home cooking to the quirks of my neighbourhood sprung to mind, and it is true that they can go without acknowledgement when living them. I deeply enjoyed Lai’s warm, vibrant and flavourful description of Chinese tradition and culture, and especially the notion that he was “preserving a piece of home” – there is a beauty and familiarity to this I would hope we can all relate to. The article reminded me of my wonderful neighbour in first year, Riley, also an international student from China who I remember kindly gifted me noodles from home and New Year decorations; perhaps in sharing her culture this was her own “act of cultural resistance and reconnection”. Lai’s desire to talk without “translating our souls” opened my eyes to the tricky reality of the language barrier that international students can face, and I also enjoyed his deeper valuing of his own language and proverbs as a result of being in a place where the humour is not the same. I was wary of Lai’s criticism of England, however, though the depiction of the UK is considerably bleak, he saves himself from seeming overly critical by vouching rather for this “unexpected underbelly” of national pride that came with his move abroad. These “acts of identity” can be true of anyone – they do not diminish where you are living abroad but indeed, rather “sharpen” your affections.

Elizabeth Millett, Music, *Hertford College*

‘It Happens Here’

‘It Happens Here’ has had a crucial role in pushing for genuinely helpful policies that prevent sexual violence, which is something I had no idea about until I read this piece (“It happens here and it’s our responsibility to stop it”: Oxford’s anti-sexual violence campaign). Awareness about sexual violence and the resources available at the university seems to slip under the radar for many students, and unfortunately it is all too common to experience some form of it. We need to give more time and resources to ‘It Happens Here’, which will help foster a culture where the stigma around sexual violence is broken down, and ensuring students know where they can turn to.

Amalia Larsson Negi, History, *University College*



Image credit: Archie Johnston for Cherwell.

Oxford’s exams need an update

LUCY POLLOCK

In a matter of days, I will face 15 hours of handwritten exams. I will wear a gown that has never truly fitted, because it was made to fit a man, and then I will trek the 20 minutes to Exam Schools, to wait in a queue for up to 45 minutes just to be let into the exam hall. I would say it’s medieval, but I’m a historian and I can’t quite bring myself to. It is, however, distinctly Victorian.

Right before my Prelims, a very kind professor told me that Prelims are essentially a hangover from the British Empire. They were designed to test how students fare under pressure – essential for those who would one day run the Empire as colonels and generals. This didn’t particularly alleviate my stress – but it does suggest how little Oxford has changed.

Handwritten exams are fundamentally outdated. I truly see very little reason for a handwritten exam (at least within any essay subject), other than perhaps as some form of suffering. Students are often forced to decide between legible handwriting or writing a full essay – an essay which they are unable to change once it’s written. I have omitted entire paragraphs in the name of time-keeping fairly regularly, only to finish my paper half an hour early (and it’s still barely readable).

How much difference would typing an exam make? The University has shown it can be done – one of my Prelims was typed and in-person, and it was glorious. It was my highest grade. I still finished quite early, but instead of fruitlessly

staring down at a paper that would only get messier with corrections, I was able to rework paragraphs and even change their placement. At least for essay-based exams, I can think of very few reasons why an in-person exam wouldn’t be better typed – for both students and the examiners who need all the skills of Bletchley Park to decipher our handwriting.

I do understand the hesitancy surrounding take-home papers. As much as I believe in the benefits of open-book exams, my own faculty reverted one of their take-home papers to an in-person exam for this year’s final exams, likely because of the risks associated with students misusing AI. It is unfortunate, but until there are both better guidelines for AI use and better AI detection, in-person exams will be necessary. I also know of many people who did not sleep for the entire span of their take-home paper – an unfortunate result of assigning over-achievers coursework. However, typed in-person exams are so easy to regulate when it comes to AI use. Blocking websites is easy enough, as is using software that tracks if a student leaves the exam portal.

Exam conventions and regulations are also borderline ridiculous. In my first year, I thought that being unable to leave in the first and last half hour, not to mention only being allowed to leave the exam hall once, was a myth created to scare freshers. Upon checking the exam regulations, I was slightly horrified to learn that it’s true. I see no purpose to these rules other than testing students’ physical capacities – a very Victorian idea indeed. The University seems so aware of stress and anxiety,

but seems baffled at the idea of a nervous wee.

Even more ridiculous is the University’s harsh stance on illness. During second year, my friend was so ill that he physically could not walk to Exam Schools and had to take a taxi, yet he was expected to take exams. He would have received a 0 if he didn’t show up. Of course, it is hard to define a limit when it comes to illness, but the net rule of essentially no allowances is completely absurd. I actually really admire some of the accommodations the University is able to make when given prior notice, but people are ill unexpectedly, which is yet another aspect of the human condition that the University appears blissfully unaware of.

Perhaps my most personal gripe when it comes to the pomp and circumstance of exams is the gowns. My friend told me I looked like Henry VIII when I tried on my scholar’s gown – and she was right. There was more gown than person. The University website advises that the scholar’s gown should reach the student’s knees – mine was practically floor-length. Largely, this is the result of having to wear a gown designed for young British officers when you’re a 5’2 woman. The first reference to sub fusc is from 1636, a time at which I, as a Jewish woman, would not even have been allowed into England.

Oxford is, to an extent, lovable for its slightly odd, slightly Stuart traditions – perhaps why over ¾ of students voted to keep sub fusc in 2015. I would miss carnations and the feeling of everyone knowing you’re exam-bound whilst in sub fusc. However, I would not miss the hand cramps from hours of writing or the fear of being smothered to death by my gown. Oxford’s exams don’t need an upheaval; but they do need to be brought into the 21st century.

THE COMMENTS SECTION

See what our readers make of our social media posts

yeah but i listen to cameron winter in a cool way (‘On Geese and the cult of the fake fan’)

beatrice.arnold via *Instagram*

Bro this is what iv been SAYING. Mandem need to start taking day trips to Nottingham Trent. (‘Oxford is not an aesthetic’)

zjzjawzjis via *Instagram*

I gave a boring looking headline a chance, and I enjoyed the article but laughed so hard when it began listing the mountain of committees and societies this guy was serving on during tern. It’s like he was running around Oxford collecting president/secretary positions like badges. Sadly their commitment to the Oxford Union and the Labour Party Club tells me this individual might suffer from an unhealthy craving for influence and high up positions. Harry Alridge, if you’re reading this, you’ll be happier if you took this energy and applied it to your assignments. (‘New College JCR President loses no-confidence motion four weeks before end of term’)

danatbrookes via *Instagram*

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The sound of belonging: Exclusion through language

EMMA HEAGNEY

Calls for migrants to learn English, supposedly for the purpose of ‘integration’, have formed a large part of immigration discourse in recent years. In 2022, Transport for London unveiled a new sign at Whitechapel tube station, written in Bengali. The initiative was intended to commemorate the contribution made to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets by the Bengali community, which comprises 35% of the borough’s population. However, just last year, MP for Great Yarmouth and leader of Restore Britain, Rupert Lowe, condemned the sign, writing that it “should be in English, and English only”, which in turn received a succinct “yes” in reply from Elon Musk.

The sentiment of Lowe and others demonstrates the fact that the English language is itself political. As a consequence of Britain’s imperial, mercantile, and often violent contact with communities across the globe, English has forcibly become the lingua franca of the modern world. The results of this, I believe, are twofold: large parts of the world do speak English, having either been colonised by the British or extensively traded with. But, some level of spoken or written English is now seen as a certain bet in all corners of the world, where it perhaps should not be. The expectation of migrants to learn English, while having no time or space made for their native languages, is a form of insidious hypocrisy. In turn, the expectation that English should be accommodated abroad is reflective of the entitlement that comes with being the historic beneficiaries of empire.

The reactionary outrage at Whitechapel station was perhaps outdone earlier this year by the controversy surrounding the Green Party’s decision to publish campaign materials in six different languages. The Oxford branch of the party posted their own promise of accessible communication to their Instagram in April, with the message translated into Arabic, Portuguese, Mandarin, and Polish. Yet, similar efforts in Leeds and Manchester were met with staunch criticism from the right.

In the context of the high-profile by-election in Gorton and Denton earlier this year, GB News’ reporting describes the move as prompting “accusations of sectarianism”, and Ed West of *The Spectator* writes of the Green Party as “Britain’s sectional Islamist party” – essentially accusing the Green Party of privileging Muslims at the expense of an undisclosed and indeterminate group. Outrage in

the media bleeds into legislation: Conservative MP for Hamble Valley Paul Holmes’ proposed amendment to the Representation of the People Bill, which would have banned the publication of campaign materials in foreign languages, was proposed and rejected in parliament on 16th April 2026.

Is this practice really ‘sectarian’? Or, is it a show of inclusivity to non-native English speakers, in an increasingly hostile political environment? Those who may not have British or Commonwealth citizenship, and therefore cannot vote, also still deserve to know what is going on in their area. Political language can often be full of jargon and unintelligible for even a decent speaker of English, and keeping all residents informed equally may only improve social cohesion. Fundamentally, the Green Party is much more welcoming of migration than any other major British party, and its campaign certainly reflects this.

As a city, Oxford is relatively progressive when it comes to accommodating migrants with little English – it has been a City of Sanctuary since 2025, meaning that it prides itself on the dignity and welfare it affords those seeking sanctuary, working with schools, local charities like Asylum Welcome, and further education colleges to provide low-cost or free ESOL lessons. Oxford is also twinned with seven cities, spanning from Italy to Palestine, and international students make up 43% of the University’s student body, contributing to a general atmosphere of open-mindedness amongst the numerous cultural societies offered.

But while Oxford may be leading the pack in this sense, and may also benefit from the impassioned swathes of student activists, progress is not always linear – there have already been two protests this term by Oxfordshire Patriots, whose organiser reported to *Cherwell* that he doesn’t “believe Nazis seem very good, however, some of our views are the same... I don’t agree with everything they say”. In this month’s local elections, the head of the University’s Staff Immigration Team, responsible for providing “free and impartial advice on immigration matters to current and prospective University employees, visitors and their accompanying dependants”, ran unsuccessfully in Oxford’s Littlemore ward as a Reform UK candidate, representing a party that wishes to abolish Indefinite Leave to Remain and withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The simple fact is that life is far more difficult when you do not speak the dominant language. Anecdotally, it can be anxiety-inducing to go to a

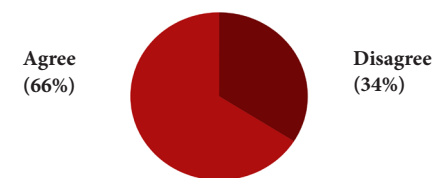
foreign country and not know how to buy a bus ticket, ask for medicine, or order food, and I do not doubt that it is even more challenging for someone who has settled in Britain with a decent grasp of English, but cannot explain the daily yet complicated terms of their train ticket, for example. What’s more, learning a language is also a hugely difficult task, the obligation of which does not seem to apply to British people in this discourse: Britain is the least likely European country to speak a second language. And the very lack of obligation to do so harms sole-English speakers too – this also being a significant factor in the poor language teaching standards at British schools. Only 2.97% of 2024 A-Level entries were for a classical or modern foreign language. As a result, Britain ranks far behind other European countries in bilingualism (50% overall vs 30% UK).

It would be a lie to claim that speaking English presents an equal playing field, as Britain’s own problems with accent discrimination have been well-documented. Crucially, most migrants do speak at least a decent level of English: the University of Oxford’s Migration Observatory found that 90% of migrants residing in the UK self-reported as speaking a good level of English in the 2021 census, and that use of English only increases with time. Several studies have shown that migration patterns tend to align with historic ties to colonial powers – for example, a French speaker from Senegal may be more likely to emigrate to France – due to linguistic and cultural ties to the imperial centre (however, this may not always outweigh the economic factors which contribute to migration). While sensationalised reports may speak of one million migrants being unable to speak English, they neglect the nine million migrants who can speak English.

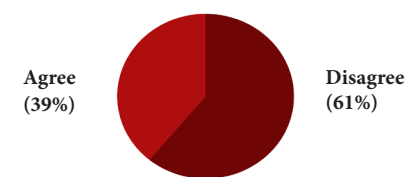
Ultimately, I think that history matters, and that the British government has a particular responsibility to accommodate all migrants actively welcomed into the country. From Windrush onwards, migrants were regularly employed in Oxford’s car manufacturing industry, an economic powerhouse with a rich history. Is it right to exclude from society those who do not have a perfect grasp of English, using the language as a barometer of how much one might ‘deserve’ a normal life in Britain, when the simple fact of the matter is that Britain’s colonial past has diversified the country? Should we force those with poorer levels of English to suffer the barriers to a good quality of life that English-only signage can pose? Why do we shudder at the thought of this, while expecting English to take us so far while abroad?

THE VERDICT

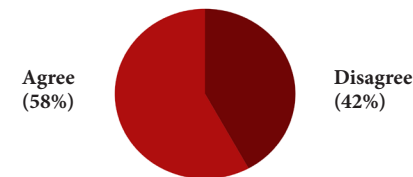
Oxford’s exam system is outdated



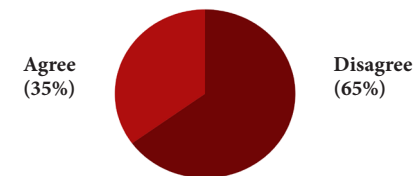
‘English-only’ signage is exclusionary



Gender is too complex for sex-segregated colleges



Oxford does enough to confront its colonial past



*According to over 400 Instagram respondents

Oxford’s prestigious reputation deserves scrutiny

SABA AHMADZADEH NOUGHANI

I was very close to rejecting Oxford for Exeter. While this is not why I eventually accepted my offer, I couldn’t stop thinking about the prestige the name ‘Oxford’ connotes. This ‘prestige’, however, was historically incubated through empire, slavery, class hierarchy, and elite political power. For these reasons, especially, I feel that studying here is nothing to boast about at all.

We often ignore the fact that Oxford did not merely exist during the empire, but helped to produce the people and ideas that sustained it. It was this institution, alongside Cambridge, that was tasked with educating generations of colonial administrators who governed the British Empire. Among them are: Cecil Rhodes, Lord Curzon, Alfred Milner, Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne, and Victor Bruce, 9th Earl of Elgin. Additionally, Britain would offer members of foreign elites a place to study at Oxbridge, a practice that some scholars view as a soft power tactic to strengthen British cultural and diplomatic influence abroad. Perhaps unrelated, today, over one quarter of the world’s countries still have a leader who was educated in the UK.

Oxford further helped intellectually legitimise the empire and colonial hierarchy. Subjects like classics, theology, and my own subject, ‘Oriental studies’ (now Middle East Studies), were historically intertwined with imperial governance. These disciplines provided the ideological justifications and administrative frameworks necessary to establish and manage the British Empire. Even today, I have classmates from ethnic minority backgrounds who have told me about Oxford coursemates and even a tutor who has proudly introduced themselves – to them specifically – as the grand or great-grandchild of the governor of areas in Bangladesh, India, and so on.

Oxford has also benefited from wealth derived from colonial exploitation. The Codrington Library at All Souls College was funded by Christopher Codrington. His fortune was accumulated from Caribbean sugar plantations where enslaved Africans were put to work. When Oxford has wished not to associate with its donors, they have renamed libraries. The Ferdowsi library in Wadham College was initially the Ashraf Pahlavi Library, as it was funded by the last

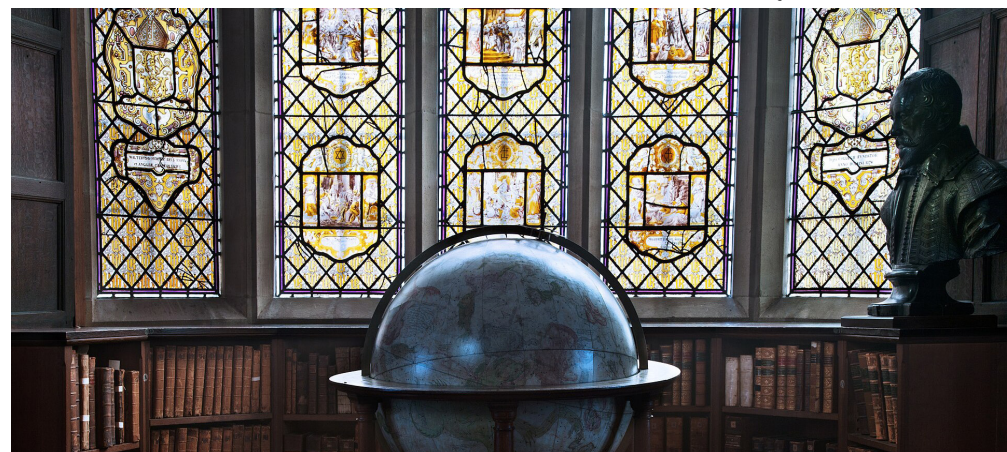
Shah of Iran’s sister in 1977. Just two years later, when the Shah was overthrown, the College didn’t hesitate to rename the library. The Codrington Library, however, still bears a slave-owner’s name.

Looking back at the last three years, Oxford students organised encampments calling on Oxford to divest from companies linked to the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, and criticised the University for insufficient transparency regarding its investments. Oxford was quick to ban and dismantle the encampments. In January 2025, as many students may remember, abseiling police officers were seen scaling the Radcliffe Camera to arrest protesters from Oxford Action 4 Palestine. Would the University’s response be so harsh if students were protesting a different humanitarian catastrophe?

Another cause of personal discomfort for me is every single time I have to wear my sub-fusc. The same sub-fusc that was worn by Leo Amery and Lord Alfred Milner, who, along with Arthur Balfour, drafted and authorised the Balfour Declaration.

These ongoing and past injustices are easily traced back to Oxford’s alumni and donors. Apart from these alumni and Oxford’s current polemical financial investments, having played a role in fuelling injustice in current ongoing international conflicts, its links to past atrocities can still be seen in its landscape. The relationship between Oriel College and British imperialist and white supremacist Cecil Rhodes (the founder of the colonies of North and South Rhodesia) is perhaps the most high-profile example. Rhodes left a financial bequest to the college, which funded the construction of the building that still bears his name, and his statue remains prominent in Oriel. Again, in the past, Oxford has renamed buildings and can easily do so again. For instance, the Faculty of Asian and Middle East Studies was previously the Oriental Institute – while the name has officially changed, the ‘Oriental Institute’ sign remains.

In 2015, the University of Cape Town, after immense pressure from its student body, removed the statue of Cecil Rhodes from their campus. Our students continue to campaign for the same, especially after the “Black Lives Matter” movement, but the Rhodes statue remains. The global “Rhodes Must Fall” movement has argued that Oxford glorifies the Empire while marginalising those harmed by it.



At times, our student body has done the same, like in 2015, when the Oxford Union named one of their cocktail drinks “Colonial Comeback”.

It is public knowledge that up until that year, academics from Worcester College were drinking from a 225-year-old skull, thought to have belonged to an enslaved woman, and gifted to them by an alumnus. Why did that alumnus feel that human remains, which were passed down in his own family, were the best gift to present to his college? Why did he rightly assume it would not raise any questions? Why did multiple Oxford academics even think to use it for such a purpose, and comfortably do so for years? Even after it was damaged, they used this human skull to store chocolate. All this alone reveals so much.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was some Oxford academics (Julian Huxley, John R. Baker, and E. B. Ford) who were among the elite who perpetuated eugenic theories, and played a role in legitimising racial hierarchy under the guise of “scientific research.” In recent times, other Oxford academics, like Nigel Biggar, Emeritus Regius Professor of Moral Theology, have defended certain aspects of colonialism, as can be seen in his article for *The Times* in 2017. As for Oxford donors whose names are ingrained in stone in the buildings we study in, their names are also found in the Epstein files. If not for wordcount sake, this list would go on,

all raising questions about the kind of institution I feel I really belong to.

And yet, instead, for reasons I cannot fathom, Oxford is somehow considered by so many to be a source of moral and intellectual authority. In a clothed expression of classism, a former sixth-form teacher of mine even went as far as to describe Oxford students as “the peak of civilisation” to explain why he was shocked that Oxford has one of the highest statistics among UK universities for cases of sexual assault on university grounds.

I will never belittle all that Oxford has given me, including my Oxford education, and I suffered greatly for my place here. However, pride in this institution – in where I study and who has studied here before me – will always be impossible for me.

We cannot pick and choose. We cannot believe that we are inheriting a millennium of intellectual achievement, and also dismiss the moral weight that comes with it. We cannot falsify, erase, or deny history, and a large part of Oxford’s history is shamefully one of empire, elite political power, and built with slavery-linked wealth. Students have every right to question what that legacy means today. If anything, doing so reflects the very critical thinking and values that Oxford claims it champions.

Image credit: Jorge Royan, CC-BY SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Oxford students who can't read books



In an age of fragmented attention and impossible reading lists, Oxford raises a larger question: can universities still defend deep reading, or merely preserve its mythology?

ANISH VEDANTHAM

In 2024, an essay in *The Atlantic* by Rose Horowitz tapped into anxieties already circulating across elite higher education with its provocative title: “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books.” The article alleged, among other claims, that students at Ivy League and other elite universities increasingly struggled to complete full books. Professors at Princeton, Georgetown, and Columbia described undergraduates overwhelmed by reading lists that once would have seemed unremarkable. One professor reported students “bewildered by the thought of finishing multiple books a semester”. Another observed that students struggled to sustain attention through even a 14-line sonnet.

At Oxford, the premise initially sounds absurd. It is difficult to think of a university more entangled with the idea of reading. The institution remains organised around libraries, primary texts, and tutorial reading lists that have become semi-mythological in undergraduate culture. Even maths students do not simply study maths; according to their Bod cards, they “read for” a degree. Entire pedagogies here rest on assumptions that students will disappear into novels, criticism, and archives before resurfacing with an essay and an original argument.

Yet, the real concern underlying Horowitz’s article was never simply whether students still technically read books. The students she described were perfectly capable readers in the conventional sense. They could decode texts, absorb information, and write essays. The anxiety centred instead on reading stamina: the capacity to sustain concentration through long arguments, difficult prose, ambiguity, and slow accumulation of meaning. Reading, in this account, had become increasingly fragmented – broken into excerpts, summaries, strategically selected passages, and material skimmed for argumentative utility rather than experienced in full.

At the same time, complaints about declining student reading stretch back generations. Every academic era seems convinced that the current cohort reads less attentively than the last. Horowitz’s article occasionally drifts toward a familiar genre of civilisational panic disguised as pedagogy. The issue,

then, may be less about whether students still want to read deeply than whether universities structurally permit it.

There is reason to think these concerns extend beyond anecdotes. Research on reading habits suggests that long-form reading has declined over the past two decades, with a study finding that about 55% of surveyed professors said they had cut reading assignments (often because students weren’t completing them). Scholars studying university reading habits increasingly describe students becoming more selective and strategic: reading not necessarily to dwell on a text but to extract enough material to survive assessment.

“Entire pedagogies here rest on assumptions that students will disappear into novels, criticism, and archives before resurfacing with an essay and an original argument”

The explanation offered by many educators is not that students have become less intelligent or less motivated. Rather, educational structures themselves have changed. School curricula increasingly favour shorter informational texts. Universities compress enormous quantities of material into tightly scheduled semesters. Students balance multiple classes simultaneously alongside internships, networking, and extracurriculars.

This is particularly visible when talking to visiting students at Oxford from elite American universities. Natasha Wipfler-Kim, a third-year visiting student from Princeton University studying English at Worcester College, described Princeton reading as broad but scattered. “Everything’s kind of distributed

a lot more”, she said. Princeton’s Humanities Sequence (HUM), which assigns enormous quantities of reading across a single semester. A sample reading list for a twelve-week term contains roughly 30 books. Natasha described being expected to read multiple books a week, including Plato’s *Republic*, in a day. “The expectation”, she said, “was that it just wasn’t really possible”.

That impossibility changes how students read. When confronted with several books a week alongside work for four or five other classes, the goal becomes coverage rather than immersion. Students cannot afford to remain inside every text equally. Skimming becomes less a failure than a structural necessity. Describing how she dislikes skimming because it forces students into constant calculations about what can be abandoned, Natasha said: “I hate the point at which you’re reading, and then you have to decide that it’s time to skim”.

Horowitz’s article occasionally blurred two related but separate phenomena: students reading less deeply and universities assigning reading in ways that all but guarantee superficial engagement.

This is where Oxford becomes interesting. Unlike most American universities, Oxford does not primarily organise learning around lectures, seminars, and continuous classroom participation. The tutorial system places extraordinary weight on solitary reading and independent interpretation. Students are expected to encounter texts alone first, formulate arguments independently, and then defend those ideas in the unnervingly personal setting of a tutorial. In contrast to large seminars at American universities, there is little room to disappear into anonymity.

As Clara Shapiro, a third-year visiting student from Harvard University, also studying English at Worcester, put it: “Since it’s a one-on-one system, if you haven’t read [the text] closely, your tutor will definitely notice that.” At Harvard, she explained, there are reading checks and classroom discussion, but also a tacit recognition that enormous quantities of reading will inevitably “slip through the cracks”. Oxford, by contrast, still largely assumes that students will at least thoroughly read the primary text, even if certain secondary criticism is strategically

abandoned. Oxford, therefore, occupies an unusual position on the spectrum between close reading and strategic extraction. Tutorials demand immersion and detailed engagement with core texts; at the same time, the sheer scale of many reading lists makes selective reading unavoidable. Students are often expected to read deeply and strategically at once.

“Students are expected to encounter texts alone first, formulate arguments independently, and then defend those ideas in the unnervingly personal setting of a tutorial. In contrast to large seminars at American universities, there is little room to disappear into anonymity”

Oxford’s workload can also be brutal, but its brutality operates differently. As opposed to taking five or six classes, students often study only one or two papers at a time. The reading remains immense. One undergraduate syllabus requires students to read Anne Brontë’s *Tenney of Wildfell Hall* and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (plus a chapter from John Stuart Mill) in a week. But, the structure more plausibly permits immersion.

“There’s just a lot more time [at Oxford]”, Natasha observed. “The day is, for the most part, quite open, so you can kind of make it happen”. Oxford therefore preserves institutional conditions in which deep reading remains possible more successfully than



many universities do. But possibility is not the same thing as guarantee.

The mythology surrounding Oxford reading culture can obscure how tactical students become. Undergraduates quickly learn that no human being can read every item on every reading list with equal care. The result is not necessarily a rejection of close reading but a division of labour within reading itself: some texts receive sustained attention because tutorials require it, while others are approached strategically for arguments, context, or scholarly positioning.

Thomas Bainbridge, an English student and JCR President at Somerville College, described the difficulty of sustaining uninterrupted concentration alongside administrative responsibilities. As JCR President, he balances committee meetings, conversations with college staff, and student welfare responsibilities alongside degree work. Reflecting on his ability to sit with a book, he said: “You just don’t have a lot of time to sit for hours without being disturbed. You will get something that you need to do, like responding to an email or attending a meeting.” He continued: “You don’t have time to get immersed in something, which I do think matters quite a lot.”

Nor are these pressures uniquely American anymore. Oxford humanities students increasingly face the same imperative to convert a non-vocational degree into employability through internships, networking, committee positions, and extracurricular distinction. Thomas highlights how the amount of work required to pivot into other industries can be enormous. Increased time spent outside the library is therefore more a natural response to economic pressure and career anxiety, rather than evidence of intellectual decline.

Strategic reading, then, is not unique to Oxford, nor is it necessarily evidence of cultural collapse. In many ways, it represents a rational adaptation to reading lists that are designed to be impossible to complete. One can simultaneously believe that deep reading matters and acknowledge that no student consistently reads every assigned text in full. Oxford reading culture often depends precisely on holding two positions simultaneously: that certain texts demand close, immersive reading, and that no student can realistically approach every assigned work that way.

More interesting is the extent to which Oxford still pressures students towards close engagement despite these evasions. Tutorials have a peculiar way of exposing intellectual shortcuts. An undergraduate can survive a lecture or seminar having skimmed the novel. Defending an interpretation in front of a tutor who has taught the text for 20 years is different.

Clara described finding herself annotating far

more at Oxford than at Harvard because the tutorial system demands not merely comprehension but independent thought. “You need to really hone in on what you find interesting personally”, she explained. “Sometimes that requires talking to the text”.

That phrase – talking to the text – captures something central about Oxford’s conception of reading. The Faculty itself increasingly seems aware that reading now exists within altered conditions of attention. Alongside traditional forms of literary study, recent initiatives have experimented with shorter, curated encounters with texts. Projects such as LitHits and The Ten Minute Book Club present expertly selected but unabridged excerpts intended to encourage engagement with literature through more concentrated forms of reading. Similarly, Professor Marion Turner’s project “Why We Read Fiction” forms part of a broader conversation within the Faculty about what reading means under contemporary conditions. These projects do not abandon deep reading so much as ask how it might be sustained. Further, undergraduates are repeatedly told to “put themselves in conversation with the text”, while mark schemes place heavy emphasis on independence of thought. The institution imagines reading not as passive absorption but as dialogue: a sustained argument between reader and author brought to life in tutorials. The ideal Oxford student generates new ideas, rather than simply regurgitating old ones.

“*That phrase – talking to the text – captures something central about Oxford’s conception of reading*”

This expectation can feel simultaneously liberating and disorienting. First years, in particular, often struggle to know exactly what they should read or what intellectual direction they ought to pursue. Clara described the unusual freedom one tutor gave her to construct an entire syllabus herself for a paper on Celtic myth and folklore. “Nobody’s ever asked me that before”, she recalled thinking. Rather than receiving a rigid programme, she found herself building one through curiosity, association, and “hyperlink hopping”, tracing connections between Seamus Heaney, ley lines, Irish folklore, and ethnographic collections of myths.

Thomas similarly described how reading lists at Somerville are often extremely expansive. Tutors, he explained, “value giving you the opportunity to read what you’re interested in and develop academic interests or niches”. This freedom allows students to pursue highly individual intellectual paths, but it also demands initiative.

American humanities education, by contrast, was repeatedly described by both Natasha and Clara as more collectively interpretive and more explicitly guided. At Harvard, Clara explained, students spend considerable time discussing texts together before writing essays. Lectures often provide strong interpretive frameworks and can occasionally resemble “performance art”. She recalled one Harvard lecture on Bartleby, the Scriverer delivered almost entirely in silence because Bartleby himself refuses to speak for much of the text.

Oxford tutorials can therefore feel comparatively austere. Students arrive having prepared essays alone and are then forced to defend or revise their thinking in real time. Tutors frequently withhold definitive readings. “It’s still a mystery to me what exactly my [tutor] thinks of a book”, Clara admitted. The effect can be disorienting but also intellectually productive. “Oxford really prepares you to generate thoughts about a book on your own”.

Yet, this raises a more complicated question. Oxford clearly preserves the conditions for deep reading more successfully than many universities do. But does it actually teach students how to read closely, or does it simply assume they will acquire those skills through immersion?

Thomas suggested many skills develop through immersion rather than explicit instruction. That assumption itself reflects a distinctly Oxford conception of literary study – that sustained exposure to difficult texts will organically produce better readers.

Historically, other institutions approached the problem more directly. Modern English as an academic discipline was shaped significantly by the tradition of practical criticism associated with I. A. Richards at the University of Cambridge. Cambridge’s English course developed forms of close textual analysis explicitly designed to train students how to extract meaning from dense passages of writing. First-year Cambridge students still sit papers intended specifically to cultivate those interpretive skills. Oxford’s closest equivalents – Old English and Chaucer set texts – often approach literature more through linguistic or sociological lenses, rather than through formal critical method itself.

This distinction matters because immersion alone does not necessarily safeguard against bad reading. Recent warnings from Oxford itself

complicate any optimistic account of tutorials as a defence against intellectual shortcuts. Katherine Rundell recently argued that AI enables a “vast counterfeiting of knowledge”, warning that students can now plausibly produce sophisticated humanities essays without having meaningfully encountered the texts themselves. Yet Rundell’s diagnosis risks overstating technological novelty. Students have always improvised, strategically avoided reading, and performed understanding they did not possess. What’s more, her claim that students “could soon get degrees without reading a book” is still completely unfounded in Oxford, where students sit exams that are designed to test recall and understanding when faced with completely new questions.

“*The question is not whether elite students can still technically read books. It is whether universities still defend forms of attention incompatible with acceleration culture*”

Oxford’s tutorial system may cultivate deep reading less through direct instruction than through pressure, repetition, and institutional expectation. Its strength is the freedom it grants students. That freedom, however, becomes its weakness as students aren’t guided on how to read. The system can struggle to distinguish between genuinely attentive reading and sophisticated forms of academic improvisation.

That ambiguity complicates any attempt to cast Oxford straightforwardly as a holdout against cultural decline. The University benefits enormously from selection effects. Students admitted to Oxford humanities courses are already disproportionately likely to possess unusually strong reading habits. English applicants, for example, must take A-Level English Literature or an equivalent qualification, which still generally requires engagement with complete texts rather than excerpts alone.

Even here, however, things are changing. Thomas noted that longer poetic works, such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Paradise Lost*, are increasingly taught through selected sections rather than in full. The broader educational culture surrounding universities has shifted long before students arrive at Oxford itself. This echoes Horowitz’s findings about prep schools in the U.S. She notes that educators have shifted emphasis toward shorter informational texts and exam skills in recent decades, citing data that only 17% of teachers primarily teach whole texts in middle and high school.

And some behaviours now treated as symptoms of decline may simply reflect changing academic incentives. Discussing the emphasis on secondary criticism and “scholarly conversation”, Natasha described a culture in which students increasingly engage with criticism strategically, mining arguments for useful frameworks rather than lingering over prose itself. “You go in, pull out what’s useful to you, and then just kind of leave”, she said. This does not necessarily eliminate appreciation for literature. It reflects the structure of contemporary academic work. Still, she worried something might be lost. Deep reading is not merely the ability to finish books. It involves a willingness to remain inside uncertainty long enough for meaning to emerge.

That may be the real issue underlying Horowitz’s article. The question is not whether elite students can still technically read books. It is whether universities still defend forms of attention incompatible with acceleration culture.

Oxford remains unusual not because students there never skim or optimise – they do – but because its pedagogical structure still allocates time for and comes to expect sustained interpretation. Tutorials force students into direct confrontation with texts in ways many university systems no longer do. Yet Oxford also reveals the limits of immersion as a pedagogical philosophy.

Perhaps the University’s real achievement is more modest. Oxford does not entirely resist the pressures transforming reading elsewhere. Its students optimise, skim, network, and strategically abandon material just like students at Princeton or Harvard. But the institution still creates spaces in which slow reading remains imaginable – where spending hours inside a difficult poem or novel continues to appear serious rather than inefficient.

Deep reading is becoming rare, but that’s not the real issue. The real problem isn’t that reading is disappearing altogether. It’s that our institutions are abandoning the idea that deep attention is a skill worth protecting in the first place.

Image credit (left): *Stickinho*, CC BY-SA 3.0 via *Wikimedia Commons*. *Compassi*, with permission.

From sub fusc penguins to college puffer herds: The ‘uniforms’ of Oxford

Between gowns, suits and ties, and college puffers, there are many forms of dress we might call ‘uniforms’ in Oxford. Do they foster a sense of camaraderie, or do they needlessly divide us up into groups?



AARON BUTTERS

At my matriculation, I remember laughing with my friends about how it seemed that the entirety of Oxford had been “overrun by penguins”. Everywhere you looked, you would see sub fusc, that bizarre getup that the University demands be worn for its official ceremonies and exams. During my first Michaelmas, as the weather got colder, it was impossible to walk about town and not see herds of students in college puffers, and I soon learned to recognise the various college crests embossed on them. Later, on nights out, you could always recognise a group of Oxford students by their (by then, slightly out-of-kilter) black tie. With all these sightings of homogeneous clothing, it seemed to me as though people spent more time in ‘uniform’ at Oxford than they would have done in sixth form or high school beforehand. But does Oxford really have ‘uniforms’? How might we define them? And what purpose might they serve?

Does Oxford have ‘uniforms’?

When the term first entered English about 1748, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a uniform was “a distinctive dress of uniform cut, materials, and colour worn by all the members of a particular naval, military, or other force to which it is recognized as properly belonging and peculiar”. Aside from the definition’s militaristic associations, what interests me is the adjective “peculiar”, here meaning “exclusive” or “unique”. While we might think of uniform as simply meaning sartorial homogeneity, lots of uniforms also stand out for their unique oddness and lack of any general practicality: school blazers, to use a well-known example from the UK, are really rather constricting, useful only when you have copious items to store within their many pockets. They are often brightly and strangely coloured too. Nobody would wear them in any other context outside of school.

There is a second definition of “uniform” in the OED, in use since 1930: “The customary dress or mode of appearance characteristic of persons of a certain age, class, or lifestyle.” This marks a semantic widening: a term that entered English with quite specific reference to the flamboyant military uniforms characteristic of the 18th century, had by the 20th century broadened its meaning to any recognisable mode of dress.

Where, then, does Oxford fit into this? What might count as uniforms in Oxford? First to mind come sub fusc and academic gowns, black tie (and indeed white tie for those rather fancy balls), and college merchandise.

Sub fusc, as the oldest of the bunch, seems to fit most closely with the 1748 definition. It certainly is ‘peculiar’, as the joke about the “penguins” illustrates. Both black tie and college merchandise,

on the other hand, seem closer to our 1930 definition. They could certainly be said to be ‘characteristic’ of Oxford students. The one factor that legitimates all of these forms of dress, however, which makes their ‘peculiarity’ acceptable, is the context of the University. Sub fusc, black tie, and college merchandise all link to that institutional power and prestige. These can be called ‘uniforms’ in the sense that they are homogenised forms of dress, unique and peculiar to Oxford.

College puffers

In order to find out how college merchandise is purchased and received by students, *Cherwell* reached out to JCRs to find out the popularity of merchandise, whether students thought it could be considered a ‘uniform’, and in what ways it was different from the other ‘uniforms’ that we have discussed thus far.

The Oriel College JCR President told *Cherwell*: “Oriel JCR donates all the proceeds from stash orders to a charity chosen by students.” This, in comparison to sub fusc or black tie, shows that there is a much more altruistic motive to purchase merchandise. Buying college stash is an act of goodwill as much as it might be a consequence of wanting to be seen belonging to the University.

At other colleges, proceeds from stash sales may go back into the JCR. Keble’s stash sales, for example, represent about 5% of their annual budget. In Michaelmas and Hilary this year, Keble sold 148 quarter-zip fleeces and 89 puffers, to a cohort of just 124 new undergraduates this year. The quarter-zips were the most popular item – interesting to note, as it shows the idea that college puffers are the most popular choice to be something of a myth. Even accounting for older students, it seems likely that well over half of the freshers bought a puffer, and likely even more bought a quarter-zip.

It is clear that college stash, as a purchase made by choice, and with proceeds going to JCRs or to charities, is acquired in a very different context to sub fusc or black tie, and so has a very different meaning to students. It is an optional purchase, and not a cheap one at that: in Corpus Christi’s stash drop, a college puffer will set you back £42.99. Nevertheless, the popularity of the college puffer and of college merchandise more generally persists. Why is this? Do students feel obligated to buy one because of their popularity? Or do they simply want to express pride for their college and for Oxford?

Mansfield’s JCR president told *Cherwell* that the stash is “really helpful for college culture – we’re a small college, and not as well-known, so it’s nice to have branded coats and jumpers you can wear around”. The JCR president also noted: “I’m not sure I would call them uniforms, especially since some people are more self-conscious about wearing them in a group.” Even among students, then, sometimes the puffers and college merchandise aren’t seen as uniforms inspiring pride or evoking

distinction; in fact, there is fear of exactly that.

So, college merchandise is not regularly perceived as a ‘uniform’ by those who enjoy wearing it. However, if we consider the puffer sceptics, the fact that some are conscious to avoid being seen in an “Oxford uniform” shows that, in fact, that’s the way they are already perceiving the puffers. This aversion is not trivial: it shows that some people do see college puffers as uniform-like, or that there is a risk of them becoming like uniforms.

It is also worth considering the significance of the branded puffer outside of Oxford. Many people choose to wear them at home – and many don’t. On the one hand, some people see them simply as practical coats, and others want, maybe if only a little, to show off the fact that they’ve made it to Oxford. On the other hand, for some, the meaning of the college puffer loses its significance a little outside of Oxford; without the context of many others wearing similar attire and the proximity to the University, the puffer once again becomes ‘peculiar’, and feels odd to wear. All of this is to say, while the puffer might for some be a fun way of expressing college pride and camaraderie, for others, there is the slight fear of them being peculiar, and of them feeling too much like uniforms to be worn outside of the context they came from.

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As freshers and exam-goers waddle penguin-like through town in their black gowns, the peculiar sight impresses upon onlookers and participants alike that certain forms of dress can connote and foster seriousness, solemnity, or academic vigour

Sub fusc and black tie

The University website describes sub fusc as “solemn and modest, in line with our ceremonies”.

The English student in me jumped at the chance to look into some of the language being used to describe it here. By being linked to ceremony, sub fusc is, by extension, linked to the power and prestige that it represents. Oxford students wear sub fusc as a reminder of the gravity of these shared rituals and the history of the institution. It is not a “characteristic mode of dress” in the sense of the expanded, 1930 definition of uniform, but rather a form of dress associated with specific events: collections, exams, matriculation. Its “peculiarity” and association with ceremony perhaps make it more of a traditional uniform than the college stash. While college puffers have a much more immediate purpose of fostering college community, sub fusc goes straight back to the heart of the University’s traditions and their roots in prestige and solemnity.

Additionally, as part of sub fusc, gowns group students into different categories. Those who have achieved a first in their Prelims or Mods, or those who have attained other scholarships, can wear scholar’s gowns, while the rest of the student population wear commoner’s gowns. While some may feel that it’s an exciting challenge to aim high in order to ‘win’ a fancier gown, it can also certainly be seen as problematic that students’ academic standing can be ‘read’ by anyone simply from what they are wearing. Is this something that we really need to distinguish in dress?

Related to sub fusc is, of course, black tie. This is a necessity for formal events, and it’s hard to walk around Oxford at night without bumping into a group in formal attire of some kind. While for most people coming to Oxford, having to regularly wear black tie is a novelty, it quickly becomes normalised.

Sometimes, it’s easy to forget that, at most other universities, black ties and formal dinners are a rarity – if they happen at all. It’s only stepping out of the ‘Oxford bubble’ that reveals, once more, as with the puffers, the essential idiosyncrasy and peculiarity of wearing black tie on a regular basis. But the fact that this rather expensive kind of dress is effectively mandated in order to attend formal events leads us to a major problem with these ‘uniforms’ of Oxford.

Who is included?

Thinking about the ‘uniforms’ that Oxford has also means thinking about who they include – and who they don’t. First, the ‘uniforms’ mentioned here: college merch, sub fusc, black tie, all lie behind a paywall. While college merch is, strictly speaking, optional, the others aren’t, and so new students find themselves immediately having to fork over money in order to participate in the university community. Good luck going to a formal dinner, for example, without a suit and tie, or a fancy dress. Some students, unaware that these extra purchases are in order, find themselves frantically rushing about trying to buy a hat and gown before matriculation, and having to forgo formals for the simple fact of not having the right clothing.

And college merchandise isn’t cheap, either. While you don’t need a college puffer or a jumper, the fact that they help to foster a sense of camaraderie within colleges could mean that those who can’t really spare the cash to buy one might feel, to a certain extent, that they are less a part of that community for not having one.

Fortunately, there have been efforts made to improve accessibility. Oxford Class Act Society, a society “for working class, state comp, low income, first generation, care experienced, estranged, young carer & foundation year students at Oxford”, runs the Free Sub Fusc Scheme, where new students can apply to receive old sub fusc donated by leaving students for free. Not only does this save students from disadvantaged backgrounds from having to give money that they may not have to spare in order to buy academic dress, but it also means that gowns and mortar boards that are bought stay in use for longer, reducing wastage.

The sub-fusc penguins waddle on

As freshers and exam-goers waddle penguin-like through town in their black gowns, the peculiar sight impresses upon onlookers and participants alike that certain forms of dress can connote and foster seriousness, solemnity, or academic vigour. The “peculiarity” of uniforms, the fact that they are so out of the ordinary, is perhaps part of their strange allure, and the potential reason that drew some of us to Oxford in the first place. Sub fusc and black tie are peculiar, and have a direct relationship with the University’s systems and traditions.

While those seem to be “uniforms” in a more traditional sense, college stash, although prevalent enough to be considered a uniform by some, isn’t nearly as institutionally attached, nor traditionally entrenched. Perhaps the key distinction is between the forms of dress the university imposes upon us, and those we choose to participate in. One is “peculiar”, placing us in close proximity to the history and tradition that Oxford has held. The other fosters a feeling of voluntary community. Both might well be “uniforms”, but they serve different purposes and effects.

But uniforms, in whatever their form, place us into groups. They mark us out from others. Sometimes this can be a positive thing. For example, college merchandise serves to foster a sense of community. But the fact that uniforms put us into groups means, inevitably, that some are excluded from those groups. Those with lower income are disadvantaged by having to ‘buy in’ to the uniforms that Oxford demands they wear. For some, black tie, sub fusc, and college merchandise may be a normality, or will easily become one. For others, they are ‘peculiar’, lie behind an uncomfortable paywall, and may come to represent a feeling of alienation, rather than a feeling of pride and inclusion.

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Cherwell

TT26

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Just one more hack message bro, that's how we'll prevent a PR disaster bro... This week, we found out who really controls the Union – New College JCR. In a grand Union plot, obviously, New College JCR were tied into removing their much-beloved President, Andy Burnout, who, obviously, was adored so much that if those against him didn't vote, he'd have won, obviously. It absolutely had nothing to do with Andy Burnout collecting society positions like Match Attax and actively making the JCR worse for it.

This didn't stop Master Debater, with one hand on his finals revision, and another elsewhere "shoving it", from trying to afford Andy Burnout a procedurally irregular pity motion, to the applause of a concerning number of goons. Proving, once and for all that the Oxford Union definitely isn't a very weird bubble.

It's a strange week for Master Debater's Mass Debaters, as one has decided to run Standing for Iced Latte and Flat White's increasingly rag-tag team. Inpapt's run seems to contravene a strong promise made by the Master Debater to provide a Mass Debater to whichever team brought him more votes. Then again, it's not the size of the PV that matters, it's how you use it, at least according to the Presidential Puppy and his empty slate.

The Dragon Scroll's attempt to have

five officers run this election, handing an advantage to Joey Essex and his Presidential Puppy, was halted by Andy Burnout. Burnout was clearly on a generational run of good decisions, as this led to a strengthened alliance between Joey Essex and his Presidential Puppy, who whilst both running for President, are so fed up with Iced Latte that they have ceased their brother wars. This isn't to say that Joey Essex is having a clean run – his slate is moving down a tax bracket with Reduced Aisle Royalty's pending flip.

In a time of so many generational fumbles, who will fumble the presidency? Stay tuned.

Editorial



Beatrix Arnold Editor-in-Chief Trinity

Before the beginning of term, I had already invested well over a month of work into my role as Editor. I showed up to Editors' Drinks, excited to meet students interested in *Cherwell*, and celebrate the work Mercedes and I had done for the Week 0 print. Instead, people consistently assumed that my male Deputy Editor was EiC, and directed questions about the print towards him, giving me odd looks or ignoring me entirely when I tried to answer.

Student journalism is now a predominantly female field, and *Cherwell* is no exception. And so it struck me as interesting (to phrase it diplomatically) that men were so often in top spots, or even if they weren't, were treated as such. I wouldn't, of course, go so far as to comment on the current leadership of *OxStu*.

Perhaps good journalism requires a kind of masculine brashness, thoughts racing to catch up with words already hot off the press. Speak first, issue a correction later.

Oxford is full of the brazenly illiterate, those smooth-talking, domineering men who loudly pontificate in their practised RP but can barely string together an original sentence in writing. These are people for whom words are cheap, who state opinions as fact, who have always been able to take for granted the privilege of being listened to. The freedom to speak your mind, unfiltered, without weighing your words, is a luxury which I, among many other female-presenting people, have never enjoyed.

I have lost count of the times people have

finished my sentences (often incorrectly), or mocked me when I got stuck on a word, or, worst of all, called my stammer "endearing". The difficulty of vocal expression has tripped me up throughout my life, forcing me to reword in advance what I'm planning to say, often forfeiting my real meaning, or the impulse to speak at all, to avoid embarrassment.

Yet a lifetime of being spoken over and for has increased the value of words for me, and has, I believe, made me a better writer and a better editor. When everything you say requires a round of pre-editing, and speech is necessarily slowed, individual words demand attention.

Despite the occasional awkward clash with lingering misogyny, my time at *Cherwell* has made me more confident in my own expression, both written and vocal. I may still be talked over, but at least my words are front page.



Zoë McGuire Puzzles Deputy Editor

I received (perhaps quite rightly) a fair amount of negative response when one of my first acts as Head of Puzzles a couple of terms ago was to cut the Sudoku. It's a very accessible puzzle, and I know that a wide number of people picked up the paper for it. The Cryptic is almost an antithesis of this; to those that are not experienced solvers, its rules can seem at best confusing, and at worst totally arbitrary. But I think this is an unfair assessment – believe it or not, Cryptics follow quite a strict set of rules, with many things being "illegal". I don't have the word count to get into Ximenean principles in this editorial, but you can look them up if you wish. When I was asked to bring the Sudoku back, I made one thing clear – I would never sacrifice the

ARCHIVES

Rent apart



This week's headline rent troubles are not the first to grace the front page of *Cherwell*. A sift through the decades of archives find it to be a perennial theme, outraging the students of fifty years ago just as much as now. Repeated rent disputes have long characterised the relationship between individual colleges and their JCRs, prompting students to organise rent strikes, to boycott college events, and, as discussed in an emergency meeting of Univ JCR in 1985, to occupy the SCR.

One article from 1991 entitled "College Con-Trick" claimed that colleges "are behaving as a cartel and employing common strategies to force up board and lodging fees". The report alleged that bursars were using "their informational monopoly to push through rent increases at the students' expense" as they "collaborate in unduly secretive battels negotiations." Thank goodness that no one could accuse colleges today of prioritising their own interests to balance their books on students' backs.

The investment in student protest against disputed rent is impressive. Jesus College JCR, also in 1985, angered by proposed rent increases, set up a soup-kitchen to cater for students who complied with their request to boycott and picket the sittings of Hall for the rest of the term. A rent strike at LMH in 1989 saw over 80% of the student body refusing to pay their battels until a fairer agreement was reached. In cases like these, which regularly dominate the front pages of *Cherwell* throughout the 80s and 90s, student solidarity against unjust financial pressures appears to have been, in most cases, successful. Not that *Cherwell* would be encouraging students to read between the lines here.

Cryptic to make space for it.

Comparatively, there is very little auteurship in a Sudoku. You (essentially randomly) fill a grid with numbers, then progressively delete some of them and solve what remains, repeating until you think you're at a reasonable difficulty. The process, at least from the perspective of the creator, feels a bit dull and uninspired. A Cryptic, by contrast, is an incredibly good way for a setter to unleash their eccentricity and style. For instance, Ali has some incredibly creative wordplays, while Nat's ability to write fluent surfaces is unmatched. The fact that the Cryptic is such a passion project for its creator (nobody ever goes "check out this cool Sudoku I made") translates to solvers too, making them a thoroughly more enjoyable experience.

A talking point I sometimes hear is that the Cryptic is an elitist pastime. An arcane set of rules, lots of specialist vocabulary, and exceedingly difficult to get into. While some of these may be true (can we please all stop assuming everyone knows cricket terminology), I think the following assumption that regular setters and solvers consider themselves part of an elite club is totally unfair. Every good solver I know is incredibly eager to introduce more people to the art of the Cryptic. In my time, I think I've explained how they work to probably over 100 people at this point. All of us want nothing more than to get as many people as possible involved, so that we can share the joy – and the immense satisfaction one gets from putting their pen down after filling the last entry.

If you're reading this and you've considered the Cryptic to be something that is too difficult for you, I implore you to give it a try. Like anything, it takes practice – but I'm sure you'll learn to love it just as all of us here on the Puzzles Team have done.

Nick Maynard on working in Gaza's healthcare system

'Genocide – I want you to use that word'



NED REMINGTON

Professor Nick Maynard is the kind of surgeon that everyone hopes to see before an operation. Talking with me on video call, he shows a warming enthusiasm and friendliness that would reassure any patient, or student interviewer. This gentle humility makes the horror of the stories he has to tell, those from working in hospitals in Gaza, all the more jarring, and impossible to forget.

Professor Maynard studied Medicine at Exeter College, Oxford, and works now as a consultant gastrointestinal surgeon at Oxford University Hospitals alongside private practice. As a leading specialist in his field, Dr Maynard can expect to get attention from his peers in medical practice and research. It's his work in Gaza that has given him global reach.

Palestine and Oxford have featured together in Maynard's life for decades. He first visited the West Bank in 2006, knowing, of his own admission, very little about the history of Palestine, only "what I'd learned in school". Visiting the streets of Old Jerusalem, Maynard described being "inspired by the people I met, by the beauty of the land".

Originally visiting Palestine yearly to teach medical students, he first went to Gaza in 2010, and "never looked back", taking teams of doctors from Oxford. His trips focused on developing his specialism in oesophageal and stomach surgery, and he began to get involved with Medical Action

for Palestinians (MAP), a UK charity of which Maynard is now the chairman.

Even before the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7th October 2023 and the resulting Israeli military action, Maynard says those living in Gaza were "effectively in prison", with bombings a "way of life" for Gazans. "Even prior to October 7th, Gaza has been a very challenging place to visit, to live in, to provide healthcare. Its economy has been almost completely destroyed for years. I've never, ever been to Gaza in all those years without witnessing, every single trip, aerial attacks from the Israeli military."

Nonetheless, Maynard says that "nothing could have prepared us for the horrors we saw" when returning to the territory on Boxing Day 2023. His gaze strayed from the camera slightly as he described his approach to Gaza from Egypt: "We'd stayed a few miles short of Rafah the night before, and it was a beautiful, sunny day, not a cloud in the sky. And as we approached Gaza, you could see this low-lying cloud over the whole of southern Gaza, smoke from the incessant bombing. And you could smell it from about a mile or two away. You could smell Gaza."

Graphic videos on social media and messages from Palestinian friends on the ground could do nothing to prepare him for "the sheer devastation of the bombing, the thousands upon thousands upon thousands of displaced refugees...for the volume of injuries". The hospitals were "completely packed", not just with the injured, but also with

their families and others displaced from across Gaza, with their homes completely destroyed in Israeli bombardments.

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Even prior to October 7th, Gaza has been a very challenging place to visit, to live in, to provide healthcare

Professor Maynard has been to Gaza on three occasions since 7th October 2023. He has been very successful at garnering media attention to raise awareness of the plight of the Palestinians – appearing on the BBC, Channel 4, CNN, and contributing to respected newspapers from across the political spectrum, from the *Guardian* to the *Daily Telegraph*. Discussing one of the most divisive issues of our time, it's the precision of a surgeon's instruction that makes his advocacy particularly effective. His careful analysis of evidence reaches conclusions that cannot be dismissed easily by the Israeli government as misinformation or pro-Hamas propaganda. His diagnosis is clear: Israel's actions in Gaza constitute a genocide – "and I want you to use that word in this article", he insists.

Still, his channelled anger is palpable when I ask him about the accusations of war crimes levelled at the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) by organisations such as Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières, and a United Nations Commission on Inquiry. He provides copious testimony, as he is accustomed to doing in interviews across mainstream media outlets: "Friends of mine have been abducted, detained, tortured to death," he says, emphasising every word. Others who survived torture met him after their release, and gave "very detailed audio and video testimonies of how they've been tortured, all of which I've submitted to the international courts".

I ask Maynard explicitly about accusations made by him and countless others, that Israel is deliberately targeting hospitals and medical workers in Gaza. He explained how, when working at Al-Qsa Hospital in July 2024, his team would communicate every day with the Israeli authorities through COGAT, the liaison service of the IDF, to confirm that it was safe to work in the hospital. Maynard says they were told: "You will be protected. There will be no military activity."

"They lied to us, because clearly they did attack the hospitals. They attacked the house we were in. I've witnessed with my own eyes the hospitals being targeted. I've witnessed friends being killed. I've seen the clearest evidence of the deliberate targeting of hospitals and healthcare workers. These are all war crimes."

Maynard has been asked the same thing by

journalists on dozens of occasions now. His frustration is most clearly directed at the “utterly ludicrous” defences given by spokespeople for, and supporters of, the Israeli government, who he says are “given substantial airtime by the BBC and other awful media outlets”. The Israeli Government, Dr Maynard claims, has never given any “verifiable or remotely credible evidence” to support their defences to charges of war crimes, or to justify attacks on medical infrastructure. “If it wasn’t so depressing,” Maynard continued, “it’d be laughable”.

“*I’ve witnessed with my own eyes the hospitals being targeted. I’ve witnessed friends being killed. These are war crimes*

Israeli authorities have repeatedly justified attacks on medical infrastructure by claiming such buildings have been used by Hamas as command centres, or to store weaponry. “Hamas may be in the tunnels. I’ve no idea, I’ve never been in them. I don’t know what’s going on in the peripheral outbuildings, 100 metres away from the main clinical buildings, they may be based there”, he acknowledges. However, Maynard is unequivocal that there was “not one shred of evidence” that Hamas were operating in clinical areas of the hospital grounds. “They’re not bombing the outbuildings, they’re bombing the clinical areas, and that is where there are patients, that is where there are healthcare workers, that is where there are medical students. These are the people who are being killed by their bombs.”

Maynard says that the medical students whose workplaces are being targeted are “utterly remarkable”. Working in Al-Nasser hospital in southern Gaza, he was surrounded by students “in the middle of a war zone, desperate to learn and succeeding in learning”. With the medical schools destroyed by bombing, lectures and exams have been held in makeshift tents amid a backdrop of bombing. Maynard recounts invigilating one clinical exam for fourth-year medical students, all living in tents with no running water or electricity: “I think there must be about 20 or 30 students, they all turned up... all of them in freshly pressed, beautifully clean white coats. I was just gobsmacked.”

It’s a far cry from the modern medical training facilities of the Oxford Clinical School, which Maynard is keen to pay tribute to for facilitating the rescue of two Gazan medical students to continue their education. These two students, however, are from a total of only four Gazan medical students who made it to the UK following 7th October 2023, a number which Maynard describes as “shameful”.

Maynard came back from Gaza most recently in July 2025, after a trip where he sustained injuries to his head whilst working in Al-Nasser Hospital. After giving interviews from the hospital in Gaza, including to the BBC with a bandage still wrapped around his head, he has since devoted his free time back in the UK to activism and advocacy. At the same time, he has returned to his full-time job as a consultant surgeon at Oxford University Hospitals. Returning to normality and the “day job” in Oxford, he says it was impossible to know what to expect after “the profound impact ... [of] dealing with atrocities”.

“*There’s not a ceasefire. There’s been a reduction in the violence, but there are still Gazans being killed by the Israelis every single day*

“I had children, patients of mine die under my hands because we couldn’t stop the bleeding from the gunshot wounds”, Maynard recounts. He tells the story of eleven-year-old Habiba, who was left with a severe oesophageal injury, after a bomb explosion. “I spent the whole night operating on her, reconstructing her oesophagus, but we couldn’t feed her. We had no nutrition to come in, and she died predominantly of malnutrition a few weeks later, despite the fact the surgery had itself been very successful”. Moments like those, he says, “you never forget...they’re imprinted on your memory”.

The return home came with profound relief and

“enormous guilt”, as Maynard’s Palestinian friends and fellow surgeons remained trapped in Gaza. However, for Maynard, it’s after “saying goodbye to friends who you know you may not see again... to patients who may not survive, you feel the most profound anger” towards the West’s politicians and mainstream media outlets. Guilt and anger have left him with an “unbelievable, powerful urge...to tell everyone what I’ve seen, because they’re not hearing it from the media...the clear genocide... the war crimes, the ethnic cleansing”.

And so Maynard continues to give interviews like this one. It’s a “double-edged sword”, he tells me, because “when you recount all these stories, it brings back all the horrible memories. But the overall benefit is this compulsion to share”.

When you leave Gaza, he says, “you feel inadequate again. You want to be back out there”. Despite the “emotional turmoil” he feels after visiting the territory, he is clear that the experience has been “life-changing and life-enhancing”. Spending time in Gaza has been “a wonderful privilege, and the last two years have in many ways changed my life”. As he speaks, I look towards the colourful woven map of Palestine hanging on the door behind him.

He says he’s “desperate” to return, but the chance to volunteer in Gaza again looks highly unlikely with his raised public profile of pro-Palestinian advocacy: “People like me, who have spoken out a lot, are not being allowed in” by the IDF, who continue to control all access to Gaza by medical staff, as well as aid workers, aid delivery drivers and journalists. A law introduced in January now forces all aid organisations to register with the Israeli government and submit the personal details of all their staff to the Israeli authorities, leaving 37 non-compliant aid organisations facing bans from accessing the territory, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

“*Oxford University is doing nothing like enough... the University authorities, by and large, have been silent, and that’s unacceptable*

With it looking unlikely that Professor Maynard will be able to work on the ground in Gaza any time soon, his activism in the UK takes on a heightened importance. He lamented how global pro-Palestinian activism has “diminished” in recent months. “The marching has reduced, the vigils have stopped...the media isn’t reporting anything about Gaza.” He blames the reduced coverage on public understanding of the official ceasefire in Gaza, dismissed as “propaganda” by Maynard. “There’s not a ceasefire. There’s been a reduction in the violence, but there are still Gazans being killed by the Israelis every single day. The need for advocacy and activism is as great as ever”.

Making small talk before and after the interview, Maynard appeared immensely calm, composed, affable. It made his anger towards the UK Government and the University of Oxford all the more profound: “Oxford University is doing nothing like enough... the University authorities, by and large, have been silent, and that’s unacceptable”.

For Maynard, the “woeful silence” of our political institutions amounts to complicity, whilst the UK Government has been outright dishonest. “Don’t believe the government when they say there’s an arms embargo. There’s not.” He accused the RAF of “providing military intelligence” for Israel through reconnaissance flights over Gaza, condemned continued UK trade with Israel, and highlighted recent cooperation between the UK Government and Palantir, the US data analytics company, which was given a £330 million contract with the NHS in 2023, whom Maynard accuses of having “strong links to the Israeli military”.

Maynard’s testimony can appear extreme, even desperate, to a sceptical observer. The scale of the horror, the strength of the anger around Gaza, makes every attempt to describe what is happening there immensely polarising. Yet hearing him speak, Maynard’s anger does not come across as that of a partisan, but rather the quiet fury of an expert in their field, giving evidence on one of the greatest atrocities of our time, and feeling ignored by those he sees as complicit.

So, what students at Oxford University could do to make a difference? For Maynard, the answer is obvious. Students should do “what students have been the best at doing for decades: standing up for those who need support, standing up for the underprivileged, standing up for the victims of genocide.”

Image credit: Nick Maynard, with permission.

SPOTLIGHT



Sophia Shade speaks to Jonathan Bartley about the Green Party, activism, and the importance of finding common ground

You won’t find on Jonathan Bartley the standard political veneer that is typical in party leaders. I spoke to the ex-leader of the Green Party ahead of May’s local elections, and he is candid about his last-minute campaign. But what he may lack in professional polish, he compensates for in relatability. For this reason, I find it difficult not to nod along to the arguments he puts to me throughout our early morning chat.

Bartley was co-leader of the Green Party of England and Wales, from 2016 to 2021, alongside Caroline Lucas and later Siân Berry. However, ‘politician’ wasn’t always his intended career path. “I fell into it”, he tells me.

He landed a place studying Social Policy at the London School of Economics (LSE) which he confesses he did “more to keep [his] dad happy”, than anything else. Looking down the list of universities, Bartley recalls that, when seeing LSE, he thought, “I’ve heard of that!” and decided to apply. He admits that, despite hating school and initially wanting to pursue a career as a drummer, he “came to love” his degree, following it through to a political internship, working on a cross-party basis. “I didn’t really have a political ideology”, he says.

Recalling how he ended up at the Green Party, Bartley chuckles: “My route was not the environment.” Instead, “the big turning point for me was having a child who was disabled”. He describes his son, Samuel, now 23, as having “opened up a whole world to me that I hadn’t seen before”. Trying to enrol him at the family’s local school was a “battle”, he tells me: “I got no help from my local councillors.” He joined the Green Party as a result, feeling they were the only party that genuinely “got inclusion”.

“Up until a few years ago I would’ve thought we’re all making progress in all these different areas of human rights: trans rights, women’s rights, rights for people in the global South, migrant rights, disabled rights.” However, “in the last few years, with the rise of populism on the Right, there’s been a real pushback against that”. “It actually frightens me, it really does, and the Green Party is the only party that, for me, is offering hope against that backlash.”

This is part of the politics of fragmentation he describes as so dangerous. “We are in an absolutely conflict-ridden society, where politics has been ‘ripping friendships, families, communities apart’. To him, Brexit provided the perfect storm for fragmented politics to thrive, with Leave and Remain factions resulting in ruptures in local communities, demonstrating the need “to find a way to disagree well but also not demonise one another”. It is clear that conflict resolution and common ground is central to Bartley’s political ideology, and for this reason he has reservations about whether left-wing populism is a perfect antidote to right-wing populism.

He doesn’t view the Greens as having become more left-wing under Polanski, though, compared to under his own leadership. “So many journalists get this wrong”, he says, exasperated. Green Party policy is voted on by the membership rather than party leader, the idea that the party leader shifts the party to a different – or more left-wing – set of policies “is just nonsense, it’s just wrong”.

Bartley seems to regret the Greens’ unsuccessful attempt to work with Labour in either 2017 or 2019 under Jeremy Corbyn, who he says he has “huge respect” for. In reference to a wealth tax, Bartley stresses that Corbyn was “talking about all the stuff Zack [Polanski] is now talking about”. This is part of the reason why the party was unable to find a loyal demographic during his own time as leader he tells me: “We were talking about it but no one was listening, because of course you’re going to listen to Jeremy.”

“When we did speak, we were only heard when we talked on the anti-fracking stuff, renewable energy, the Green New Deal”, Bartley explains. To him, therefore, what’s changed is not party policy but “the space to be able to say it, and I think Zack is saying it very well indeed”.

On his own time as leader, Bartley tells me that he spent a long time building up the systems, strategies, and infrastructure of the party. The need for this came after a surge in popularity it saw – albeit on a smaller scale than today – under the leadership of Natalie Bennet from 2012 to 2016, during a time when Labour was what Bartley describes as more right-wing.

It wasn’t all smooth sailing, though. “One big regret was that I didn’t push what I believed was right more, internally in the party. So often I had a gut feeling about something but I listened to other people and let other people run with their views rather than my own, and that’s important in a democratic party, but the decisions were later proved to be wrong and I wish I’d have gone with my gut.” He cites setting up a party podcast, and having more populist messaging, to widen the Greens’ appeal, as examples of what he should have done.

There were successes however. The adaptation of their “target to win strategy” saw the Greens make gains at the local level, something that has continued during May’s elections. Oxford has proved to be a microcosm of conciliatory success for the Greens, with Oxford University graduate Alfie Davis becoming the Green councillor for Hollywell, and boasting the third highest Green vote share in the country with 68% of the ward’s votes.

Bartley is now a councillor himself, after a hiatus from politics since stepping down from party leadership in 2021, and after coming third in the election for the Clapham Town ward, in the London constituency of Lambeth.

On the subject of the next general election, Bartley appears cautiously optimistic about the Greens’ prospects. “You have to have that council base in order to win Parliamentary seats”, he explains. “Everyone kind of just expects the great MP candidate to arise and everyone will vote for them, and that’s not how it works.” But, “if you get that infrastructure in place...we then have a huge activist base on which to build and to win parliamentary seats”. He is, though, positive there will always be a need for the Green Party in British politics, in a “fragmented system” where the political right is gaining significant traction.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

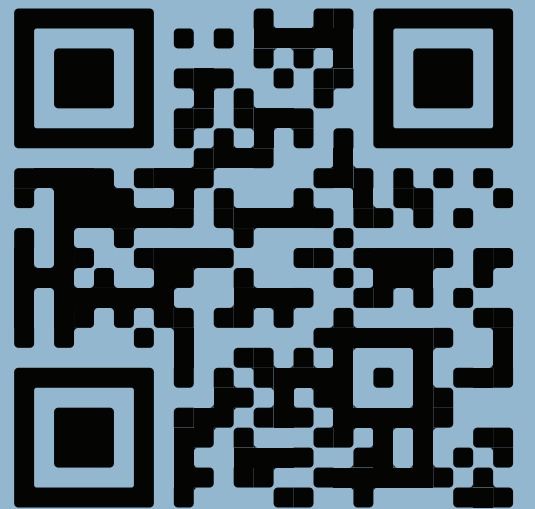
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‘Stories From an Abandoned Warehouse’ reviewed

Leo Jones discusses Crazy Child Productions’ staging of a gripping piece of Chilean resistance theatre



Crazy Child Productions’ *Stories From an Abandoned Warehouse* was a surreal, emotionally-charged spectacle that blurred the line between expressionist nightmare and dark comedy. Through its distorted and emotionally charged aesthetics, the production transformed the Michael Pilch Studio Theatre into something dreamlike and unsettling, where memory, grief, absurdity, and humour collided with a startling intimacy. The result was a theatrical experience that felt less like watching a conventional narrative unfold, and more like wandering through the fragmented subconscious of its characters.

As a Spanish speaker, I was particularly struck by director Patryk Winiewski’s in-house translation of the play, which paid careful tribute to Ramón Griffero’s original *Historias de un galpón abandonado*. Although occasional Latinisms slightly disrupted the rhythm of the dialogue, these moments ultimately reinforced the play’s Chilean origins and lent the production an added sense of cultural specificity. This felt particularly special given that Winiewski’s production is the first time that this work of Chilean fringe resistance theatre has been adapted for the English stage. Rather than distancing the audience, the translation captured the rawness and volatility of Griffero’s writing, preserving both its poetic fragmentation and emotional immediacy. The student cast approached the material with confidence, fully committing to the play’s surreal tonal shifts and expressionist style.

The Pilch’s stripped back, warehouse-like setting also enhanced the material, honouring Griffero’s original production staged in the titular abandoned warehouse ‘El Trolley’. Griffero’s play was a means of resistance against the horrors of General Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship in Chile (1973–90), with the plot reflecting a society fractured by repression and violence. But rather than depicting these realities directly, both Griffero and Winiewski filter them through surrealism and fragmentation, allowing trauma to surface obliquely through distorted characters, disjointed dialogue, and moments of absurd humour. The warehouse emerges as a microcosm for Chilean society under Pinochet, as the omnipresence of the ruling class (‘The Council’) behind a cabaret-style red curtain served as a constant reminder to the audience amidst the rest of the stage’s muted sepia.

Winiewski’s adaptation heightened this tension between political despair and theatrical excess with remarkable precision, embracing a deliberately exaggerated performance style that he described in the programme notes as “the heart of my vision”. In doing so, the production transformed overacting into something active and purposeful. Characters moved with stylised physicality, enhancing the political caricature that Griffero is drawing upon in the original play. These exaggerated elements helped to democratise the production, and as a result, there was no need for background knowledge of Chilean history. Instead, the oscillation between genuine comedy and despair did all the work, pioneered by stellar acting from the whole cast. Each character fits into the production like a puzzle piece, with each line of dialogue contributing to the production’s constantly shifting theatrical rhythms.

Camilo (Sam Drury) and Carmen (Savannah Lollo), both teachers, are the first to arrive at the abandoned warehouse. Searching for absent students while passionately extolling the value of literature and formal education, the pair embody a fragile belief in culture, learning, and continuity within an increasingly fractured society. Their inability to find anyone to teach reinforces the play’s presentation of characters as isolated archetypes, trapped within identities shaped by occupation and survival. Drury and Lollo’s grounded performances anchored the production emotionally, providing moments of sincerity as the constant arrival of new characters throughout the first half continued to add new layers to the atmosphere of the warehouse.

The performances by Genevieve Kidd (Lady Carla), Seb Foster (Mr Fermin), and Diandra Kočan (Madame) were particularly compelling. Together, Kidd and Foster brought a decadent theatricality to the stage, with Lady Carla embodying the hedonistic excess of the ruling class through a performance charged with both seduction and menace. Her seemingly insatiable sexual appetite remained deliberately unresolved by the end of the play, adding a strangely human vulnerability beneath the character’s otherwise grotesque extravagance. Kidd handled these competing layers in Lady Carla’s character exceptionally. Paired with Mr Fermin’s fake nails, stiletto boots, and exaggerated flamboyance, the duo introduced an important alternative dimension to the portrayal of The Council. Their performances suggested that authoritarian power in the play operates not only through fear and violence, but also through spectacle, performance, and excess.

Kočan’s Madame is also clearly drawn toward



these qualities, ultimately aligning herself with The Council by the play’s conclusion. As an archetype, she exists in deliberate contrast to both Lady Carla and The Woman (chillingly portrayed by Nicole Choi), positioning her between competing models of femininity under the dictatorship: motherhood, submission, desire, and power. Kočan navigated this ambiguity with remarkable subtlety, allowing Madame’s gradual attraction to authoritarian excess to emerge less as a sudden transformation than as an unsettling inevitability. In doing so, the character became one of the production’s most compelling reflections on complicity, suggesting how easily systems of repression sustain themselves through seduction as much as fear.

Grace Weinburg’s The Child was, arguably, the most memorable performance from the production. Present on-stage in a baby’s cot before the play even begins, Weinburg’s character has a distinct connection with the audience from the outset. Through eerie monologues and consistent interactions with the fourth wall (including rummaging underneath audience members’ seats to find props for the Council’s ‘party’), The Child became a deeply unsettling presence that hovered between innocence and omniscience. Weinburg’s performance captured the play’s surrealism

at its most disturbing, transforming childish vulnerability into something uncanny and quietly threatening. This was undercut by the play’s conclusion, as she is cruelly excluded when the Council takes leave, replaced by Madame, despite her undying loyalty to the Pinochet-adjacent dictator, Don Carlos (Henry Cane).

Crazy Child Productions has staged something genuinely daring. It was not simply a revival of an important piece of Chilean resistance theatre, but a demonstration of the enduring power of experimental performance to articulate political and emotional truths that realism alone cannot capture. *Stories From an Abandoned Warehouse* embraces excess, fragmentation, and absurdity without ever losing sight of the human suffering beneath them. Camilo’s death is perhaps the production’s most devastating example of this, as his body lies motionless onstage while the surrounding action continues in grotesque indifference.

Strange, unsettling, and often deeply moving, Winiewski’s adaptation lingers long after the final scene fades – not because it offers easy answers, but because it forces its audience to sit within the instability and contradictions that define both the play’s political world, and our own.

Image credit: Freddie Houlahan, with permission.

Stars, stripes, and sectarianism: ‘Ulster American’ in review

ARUN LEWIS



Anyone who describes reviewing a student play as a burden simply hasn’t watched a good play for some time. A free seat to watch young actors, directors, cast, and crew put all their effort into a production with minimal funding and frills is always an incredible experience. *Ulster American* is one such production. In the limited space of the Burton Taylor studio, set amazingly by Naomi Flexman and well lit according to the conditions of the play by Gabrielle Panova, the creative and personal struggle between the trio within the director’s apartment is brought to life.

Whilst David Ireland is a fantastic playwright, with his work drawing such names as Woody Harrelson, Andy Serkis, and Matthew Broderick, the play itself is not fantastically well known, and so directors Kate Burke and Robyn Hayward were confronted with a challenge when producing this black comedy. How to communicate to the audience that the entire play shouldn’t be watched in stony silence, but that its seriousness should also be grasped? The directors, producer Frankie Maino, and welfare officer Madeleine Evans faced an almost impossible challenge, particularly given the sensitive material the play touches on.

But it is a challenge they have pulled off adeptly, helped by a fantastic cast. With Aaron Gelkoff

playing Jay Conway, an American actor almost stereotypically self-centred and shallow, Rohan Joshi as Leigh Carver, the anxious-to-please and superficially sensitive director, the play’s opening thirty minutes were well secured. Gelkoff gave an unforgettable performance that never fell into cliché, even as he played the sort of publicly quasi-intellectual American actor most people can imagine – think Brad Pitt. Joshi gave what I believe to be the finest performance of the night, acting as the cantilever of the play, a director increasingly desperately attempting to keep his production afloat. Conway lauded over Carver with skin-deep soul-searching and quizzical observations that Carver, in his desire to avoid any obstructions to his play, accepts, only raising a swiftly muted challenge when Conway describes a particular debauched and morally bankrupt thought.

“
Joshi gave the finest performance of the night as the cantilever of the play

The arrival of Ruth Davenport (Caeli Colgan), the playwright, upsets the dynamic that had prevailed thus far. Davenport, as the eponymous play’s auteur, engages with the themes the audience might expect as a product of Ireland. She is brilliant, challenging Conway where Carver

had been willing to let issues slide – after her brief awe at his celebrity wanes, of course. Davenport’s family looms large over the play, as her own identity as a Protestant Unionist rubs both the quintessential *Guardian*-reading upper middle-class liberal Carver, and the self-righteous Conway, the wrong way. Carver fails to grasp the basis for unionist identity, whilst Conway’s idiocy and lack of interest in the play itself – communicated by repetitive, deliberate contradictions by Gelkoff – leads this supposedly proud Irish American to express horror at the fact that, rather than being written by an Irish Catholic, “the play was written by a Unionist Protestant Brit”.

The energy of the play doesn’t abate once the trio assemble, and the comic elements are used fantastically – it, unlike some black comedies, never fails to elicit laughs from the audience, even as the play thundered towards its dramatic conclusion. But there was something left on the table as the audience stood and applauded and began to file out. For a play that pertained to be about Irishness and the intricacies of Northern Ireland, juxtaposed with those of America, little examination of either appeared for long. That is partly David Ireland’s sin, but I think that the directors could have been bolder in how they approached his work. Having two women in the play, rather than one woman against two men, would have greatly changed the power dynamics regarding discussions of Britishness, Irishness, and its relation to the blunt brutality of the American actor’s wishes; again, this is a sin of Ireland’s, not the cast or crew. The actors are

fantastic, and are reliable fixtures of the OUDS circuit that improve with every performance.

The play’s great performances and direction have, however, left its contentious script unchallenged. The ending of the play captures this well. However, whilst it is in line with a black comedy to have Conway and Carver claim credit for Davenport’s success, whilst lumping her with a gendered accusation of mental health issues, this fails to deliver on the promise raised earlier in the play. Davenport – again, played fantastically by Caeli Cogan – is clearly Ireland’s favourite, but she, like Conway, is a character that never reaches the depths of her own morality. Joshi’s Carver steals the limelight in large part because he reaches beyond the bounds of Ireland’s limits and lends depth and intricacy to the character. He appreciates the experimental element of student theatre, his character attempting to ensure the play’s survival, his own success and conception of himself as a liberal and friend to Davenport. The high drama at the end of the play, featuring an addition not part of the original script, is effective, but the addition is unnecessary. It undermines the nuances to Conway’s character and hamfists what had been a subtle but palpable inequality of power running throughout the play, and serves as a fine allegory for the production itself. It is superbly acted, fantastically staged and lit, and the production of the play is star-quality. But a failure of directorial ambition, not in producing a poorly directed play but in failing to challenge, or meaningfully amend, *Ulster American*, precludes it from being a truly great play.

FASHION Oxford Fashion Society's 'Women in Fashion' panel

Emma Heagney and Amy Lawson on the advice offered by top fashion professionals

On a sunny Friday evening at the Research Centre in Christ Church, Oxford Fashion Society hosted a panel titled 'Women in Fashion', featuring Julia Hobbs, Senior Contributing Fashion Features editor at *British Vogue* (a gloriously convoluted title only fashion media could produce), and Daisy Hoppen, founder and director of PR agency DH-PR. It is easy to feel a sense of anticipation in the room: the two are some of the most high-profile guests the Fashion Society has hosted since a panel with Adam Baidawi (Global Editorial Director at GQ) in Hilary of this year.

Yet – perhaps in typical PR fashion – the two women seem eager to dispel any such tension. When asked how they would describe themselves, Daisy, with a thoughtful expression, describes herself as a “problem solver”, whilst Julia, sweeping her elegant dyed-red bob out of her face, claims to be “5’9” and a natural redhead”, drawing easy laughter from the audience. Neither has a fashion background: Daisy studied Law at undergraduate and Master’s level, before changing track and interning at the *Financial Times*, whilst Julia did Medieval History at Leeds, and worked at a jeweller’s – she chuckles whilst recollecting trips on the tube to Vogue House, laden down with thousands of pounds worth of jewellery. There was something almost cinematic about their stories of getting into fashion. After a spell of freelance writing, Julia describes how an acquaintance informed her of a job opening at *Vogue*, leading her to hand-deliver her cover letter to the doorman at Vogue House just before midnight. It’s hard to imagine getting a job this way now, but there is something charming about Julia’s story, humanising the industry in a way the media seldom does.

With the recent premiere of *The Devil Wears Prada 2*, conversation turned to the depiction of the fashion business in the media. “*The Devil Wears Prada* is more of a documentary”, the women laugh. For them, it’s a good thing that the media glamourises working in fashion – for the most part, it is glamorous. Julia recalls a highlight of her career at *Vogue*, in which she found herself in Kate Moss’ London home, trying on clothes in the supermodel’s wardrobe, a story which seems to have been plucked straight from a young girl’s dreams. Above all, however, they want the job to be appealing to young people, and if glamourisation is the way to make this happen, then so be it. “Daisy is a Charlotte with a

Samantha rising”, Julia tells us as they assign each other *Sex and the City* characters, proving that the fashion fiction of their youths had much of the same effect that it does now.

But fashion is not always glamorous. In fact, it’s “cut-throat” – as Julia shares, “the job won’t love you back”. A heavily-pregnant Daisy is quick to point out the toll that her job has taken on her experience as a mother. “Women have to make compromises”, she states, citing the pressure she felt to work throughout her maternity leave. For this reason, both women emphasise the value of female friendships and mentorship. While diversity in fashion has improved, the industry has a long way to go, with the British Fashion Council’s UK DEI Report finding that while women account for 78% of the fashion world, they constitute only 39% of executive teams. For Julia and Daisy, it is important that they support younger women in their fields – Daisy’s PR agency proudly offers year-long internships, and Julia expresses her desire to be a mentor-like figure to junior editors at *Vogue*.

As the biggest fashion magazine on the planet, *Vogue* also documents the changing media landscape. The pair discuss the recent news of *The Face* shutting down, reflecting an increasingly competitive market for arts and culture publications. They fervently agree that AI summaries are currently the biggest obstacle to journalism, and are threatening the viability of newspapers and magazines to stay afloat in troubling financial circumstances. “Fashion is ultimately a business”, Daisy tells us, “but print media isn’t going anywhere”. In a world soon to be dominated by AI, they emphasise the appeal of stepping away from the screen, and remind us that those working in fashion still look to print magazines for their inspiration. Sure, *Vogue* may have to take on creative partnerships with Ebay, BMW, Nike, and others to facilitate this, but at least there’s hope for a more analogue future.

The two are full of advice for those aspiring to enter the industry. For Julia, the key is to think outside of the box. “Being niche has a huge power”, she says, expressing that a lot of the content which catches her eye is sure of the value of its own perspective. She also comments on the value of getting to grips with making your own visual content, since this kind of medium is (marginally) less of a victim of generative AI when compared with written forms. As short-form content becomes increasingly ubiquitous, Julia



seems to urge those interested in making a platform for themselves toward harnessing its power, to “challenge yourself to be comfortable on camera” – even if it is just for 60 seconds. Indeed, getting comfortable behind the camera is Daisy’s advice: “Cool girls bring their own cameras!”

Ultimately, the greatest advice they offer is to have fun: connect with others, keep up with culture, and don’t stop partying. While this may not always be conducive to a healthy work-life balance – “a lot of us are insomniacs” – it nevertheless rings true for the work that the women do. “People fuel this industry”, she concludes, referring to both the relationships between creatives and the journalists themselves. “Writing should share who you are, what you do, and where you’re coming from.” Any young journalist who has written for *Cherwell* or any other publication may feel this sentiment deeply – when

looking for inspiration, the best thing to do is usually as simple as getting outside and experiencing life. After all, Julia adds, “fashion is gossip.”

Is there hope for young journalists in the midst of an unemployment crisis, funding cuts to arts-based degrees, and the unknowns of AI? Yes, Julia and Daisy think, but it is by far the hardest time to be a new fashion journalist. Gone are the days of fashion publications taking on a junior editor who has no clue what they are doing – young people now need to prove why they are useful to an office. But saying yes, even if you’re unsure, will go a long way. Praise must be given to the Oxford Fashion Society committee for facilitating real, human connection between industry experts and budding writers, a connection which is needed now more than ever.

Image credit: Jaami Al-Choudhury, with permission.

Colour and codification: Eleanor Medhurst on queer fashion

CERYS BENNISON

Eleanor Medhurst is a historian of queer visual and material culture, with her website *Dressing Dykes* creating a space for lesbian fashion, be it past or present. As the June sunshine heralds the start of Pride month, I interviewed Eleanor on the shifting borders of queer fashion – whether it’s intentionally stylish or not.

Obviously, the rainbow flag is the fabulous symbol of pride, but how does colour relate to queer fashion more generally?

Colour is everywhere in queer visual culture, including fashion – these are themes that I explore in my next book (more on that soon!), but which also appear in *Unsuitable: A History of Lesbian Fashion*. There’s a lot of symbolism within queer fashion: ways to speak with our appearance when

it hasn’t always been safe or possible to share our identities out loud. Colour is one of these, often in the form of coloured flowers (like the green carnation or lavender) or shapes (like the pink triangle). These are usually references to queer history, and their incorporation in fashion is a sort of ‘if you know you know’ situation.

How do you think Pride as a celebration has influenced queer fashion?

I think Pride as a protest has influenced queer fashion in how it’s often a loud, unavoidable event where queer people put themselves on display in order to make queer lives (and queer issues) visible to the general public. A key link between Pride and fashion is the use of bold, slogan t-shirts, which are often handmade and boast activist messages. As Pride has, in some contexts, become more of a festival, references to the rainbow flag are unavoidable; this works as a kind of visual

shorthand to assert a queer presence in the world that is recognised by almost everyone.

How do you think queer fashion still grapples with constructs of gender?

Clothing in general is still so regulated by gender. It’s often still taboo for men to wear skirts, for instance, and colours like pink hold especially gendered connotations in our clothes. Queer fashion often unpicks these meanings – usually in a playful, creative way. Queer people are really at the frontline of gender deconstruction within fashion and self-presentation.

How have assertions of the sensible shaped perceptions of lesbian and trans fashion specifically?

Lesbian fashion is stereotypically unfashionable – full of sensible shoes and dungarees, very much shaped by feminist ‘uniforms’ of the 1970s and ‘80s. These are revolutionary in themselves: they carved out space for women to dress in clothes that weren’t always feminine. They made room for comfort and practicality in women’s fashion, letting the borders between gendered styles become less defined. But it’s important to note that this is also not all that lesbian fashion can be – sometimes lesbians dress in clothes that are campy and glamorous, and not at all practical!

In your essay ‘Lesbian Activism and Crafted Fashion’ you delve into the histories of lesbian knitting practices. What do you think the link is between queer fashion and craft more generally, especially in a world where handmaking is experiencing a resurgence?

This is a pretty big topic to cover, and I’m not sure that I can do so in a single answer: I’m currently working on an entire PhD about lesbian craft! Generally, though, queer people are often drawn to craft because it provides a way for us to shape our own place in the world; in a world that isn’t made for us, this is a powerful thing.

Writing from Oxford (and the backdrop of its academic history) do you think location plays

a significant role in different attitudes to queer dress?

I think that location definitely plays a role in attitudes to queer dress, as some places have much more accepting environments than others. This is often based on how queer the population of a particular place is, and how normal it is to see people dressing in non-normative ways!

With the controversy surrounding the Met Gala – and the encroaching power of oppressive voices within fashion – how do you think queer fashion sits within the industry today?

Queer fashions have often been outside of the fashion industry altogether. Sometimes this comes from not being accepted within the mainstream, and others from a place of radical politics. While queer people have always worked within fashion, the fashion industry has also exploited queer style, borrowing elements of queer culture and diluting their meanings for mass appeal. It’s a complicated landscape, and one that is difficult to disengage with: we all get dressed every day, after all.

You recently wrote a book on Billie Eilish’s style. She has an incredibly distinct image while maintaining the priorities of sustainability. How do you think this can be worked into wardrobes more broadly, as a queer symbol or otherwise?

Sustainable fashion is an important topic for a lot of queer people. It goes hand-in-hand with a DIY ethos, as well as the link between craft and queerness that I touched on above. Sustainability can mean many things, but to many queer people it’s about reinvention: giving things a new life, remaking them, making them our own.

And last but by no means least, who is your queer fashion icon?

There are so many! Historically, some of my fashion icons include Natalie Clifford Barney, Gladys Bentley, and Madge Garland. In the present day, I’m going to go for the obvious (but correct) choice, which is Chappell Roan.

Image credit: Jason Martin, CC-BY-SA-2.0 via Flickr.



Subs, dubs, and AI flubs: What to do when lost in translation

Emma Heagney explores the role of subtitles in tackling language barriers in film

When I travel, I like to think I am not like the other British tourists. I try my best to blend in with the locals – attempting (and sometimes failing) to remain nonchalant on complicated metro systems, eating local cuisine, and avoiding ‘loud’ clothing. On a recent solo trip to Stockholm, however, my expectations were challenged by what I believed to be a given: English. I had been to Italy, where English captions accompany pretty much everything, and France, where the same is true, though it is offered with more reluctance. In my ignorance, I had not bothered to learn any Swedish beyond a measly ‘engelska?’, which became problematic as I quickly discovered that my bleached-blond hair made me look like a Scandi girl to the locals.

I should experience some local culture, immerse myself in the arts scene, I thought as I settled into my hotel. Checking the programme of the capital’s Kulturhuset Stadsteatern, or ‘city theatre’, the single showing with English subtitles was the Austrian film *How to Be Normal and the Oddness of the Other World*, directed by Florian Pochlatko. Sure, it wasn’t Swedish at all, but how else would I understand the story, if it wasn’t for English subtitles? As I hurriedly approached the Kulturhuset, one Ryanair flight and a frenzy through the Stockholm metro behind me, I was suddenly informed that there would be no subtitles at all.

How hard could it be to watch an entire film in German when I could not even introduce myself in the language? Quite hard, it turns out. Sure, body language and visual effects went a long way, and I felt the beautiful serendipity of discovering a Swedish review on Letterboxd from a local at the same screening, but I missed almost every joke, and felt myself growing increasingly bored as the film progressed. The biggest surprise for me in Stockholm was just how English-less it was, from road signs to price tags to food labels – I had to open Google Translate in the middle of 7/11 to work out if I could eat my halloumi wrap cold.

I do not expect sympathy at all, as my own ignorance led to this situation. But the experience did make me reflect on the relationship between native English speakers and subtitling in film. My not-so-Swedish encounter was certainly extreme,

with no subtitles, or even a warning, beforehand – but I was not so turned off by the experience so as to never do it again. It made me wonder, are sole English speakers reliant on subtitles? Do they add or detract from the viewing experience?

Subtitles themselves are in many ways crucial, so that we may broaden our tastes and learn about other cultures. After accepting the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film in 2020, *Parasite* director Bong Joon Ho famously stated that “once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films”. I do believe that progress is already well underway in the globalisation of film, as what was once potentially a pursuit of only the avant-garde film student is now available to the masses. This is particularly thanks to the rise of Letterboxd, where international arthouse cinema is compiled into digestible lists.

The art of translating subtitles is also, perhaps surprisingly, one of the few language-based jobs not being ravaged by advancements in AI. Despite the now infamous case of Duolingo replacing much of its staff with AI, translator vacancies continue to grow, owing to the simple fact that AI is not currently capable of the quality control and idiomatic knowledge possessed by a human. Have you ever tried to translate complicated Swedish halloumi wrap instructions with Google Translate? In regard to film, it is vital that translated subtitles do actually convey the meaning of the scene, which is why the role of humans is still absolutely necessary.

Yet, anxieties concerning AI continue to plague the translation industry, and may result in changes to subtitling in the future. Hollywood actresses Demi Moore and Reese Witherspoon have both come out in favour of AI, with the latter even stating that “it’s so, so important that women are involved in AI because it will be the future of filmmaking”. AI tools continue to improve, and it is difficult to predict the accuracy of both Witherspoon’s statement and the concerns felt by translators, but the reality is that AI usage is already commonplace in filmmaking, from editing to script-writing and more. AI dubbing is also prevalent, with new software able to move actors’ mouths to fit speech in other languages. Controversy arose last year when generative AI was found to have been used to

translate speech from English to Hungarian in *The Brutalist* – I, for one, am pleased that the Academy has since cracked down on AI-generated content in film, but I do worry about the future opportunities for translators in film, as well as for actors who do actually speak foreign languages.

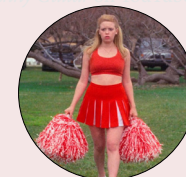
While it is easier than ever to watch films entirely in English, are we missing something by neglecting their original languages? I think that it is important to note that my choice of film in Stockholm was heavily influenced by which ones had English subtitles listed as available. I do not think that cinemas in other countries should bow down to the English language at all, but English speakers may be surprised to realise just how much they can understand without subtitles, and how thought-provoking the result may be. Maybe if I had the guts for it at the time, I would have complemented my Swedish journey with a piece of local culture, and learned something beyond ‘engelska’.

Far from wanting to sound pretentious, I want you to understand that subtitles – both their existence and a lack of them – do not have to be a barrier to a good cinematic experience. It could be fun, even enriching, to actively try to watch film in a different way, such as by watching a colour film in black and white, or without sound. It almost feels like a reinvention of the creativity that comes with watching a silent film in the present day, where a chosen musical accompaniment can completely change our perspective. Watching Murnau’s silent *Nosferatu* on Wikipedia (yes, you can do that) was a very different experience from, say, the live organ accompaniment to the Oxford Festival of the Arts’ screening of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* at Magdalen Chapel.

There may be limits to this approach, however. Maybe the screenplay of *How to Be Normal and the Oddness of the Other World* did a lot of heavy lifting, with psychedelic visuals conveying the psychological focus of the film – although the Ed Sheeran poster on main character Pia’s wall completely threw me off, and made me worry more about the state of British cultural exports than her deteriorating mental condition. Ginger singers aside, my point still stands that even without subtitles, foreign-language films can be thoroughly enjoyed.

FILM AND TV

What’s Oxford watching?



But I’m A Cheerleader

Rüya at St Hugh’s recommends *But I’m A Cheerleader* (1999):

“The biggest win in recent lesbian history until *Bottoms* (2023) and the campiest thing you can watch in anticipation of pride month.”



Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me

Emma at Merton recommends *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1998):

“I think this might be the saddest film I’ve ever seen, but it’s so good. Sheryl Lee as Laura Palmer is hands down the best acting performance of the 20th century.”

Image credits: ‘But I’m A Cheerleader’ and ‘Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me’ via [imdb.com](https://www.imdb.com)

Oxford on-screen: Historical atmosphere and fantasy worlds

SIENA TRACEY

There are many questions you inevitably get asked when you tell someone you go to Oxford, ranging from the extent of the workload, the quality of the nightlife, and whether everyone you’ve met actually went to private school.

“Is it just like Hogwarts?” is a more outlandish query, and yet I’ve found it to be one that is just as common. On more than one occasion, I have been asked how much Oxford really resembles this fictional setting of the *Harry Potter* movies. Although much of the childhood nostalgia for this series has been soured by its author’s political output on social media, it remains widely popular, and many of its fans associate its magical school with the city and the University of Oxford.

The fact that parts of the *Harry Potter* movies were filmed in Oxford is a fun piece of trivia that has become common knowledge, and is frankly difficult to ignore when the city centre is replete with tourist shops full of merchandise – including a rather off-putting sculpture of Dobby in the window of one on Broad Street – not to mention the tourists

themselves, often decked out head-to-toe in the Hogwarts uniform, sporting cloaks, ties, and wands.

Even my own college, Wadham, which makes no appearance in the *Harry Potter* films and sports architecture probably too Jacobean to truly embody Hogwarts’ medieval allure, is frequently bombarded with tourists in such elaborate fancy dress.

A range of locations in Oxford appear in these movies, and in slightly different ways. While the Divinity School and the Duke Humfrey’s Library provided actual filming locations for the Hogwarts Infirmary and Library, respectively, Christ Church’s Hall acted as the main inspiration for the Great Hall seen on-screen. Moreover, Christ Church was not the only college to make it into the films; a scene in the fourth instalment in the franchise was famously filmed in New College’s courtyard.

Aspects of a film, such as the script, the acting, or the music, are more conventional areas of focus for analysis than filming location, and yet the latter contributes much to a film’s atmosphere, especially when the setting is fictional. In the case of the *Harry Potter* series, Oxford’s medieval architecture affords the fantastical Hogwarts with a sense of mystery and romance that enhances the magical atmosphere.

The authenticity of these historic buildings makes the setting more immersive; you really get the sense that this is an ancient castle with years of history and many secrets to explore.

And yet old buildings do not only evoke feelings of magic and excitement, a fact shown by another movie that makes use of Oxford as a filming location.

Another Country (1984) centres around Guy Bennett – based on Guy Burgess, a member of the Cambridge Five – a Soviet double agent whose experience at a British public school in the 1930s, as a young gay man dealing with romance, conflict, and persecution, lays the groundwork for his eventual defection.

Here, the filming location does something slightly different. The medieval architecture confers a sense of prestige associated with a long history, imbuing the public-school setting with institutional power and reinforcing Bennett’s lack of belonging. Confronted with a set that harks back to medieval days, the audience is reminded of the historic and traditional nature of the world Bennett inhabits, highlighting even more how he does not fit into it.

One of the film’s opening scenes perfectly captures the importance of the filming location; at a Remembrance Day service, the schoolboys stand in orderly formation, chorusing out a hymn with expressionless faces. While Bennett sings along, he stares longingly at another student, eventually stopping singing completely as they engage in prolonged eye contact. The romantic undertones of such an interaction hint at same-sex affection; that it is romantic is seemingly confirmed by the frequent cuts to another scene, in which a teacher discovers two other students engaged in clandestine same-sex relations.

The quadrangle in front of the Bodleian Library acts as a backdrop to all of this, only amplifying the sense of transgression in the face of custom and convention. An expression of same-sex attraction, already subversive, becomes even more significant when juxtaposed with a background that carries with it all these implications of history and tradition and conservatism.

The prestige of Oxford as a backdrop also emphasises the power of the public-school

institution, adding to the picture of an illustrious educational establishment possessing significant authority. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Bennett’s sexuality cannot be reconciled with the world he lives in unless it is concealed or repressed. The powerful institution suppresses his attempts to carve out a space for himself as a gay man, and he is left with no choice but to look for belonging elsewhere, which he does by defecting to the Soviet Union.

The relationship between film and filming location does not only work one way. If the prevalence of Hogwarts comparisons and wand-brandishing tourists tells us anything, it is that popular perceptions of both the city and the university have been powerfully influenced by the *Harry Potter* franchise.

While Oxford as a filming location generally improves a movie – it helps to build atmosphere, establish an immersive setting, and enrich the narrative – the impact that movies have on attitudes towards Oxford can be less positive. In one sense, the association with a fantasy setting evokes a sense of magic, which makes Oxford feel even more charming. Nonetheless, constant references to a children’s franchise can feel a little juvenile and out of touch.

After all, these associations contribute to a view of Oxford that is more fantasy than reality, and it is important not to put Oxford on a pedestal, and lose sight of the fact that it is a university like any other. Ideally, we should strike a balance; an awareness of the reality of life at Oxford can co-exist with an appreciation of its grand architecture and historical atmosphere.

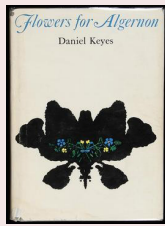
Still, in spite of my reservations about grown adults’ fanaticism for a story meant for children, I’m inclined to think that these associations are largely harmless. If students choose to apply to a university because it reminds them of a nostalgic film favourite, or if tourists want to pose in front of the Radcliffe Camera dressed in full wizarding gear, it simply reflects how the influence of film means Oxford has become something different for some.

Image credit: Frank Schulerburg, CC BY-SA 4.0 via [Wikimedia Commons](https://www.wikimedia.com).



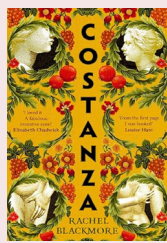
BOOKS

What's Oxford reading?



Eoin at Somerville recommends *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) by Daniel Keyes:

"The story of a man who gains intelligence through an experimental treatment. Told through his perspective, the novel explores his newfound isolation and inevitable deterioration. It still brings a tear to my eye when I read it."



Amy at St John's recommends *Costanza* (2024) by Rachel Blackmore:

"Blackmore tells the beautiful yet heartbreaking story of Costanza Piccolomini, art dealer and mistress of the famed sculptor Bernini, doing justice to what was surely a life lived to the full."

Image credits: 'Flowers for Algernon' and 'Costanza' via Wikipedia and Amazon.

Barker & Co. Booksellers and Oxford's indie revival

BEN O'BRIEN

A new secondhand bookstore opened in Oxford city centre last week. Located in the Golden Cross shopping centre, just off Cornmarket Street, the bookstore stocks hundreds of secondhand books, ranging from accessibly priced paperbacks to rare and expensive antiquarian first-editions. It was previously home to dessert cafe Fluffy Fluffy, and before that, it was an optician's.

Its four co-directors, Helen Flatley, Mehdi Bensenane, Scott Moynihan, and Sumner Braund, who have backgrounds in medieval history and philosophy, opened the store in order to provide a boost to secondhand bookselling in Oxford. Helen, a medievalist and history lecturer at the University of Oxford as well as co-director of the store, said: "Some of us did our PhDs here and have been thinking for quite a while that Oxford needs more secondhand bookshops, so that was the inspiration for it."

"Effectively, we've built the kind of bookshop we ourselves would like to go to", Helen told *Cherwell*. The store stocks a wide range of genres, including ancient philosophy, medieval and modern history, and fiction. Its site dates from 1496 and is thought to have links to Shakespeare. According to the store's Instagram page, the bard is rumoured to have stayed in the building in the 17th century, when it was a coaching inn. He is also said to have put on a production of *Hamlet* in the Golden Cross courtyard. The courtyard itself is one of the oldest parts of medieval Oxford, dating back to the 13th century, Helen explained.

The owners said they have been delighted with the response they've had since opening the store in May. "We've been especially heartened by the amount of students that have been in", Helen told *Cherwell*. The store aims to cater to students' needs both in terms of stock and prices. Helen said: "It's one of the things that we thought would be important, to have a range of prices, so we have many books that

are accessibly priced, as well as some more rare and expensive things."

Some of the store's most noteworthy antiquarian books include a first-edition copy of George Orwell's *1984*, priced at £1000, and a 1863 copy of George Eliot's *Romola*, priced at £200. The store also stocks some early illustrated editions of Shakespeare. The owners hope to expand the antiquarian side of the business, Helen told *Cherwell*.

"*When people come to Oxford, they come here for a reason. We wanted to create that Oxford feel, but with an open door...a network of community***"**

As well as catering to students' needs, the owners hope the store will provide tourists with a special insight into Oxford. Mehdi Bensenane, a philosopher originally from Paris, said: "When people come to Oxford, they come here for a reason. They are interested in the history of the place, in the humanities, and in the sciences.

"But Oxford can be rather opaque when you think about it from a tourist's point of view. Buildings are defined not so much by what they do but who was their benefactor – Ashmolean, Bodleian. Colleges can be hard to access, too, as you have to pay to look around. So we wanted to create that Oxford feel, but with an open door. We're hoping to create a network and a feeling of community for independent bookshops, whilst addressing the expectations of local communities and tourists."

A number of Oxford's independent shops have been threatened with closure recently. Riverman Records, a second-hand record

shop and music store on Walton Street with a cult following, is facing an uncertain future as its landlord has submitted a planning application to turn the premises into living accommodation.

Oxford's longest-running independent cinema, The Ultimate Picture Palace in Cowley, is also facing the prospect of closing after its landlord, Oriel College, refused to extend its lease in order to allow vital investments and renovations.

Blackwell's on Broad Street used to run a thriving secondhand and antiquarian books section, but has scaled down its operation in recent years. In addition, the future of the Oxfam bookshop on St. Giles's Street has recently been thrown into doubt after Regent's Park College, which owns the premises, submitted a planning application to turn the premises into an MCR. The application was rejected by Oxford City Council, and Regent's Park has said that it is considering its options.

Image credit: Ben O'Brien for *Cherwell*.



The death of the male novelist, or the birth of the feminist?

ELIZABETH GAMMAIDONI

A trend has emerged in recent years which centres on a worry that male authors are being increasingly published and read, whilst women have begun to dominate the industry. This trend is closely linked with the controversial intention of Jude Cook to launch Conduit Books, which would aim, at least initially, to publish solely books written by men. This trend, in calling itself "the death of the male novelist", perhaps exaggerates the situation at hand by implying the total loss of male authors. How much truth is there to this?

In reality, the situation is not so dire. Looking closer, it turns out that almost every article written on this topic refers to a single study by Joel Waldfogel, an economist, in 2025. Whilst a comprehensive, 42-page study, it does not take a genius to know that, for a reliable conclusion to be drawn, ideally, more than one source of proof should be drawn on. In addition, the World Economic Forum reports that "Waldfogel determined female and male authorship by first name, which risked misclassifying some authors". It is notable, too, that while many articles cite Waldfogel's study as proof that women so harshly outnumber men in the publishing industry, they never appear to give actual statistics, and this is telling when looking at the results yielded from his study.

He breaks book sales down by sector, and compares the percentage of books authored by women in that sector to the number of sales of the same books. In only two sectors do women outperform men in terms of authorship: romance, where women produce 78.3% of the work, and "Cookbooks, Food & Wine", where women produce 51.4%. The latter is close enough to half that the split is essentially even, meaning that there is only one sector in which women author a significantly increased number of books compared to men.

The belief that women take up more space in society than they actually do is an idea that has risen in recent decades, perhaps because of the increasingly visible presence of the feminist movement. Some may see this as a threat to the current state of society and lash out against women's representation in every sector. Despite this, women's texts produce over half of the sales in 10 of the 41 total categories. Perhaps, then, the answer lies not in the authors themselves

but in the publishers and purchasers of books.

Although there is a more equal weighting between male and female authors than is often assumed, many statistics make it clear that women comprise the majority of both publishing staff and readers. In 2019, women made up 78% of publishing staff (although this number drops in more senior roles) and, in 2024, 65% of women read fiction compared to 35% of men. Perhaps it makes sense that more published texts are by women, given that it is a female-dominated industry in the sense of both the workers and the consumers.

However, it is easy to pick holes in this argument. For one, it has been shown that, whilst women read books equally by men and women, men tend to read books written by men. If the majority of readers are women, and women tend to read books by men and women equally, then the fact that there is an approximately equal number is a good reflection of the population's reading habits.

There is also something to be said for the importance of men's representation within texts. Perhaps the sales of texts by women are elevated despite not making up a ridiculous proportion of the total because men are lacking in healthy representation within texts. Although diversity is important within reading, it is also important for everyone to feel seen by reading texts which represent their own situation. Men are able to find far more representation in past texts than women are, but this cannot be used as a blanket statement. Identity is intersectional, and men who are part of marginalised groups would be hard-pressed to find literature that represents them. Even people who would find their demographic in the old-fashioned canon would likely not feel represented by it: a man living in the 21st century would likely not relate to the experiences of men in a Dickens novel, for example.

Men's representation in modern novels is important, but there is some doubt as to whether this representation is waning. Although it is taken as such, Waldfogel's study does not seem to imply the death of the male novelist, and neither does some research into winners of major literary prizes over the last half-century. The Booker Prize and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, for example, both list their historical winners going back decades. These lists reveal that perhaps it is not so new a concept that women and men be on equal grounds regarding

publishing and literary prizes.

In 1970, three men and three women were on the shortlist for the Booker Prize, and Bernice Rubens, a woman, won the prize. There are plenty of other examples of women being nominated with more equal weighting to men than is often assumed throughout the histories of these prizes, in similar ratios to those seen today. Whilst men have often dominated nominations, maybe the extent to which they have done so is less than is often assumed.

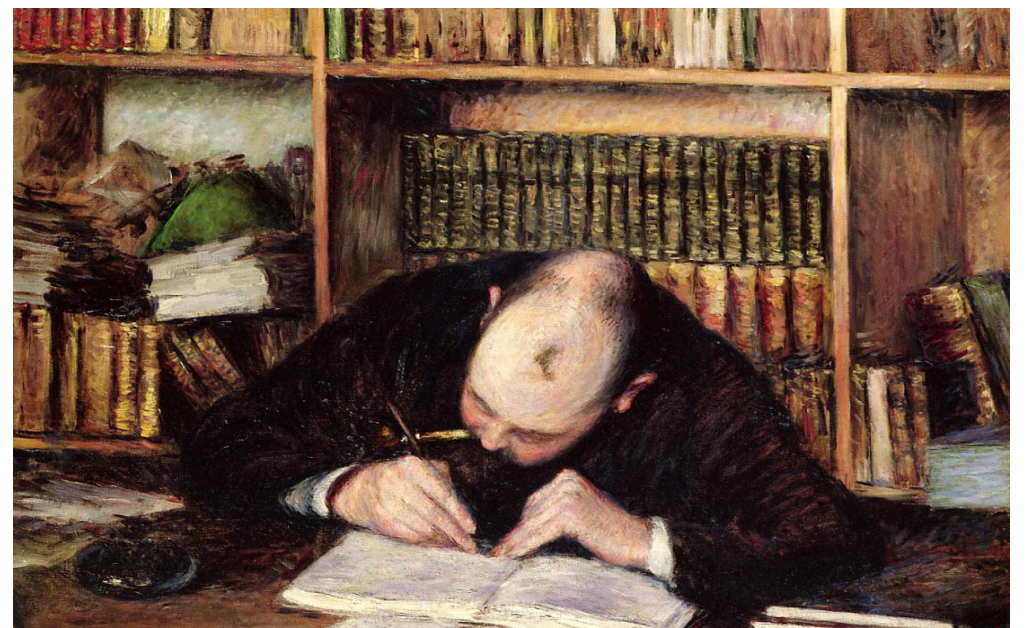
Perhaps changes to the publishing industry are not born of genuinely overwhelming shifts in gender splits, but instead lie in the eye of the beholder. In recent years, feminism as a movement has become increasingly vocal and proud in the Western world. Women have been present in the publishing industry and in literary prize lists for decades, yet it is only now that feminism – in particular, the visibility of women in the arts sector – is making its voice increasingly heard that society has begun to worry that the male novelist is a dying species.

This is not an isolated situation, and is mirrored in other areas of society. People are afraid of the

increasing gender quotas which aim to make gender divides within companies narrower. The FTSE Women Leaders Review shows that women are still underrepresented within companies at 43%, yet fears abound about whether gender quotas are damaging the quality of the workplace. The anxiety that women are gaining power within the world is not specific to books, and has risen along with the visibility of feminism in the last few decades.

Perhaps people have an issue not with women's fiction being published in large quantities, but more with the way it cyclically supports and is supported by the vocal and power of the feminist movement. This backlash against progressive movements has always existed, and often involves strong responses to a fear of forward movement within society. The idea that male novelists are a dying breed is not founded in truth, but in anxiety over women gaining equal voices to men. The death of the male novelist as a concept is exaggerated by the dramaticism of its name, which fails to stand up under investigation.

Image credit: Gustave Caillotte, CC0 via Wikimedia Commons.



Stats.fm: Music as a signal of identity

Suzi Sharp reflects on the trend of using meaningless statistics as markers of taste

It used to be difficult to tell what music someone listened to. There were no public Spotify playlists, no Stats.fm top tracks to brag about, and no songs attached to your termly Instagram dump. Today, however, music taste can become an inextricable part of how your identity is perceived. With unprecedented access to data on our own habits, and those of others, we can tie our music consumption ever more tightly to our own personal brand. This has led to an experience of music-listening which is mediated by the public perception of precisely what music one listens to and what it says about them, in ways which have arisen alongside an individualistic shift in the personal branding zeitgeist.

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It is far harder to maintain a separation between your taste, your identity, and how you are thought of by others

It is easier than ever to track your listening. With the advent of automatic tracking software such as Stats.fm and its more manual predecessor Last.fm, we no longer have to painstakingly keep a spreadsheet to know exactly what we listen to at every hour of the day. In fact, streaming platforms such as Spotify have even started handing us generalisations of what we listen to per hour, with 'Daylists'. These consist of the music you most frequently turn to at that specific time each week, updated every few hours and accompanied by a few handy adjectives. My personal favourite title has been 'Instrumental ballroom dancing this Thursday afternoon', but, crucially, in Spanish. Daylists, notably, are made using AI to gauge these preferences, perhaps making them the epitome of this algorithm-led listening, creating pseudo-echo chambers of taste.

This monitoring ability also comes hand in

hand with an ease of discovery which would have previously been unthinkable. Rather than reliance on local record/CD shops – which would stock new releases, the well-known classics, and some local talent – or even the radio, offering similar coverage, with streaming, algorithmic listening is now in full swing.

This means that consuming an artist's entire discography is no longer something which requires effort, simply hit play on their artist page on the streaming platform of your choice. Additionally, once an algorithm works out that you're enjoying a certain song, it can feed you more just like it with precisely zero labour on your part. The time between encountering a genre for the very first time and being a relative expert on it can now be cut down to a matter of hours, and you can now have statistical proof of your endeavours, too.

Simultaneously, sharing your listening habits is now a very commonplace activity, largely through social media. Without even touching on the recent controversy over artists hiring marketing agencies to – allegedly – fabricate online fandoms for themselves, music is a core part of most social platforms today. Scrolling through somebody's Instagram page, or their story highlights, now serves as a run-down of what they want you to know about their music taste (as well as obviously what they want you to know about their life).

A real on-the-nose example is the annual swathes of Spotify Wrapped graphics – a full year of your listening neatly packaged for exhibition. Personal consumption has never been so public. This is in stark contrast to a time when one had to go out of their way to share these things: band merch, badges, physical copies of music all required active effort to acquire and show off. Today, the equivalent is three taps on a screen and a 30-second listen-through of the clip to make sure it's communicating the right vibe.

This has all come together to produce a world in which your music consumption is a core part of your personal branding, your aesthetic, what would be on a Pinterest mood-board titled [your name]-core. In other words,

music has become another consumable good mediating your personal identity. It's another element used to express Who You Are™, insofar as this is your publicly available self, visible by others.

There is now a break between authentic self-expression and one's 'music taste': we are all pretending to not know that when we're listening there's a non-zero chance that this particular song-rotation will be made public in some form or another. While I'm sure some people do manage to marry the two, and are wholly unshamed of every song they've ever streamed, or who simply do not partake in the stat-posting and musical accompaniment to photo dumps, I think it is worth acknowledging that our relationship with music is changing. It is far harder to maintain a separation between your taste, your identity, and how you are thought of by others.

“

The time between encountering a genre for the very first time and being a relative expert on it can now be cut down to a matter of hours

Never before has it been this easy, or quick, to completely change your go-to music selection with the help of streaming platform discovery functions, nor have we ever had the tools to see and share our habits at the level of detail we do now. This has contributed to everyone knowing far more about each other's tastes than they used to, and the culture of sharing your interests to be cool online has reinforced this. In essence, choosing what to listen to at any given time is, for many, no longer a decision based purely on the feelings of the moment, but is instead mediated by the knowledge that they are not alone in witnessing this choice.

MUSIC

What's Oxford listening to?



Emma at Merton recommends *Screamadelica* (1991) by Primal Scream:

“This is the perfect summer album – acid house, reggae, and psychedelic rock come together on this classic record to become the ideal soundtrack to a pint in the sun.”



Elizabeth at Balliol recommends *Florescence* (2026) by Maisie Peters:

“A collection of gentle love songs and heartfelt ballads, Maisie Peter's third studio album is a lyrical masterpiece, taking the listener by the hand as she charts the course of her early twenties.”

Image credits: 'Screamadelica' and 'Florescence' via Amazon.

WHAT'S ON

STAGE

The Moro Affair
The North Wall
4th - 6th June

Haunted House
Christ Church Cathedral Gardens
11th - 13th June

MUSIC

Daft Funk Live
O2 Academy
6th June, 7pm

FILM

Romeria
Ultimate Picture Palace
Until 4th June

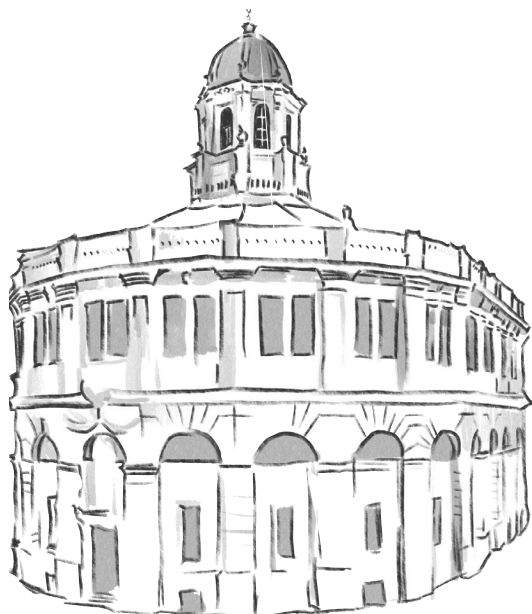
LITERATURE

Pride 2026 with Rosa Rankin Gee
and Josh Silver
Blackwell's
6th June, 3pm

ART

Colonial Views of India
Asmolean Museum
Ends 13th September

Wonder of Birds
Weston Library
Ends 3rd January 2027



The Source

Siskin

Near the riverside, a girl with walnut hair sat with her back to the crowd. Her legs were pulled up to her chest, and she wore a white skirt that flowed over her bare feet and dipped into the water, a pallid sludge of brown bleeding up into the fabric. She stared at the water, at its currents, its ripples, its transient surges. Her freckled face was completely blank.

I watched her from afar. A few of the others had approached her, but she didn't say a word. She didn't move, either. I wondered if she even knew we were there.

We'd arrived a few hours back, dumping our bikes on the grass and whooping into the open fields. The day was spent drinking and bathing in the late June sun. No one saw the girl arrive. She was just suddenly there, alone by the river.

Read the full piece online at cherwell.org

SASHA DARVAS

Measuring out life with teaspoons: Oxford's Death Café

JENNIFER ZHOU

Jaffa cake?" These are the first words I hear upon stepping into Oxford's Death Café. We're in the Old Fire Station on George Street, a venue for all kinds of offbeat activities: indie theatre, standup, and its kitchen, which operates as a social enterprise run by women refugees. At 5pm on a Monday, it is deserted. Already running late, I get lost on the street, knock on the wrong door, and finally blunder into a lobby where there is absolutely no noise or company. Tiptoeing timidly to the desk (and banishing mental descriptions like dead silent and silent as a tomb), I stage-whisper into an intercom: "I'm here for the Death Café."

Was that right? Should I look sadder, perhaps? A receptionist tells me to go right; I nod and shuffle past with a solemnity that instantly strikes me as pompous. It is already unspeakably awkward.

Theoretically, I know what to expect. Death Cafés emerged as a movement in Switzerland and France in the 2010s and spread across the world. Billed as casual discussion forums, they encourage participants to engage in frank dialogue about the end of life: what is death? Why do we fear it? How does dying shape the way that we live? It is a specialist salon, a café philosophique turned morbid. Bernard Crettaz, the sociologist who inspired the cafés, wants to end what he terms the "tyrannical secrecy" around death. We should be able to discuss it without stigma, he says – the subtitle of his book is *Sortir la mort du silence* ('Bringing death out of silence.')

So far, silence is prevailing. In the Old Fire Station's canteen, a dozen strangers sit around a table; none of them are talking (sepulchrally silent, silent as the grave). I am conspicuously the youngest. Anne*, whom I later learned is the group facilitator, heads the table. She is 84 and strikingly sprightly. Cheerfully,

she slides me a cardboard carton: "Jaffa cake?"

We all take some. There's an air of manic jollity about the whole thing; it reminds me of people who dress up as Disney princesses to visit children's hospitals. For about five minutes, I gaze into every unoccupied corner of the room, counting tiles and committing wall art to memory. No one says a word – small-talk has been utterly disabled.

When we finally start, Anne asks us to introduce ourselves. Then she smiles and says calmly: "We're all going to die. Not pass away, not go to a better place: we'll die."

It's a bit shocking. Around me, though, other participants are nodding; a few chime in with agreement, saying that they only learnt the stock phrases as a way of sounding decent around others. "I couldn't say 'my dad's dead,' it sounds crude" – these euphemisms are not coping mechanisms but social rites, like wearing black. Someone adds that their kids are confused by decorous phrases. If her grandmother has "passed away", does that mean she's coming back? If she's "gone somewhere", where is she? We are all here to try and regain the abilities we had intuitively as children – speaking forthrightly, living in the present.

Anne's ban on euphemisms sets the tone: we discuss the ways in which dying is sternly practical. A printout on how to arrange a Power of Attorney circulates around the group. If death is grand and mysterious ("that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns"), dying is relentlessly banal. We discuss bedsores, waning appetites, the larcenous cost of burial – someone laments that they had to take weeks off work to care for their critically ill father, despite only anticipating days.

"I don't want people to find my body", somebody pipes up.

"Because it'll upset them?"

"No – I'm scared I'll smell bad."

Slowly, imperceptibly, the ice breaks. We talk about things we want to do before we die (for me: write a book). We exchange concepts of the afterlife. Death Cafés brand themselves as nonpartisan, "with no agenda, objectives or themes". I do notice, however, a preponderance of Buddhists and spiritualists in the circle; a theory that we all belong to one 'indistinct mass of energy' is advanced and receives approving nods. It is not that these belief systems are more morbid. In fact, the opposite may be true. If death is the resetting of a cycle, a passage to one more mortal lifetime, then why fear it? Why hold it apart from – or even contrast it with – life? It is an illuminating thought, and impresses even me, the staunch nontheist.

Interestingly, two people in the group are 'death doulas'. Members of this burgeoning profession, including *Hamnet* director Chloé Zhao, pitch themselves as midwives for the end of life. While not medical professionals, they provide emotional and practical assistance to the dying. The two at the

table describe their training, which includes lying in a wooden box and imagining their own funeral.

Is it useful to picture death? Is it helpful to talk about it, or just self-indulgent? Over the course of the meeting, the dread that I felt at the beginning was slowly replaced by shock, then relief. The Death Café is mundane. I had worried about lacking the special vocabulary, the necessary concepts. But what I saw was that death is pieced together from the most commonplace pieces of everyday life. Grief, tedium, guilt, vanity, humour, superstition. None of it requires a new language – just the courage to use the old one. Death is silent (as a crypt, as a vault, as a mausoleum). We don't have to be silent about it.

*Not her real name.

Death Cafés were founded by Jon Underwood based on the work of Bernard Crettaz. Information can be found at deathcafe.com

Image Credit: Julius Schorzman, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



An archaeological future: Distorted legacies

ABIGAIL CHRISTIE

The enormity of human history often feels incomprehensible. This vastness creeps up on us in the most imperceptible ways, whether it's reading names inscribed on the remnants of the Berlin Wall, or staring face-to-face at a thousand-year-old portrait of a young woman. What never fails to strike me as remarkable, however, is the familiarity of the human experience – how grappling with the magnitude of time, and the weight of our history, has always stuck with us.

The Colossi of Memnon have stood in the ancient city of Thebes, now modern-day Luxor, since 1350 BC – that is, for over 3,000 years. Immovable edifices in an eternal landscape, these statues have endured the rise and fall of many a civilisation, the cracking open of the earth, and the annual soothing balm of the Nile. But what makes this monument even more extraordinary is its history layered upon history: tourists from across the ancient world who had inscribed their names on the feet of the statues, immortalised their own existence, and intertwined it with all that came before. There is an urge to shout through the vastness of time: "I was here, I existed."

The ache to remember and be remembered is one of the most important things that makes humankind human, and this hasn't changed across the sweeping expanse of time. As we visit, photograph, read, and discuss such monuments, we too

become part of their history, and we preserve the ache that is undeniably universal – one that transcends time, language, religion, identity, or culture, and is recognisable in every context.

If you take a stroll around Oxford, you'll find this desire isn't so distant, even now. The parapet of the University Church tower, accessed by a winding spiral staircase, with footsteps moulded into the stone by centuries of use, is home to a plethora of memories. The names of students, lovers, and visitors are each engraved into its very fabric, attesting to their own existence, with the church as their witness, and us as their audience. The antique shops nestled along the High Street speak to this longing to remember. Brimming with brief snapshots of lives lived, each nook and cranny is inundated with photograph albums in gilded metal cases, carefully crafted jewellery, and curated collections of miscellanea. Even as I thumbed through my library book this morning, reading around the furious scribbles in the margin, I found it hard to ignore the fact history is quite literally in our hands: it is ours to preserve and ours to create.

Studying archaeology in Oxford, a city where researchers, tourists, readers, and students alike converge and continue to breathe life into its history, it feels necessary to also contemplate our future. What sort of evidence will outlive us and become artefacts of our time? How might future civilisations try to create a cohesive image of our age? Would such a thing

even be possible? Rational answers might point towards the assortment of memorabilia found in those same antique shops, or documents and keepsakes scattered across attics and basements, maybe even tucked away in purpose-built storage. Yet, though entirely reasonable suggestions, this increasingly digital age makes the physical survival of memory seem more of an afterthought.

Only this year it was revealed that the AI company Anthropic scanned and digitised millions of books in order to train its AI models, destroying the original physical prints afterwards. This not only sets a deeply worrying precedent, but amplifies how it is now more poignant than ever to continue to be vigilantly commemorative, and to take control of the narrative of our history. Such physical, tangible history shouldn't ever become a luxury, and the scarcity of evidence only seems reasonable in an ancient context, where accident of survival tends to prevail. It feels imperative, then, to print photographs, write dated diary entries, buy newspapers, make scrapbooks, send postcards: physically record those mundanities of daily life which are so often easily forgotten, yet so frequently serve as reminders of the comfortable, familiar humanity we share with our ancestors across time.

That said, when reflecting on our digital age and its impact on our material history, it seems naive not to also consider the consequences of our existence on the very planet which we inhabit. Given the state of

the current climate crisis, concerns for the survival of our physical remnants seem almost trivial – the defiant longevity of plastics will outlive their creators. The writing spelling out our existence is not only on the wall, but in the water, inside our bodies, stacked high in landfill sites, and buried in the soil: an indelible legacy of plastics and pollution. In droves, the oceans and seas will quite literally regurgitate our past from their waves, spitting it out at the shoreline. Considering a plastic Mars Bar wrapper from 1986 was found on a Cornwall beach in 2019, we might envisage the fortuitous nature of future excavations looking to understand us. Evidence, it seems, will inadvertently be in abundance for the age of humanity that resists obscurity. But what planet will remain hospitable to such legacies?

Of course, this isn't to say blame should be assuaged from the larger corporations responsible for generating such immense scales of pollution on our planet, nor to shift moral culpability, but rather to empower the individual. We shouldn't underestimate the power of our own individual impact in changing this. There is action in hope – an emotion so intrinsically human – and where there is hope, there is humanity. If we're able to preserve and reanimate so much of our past, then we must also have the capacity to create with more intention and to consume with more conscientiousness, so that we may have a planet where our legacies thrive.

HOROSCOPES



Aries

How many pairs of sunglasses do you own?!



Taurus

You will get through these fifth week blues (with the help of some Pimm's).



Gemini

Sunbathing in college will make you more productive.



Cancer

You can't spend all your money on coffee.



Leo

A bad haircut is in your future.



Virgo

A moonlit walk down Holywell might clear your head.

HOROSCOPES



Libra

Swimming in Hinksey is not a personality trait.



Scorpio

That six hour nap is just a siesta!



Sagittarius

You will never again be tricked into Thursday night Bridge.



Capricorn

Sleep more, please!



Aquarius

Take a chance! Talk to them.



Pisces

Your tutor is lying to you. That essay you wrote in two hours deserved a first.

It takes a village, but no one wants to be a villager

REBECCA BUSHEE

It takes a village, but no one wants to be a villager. I heard these words recently, and they remained fixed in my mind. I must have turned them over 1000 times, walking down St Giles' last week. Something clicked then. It gave voice to something I didn't realise I had been feeling. I kept thinking about that art show or swim competition I'd asked my friends to attend, even for 15 minutes; about my quiet hope, which waned with every minute that passed without their presence. Or the many failed birthday parties I arranged in the past – too close to finals for most to make it. It extended beyond big things, too: the lunch I'd rescheduled three times, or the last-minute cancellations that seem to be a leaguer any plans I make: "Sorry! I have an essay", or "I've got less done this week than I thought, can we meet next week?"

I consider my time precious. I am anxious about being late, and when I make a plan, barring illness or serious crises, of course, that time is sacred. I understand that this is not everyone's mindset. Indeed, I've had to change my habits (often leaving ten minutes later intentionally, only to still turn up five minutes early) and adjust my expectations in university accordingly. But I will never subscribe to being a 'flake'. I don't make promises I know I can't keep, and I always show up. I used to think 'flakiness' was unique to my home university, some sort of Ivy league self-absorption which made everyone unable to make space in their lives for other people. Coming to Oxford, I've realised it may be a broader issue.

Oxford is full of busy people. It can seem at times like you are fighting for space in between someone's various committee obligations, tutorials, and frantic essay crises. After all, no one can be in three places at once. However, it seems like time, and again I lose that battle for priority in the endless list of tasks everyone must complete. Promises, if they're not immediately codified in Google Calendar, may as well ring hollow. It's not even that people here (or at my home university, for that matter) are selfish. Plenty of people show up when it counts. But enough people don't, so that I've begun to notice a pattern. I believe this is the consequence of a changing mindset: a sort of deep-rooted individualism.

I'm not sure if there is a single culprit for this phenomenon, however, looking at internet "self-care" trends may provide some insight. In recent years, short- and long-form videos alike have reiterated this specific refrain: "protect your peace". On the surface, this is an innocuous, even positive mantra. It distils the ever-important need to establish boundaries, and prevent yourself from becoming a human doormat, into a catchy slogan. I agree with this message in many regards. As a bona fide people-pleaser myself, healthy boundaries are incredibly important, especially as instant communication seems to have eroded most physical ones. On the other hand, I

think that this phrase can have insidious connotations. In an effort to inform us that we "don't owe anyone anything", these creators also tell us that we cannot put anyone before ourselves. If showing up for someone else is too much of a burden, they say we should eschew it altogether.

As always, it's a balance. Prioritising yourself is important, especially if you're someone who subordinates yourself in an effort to place others' needs first. But I think that we owe others basic courtesy. I will be the first to admit I do too much for others, contorting myself to accommodate their needs. This is not good for me, who exhausts myself to accommodate someone else, or for them, who doesn't realise they were forcing me to assume such an unusual shape. At some point, I had to realise that it wasn't worth it. But the fact that I tried remains important. We owe it to others to try.

Then again, maybe they have their reasons for needing extra accommodation. Often, the sad part is that it's not malicious at all. People don't show up for a variety of completely understandable reasons. Forgiveness is important, as it's impossible to know what these reasons are. However, it does not negate how demoralising it feels to repeatedly reach out. I think that in the process of trying not to owe anyone anything, we have also forgotten that people are owed a genuine apology, if not an explanation. If there is a reason we cannot show up, we must try to express it.

I have seen people "protect their peace" to the point where they fail to take the initial step. Of course, there comes a time when reaching out, or trying to arrange plans with someone becomes futile, but that should never be the case at the outset. These same self-interested narratives, which tell us to put ourselves above everyone else, would tell us to cut out people who do not show up for us immediately. They would say that the burden of reaching out causes too much discomfort. Perhaps this person hasn't shown up, apologised, or explained their behaviour. You cannot keep reaching out to someone who refuses to engage with you at all. But, oftentimes, you cannot know this until you've earnestly tried.

I used to wait for people to text me first, wondering why so few people ever seemed to make plans with me. I took it far too personally. Eventually, one of my friends said to me, "Everyone is waiting for someone to message them first, at some point, you have to do it yourself". This advice was precious. Waiting around to be wanted was silly, as I had done nothing to encourage it – I hadn't shown up or reached out myself. Everyone wants a village full of people who care about and support them. But to have a village, you need to be a villager. Sometimes that means showing up, reaching out first, or supporting someone with no initial expectation of reciprocity. People will show you who they are. If they cannot be there for you, you don't need to keep trying. But that doesn't mean that you don't have to try. You need to give others a reason to be a part of your village.

CHERWELL-FED

A new kid on the matcha block: NEPA Coffee and Food



PRITY LALOUX

Any international student (or performative male) will know that it can be surprisingly hard to source a good matcha latte in Oxford. In January 2025, *Cherwell* provided some guidance on this issue by offering the student body a definitive ranking of Oxford matcha. Since then, however, there have been some new developments. NEPA café opened its doors on St Clement's Street last year, and recently opened a new location on Cowley Road too. Having heard reports that their matcha gave all other cafés a run for their money, I decided to venture to both locations to find out.

My outlook when seeking out new matcha is often pessimistic. Too many times I have spent upwards of £6 only to be given a large cup of green milk. So, when I walked through the doors of NEPA on St Clement's Street, I tried not to get my hopes up. Still, my friend's raving made it hard not to. To start, my fears were abated by the bright, clean atmosphere, and the hospitality of the staff. However, the tables were slightly too small, and the size of the café was limited. My friend and I were welcomed by low-volume pop music, which provided a nice atmosphere without being intrusive to those working. After we seated ourselves, it was time for the moment of truth – the matcha tasting.

As a starting point, I ordered an iced matcha latte with soy milk (my preferred milk alternative for matcha). As I saw the barista hand-whisking the bright green powder, even my most cynical thoughts quieted down. I was certain that I was in for a good beverage – and I was right. The tea was pleasantly strong, with a very prominent matcha flavour from the first sip. It provided the perfect balance of earthiness, bitterness, and astringency for my taste, and it was nicely mellowed out by the milk. And since I appreciate that the drink comes unsweetened, my focus was on the flavour of the tea. Crucially, it was bright green and did not taste watered down at any point. Although the prices are far from cheap (£4.50 for a normal matcha latte, £5.10 with soy milk), the size and flavour of the drink did make up for it.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that NEPA not only had a standard matcha latte on offer, but a fairly extensive summer menu, which includes strawberry, lychee, and mango matcha lattes. I must admit that, since my first trip, my friends and I have managed to cover all of the flavours on offer. NEPA's summer matcha menu steals the show in my opinion and offers some of the best fruit-based matchas I have ever tried. Previously, I hadn't ever



tried a lychee matcha, and I was pleased to find that the syrup in NEPA's version was not too sweet, as some lychee-based drinks tend to be. I thought that the slightly floral flavour of the fruit provided a nice contrast with the earthy matcha, and formed a unique flavour that I had never experienced before. The mango matcha, which included a mango purée rather than a syrup, tasted sweet and fresh, with the richness of the mango flavour pairing well with the notes of the matcha. However, my favourite always has and always will be the strawberry matcha latte. The perfect pink swirl paired with bright green makes for a beautiful beverage, with a purée that makes the latte taste like fresh strawberries rather than jam. For me, this was a near-perfect execution of a strawberry matcha latte.

Menu

- Matcha: £4.50
- Strawberry matcha: £6.20
- Lychee matcha: £6.50

51 St Clement's St, OX4 1AG

A few days after my first visit, I ventured to the NEPA on Cowley Road to see if there were any significant differences between locations. There, I found a much larger space with a few outdoor tables. While the size of the St Clement's location occasionally risks feeling cramped, in the Cowley location, I had ample room to find seating and to set up my work. I perched on one of the stools facing Cowley Road, which offered me the perfect opportunity to people-watch in between readings. I was disappointed to find that the summer menu was unavailable on the day that I went, but the plain matcha latte I got was characteristically delicious. Where the St Clement's location was perfect for a quick stop before a walk, or for a chat with a friend, the Cowley location was the ideal afternoon study spot. Combining a lovely setting with delicious tea, NEPA truly was the perfect cure to my previous matcha blues.

Image Credit: Prity Laloux for Cherwell.

AGONY AUNT

Dear Agony Aunt,

I feel like none of my tutors like me. Their feedback on my essays is disparaging compared to my peers and the way we interact in tutorials feels contrived. I'm worried about what might come up in Prelims. I know people say they don't matter, but I want to prove myself.

Sincerely,
Dawdling Hughsie

Dear Dawdling Hughsie,

Every college seems to have those scary tutors. One of the 'feedback' comments on my first ever essay at Oxford was "eurgh", swiftly followed by "nightmarish paragraph". I was sitting in classes and tutorials, knowing that I was damned if I didn't speak, and even more damned if I did. And it's only now that I can look back and laugh at it all.

Your tutors do so many interesting things – research, supervision, conferences – that undergraduate teaching probably isn't something they put much effort into. If I had to teach classes of bored, hungover 19- and 20-year-olds, I'd be at the end of my tether too. Not that this excuses some of the worst things they can come out with. Sometimes you just don't get on with academics (and, pssst, half the faculty probably don't either!), and you can look forward to not picking the papers they teach in the much more important years beyond Prelims. Because, yes, they don't matter: the only person you are proving yourself to is...yourself. Don't let the academics grind you down!

With luck and love,
Agony Aunt

Journey to decentre of the earth: Wilful ignorance of men

NORA MILES

When I went back to my high school last year to talk to prospective applicants, the number one thing I was asked was: “Are all your conversations, like, really smart?” And I felt a slight sense of shame to admit that they weren’t. I recognise that it’s pretentious to want to discuss philosophy at brunch or the political and economic state of the world right now in the queue for the club, but I do sometimes lament the extent to which my conversations are filled with gossip – and it’s almost always gossip about boys.

So a few weeks ago, when I came across creator cc’s thoughts on TikTok, who had captioned her video: “POV: trying to make plans with the friend that decentered men”, I stopped and paid attention. It featured a presentation of successive, slightly outlandish activities. “Sorry, I can’t hang out today”, she announces: “I’m working a NASCAR race.” Or she would be studying Spanish in Mexico, or being a seatfiller at the VMAs, or doing a matcha workshop, or going to the outdoor library, or working as a TV extra.

Carmin is not the first to use the term ‘decentering men’, and as an amateur internet sociologist, I will take it upon myself to try to define it for you. As I understand it, to decentre men is to construct an ascetic resistance to the parameters of your own thoughts. To recognise a masochistic obsession with the male gender, and to focus on yourself, with force. To denounce men is not to completely reject romance, or develop cynicism regarding love; it is simply to carve out time where those things don’t consume you. To resist the temptation to obsess over being perceived. To reclaim solitude, or time with friends, as a space for reflection, and not for courtroom-grade crush interaction cross-analysis.

Far be it from my job to tell you how to live your life, but in my opinion, such a mindset can hardly be a bad thing. I was lucky enough to be able to talk to the account owner, Carmin, about her content, and we discussed the benefits of taking time for yourself in this way (though, perhaps, less extravagantly) in order to reinforce your sense of self outside of your relationships with men: “A lot of people are afraid to spend time by themselves but, because of that, they’re missing out on things that would have otherwise

been great experiences.”

I pointed out that almost all of the activities which she showcases on her account involve taking part in some kind of in-person activity. Carmin believes that this is key to widening your outlook: “There’s no substitute for putting yourself out there and trying new things IRL”. Here, then, is a tangible step to be able to take in Oxford. Although Carmin definitely takes the cake when it comes to adventure, there’s so much that you can do in Oxford on your own to try to tap into your own sense of independent free-spiritedness.

“It’s like you’re charging different parts of yourself, when I’m by myself I can have that time to reflect.” When considering this more closely, the challenge then is not to let men invade these reflective spaces. Even taking a walk has been appropriated through a lens of desirability. Your ‘hot girl walks’ score negatively on the Bechdel test, and you should be honest with yourself about it. Social life has become cloaked in this strange level of self-denial. You’re not going to the club ‘to dance with your friends’ if you spend the whole time constantly looking over your shoulder at the men around you, and that’s ok! But so is a night in where no one desires you.

Although the term ‘decentering’ is a modern one, or one that seems to have gained popularity on digital platforms at least, it has roots in centuries’ worth of feminist ideology. The problem that this phenomenon seems to attempt to tackle is similar to the one that De Beauvoir identified in 1949: “Defined to the sphere of the relative, destined to the male since her infancy, accustomed to seeing him as a sovereign whom she cannot hope to equal, the woman, who has not stifled her claim to be human, will dream of overcoming herself by uniting with one of these sovereign beings” (translation my own).

Betty Friedan continued this feminist psychoanalysis by trying to draw attention to “the problem with no name” – an inexpressible dissatisfaction with a life lived revolving around men. But when I picked up a copy of *The Feminine Mystique*, I was struck by how different the modern picture really is. Friedan explains that when she interviewed seniors at Smith Women’s College (at some point before 1963), she observed that “many of us could not see ourselves beyond the age of twenty-one”. I don’t think this is true today. I think almost every woman at Oxford does want to use her education

in some capacity, and the majority of us have concrete plans for the future, or at the very least a concrete desire to do something meaningful, whatever that may look like.

The problem no longer lies in the disruption of aspirations, but in the suppression of the means to achieve them. The obfuscation of the end goal and the onset of a certain kind of oxymoronic mania sees a brilliant woman concern herself with whether or not her tits look good while she sits in the library, pushing the limits of her field. We are not Friedan’s prospective trapped housewives. The modern “feminine mystique” is such that women need to be simultaneously ambitious and desirable, that we pursue greatness but without relinquishing the need to

be looked at while doing it.

Oxford is a city filled with the smartest girls hand-picked from all around the world for their genius, and who pursued their best interest so ferociously that they managed to gain admission through sheer hard work.

The women of Oxford conduct groundbreaking research, translate in and out of dozens of languages, and consider books in ways that no one ever has before. We wake up at 6am to play sports, we volunteer to give back to the city, we write, we dance, and we sing. Are you really going to look me in the eye and tell me that the floppy-haired boy in hall is the most important thing in the world to you right now?

Image Credit: ccsthoughts, with permission.



OXFORD TINY LOVE STORIES

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind are my past homes. They have become dim, when I conjure them; they are only ever lit by lamps, as though the very back corners of my memory lack daylight. I never set much store in buildings, rather in people. But my mind has held on to these spaces. I once went back to visit an old neighbour I hadn’t seen since childhood. Sobs and salty tears replaced any coherent expression of polite gratitude.

I couldn’t stop myself. It wasn’t even my old home, but hers, and yet it smelt like love.

Ana Pasa, Lady Margaret Hall

CHERPSE.

Oxford’s blind dating

Will this ship sail after a coffee date at the Paper Boat Cafe?



Miss Casual

First impressions?

He seemed a bit shy but was nice and sweet.

Did it meet your expectations?

I think I thought it’d be someone I wouldn’t get on with at all and was surprised that we could talk about so much!

What was the highlight?

Complaining about the terrible dating scene at Oxford.

What was the most embarrassing moment?

When his ex walked into the room.

Describe the date in three words.

Chill. Easy. Casual.

Is there a second date on the cards?

Probably not because I think neither of us are looking for a relationship and we both got “friend” vibes.

Mr X-factor

First impressions?

We were both waiting outside the cafe for about five minutes, five feet away from one another, not realising that we were there for the same reason.

Did it meet your expectations?

I had no expectations really, I was mainly going for the fun of it: so yes, it did.

What was the highlight?

The conversation: we had a lot of mutual acquaintances and talked a bit about the absolute state of dating in Oxford.

What was the most embarrassing moment?

I did not realise that my ex-girlfriend had walked in about 15 minutes before the end of the date, and sat downstairs.

Describe the date in three words.

A fun afternoon.

Is there a second date on the cards?

No, but that’s more because of where I am in my life than anything that she said or did.

SPORT

Oriel's quest for headship at Summer Vllls 2026

Sophi Hayes-Hoyle interviews Oriel Boat Club's captains ahead of Summer Vllls



Sitting in Oriel Boat Club's captain's room, across from Captains Freiderikos and Merle, I am immersed in a blue and white legacy. The walls, as Freiderikos tells me, are ornamented with the pictures of every Men's captain since 1880 – "I'm in contact with 15 of them", he adds, recounting one night he returned to college after a tough training session, all set for bed, only to find 30 septuagenarians pointing to their pictures between sips of wine and reminiscence.

What stands out most after speaking to Oriel Boat Club's captains is the sheer devotion of its alumni network: as Oriel approaches the 700th anniversary of its foundation, generations of alumni have banded together to row across the English Channel. Part of Oriel's fundraising campaign '700 Years of People and Place', the cross-channel row, taking place across April and May, aims to raise £1 million to establish the Boat Club Endowment Appeal.

"The endowment fund is a massive thing for the club", Merle tells me, in awe of the enthusiasm for the channel row, in which six to seven decades of Oriel rowers are represented. "It makes me really proud to be part of this club", she adds, explaining that the £1 million endowment would be combined with the College's endowment fund to generate money for equipment, coaching, and to provide a sustainable source of yearly income that would keep Oriel rowing free for everyone.

Freiderikos gestures to some new gear beside me, quipping that the club has done "a bit of equipment maintenance since last year", a reference to the unfortunate mishap faced by Oriel's M1 at last year's Summer Vllls when Oriel's Tom Mackintosh, Oxford University Boat Club rower and Olympic Champion, resorted to a climb up from the 'seven' seat up, all the way past the cox, to examine the broken fin on their boat.

Oriel's legacy manifests in the Club's Crewbook, honouring the names of every athlete who has ever lifted an oar for the Boat Club. An alumni association, 'The Tortoise Club', also contributes massively to this culture, keeping many Orielenes in contact with the club as it trains up new cohorts.

Fuzzy sentimentality for one's university years is a

given. Yet, there's something about the bonds made through sport, through the river's highest tides and lowest ebbs, that holds the community together just that much tighter. "I think the really special thing about bumps is that it is a cultural thing", Merle considers, "you really pass it on from generation to generation and year to year. The fact that we are able to start in the position we are in now is really because of all the years of rowing by previous generations. That all comes together during eights".

With the Club's great investment, of course, comes great pressure. I wonder how exactly Freiderikos and Merle handle the weight of expectation, both placed upon themselves, and from preceding generations.

“*We really wanted to catch Wolfson [last year], and we weren't able to, so now it's hopefully retribution time*”

"There is definitely the expectation to do well", Merle agrees. "If anything, though, it's motivating." Freiderikos chimes in: "If people care, that fosters a good culture. At school, you just row for yourself, your family, the coaches. Here it's much, much bigger than that." Indeed, all one needs to do is turn up to the banks of the River Isis on the Saturday of Trinity's 5th Week to understand that, for Oxford, Summer Vllls might as well be an Olympic event.

On the Men's Side, hopes are high. "I'm feeling really positive", says Freiderikos, noting the two Blues standard rowers moving into Oriel's M1 Boat, accompanied by another rower of international standard. A win at Torpheads this year, the substitute event for Torpids, has left the boat feeling well placed to strive for headship. This, Freiderikos tells me, is what they have been training for.

The chance to bump up to headship in the 700th year is special, Freiderikos adds, "like a fairytale waiting to be written. I don't think it's something

we've been working for just this year; we've been working for this over the last two years, even as freshers rowing in our first Torpids. We really wanted to catch Wolfson [last year], and we weren't able to, so now it's hopefully retribution time".

With Torpids 2026 cancelled, an anti-climax replaced a staple event in the Hilary Term calendar. Torpids keeps novices engaged with the club, motivates crews throughout the damp, dreary mornings of winter months, and helps clubs to hone their selection strategy ahead of Summer Vllls. "Usually we have the opportunity to switch people around between Torpids and Summer Vllls, explains Merle, but we don't have the opportunity to do that this year."

Starting off the year slightly disappointed, with fewer rowers who had trained before, Freiderikos was able to turn this around: "I was nervous at the start of the year, but coming into Torpheads everything clicked". This he attributes to the Club's success in training novices: "It's important to raise novices to a high standard: you can't have any weak members in the boat, they all have to be strong."

Rowing, in that sense, is "the ultimate team sport". Merle reinforces the technicality of training up novices: "This is also a skill: being able to train people up relatively quickly. I think that's really impressive." Investing in rowers at every level is the strategy that underpins the breadth of Oriel's Boat Club. As Freiderikos says, "Instead of just having a pool of ten people who've rowed at school before, you could have a pool of 400 prospective rowers."

Currently, of the four eights on the Women's side, over three eights learned to row at Oriel, while two full eights learned to row this year. Freiderikos lends some of the credit to the club's Vice captains, who have been particularly good at novice retention. Oriel boasts five crews on the Men's side and four on the Women's, bringing up their numbers to nine crews in total. Women's Captain Merle is amongst the Oriel 'home-grown' herself, having tried out rowing as an undergrad, only to take up the sport seriously in Michaelmas of 2024.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

Image credit: Merle Beerens, with permission.

TRACK AND FIELD

Oxford shoe the tabs at Athletics Varsity 2026

Saturday 23rd May saw Oxford take the win in twelve of sixteen middle distance events, proving once again their speed over Cambridge. Victories were had in the Blues races as Rebecca Flaherty claimed a Varsity record of 16:05 over 5000m. Jack Organ and Ella Fryer also placed first in the Blues 800m. Athena Tharenos impressed as she won both the Seconds 800m and Steeplechase, filling in for the triple jump before completing her day racing a leg in the 4x400m relay.

ROWING ON

College boat clubs battle to qualify for Summer Vllls

Ahead of Vllls week, college boats that finished outside of the top four divisions last season must secure their spot to row. It was a strong day for University College, as every crew they entered rowed on. Thirty-seven men's crews qualified, including third boats belonging to St Annes, St Peters, Mansfield, Oriel, and Exeter. Meanwhile, St Hugh's M2 failed to row on. On the women's side, St Peter's W2 narrowly pipped Pembroke, New, and Merton's third boats to qualify.

OXFORD CRICKET

Oxford clutches draw against Marylebone

Oxford University Cricket Club, captained by Ben Taplin, played a friendly match against Marylebone at The Parks on 22nd May. Marylebone won the toss and elected to bat first, scoring 258 runs in 46 overs before declaring, with a loss of three wickets. Oxford scored 137 runs with 9 wickets falling: Amogh Karpe's aggressive 60(45) and Taplin's patient 17(52) proved crucial in allowing Oxford to narrowly secure a draw.

VARSIITY TRIATHLON

Decisive victory over Cambridge for Oxford

Oxford University Triathlon travelled to Eton Dorney in Windsor on 10th May for their annual Varsity Match. The Varsity Match overall result is decided based on the cumulative times from the first six athletes to finish from Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Oxford achieved a landslide victory, winning five of the six races. Oxford's Men's Blues took their win by 18m 46s. The Women's Blues were just as successful, winning their race by 22m 41s. Although the Men's IIs faced a loss by 2m 28s, the Women's IIs returned Oxford to glory, winning by 13m 17s. Both Mob matches saw an Oxford win.

UPCOMING

Summer Vllls

27th-30th May
The River Isis

Oucc vs Bristol

Friday 29th May
The Parks

Mixed Netball

Sunday 31st May
St Hilda's Netball Courts

Going to watch a Varsity or Cuppers match?

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

