Cherwell

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Free speech laws face first test after Cofnas chaos



- Over 1,000 protesters
- Just 26 attend Nathan Cofnas' talk
- Police investigate two assaults as Oriel's Head Porter is injured

MAIR ANDREWS and STANLEY ARLIDGE

Oxford saw its most disruptive student protest in years as hundreds of students took to the streets surrounding Oriel College to oppose Nathan Cofnas' talk last Tuesday.

After non-violent demonstrations, including music and speeches, protesters barricaded entrances to the College, broke into restricted areas on Oriel Street, and climbed the College's walls. Thames Valley Police (TVP) confirmed to *Cherwell* that they are investigating two assaults, including one on a police officer.

Following the protest, Lord Mendoza told Oriel students that the College's Head Porter "was injured protecting students and the college". Mendoza also said he was grateful to students and staff, saying Oriel's community "demonstrated resilience, responsibility, and care".

On Oriel's handling of the event, he said: "We did not ask for this event at our college. Our staff planned effectively to ensure we could protect the safety of our community. We also fulfilled our legal duty to secure lawful freedom of speech for all, both those at the event itself and those who wished to protest inside our college."

Anti-racism protesters blocked entry to the talk at all four entrances, resulting in a much reduced audience within Oriel: around 26 people attended the venue, which can host 110. The evening before the event, several tickets, including those of student journalists, were cancelled. *Cherwell* understands that a ballot was held to meet the venue's capacity.

The protest overwhelmed Oriel's security measures. Two days before the event, an Oriel JCR meeting discussing riel security and welfare arrangements suggested that around 300 to 500 external protesters were expected. The actual event was attended by over a thousand individuals, including demonstrators from across the country, free speech campaigners, and students. *Cherwell* understands that Oriel security had contacted TVP to help students access the College when the blockades began; however, police arrived at Oriel Square at 7pm, two hours after the protest began.

Oxfordshire Stand Up To Racism organiser Ian McKendrick told *Cherwell* prior to the protest that "the number of students that have got involved in organising the protest is unprecedented. We haven't seen anything like it since the Black Lives Matter movement".

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Year abroad financial support varies widely between colleges

ELEANOR HARRIS

A *Cherwell* investigation into funding available across 21 colleges for Year Abroad (YA) students has revealed that two have spent over £20,000 in the last three years to fund their students' placements, whilst ten have allocated no specific funding for YA activities. This study takes into account the experiences of 742 YA students since 2023.

The investigation considered college-based grants that are specifically for students undertaking a placement abroad as part of their YA. The data, obtained via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, does not include general travel grants, but for some colleges may include grants intended solely for language students that can be spent on related experiences (such as language summer schools over vacations), in addition to the YA.

Home students on their YA still receive their maintenance loan, usually increased from the amount they would receive in the UK, to help cover a higher cost of living. Most students also receive Turing funding, a grant from the government that partially reimburses living expenses. Many colleges informed *Cherwell* that existing hardship funding was available for all students facing financial difficulties, including those taking a YA.

Queen's and Christ Church offer the most support

Queen's College and Christ Church have offered the most financial support, providing £34,000 and £22,000, respectively, to YA students over the last three academic years (2023-2026).

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University calls for 'credible plan' on EU tuition cuts

JEREMY AZZOPARDI

The UK and EU have agreed to a reciprocal 'Youth Experience Scheme' at a joint summit in Brussels on 20th November. The initiative will allow 100,000 UK and 100,000 EU young people aged between 18 and 31 to work, study, au pair, volunteer, or travel in each other's territories for up to three years.

The deals signed on Friday, which also include agreements on agri-food trade and carbon markets, have been described as the UK's "biggest step towards deeper ties with the EU since Brexit".

A spokesperson for the University told *Cherwell*: "The University of Oxford welcomes efforts to strengthen the UK's relationship with the European Union. Any changes to tuition fee arrangements for EU students would need to be accompanied by a credible plan to meet the significant additional costs this could impose on many UK universities, particularly at a time when university finances are already under considerable pressure."

The Russell Group has projected that granting home tuition fee status for EU students could cost UK universities £570 million, although others, such as Professor Christoph Meyer at King's College London, have disputed this modelling.

The EU has lobbied for its nationals to pay the same tuition fees as UK domestic students, but the issue remains unresolved, with agreement postponed for six months. The UK has proposed an intermediate cut for EU nationals, reportedly as low as £12,000, without granting full home fee status. UK universities have generally opposed equalising tuition fees for EU students on financial grounds, while Oxford's Chancellor, Lord William Hague, has previously called for governments to "reach agreement" on the issue.

The number of EU students enrolling in undergraduate courses at UK universities has fallen sharply since Brexit, declining by 68% between 2020 and 2024 to the lowest level since 1994. The higher international fees, which can reach £66,580 for some courses at Oxford, have driven students away from the UK. The Oxford University Italian Society (OUIS) told *Cherwell*: "EU students now face visa costs and administration, the immigration health surcharge, international fees often several times those of home students, and limited access to student finance. These burdens fall most heavily on less affluent students, so the university risks losing some of the continent's most able students for purely financial reasons." Oxford's 2025 undergraduate admissions report noted that the proportion of students who applied from the EU decreased from 11.7% in 2020 to 6.5% in 2024.

The Telegraph has reported that the UK agreed to exempt EU students from the government's new international students levy. From 2028, universities will pay £925 annually per international student.

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University calls for 'credible plan' on EU tuition cuts

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The Oxford University German Society welcomes the youth agreement. Ludwig Illies, the society's Co-President, told *Cherwell*: "Focusing on young people is important because we form our identities and friendships in our youth. It is a great first step, of hopefully many, to make it easier for people of both countries to connect."

Under the youth mobility scheme, UK nationals will be able to stay in up to three EU Member States over a three-year period. The 100,000 cap for both inbound EU participants and outbound UK participants will be distributed between EU Member States on a per capita basis relative to population size.

However, the agreement may not be implemented until January 2030. OUIS told *Cherwell*: "The prospect of further delay is disappointing. Having already lost freedom of movement and years of Erasmus, this generation has watched successive cohorts graduate without opportunities their predecessors took for granted, and each postponement contributes to that sense of loss."

Oxford has benefitted directly from EU programmes, including Horizon Europe research funding. The UK is the largest beneficiary in the latest round of the European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grants, a sub-programme of Horizon Europe, with the University of Oxford the biggest overall winner, obtaining 14 grants out of 319 supported projects across Europe. By May 2025, Oxford had already received €42 million in total funding since the UK rejoined Horizon Europe in 2024.

The University is also set to join the EU's Erasmus+ programme from January 2027, although the future of the scheme remains uncertain amid EU-wide budget negotiations for the 2028 to 2034 cycle. Plans are underway for Oxford University students and staff to access funding for exchanges in the 2027-28 academic year.

The impact of the 'Youth Experience Scheme' on Oxford University undergraduates undertaking a year abroad is unclear. Students post-Brexit have faced numerous administrative barriers when applying for visas to study or work in the EU.

A British student from Christchurch who recently returned from a year abroad told *Cherwell*: "Acquiring a visa to study abroad came at a significant personal cost, and the application process was lengthy. Although I managed to study for an extended period of time in Estonia, my time in Spain was limited as obtaining a visa proved to be impossible".

British Modern Languages student Anna Sadowski, who studied in France and Italy, told *Cherwell*: "I was a teenager when the referendum reshaped what was possible for young Britons in Europe, and for young Europeans in Britain. Nevertheless, some of my closest connections are with students from across Europe, which to my mind is the most persuasive case for youth mobility."



'It has to be naughty': Cate Blanchett on creative risk at Sheldonian

POPPY LITTLER–JENNINGS

This week, acclaimed actor and producer Cate Blanchett marked her debut as the Cameron Mackintosh Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at the Sheldonian Theatre. In conversation with Jude Kelly, Master of St Catherine's College and renowned theatre director, Blanchett spoke about artistic freedom and catharsis, as well as the importance of consent in the age of artificial intelligence.

The discussion, entitled 'A Conversation on Creativity, Risk and AI', touched on Blanchett's upcoming projects, including the live-action remake of How to Train Your Dragon 2, a biographical film about American television personality Martha Stewart, and a production of Samuel Beckett's Happy Days.

After quickly shedding their academic dress – or "clobber" – Blanchett and Kelly began dissecting the former's "great love of rehearsal rooms", particularly the element of risk that presides over them. Blanchett spoke of the questions asked in that liminal space, the element of "frisson", and the "embrace of failure" that for her characterise those rooms. Highlighting the merit of experimentation and risk, she observed that deciding how an audience should interpret a work or a character constitutes "theatrical death".

Blanchett advised that we must embrace discomfort as a "bedfellow" and avoid the temptation to "wrap [audiences] in tissue". She recalled a moment in her early career where a director spent an hour and a half criticising her for "corpsing" – breaking character and laughing – during rehearsals. The impact, she said, was brutal but pivotal. She stressed the importance of difficult conversations and noted that "there is an art in conflict" that we are no longer taught.

When asked about the often unlikeable characters she has played, Blanchett emphasised the scarcity of truly three-dimensional female characters and the value of finding "fissures" in which unpleasant and unpalatable characteristics can slip.

Consent is Blanchett's issue with AI. It is "not human", she responded when asked about her "relationship" with the technology. "By and large, we are living in a rape culture", she remarked. The culture, she said, is one in which the modus operandi is "snatch and grab", an approach that extends to AI. Blanchett is among the first to own her digital likeness: she co-founded a tool, The Human Consent Registry, that allows people to protect their identity from AI.

On the subject of theatre specifically, she once again underlined an element of risk, describing it as a "bastard form" that "begs, borrows, and steals" from everything." "It's really f***ing naughty what we do. It has to be naughty."

With the caveat that she "hate[s] advice", Blanchett's closing words of wisdom to the audience were those of an actor she had previously worked with: if you are going to fail, you should "fail gloriously".

Image credit: Aawiosnaa, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

Reuters Institute announces fellowship for Palestinian journalists with Israeli passports

GAVRIELLA EPSTEIN-LIGHTMAN

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) at the University of Oxford has announced a new fellowship, in partnership with an Israeli non-profit, open to Palestinian journalists.

One Palestinian will be able to join the Reuters Institute for a term at its base in Oxford. It will run from April to June 2027. Applications, which are now open, close on 6th December.

The fellowship is sponsored by the New Israel Fund (NIF), a non-profit working towards "a just, safe and equal future for Israelis and Palestinians" by promoting partnerships between the two. The RISJ is a UK-based research hub which operates alongside the University's Department of Politics and International Relations.

The fellowship is one of a number of opportunities offered through the Reuters Institute's Journalist Fellowship Programme, a scheme that allows mid-career journalists to pause their day jobs and explore journalism in depth. Most Journalist Fellows are fully funded and receive a stipend to cover living and travel costs.

Anne Godlasky, Director of Journalist Programmes at the Reuters Institute, told *Cherwell*: "The Reuters Institute has welcomed journalists from around the world to its fellowship programme for more than 40 years – this includes a number of Palestinian journalists through our open-call applications." While that route remains available, she said that the New Israel Fund fellowship will provide "additional dedicated support for a Palestinian journalist at a time when these journalists are facing enormous threats, which the Reuters Institute has covered extensively".

Godlasky added: "We hope it provides a respite, a support network of global journalists, and the skills and planning needed to continue reporting the truth in the region and holding power to account."

When asked why the fellowship is available only to Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, Godlasky told *Cherwell*: "The Reuters Institute's Journalist Fellowship is supported by 16 different funders...]Some of those fellowships are tailored towards journalists from specific companies or countries, depending on the funder agreement, while others are directed towards those with particular interests."

She said that the decision to make the fellowship available to Palestinians with Israeli citizenship is "aligned with NIF's funding of Palestinian-led media initiatives and their broader work promoting freedom of expression and democracy. They think bringing a Palestinian journalist to Oxford could be particularly valuable when many Palestinian journalists face discrimination and harassment inside Israel."

The fellowship is set to include one-to-one mentoring and intimate sessions with experts on topics ranging from journalism ethics to business models, AI, and world affairs. Each fellow will work on a journalism-focused project important to them. "Perhaps most importantly," Godlasky added, "the fellow becomes an integral part of a cohort of roughly a dozen journalists from all around the world, forming a network that for many provides career-long support."

David Davidi-Brown, Chief Executive of the New Israel Fund UK, told *Cherwell* that the charity hoped the fellowship would help develop journalists who could contribute to "preserving freedom of expression and using their talents and platforms to advance equality".

He added: "Our aim with this fellowship is to offer a dedicated opportunity for Palestinian journalists to join reporters and editors from across the world on a prestigious programme of seminars, networking events, access to courses across the University of Oxford, and time focused on a project of their choosing."

Davidi-Brown said the fellowship could be "particularly valuable in the current climate when many Palestinian journalists face discrimination and harassment".

He added: "Some readers might be sceptical about the NIF as we are aware some people can be biased on our name. I hope readers will look at the work we support and be reassured that this fellowship sits within a broad range of activity, mostly led by Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel working together, that seeks to advance human rights, justice and equality."

Alongside the new fellowship, NIF UK seeks to address gaps in existing support for Palestinian journalists through partnerships with Palestinian media and journalism organisations. These include I'lam, an organisation which trains and supports Palestinian journalists within Israel. Sada for Social Change, a more recent NIF partner, focuses on developing Arabic-language digital journalism.

Free speech laws face first test after Cofnas chaos

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Thames Valley Police told *Cherwell*: "While a planned protest took place lawfully, police were called after some individuals prevented guests from attending and worked with university staff to prevent crime and maintain public order. The event proceeded, and attendees left safely."

In his talk, Cofnas spoke about DEI, which he labelled "the lie that underlies the ideology of modern-day leftism". He argued that DEI was the "ideology of taking the equality thesis seriously" and explained the "equality thesis" as the belief that "everyone has the same potential". The former Balliol student and Cambridge professor said "just in terms of overall brain size there are substantial differences, with Africans having the smallest and East Asians having the largest".

Cofnas was invited by the Oxon Universities' Reform Society (OURS), a newly registered student society. It is normal practice across the University that students can book rooms at their colleges for registered student societies' events. Authorisation does not consider the talk's content; however, the Proctors' Office or college could cancel the event later if a risk assessment concludes it is unsafe or unlawful.

Cofnas, a self-described "race realist" is most controversial for his role in publicising plagiarism allegations against the late Cambridge professor, Jason Arday. Outside the talk, speeches and chants sought to honour Arday's legacy. During the talk, Cofnas defended his allegations and, when asked to apologise to Arday's family, refused.

OURS has faced scrutiny following antisemitic writings by its president, Vittorio Cuneo-Flood. Regarding the allegations, Students for Reform President Jack Eccles told *Cherwell* that, even though the society is not affiliated with Reform UK, "I am very aware that this situation does damage the Reform UK brand. I will contact the group personally and... ensure they do not falsely claim to speak on behalf of the party".

The fallout from Oxford University's most scrutinised speaker event in years has instigated national debate about the limits of Freedom of Speech in Higher Education.

Defending the Act and Oriel for hosting the talk, free speech campaigner Professor Abhishek Saha told *Cherwell*: "It is exactly the kind of thing the Act was designed to protect." Defending the principle behind the Act, he said: "Freedom of speech means very little if it only protects ideas that nobody finds objectionable because those ideas do not need protection."

When asked about the distress to students due to the talk, he said: "I sympathise with students who find Cofnas' views deeply offensive or distressing, and universities must protect those students from unlawful discrimination, harassment, threats to safety. But those students do not have a right to be protected from ideas they find deeply offensive."

Saha continued: "The fundamental purpose of a university is the pursuit of truth and knowledge. That requires protecting the freedom of people to advance controversial, unpopular opinions, regardless of claims of distress or threats of boycott". Later, he added that "if we are automatically censoring some ideas, saying that they're too bad or too false or too dangerous. That's not how we arrive at truth and knowledge".

Alternatively, others have argued the event exposes the weaknesses of free speech legislation. Speaking to *Cherwell* before the event, Jolyon Maugham KC, Good Law Project Director, said: "We should not be in a world where a truth that the US Declaration of Independence declared to be "self-evident", that all men are created equal, is open for debate."

Maugham blamed the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, which Oriel has repeatedly cited as the legislation binding them to host the talk. The Act was introduced by the former Conservative government but rolled out by former Labour Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, following a review last year. It imposes obligations on universities and colleges to protect the freedom of speech of visiting speakers, enforced by potential financial penalties.

"The Act needs to be repealed," Maugham told *Cherwell*. "It really is that simple. What we are seeing is the intended use of the act. [Bridget Phillipson] has thrown open to the far right the door for speakers to come and humiliate black people." He added that "the far right is coming for all of us. It's not going to stop with black people, as it didn't stop with trans people".

In the lead-up to the event, Mendoza and representatives from the Proctors' Office called the event a "test case" for conflicting free speech and antidiscrimination legislation. Maugham told *Cherwell* that the Good Law Project is considering using the event to "test the limits of the new legislation" in court. "We're interested in whether a test case might be brought against Oriel College for deciding to host this event in the way in which it did."

Image credit: Stanley Smith with permisssion.



New teaching centre making use of Pitt Rivers and Ashmolean artefacts opens

KIERA O'CARROLL

Oxford's newly opened object museum brings together over one million objects from Oxford University's four museums. The Collections Teaching and Research Centre (CTRC) now brings together objects from the Ashmolean Museum, History of Science Museum, Museum of Natural History and Pitt Rivers Museum.

It aims to facilitate object-based teaching and research visits. Dr Sumner Braund, acting head of research, told *Cherwell*: "My ambition is for students to start thinking of museum collections like libraries.

"These are historic objects that are critical to your research. You should be using them in your essays. You can use them as historic sources. Start using the collections as you would a book in the Bodleian".

The CTRC is a resource for staff, researchers, and students within and beyond Oxford. It is a part of the University's Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) division, and most of the CTRC's objects are from the History of Science Museum. It is located in Reuben College beneath the Radcliffe Science Library.

Rather than centralising collections, the team behind the project hopes it will make Oxford's unique collections accessible in one space. Claire Parris, PR Manager for GLAM, told *Cherwell*: "We encourage professors across every discipline, even medicine, for anatomy, to come visit with their students." The gallery is only a small percentage of the full scale of the collection, but it has collected almost all of the HSM's collection from off-site storage in Oxfordshire.

Extending over two floors, the entrance to the CTRC is decorated with purposefully unlabelled and digitised photos of some of its objects. There are 3 different teaching rooms, capable of hosting up to 96 people when their walls are retracted to form one room. Diverse materials and techniques are incorporated in the design so students can closely engage with the objects they are studying, including plastic foam, movable tables, and cameras with multiple angles that can be mobilised to attend each item.

The room was recently used for a course on citizenship where academics and staff could bring together Bodleian material and History of Science Museum material on the same desk. Braund told *Cherwell*: "Normally that would never have happened. You couldn't necessarily bring collections from different institutions into one space but having a centralised storage and a teaching space like this makes it actually possible. Students interact with the objects and the texts which contextualise them."

The CTRC operates an open-storage technique, "rather than having a collection boxed, where appropriate, we have them free on the shelf," Braund explained. A great wall of antlers hangs near trays of some of the 1.2 million British insects from the Natural History Museum. "Even with the best intentions in the world you're only ever able to portray in a gallery a small percentage," Braund told *Cherwell*. "Making your storage an active space of your museum expands the scope of research, public engagement and visits". Objects are usually quarantined for three months upon arrival, and some are locked in a giant deep freezer at -30 degrees Celsius for two weeks.

A digitisation studio is one of the CTRC's key features. Currently working on project 'DiSSCo' to digitise British insects, they use a five-angle camera to scan butterflies less invasively. Describing the loss of biodiversity as a direct "result of the current climate crisis", Braund told *Cherwell* that "being able to research biodiversity in historic periods could facilitate future thinking". Their dedicated conservation laboratory with a full-time staff member collaborates with the studio.

Pre-arranged tours are offered by the CTRC for objects found on the University Museums online databases. Braund told *Cherwell*: "It's not as frictionless as pulling a book off the shelf of the Bodleian but you are absolutely welcome to come look at an object up close. We'll train you in how to handle it properly and you can study and include it in your work." The CTRC has a particular interest in supporting students.

It is also home to the beloved brown bear from the Natural History Museum. Enjoying its retirement from public life, conservators have "very lovingly" restored its fur in places where it had lost it to the public affection of over one million visitors in eight years. The bear guards the entrance, welcoming future visitors of the CTRC.

Image credit: University of Oxford, with permission.



Trans Requiem world premieres in Somerville chapel

KIERA O'CARROLL

Oxford saw its very own Trans Requiem World Premier, Saturday 21st of November. Oxford-based composer Barnabas Sharp told *Cherwell*: "It was time for a requiem to be written for the trans+ community. Their struggles, their mourning and their hope brought into music". A graduate musician and regular performer, they have composed a piece combining classical music and the trans experience. Sharp's 'Trans Requiem: a Pseudo-Sacred Cantata' illustrates what it is like to be trans, non-binary, or gender diverse in the current political climate.

Written entirely by themselves to avoid any religious affiliation, the requiem follows a new structure, style and text. Sharp told *Cherwell* that they aimed to "comfort and lift the spirits for those it was composed for, inform our allies and the unaware masses how much our community has been suffering by violence and death". The organisers behind the event, RETUNE Project, also told *Cherwell*: "We hope trans+ audiences feel seen and represented by this piece, while cis audiences gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing trans+ people in the UK currently. Above all, we hope it demonstrates the power of music to create a sense of belonging."

Founded in 2023, the charity RETUNE produces concerts and resources to create a space for systemically marginalised musicians. The Operations Lead of RETUNE, Erin Townsend, told *Cherwell*: "The trans+ community is close to our hearts, particularly in a time when the media so often overlooks the humanity of trans people... There is no doubt that trans people have just as much of a place in classical music as anyone else."

Speaking to *Cherwell*, the conductor Esme Harper said: "Given the levels of hate and disinformation that our community continues to face, I believe music can be a particularly powerful medium through which to bring these issues to the fore." Soprano soloist Ella Taylor's incredible voice was a poignant part of the performance. The Cantata combined themes of loss, joy, grief and hope, heavily inspired by Brianna Ghey's murder in 2023.

The audience's reaction was profoundly positive, with audience members emotional in sombre moments as the music grew heavy. Reprogrammed for the day after Trans Remembrance Day, it followed a vigil on 20th of November organised by Oxford University LGBTQ+ Society and Oxford for Trans Rights. About 30 people assembled in Radcliffe Square. A member in attendance told *Cherwell*: "It was dark, and each person was given an electrical light, balancing it in their hands. People gathered around giving personal accounts of their experience, calling out to others to reach out in times of need, sharing their love and their grief.

"On a day like Trans Day of Remembrance, we remember those that are no longer with us, share in the joy and struggle of today and look forward to all that we have ahead. Today is not easy, tomorrow might not be, but it is certain, and we are continuously reminded that we cannot do it alone."

The Oxford LGBTQ+ society will take part in a march and vigil against gendered violence as trans people continue to be among the most targeted groups facing gender-based hate crimes. The gathering 'Take Back the Night' will happen on Saturday 28th November.

Image credit: Kiera O'Carroll, with permission.



Out with the Greggs, in with the Gail's

OSKAR DOEPKE

Greggs on Cornmarket Street is set to close later this month, according to a sign posted on its storefront. The sign reads: "Sorry, we're closing on Monday 30th November."

When asked about the shop's closure, a Greggs spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "As part of our ongoing work to grow and diversify the Greggs estate, new and improved shops open as older shops close, including a new shop on Cowley Road in Oxford earlier in the month."

Greggs, a bakery and fast food chain known for its sausage rolls, opened its Cornmarket location in 2020. At the time, it was one of the largest Greggs in the country, with 66 seats upstairs. A regional manager had told Oxford Mail the company expected "guaranteed plenty of footfall here in Cornmarket".

According to the Oxford Mail, the Cornmarket location is closing as Greggs "couldn't reach an agreement with the landlord". Greggs did not confirm to *Cherwell* whether it would reopen a location in Oxford's city centre.

After the shop closes in November, the nearest Greggs to Cornmarket will be at Oxford rail station. The chain also has locations on London Road in Headington and in Templars Square in Cowley.

In response to the shop's closing, a student at Pembroke College told *Cherwell*: "I'm shocked and saddened it's closing. It always reminded me of home and will be sad to see it go. I'm very hopeful it will reopen soon."

This shop's closure comes as Greggs submitted more than 30 pages of evidence, along with an open letter, to have the word 'Festive Bake' included in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). In the letter, Greggs writes that the OED should "find a place for the Festive Bake" as "the nation has been talking about it" for 17 years, adding that the dictionary has already "let in the Big Mac" and "even the pumpkin spice latte" too. The Festive Bake is defined as "a popular seasonal pastry typically containing chicken and festive ingredients".

Meanwhile, Gail's – another bakery – has announced plans to open a shop in Westgate. The chain currently has locations in Jericho and Summertown.

Another student told *Cherwell*: "For me, Gregg's was, quite literally, a taste of home and in a city where I often feel homesick and overburdened with work." The student added: "Now with Gail's opening up in Westgate, it feels like salt has been rubbed in the wound. I'll tell you one thing: I won't be hailing Gail's."

NEWS SHORTS

Oxford tops rankings, on paper

A new Russell Group ranking has named Oxford in the top ten cities for plant-based menus in the UK. The leaderboard, created by Forward Food, evaluated the physical menus across 24 Russell Group universities, evaluating factors such as visibility, menu placement, descriptions, promotion, and pricing. *Cherwell* understands that college dining was not included in the survey and recommends that the Forward Food editors enjoy Keble College's 'Veggie Monday' sausages to re-evaluate the rankings.

Voi, oh Voi

For our readers from beyond Surrey, Lime bikes have disappeared from Oxford. This follows Oxfordshire Council's new 'micromobility contract' which has handled hire bikes and e-scooters to the company's competitor, Voi. The change has been met with disgruntlement from *Cherwell*'s editor, whose relationship with Voi soured after the app failed. Fortunately, he still made it to the end-of-term dinner, but the lemon cheesecake reflected the mood: sour.

Cummings is coming to town

On Thursday 26th November, Dominic Cummings, former Downing Street politician, will hold a Q&A at Oriel College, along with Stephen Hsu, physicist and tech founder. They will also screen the documentary 'Machine God', which explores the race to build artificial superintelligence and features interviews with AI developers, safety developers, and accelerationists. *Cherwell*'s advice: stay at home, protect your ears, and save time.

CROSS CAMPUS

Brie–ch of security

Christ's College, Cambridge, has increased security measures after a non-student visitor 'broke in' to the College. The culprit caused minor disruption, leaving behind a block of Cathedral City cheese, a bottle of pink lemonade, and a broken plate in an accommodation staircase. The College's main gate is now locked between 8pm and 7am to keep out any mischevious and mysterious visitors. *Cherwell* understands that students feel "secure" knowing that visitors to the University are taken seriously at the other place.

Coke–blocked and can–celled

Trinity College Dublin has switched off its Coca-Cola vending machines to make way for replacements. The machines had drawn criticism from the college's Students' Union, as Coca-Cola is listed by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement as "implicated in Israeli war crimes". It is not yet known what the replacements will stock, or whether students will cope with the walk to the nearest Lidl.

Oxford professors call for apology regarding Britain's role in Palestine

MAIR ANDREWS

Two Oxford professors behind the Britain Owes Palestine campaign have renewed their calls for a government apology for Britain's involvement in the partition of Palestine.

At a talk hosted by Oxford Palestine Solidarity Campaign (OPSC) in Trinity College last week, the academics argued that Britain acted "unlawfully" during its rule of Palestine from 1917 to 1948. They suggested that the roots of the current conflict come from these actions.

The calls come weeks after Prime Minister Andy Burnham promised to listen to calls for a "formal apology on behalf of the British state" for their involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. In a column for *The Guardian* during Black History Month, the Prime Minister wrote that "Facing a changing world together requires us to stand on firm foundations. To meet those challenges of the future, we need to face up to the past."

In light of these discussions of Britain's colonial legacy, the professors behind Britain Owes Palestine are calling for a similar exploration of responsibility for the Palestinian problem, stating that "the principle of acknowledging past wrongs should not be applied selectively" and we should not "weigh one history against another".

Professor Avi Shlaim, Emeritus Professor of International Relations, and Professor Dawn Chatty, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and Forced Migration, co-authored the petition, backed by 45 crossbench MPs and public figures including historian William Dalrymple, singer Paloma Faith, and comedy actor Alexei Sayle. The petition was prepared by leading barristers, Ben Emmerson KC and Danny Friedman KC.

In a statement to *Cherwell*, Professor Shlaim said that they renewed the calls "for two reasons: an apology is long overdue, and the Palestinians deserve no less."

Last year's 400-page legal petition claimed that there is "incontrovertible evidence" that the UK breached international law when it controlled Palestine from 1917–1948. It claims that "the roots of today's genocide in Palestine" lie in Britain's actions prior to the formation of Israel in 1948. The petition documents abuses such as torture, arbitrary detention, extra-judicial killings and the mass demolition of homes during the period in which Britain controlled Palestine.

It also asks the Government to consider evidence, search for records not yet released into the National Archives, and respond fully and publicly.

Regarding what these "meaningful reparations" for Palestine would include, Shlaim told *Cherwell* he called for changes such as "decolonising the school curriculum and educating the public about Britain's historic role in the dispossession and displacement of the Palestinians from their homeland". The most meaningful reparation, he added, "would be diplomatic support for the Palestinians today in their struggle for independence".

The inclusion of British involvement in Palestine within British school curricula is a crucial demand from OPSC. In a statement to *Cherwell*, they said: "In schools, children need to learn the reality of the brutality of the British Mandate in Palestine, and the terrible role that Britain has played in depriving the Palestinians of their homeland."

Neither Burnham nor Britain Owes Palestine agree with calls for financial recompense.

The renewed calls came during a panel at Trinity last week marking the 109th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration was a public statement in support of a Jewish national home in Palestine and served as the foundation for the state of Israel. The letter, written by Balfour while he was Foreign Secretary, was addressed to the Jewish community leader Lord Rothschild and stipulated that nothing should be done "which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

Many Israelis regard it as a historic step on the road to statehood in 1948, while others claim that it laid the foundations for future conflict.

In a joint statement to *Cherwell*, Ahmed Murad, Chair of OPSC, and Mark Sandels, Admin Secretary for OPSC, criticised ongoing British involvement in Gaza: "The British Government has been an active partner in helping Israel during its genocidal war on Gaza through arms sales to and intelligence sharing with Israel."

Regarding the British action in Palestine currently, Shlaim told *Cherwell* that he is "encouraged" by the UK government's efforts in "resetting [Palestine's] relationship with Israel".

Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband has imposed a ban on settlement goods and announced other measures to actively counter the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Shlaim described the Foreign Secretary as showing "real moral courage" in his "critique of Israeli policy." Though he hopes that the government will "apply more pressure on Israel", they have "already moved from words to action."

"Confronting the past is in itself an important step forward," he told *Cherwell*. "Confronting the past, warts and all, is a sign of [sic] maturity in a society. Reckoning with the truth is not a sign of weakness but of strength."

The Britain Owes Palestine petition is yet to receive a response from the government.

Cherwell has contacted the Home Office for comment.

Image credit: Kiera O'Carroll for Cherwell.



Oxford researchers support new multi-million-pound AI dementia research hub

ANYA TINDALL

Researchers from the University of Oxford are involved in a new £20 million research hub using artificial intelligence to transform dementia prevention and diagnosis. Led by the University of Exeter, the six-year BRAINIAC Hub includes eleven universities and ten NHS sites.

Dementia currently affects an estimated 982,000 people in the UK, with a projected rise to 1.4 million by 2040. At the moment, dementia care costs the UK £42.5 billion per year and, according to a projection from the Alzheimer's Society, this could double to £90.6 billion by 2040.

The research aims to increase assessment and diagnosis rates by over 30% by identifying those at increased risk earlier. It will use specialist AI which can combine brain imaging, genetics, blood biomarkers, health records, and digital cognitive tests to build evidence for their potential use in NHS settings. These tools will be piloted in ten new clinics, involving more than 1,700 patients. Assessments will be able to be completed remotely by people to increase the project's potential reach.

NHS partners, charities, and industry are providing the project with £10 million in funding, with another £10 million donated by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

Oxford has been a key area in dementia research for several years, with the Oxford Brain Health Clinic founded in 2020. MRI scans, neuropsychological assessments, clinical questionnaires, and interviews are used to identify and diagnose patients with earlier, less advanced forms of dementia. Vanessa Raymont, director of Dementia Platform UK, Associate Professor at Oxford, and one of the BRAINIAC Hub researchers, told *Cherwell*: "Different types of tests are needed to pick people up with minor memory problems, because they can be so subtle.

"Oxford is one of the sites for BRAINIAC that is doing this kind of work already, and that's why our input is important, because BRAINIAC's vision is to refine the test even more – at existing brain health sites and new ones."

According to Raymont, AI can model a wider data set, including age, ethnicity, and family medical history, "that could actually give you a better indicator of who's at risk than just a memory test". BRAINIAC researchers hope to be able to identify and treat people at risk of dementia "very early on... [who] haven't developed symptoms yet".

Raymont hopes that Oxford's involvement can complement the research undertaken by the national research Dementia Platform UK. BRAINIAC's clinics are both in specifically "academic sites", like Oxford, and areas more representative of the general UK population. This is in an attempt to ensure a range of data from varied populations, and AI is a useful tool in this process, helping to resolve the inevitable "deficits in the data".

Professor David Llewellyn, Director of the BRAINIAC Hub and academic at the University of Exeter, told *Cherwell* that the project is designed to "make it easier to connect people with suitable clinical trials, helping researchers evaluate new treatments more efficiently".

"People living with dementia and carers will help design the tools alongside clinicians, engineers and data scientists," he explained. "Their involvement is essential if we are to create technology that is useful, understandable and practical in everyday care."

Regarding concern over whether AI, still a developing tool, is yet reliable enough for use in medicine, Llewellyn told *Cherwell*: "To earn a place in clinical care, these tools must be trustworthy. We need to establish how well they work for different people, make their uncertainty clear, protect privacy and demonstrate that they improve care."

The first clinics are expected to open in 2029. Llewellyn hopes that their research will make a tangible difference to patients: "For me, the most exciting possibility is giving people more time: less time waiting for answers, earlier access to support, and ultimately more years of good brain health. The success of BRAINIAC should be judged by the difference it makes to patients and families."

Image credit: Allyox, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



Proposal for Europe's largest solar farm in Oxford blocked by UK government

JEREMY AZZOPARDI

The government has blocked plans to build Europe's largest solar farm in the outskirts of Oxford. As a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) requiring government approval, the £800 million proposal in Botley West was rejected by Baroness Margaret Curran, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.

Spanning more than 2,000 acres, Botley West Solar Farm would have generated 840MW of clean energy for 330,000 homes, equivalent to roughly 1.5% of the government's solar generation capacity target by 2030. Photovolt Development Partners (PVDP) has previously claimed Botley West's capacity would be sufficient to power all homes in Oxfordshire and upgrade what is "currently one of the most carbon-intensive [grids] in the country".

The Decision cites concerns about "substantial harm to the Green Belt", adverse effects to designated assets of cultural heritage, visual pollution, and impacts on nearby London Oxford Airport that would pose an "unacceptable risk to public safety".

Baroness Curran's Decision highlights the proposed site's proximity to Blenheim Palace, a World Heritage Site, the Cotswold National Landscape, and other Listed Buildings, noting that the applicant, PVDP, did not conduct their assessments in sufficient detail "proportionate to the importance of the heritage assets".

Reacting to the government's Decision, John Orme, from local campaign group Stop Botley West, told *Cherwell*: "The Botley West proposal was wrong in scale, location, governance and process. Solar panels belong on roofs, and not on productive arable land." A survey of 1,442 local residents commissioned by the campaign found that 90.8% were opposed to the construction plans."

Orme added: "We believe there is a clear need for national guidelines on the style and location of renewable projects, so that speculative, misguided and poorly-judged applications such as Botley West are rooted out at the start of the planning process." Stop Botley West has urged the government to instead use "industrial and brownfield sites to house large-scale solar arrays".

Local farmers have also highlighted potential negative impacts on food production. These claims have previously been dismissed by Professor of Energy and Climate Policy Nick Eyre at the University of Oxford's Environmental Change Institute as "hugely exaggerated", who has also added that Oxfordshire has too few homes to construct the necessary number of roof solar panels.

Mark Owen-Lloyd, Director of PVDP, told *Cherwell*: "We are extremely disappointed by the decision to refuse development consent for Botley West Solar Farm. We continue to believe that there is a compelling case for Botley West, based on the project's merits and its potential to deliver significant benefits for Oxfordshire, while contributing to the UK's energy security and clean energy ambitions."

Stop Botley West, the community volunteer group that led public and legal opposition to PVDP's Botley West project, continues to advocate for changes to the UK's planning system. When asked about the implications of the government's decision in relation to wider plans for an "Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor", Orme told *Cherwell*: "One of the major limitations of the NSIP planning process is that each application is considered in isolation, rather than consider the cumulative impact of development applications. We would like to see that the important role of local authorities and their communities is emphasised."

Plans for a £900 million data centre funded by Exeter College, located near Oxford Parkway station in Kidlington, have also sparked controversy. Exeter was in "advanced negotiations" with PVDP to power its data centre, titled EXOq, using a maximum of 5% of Botley West Solar Farm's energy output. Cherwell District Council has yet to decide whether to grant permission for the EXOq data centre.

Year abroad financial support varies widely between colleges

Continued from Page 1

Queen's has the fourth-largest endowment per capita of the student population, with a total endowment of approximately £410 million at the end of the 2024-2025 academic year. The college's YA grants are derived from the Laming Fund, which support costs of "up to a maximum of £3,000 during the course of their degree" per pupil that are related to "study abroad" or "linguistic immersion overseas". The grant is given on the condition that the placement's goal is to help the recipient improve their language skills. In a comment to *Cherwell*, Queen's noted that the fund is not means-tested, and that "all students can access the funding regardless of other funding or income they are receiving".

Christ Church, which had an endowment of around £816 million in the same academic year and the second-highest college endowment per capita, specifies that students may be eligible for up to £700 but does not give the eligibility criteria. *Cherwell* has found that 80% of the college's YA students over the last three years were awarded funding, with all 17 students in 2025-26 receiving the full £700. However, in 2024-25, £1,000 funding was offered to 2 of the 10 students undertaking the YA (20%), whilst in the preceding academic year, £9100 was offered to 17 out of 18 YA students (94%).

Wealthier colleges offer more specific Year Abroad funding

Alongside the significant funding opportunities at Queen's and Christ Church, both in the top five colleges for endowment per capita of the student population, further examples suggest students at some of the colleges with the largest endowments are best placed to afford the costs of a year abroad, a trend that continues across the colleges analysed.

Between 2023 and 2026, Merton College gave £16,900 to YA students. In the year ended July 2025, Merton had the fifth-largest endowment per student, at approximately £674,000. Its endowment totalled around £388 million.

Lady Margaret Hall offered £14,600, and Lincoln College gave £10,385.15. Jesus College's funding totalled £10,078.

Whilst Merton has one of the largest endowments by capita among Oxford colleges, LMH, Lincoln, St Peter's, and Jesus offered more in YA financial support than some colleges with greater endowments per student, such as New College and Brasenose College.

Five of the colleges investigated have awarded YA grants that totalled less than £10,000 over the last three years. The remaining ten colleges have offered no YA-related financial support. Some colleges may offset a lack of financial support by offering subsidies through hardship bursaries or more general travel grants that, at certain colleges, can be used for YA students.

60% of colleges that offered no financial support specifically for the YA fell in the bottom half of college endowment amounts per capita for July 2025. In general, the wealthiest colleges offer the most financial support to YA students, and the poorest colleges tend to offer the least. However, this trend is weaker when examining middle-income colleges.

A prominent outlier was St John's College, which had an endowment of over £1 million per student in 2025, ranking third-highest in endowment per student, yet is among the colleges to offer no funding specifically allocated for Year Abroad students. Responding to the findings, St John's told *Cherwell* that Year Abroad students experiencing financial hardship could also apply to the college's Academic Support Fund and Academic Assistance Fund, which "act as secondary sources of funding should students need it", and pointed out that the University charges colleges for part of the cost of central University funding.

Funding per student

There is notable variation in the selectivity of funding allocation for a college's YA students, with many colleges restricting funding either to successful applicants to competitive bursaries, or to a small number of eligible students.

In 2025-26, 236 students undertook the YA out of 20 colleges in the study. This does not include Corpus Christi, due to insufficient information. Approximately 30% of these students received funding.

YA students at Christ Church, Lincoln, and LMH can expect to receive funding. All of their students benefited from some form of YA-related financial support in the last academic year. Last year, Christ Church spent £11,900 on 17 year abroad students, each receiving £700. In the same year, the 9 YA students at Lincoln received a total of £4,300, averaging £478 per student. The highest individual award was £500. At LMH, £3,850 was awarded to all 11 YA students, with individual grants capped at £350.

Conversely, the grants and bursaries offered by the remaining colleges (Brasenose, Jesus, Merton, New, Oriel, Queen's, St Peter's) tend to be based on a competitive application process or have specific eligibility criteria.

At Jesus, funding was restricted to the college's Phil Carey bursary (worth £3,026 per year) and the Tarling Scholarship (worth £1,000), with only one grant of each available. The latter is only available for students studying Law with Law Studies in Europe. This means that whilst Jesus College offered individual students more than other colleges, far fewer students received it, and most students at Jesus took a YA without receiving any additional funding.

The amount of funding distributed by Jesus has fluctuated over the last three years. Whilst Jesus offered £4,026 to 2 of the 7 students undertaking a YA last year, in 2024-25, Jesus did not offer the Tarling Scholarship and therefore offered £3,026 to only 1 YA student out of 9. In a comment, Jesus College told *Cherwell* that in 2025-2026, only two students met the eligibility criteria for a Year Abroad bursary, whilst in 2024-2025, no students met the eligibility criteria for the Tarling Scholarship. Jesus told *Cherwell* that both its funding opportunities are means-tested based on household income. This contrasts with Queen's Laming Fund, which all YA students are able to apply to regardless of household income.

Although a student may attend a college with a greater budget for YA students, the funding given may change drastically year on year. Students may find themselves competing with their peers for limited funds that have a huge impact on their YA experience. In addition, the students' eligibility for further YA support may vary significantly based on their college.

Student experiences

The YA can be financially difficult for many, and the financial support each student is entitled to may shape the activities they choose to do, or where they choose to live.

According to listings online, a room in Paris or Madrid including utilities typically costs upwards of €700 (just under £600). For studios, this can rise to over €1,000 (£830), and €2,000 (£1670) for more spacious flats.

Finances can become more difficult when transport and food costs are taken into account. A city-wide travel pass, for instance, which is vital for commuting, costs over €90 (£75) in Paris and €71 (£60) in Munich per month.

Although students undertake years abroad across the world, many of the study exchange placements, in particular those offered by Oxford, and internship placements are in major Western European cities, which tend to have a high cost of living.

Possible placements for students undertaking a YA include teaching, paid or unpaid internships, other forms of work (such as an Au Pair or Workaway placement), and study exchange programmes. Many students choose to gain experience in a career area they are interested in pursuing after graduating by carrying out unpaid internships – but such activities depend on funding opportunities.

When asked about YA funding, a languages student at a college without specific YA grants told *Cherwell* that a lack of funding opportunities "really impacts the student experience… It meant that I felt the need to work during my year abroad to afford to stay abroad. And in the working sphere, it was really hard to find a paid internship.

"If I'd had more money, I would have been able to do a charity internship, or do an internship in Belgium [where internships are legally non-remunerated]."

She also added that, despite a very poor internship experience in which she worked in "bad conditions", she chose to continue due to having no financial safety net.

The student was being paid around €730 a month (£600) for a 35-hour working week. Her accommodation, which she described as "one of the cheaper options", cost €900 a month (£750). If she were a student at Christ Church, the college's YA bursary would have been worth more than her monthly salary, and would have covered almost a month of her rent.

Another student at a college without YA grants told *Cherwell* that worries about finances also significantly impacted her plans for her time abroad: "The reason why I chose the university I'm at is because the tuition fees are waived for every student... Money is a major concern with where I'm choosing for my year abroad and what activities I'm choosing."

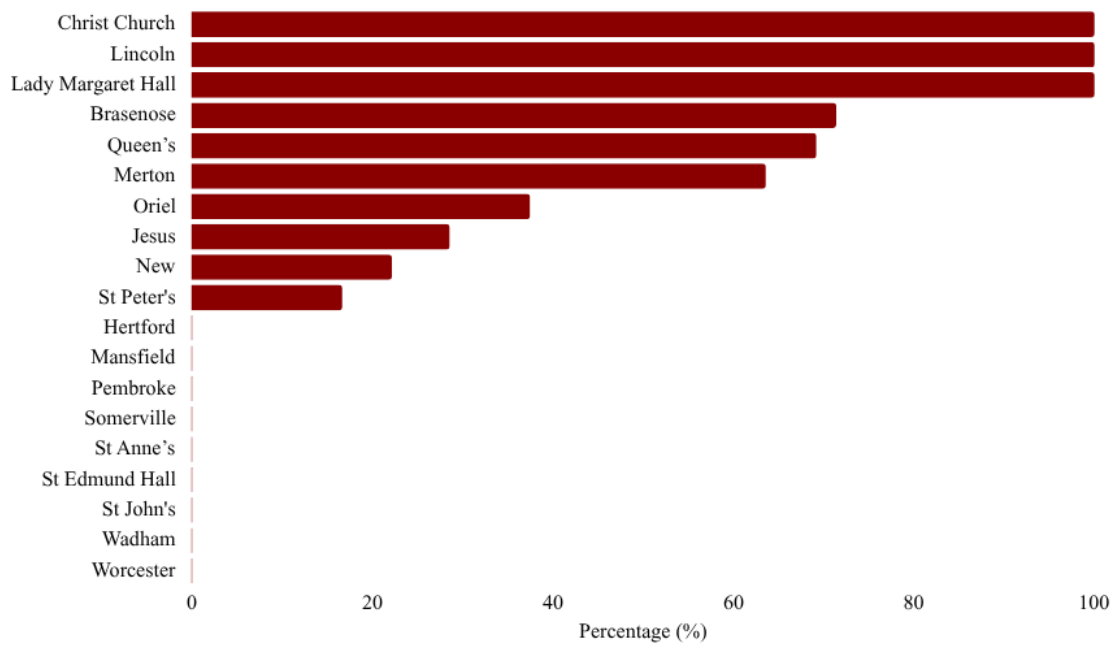
She added: "Being at Oxford is a massive privilege, but I also would like to highlight that there is a massive difference depending on the college that you're at. Being at a college with a bursary would mean I could undertake unpaid internships.

"If there were equitable opportunities for students across colleges, it would massively impact the way I would have viewed my year abroad."

Graph credit: Ned Remington for Cherwell.

Percentage of year abroad (YA) students obtaining a form of specific college YA funding, 2025-2026

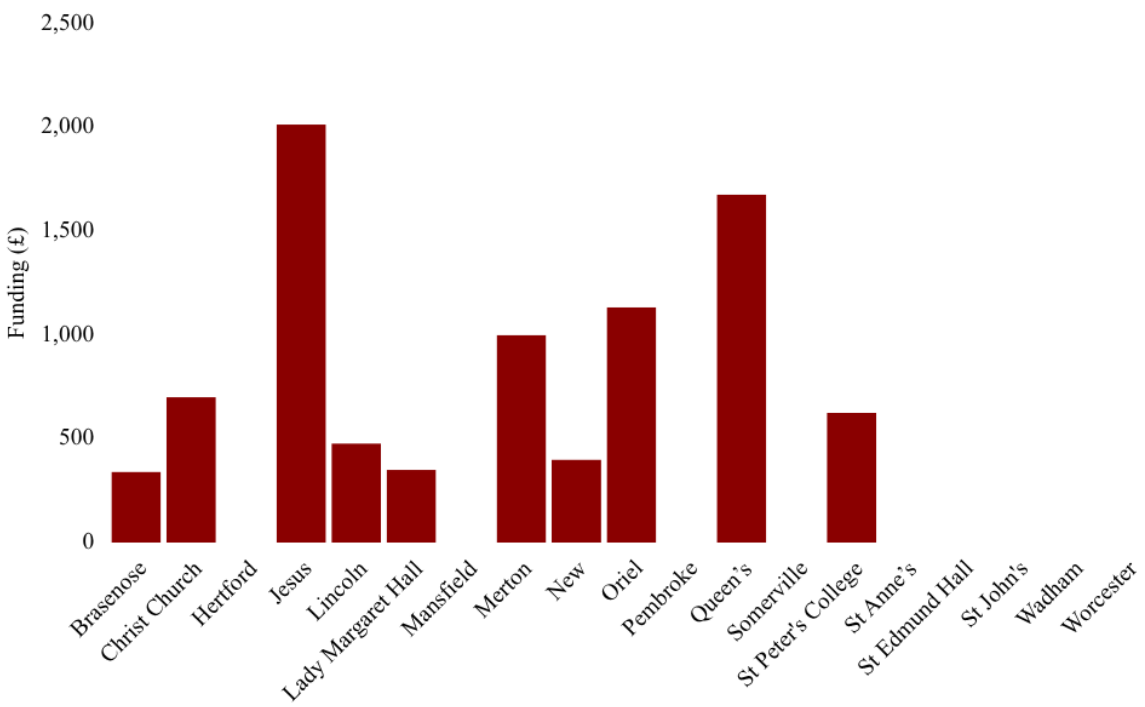
*Based on data obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests**



Cherwell was unable to obtain an exact number of students taking the year abroad for Corpus Christi and Exeter College in the 2025-2026 academic year, and therefore the data for these colleges has been excluded.

Average specific college funding offered per student for year abroad (YA) programmes, 2025-26

*Based on data obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests**



Cherwell was unable to obtain an exact number of students taking the year abroad for Corpus Christi and Exeter College in the 2025-2026 academic year, and therefore the data for these colleges has been excluded.

OPINION

We are focusing on the wrong part of higher education

KATERYNA SAVIENKOVA

The importance of higher education cannot be underestimated. Parents across the world start saving money years in advance to send their children to university, putting pressure on them to achieve good grades in school. They spend hours helping with homework, or years paying tutors, to get their children to succeed academically. All of that effort is done for one goal – to hopefully hand over their dear child, a project 18 years in the making, to an institution that will determine the rest of their life. But did we ever stop to think about what kinds of people these institutions will produce?

Clearly, there is a hierarchy of institutions, both domestic and international. Domestic hierarchies will vary from country to country, but the international system has a more or less recognised structure. Eight of the top ten universities in the 2026 QS World University Rankings – which assess research and discovery, learning experience, employability, global engagement, and sustainability – are in the UK or US. Nine of the top ten teach primarily in English.

In these findings, the legacy of the British Empire is difficult to ignore. Half of the 'best' universities are located in former colonies of the British Empire, whilst the other half, with the exception of Switzerland, are in Britain. What differs is what these two prevailing countries focus on with their higher education, which translates into producing different kinds of people.

It is hard to deny the influence of the 'American Dream' on education in the US – American education is very representative of ideas of freedom, opportunity, and rewarded hard work. Academically, students can choose double majors and triple minors, study electives on Taylor Swift, and adjust their schedules for full-time employment or sports commitments. They can do whatever they want!

But American higher education isn't just academia – extracurricular activities, sports, clubs, religion, and culture are all embedded in it. You can choose to ignore this world, but it is so interconnected with university life that it's difficult to draw a line between the two. America also loves to profit from culture; in the world of education, this can become merchandise, stickers, sponsored events, or just a recognition of belonging among strangers. Being in a group project for an introductory class that feels completely unnecessary also creates culture, connecting students who may never have otherwise met.

What kind of person will come out of such an institution, having had so much leeway, support, social connections, and culture which were not sought out but presented ready to consume? After four years of American higher education, you leave with little theory, a fair amount of applicable knowledge, some hands-on experience, and, crucially, a confidence that the world is your oyster. There is something about the safe, busy, and intertwined environment of the American university that makes you believe that the world is good – and that you are good for the world.

It would be hard to argue that after graduating from a prestigious British university one wouldn't feel ready for the world. But that readiness comes from a different place than in the US, and creates a different kind of person. The ethos of Oxford has been, in my experience, 'just do it', but not in the Nike way; rather, in a way that tells students to take initiative using the resources that are given; it is something more like: "We have given you resources, now just do it by yourself."

Whilst this rigorous approach makes a lot of sense academically, its translation to other aspects of university life is questionable. Academia defines Oxford's culture – the social activities are conferences, the informal activities are trips to pubs. These things are not ineffective, but they do not produce the sense of seamless integration that American university culture does, which makes the lives of scared first-year students much easier and more exciting.

It is hard to come to a conclusion about Oxford, after only a couple of months of experiencing it, but it seems that someone listening to a Latin graduation speech in the 17th-century Sheldonian Theatre will be deeply different from someone walking across a stage at any US university. At the very least, the Oxford graduate will know his university's reputation precedes him. Will he feel a sense of community, though?

I am not to judge whether the product of the American system is better or worse than its British counterpart. Comparing the two, however, shows how the meaning different societies give to higher education is translated into practice. These differences are then reflected in the final product – millions of young people who finish their studies every year, ready to do their part in the world.

It may be for the best that our contrasting higher education systems result in so much diversity. But will such different types of people complement each other in an international work environment? Will they be friends outside of it? I haven't gotten as far as answering these questions. But the main idea is clear: if higher education is made important in current societal structures across the globe, so is the variation in the outcomes.



Image credit: Anne Irving for Cherwell.

Living on borrowed time: Oxford's journalism

ANNABEL COCHRANE

When Alexander Görlach, former publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *The European* magazine, asked the crowd of Media Society attendees when they last picked up a printed newspaper, it was clear he expected an answer like his own: not for years. This would hammer home the trepidation that dominated his discussion about the future of modern, online journalism. But the contrasting response, a mix of chuckles and shrugs followed by "well, the last *Cherwell*, obviously", seemed to jar after the laughter had died out. It's clear that the journalism we have here in Oxford, a thriving, near-saturated print culture, and the journalism Görlach diplomatically discouraged us all from pursuing aren't just slightly different, but incomparable – the word can't possibly cover both.

Even after only a few weeks in Oxford, I've felt the palpable hold of student publications over this University, whether at bustling launch events at pubs across the city or unwavering recruitment drives at the Freshers' Fair, more determined than any other society. Writing and reading about relevant issues both globally and locally is a key part of building this academic community, so it's easy to adopt a rose-tinted view of what it means to be a journalist outside the Oxford bubble. There is everything admirable but nothing realistic about our steadfast intention to educate each other about what goes on outside college walls.

So, if we want to pinpoint this dissimilarity, that word 'intention' is where I would start, as it's precisely what is contorted in the digitised world of media that Görlach knows all too well. The multiplicity of sites, papers, and journals now readily available means it's no longer possible (if it ever has been) to attempt to read a neutral perspective; you must, as Görlach implied, become almost mercenary with your intentions when seeking out material. He noted that the political orientation of a source comes second to the standards he wants to hold himself to in terms of quality of writing, citing his loyalty to *The Economist* as an example, but added that when he needed "cheering up", he would turn to *The Guardian*. Such a level of selectiveness even in the day-to-day act of getting the morning headlines would have been unimaginable in a pre-digital age and is still an alien concept to our more inclusive culture of student journalism. The question of intention can equally lead to the opposite extreme – the majority of people do not ponder what they consume to the extent of Görlach, and rely on what the Reuters Institute labels "incidental exposure", being entirely at the mercy of external companies, predominantly social media outlets, to deliver pieces of journalism at well-timed intervals on their feeds. The role of the journalist is, at both ends of the spectrum, at the mercy of whim, whether this is of the algorithm or the academic. Simultaneously, even the most established papers cease to be viewed as organisms by everyone but their most committed followers, turning into a variety of Instagram thumbnails and the regular voices of one or two particularly enigmatic commentators.

But it would be naive to claim that the decline of coherent media is purely the fault of technologicalisation – the call is also coming from inside the house. It's no secret that journalistic principles have never truly applied to the senior money-wielders behind the tabloids, yet there have been recent instances where the relationship between the article and its financier has become paradoxical. For example, while we might not expect, or want, objectivity from a journalist, every release from a publication under the Polish media group Polska Press is automatically inextricable from its recent owner, state-run oil firm Orlen – the company echoes the ruling party's intention to "repolonise the media", leading to concerns for Poland's media pluralism, a key element of modern journalism. The gradual subsumption of countless local papers into a nationwide political drive is hardly something that can be shrugged off when doing the crossword, let alone reading the opinion pages.

With this in mind, if the only current sign of cohesion in newspapers or other bodies of journalism is their commercial and strategic utility, will we ever reclaim a media that prioritises informing? Yet we have been forced to ask this question on a far greater scale, since the role of the journalist as gatherer, fact-checker, and reporter has expanded in conflict zones (most recently in Ukraine and Gaza) to include sacrifice. Watching journalists lose their lives for their stories makes us wonder whether there is indeed a difference between a journalist and an activist – a comparison that feels almost shameful versus the low-stakes reporting done from our *Cherwell*-shaped ivory towers. Görlach pushes for these titles to be kept very separate, however, not because journalism should be apolitical, but because it should be undiluted in its purpose of providing information.

Nevertheless, this conclusion doesn't take into account the fact that knowledge, especially in crisis zones, is a coveted luxury; losing it is an experience few of us will ever understand. Maybe we call a journalist one who recognises the sheer value of knowing things, of understanding them, purely because they have experienced unwanted ignorance.

It feels a little ironic that my first contribution to *Cherwell* might seem to threaten the justification of its existence, but in some ways I start as I mean to go on. The parameters of our humility here in Oxford shouldn't be limited to the financial or academic, but expand into the social and journalistic. While the freedom and fluidity of our paper culture are welcomed with open arms, it wouldn't hurt to look up from your pitch or commission every now and then to question where our journalism is taking us.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Student spring, or student winter?

"Fear not, a Student Spring is blooming." Thus closes Kiera O'Carroll's contribution to last week's Debate Chamber, a piece that seems to draw direly needed optimism from the wave of student protests that has swept across France since September. I would really like to believe that this is the case. It is true, one would hope, that the digital age has created a new era of social action – O'Carroll cites movements in India and Serbia, and I rather enjoy the fact that the interim Prime Minister of Nepal was elected over a Discord call. I fear, however, that we here in the UK, and especially at Oxford, may not feel the fresh winds of this "spring". British students are not known for expressing discontent particularly effectively, a travesty given the myriad flaws of our education system. Unless we take the spirit of moments like the Cofnas protest and run with it, we might remain stuck in a 'Student Winter'.

Ti-Jean Martin, History, *Merton College*

Change is no fairytale

As one of many in a generation disillusioned by politics, waking up to the American midterms results was an uncharacteristically joyful moment of hope for the possibility of change. Reading Rüya Oral's article ('The midterms and the YA novel: Impossibly happy endings') therefore really struck a chord with me, especially as a fellow lover of "inconceivable happy endings". It is so easy to escape into fiction for respite from the real world, giving us some semblance of control rather than the powerlessness that politics has come to be associated with. However, the recent US election results demonstrated that this escape mechanism can be repurposed into fuel for the fire; what we see on the page truly can manifest in reality. I sincerely hope that we do not lose faith in our ability to make change in the system. After all, if Texas can be flipped, then anything is possible!

Freya Robson, French and Philosophy, *Hertford College*

THE COMMENTS SECTION

See what our readers make of our social media posts

Went from toriel to restorial ('Nathan Cofnas to speak at Oriel College: A summary of events')

hassan.akram via Instagram

City need a lawyer tbf ('Han Willhoft-King's journey from Manchester City to Oxford')

klvn.pl via Instagram

Funny, in the past they made it sound like it's impossible to remove things from up there. ('KKK hood and sign on Cecil Rhodes statue removed after activist group's 'makeover'')

ines.wox via Instagram

Chud take ('No, I won't buy a scholar's gown')

woof_im_a_cow via Instagram

This is absolutely horrific and wildly inappropriate. The indifference to the dignity and safety of not only students but also academic peers and the general populations by this decision speaks volumes. The support for white supremacy is crystal clear, and the fact that this is coming from Oriel college of all places would be laughable if it wasn't so sinister. Shame on everyone involved in this ('Oriel Provost and Proctors confirm that Cofnas event will go ahead at Extraordinary SU meeting')

anniebuzzytail via Instagram

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Nathan Cofnas: Face to face with hatred

FREIDERIKOS VASSOS

Sitting across from the short, bespectacled man in the tight suit, it was hard to believe he had been the focus of the past weeks' controversy. Beyond Cofnas' anxious window-glancing and uninspiring public speaking, the library felt like a poorly attended late-night JCR meeting. The only things reminding us of the external onslaught were the unwavering chants of "is your mother proud of you?" and "your views are pseudoscience" echoing from the quad below, and the journalists glancing at their watches.

I'd started my evening by interviewing Oriel friends as they gathered in solidarity in Oriel's second quad to protest against the talk. Everyone was outraged that the Oxon Universities' Reform Society had invited such a person to express his views in their college. Oriel students' home was being dragged through the dirt, and as the protesters outside chanted "Oriel we know you like some old eugenics", I felt almost embarrassed walking into the talk under their gaze. Once inside, my job was simple: to report the goings-on of the talk to the *Cherwell* journalists outside so that they could publish live updates.

While we waited, the Oxon Universities' Reform Society President, Vittorio Cuneo-Flood, reassured us that the talk was going ahead. The ongoing siege was merely a delay. Another 15 minutes passed. Inside, the hushed chatter of those labelled as racists. Outside, the cacophony of the protest. And then he arrived. Vittorio read a pre-written statement on behalf of the Proctors outlining that we were not to interrupt the talk. Then, an introduction by an Oxon Universities' Reform Society moderator outlining Cofnas' troubled history with academia.

Cofnas was met by loud applause from a small group sitting at the front. The rest of us sat at the back awkwardly engaged in sporadic note-taking. His argument was divided into two parts: a condemnation of the "equality principle" underwriting DEI, followed by a history of how his own view had become marginalised and discredited. An incoherent, rambling style made Cofnas' lecture appear like the words of a man desperate to share the thoughts ruminating in his head.

The noise of the protest outside was unrelenting. It would undulate, an endless backdrop to Cofnas' inflammatory and provocative comments, turning the heads of the audience and speaker alike with every spike in intensity. Meanwhile, Cofnas droned on, constantly citing studies by forgotten and disproven academics. It was an hour of listening to a host of outrageous claims concerning the "substantial differences in overall brain size of different races" and insensitive comments alleging that Jason Arday was the author of plagiarised articles. The trouble was that I was neither interested in what he had to say, nor able to at that moment call out his lies – for I could never be as well-read on "racial realism" as any of the extremists in the room.

So I sat, and I waited. The talk continued mostly uninterrupted, except for a moment when the doors behind us were closed. Only later did I find out that my editor had considered telling me to leave for my own safety. Cofnas was given a microphone to help him speak over the chants booming from beyond the windows. Soon enough, Vittorio hurried him along to the end of his talk. A quick Q&A followed, where a Guardian journalist asked Cofnas whether he would "apologise to Jason Arday's family", to which Cofnas unremorsefully snarked that "the implication is that I've done something wrong by pointing out corruption by a powerful public figure… is that it?" and that others should be the ones to "receive these pointed questions". It was a nice contrast to the other questions, which seemed designed to appease Cofnas and treat him as a legitimate academic. Afterwards, Cofnas slithered away through a back door into the night, escorted by Proctors and security.

Then limbo: I found myself stuck in a room with unsavoury characters with whom I shared the common project of survival. Unsure how I would be received outside, I texted "don't shoot" to my friends in the protest and was able to confidently walk out the front door and return to the embrace of familiar arms in the quad below. Luckily, I had made my status as a reporter known before, so I was greeted with smiles rather than boos.

I've since wondered who the real winners and losers of the situation have been. Despite the strength of the public outcry, Cofnas and his supporters have never had a bigger platform. It is true that fewer than 30 of the 110 seats were filled in the hall, but there is not a student in Oxford who doesn't know Nathan Cofnas' name or views now. All this for an uncharismatic and tainted man. It seems that Oxon Universities' Reform Society, and in particular Vittorio, have succeeded in making themselves known. When otherwise they should have been just a footnote in Oxford's long history of controversial speakers, their cause is now championed by right-wing news outlets such as GB News – with Free Speech Union external affairs officer Connie Shaw reporting on the talk.

My college has been shaken. Not just by the experience of the night, which involved students being locked out of their home and intimidated by protesters, but also by the hostile coverage of their college. Oriel's JCR Vice-President Gabriela Panova lamented that "comments online have substantially misrepresented both the role of Oriel College and the actions undertaken by the JCR", which attempted to "provide students with meaningful opportunities to express their concerns". Indeed, Oriel's Provost reiterated in his address the morning after the event: "We [Oriel] did not ask for this event at our college." One need look no further than the JCR's statement condemning the event (which received 135 out of 149 votes) alongside similar MCR and SCR statements to understand how the student and governing body feel. Watching a man whose stated views actively target members of our community being hosted in our home to spread his hate speech has been nothing short of nightmarish.

So an event held under false pretences with a dull speaker and a small, discredited audience has spread racist thought and ideology. Even the instigators, Oxon Universities' Reform Society, can't be said to have benefited. They find themselves officially distanced from Reform UK and rightfully ostracised. Perhaps this was a success of the protest. An added consequence has been the besmirching of the name of a community which did its best to cope under the circumstances, as well as the direct harm caused to the members of that community – most notably to the beloved head porter who was trampled while protecting students. We must reflect on how things reached such a tragic state, and how our supposedly inclusive learning space was invaded by a man such as Nathan Cofnas. Civil wars rarely have winners, and this was certainly no different.

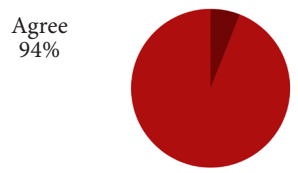
In response, Nathan Cofnas told *Cherwell*: "Brain size is moderately correlated with intelligence. On average, Africans have smaller brains than Europeans, who have smaller brains than East Asians. These facts are not disputed in the scientific literature. Any informed person who says otherwise is lying. An argument is considered "outrageous and insensitive" if it poses a serious threat to wokism. My view is that we should be allowed to challenge that false ideology."

In response, Oriel College also told *Cherwell*: "Oriel College did not choose to bring this event to our community but acted correctly to ensure the safety of our students while securing lawful freedom of speech for all. Thames Valley Police are responsible for managing public protests."

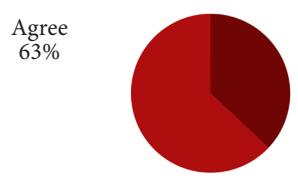
Read the full article at cherwell.org

THE VERDICT

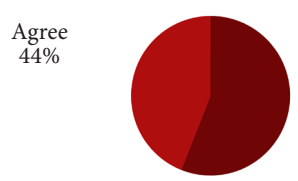
UK and US university cultures are completely different



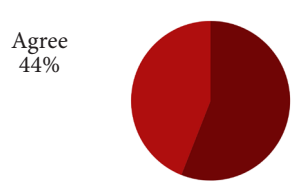
The UK is not doing enough to resolve the Russia–Ukraine War



Oxford's paper culture gives the wrong idea about journalism



Oxmas is the best time of the year at Oxford



We should care about Ukraine now more than ever

DAINA LIEPAITĖ

There are multiple levels of severity to a Lithuanian air raid alert – white, yellow, and red. White means the threat has been resolved; yellow urges people to locate their nearest bomb shelter; and red orders everyone to take cover immediately.

Last spring, people in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, received a red air raid alert. Children were hauled out of schools, and some were incomprehensibly led to football stadiums, while many people realised that their nearest bomb shelters were much further away than could possibly be reached in a true emergency. Because this wasn't, after all, a 'true' emergency – a drone had entered Lithuanian airspace, but no attack ensued. Still, it was an emergency in the way that it forced people to face the unsettling fact that Lithuania no longer lives in a time of peace. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, now in its fifth year, has slowly but very tangibly expanded into a hybrid war against the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and several other countries.

It's nothing out of the ordinary these days to open the Lithuanian news and see an alert for an air raid, or to receive one on your phone. Even just five years ago such an event would have caused national chaos and uproar; now it happens almost every week, some weeks multiple times. During the vacations, when I am back in Lithuania and hear an airplane go by that seems to be louder than usual, the question is always forced into my mind: is this it? Is this the moment it starts? I know that in those 30 seconds, everything about my life as I know it could change.

I feel greater unease when I am here, in Oxford – when, for instance, I open LRT, the Lithuanian national broadcaster, and see that multiple air raid alerts have been announced. Even more so when I read that NATO fighter jets were mobilised, yet did not succeed in destroying the drones, as happened in early November. I feel guilty being away from my family for half of the year; I have to consider the deeply uncomfortable question of what happens to them in the event that Russia escalates its war.

Having spent a year studying in Oxford and engaging in political discussions with people from the UK, I find it jarring how much focus there is on domestic issues, with problems outside of this country often left as an afterthought or not mentioned at all. While caring about domestic issues is perfectly understandable and necessary, the apparent lack of interest in international problems shocks me because I come from an environment where outside events, more often than not, take precedence in our political discourse. While Lithuania's situation is, of course, nothing compared to the situation of Ukrainians who are currently fighting and dying for their country, Lithuanians still experience the reality of living next to a country that wants nothing more than to wipe ours off the map.

International news coverage of Russian aggression against Ukraine has been measurably declining in recent years. Analysing millions of news article titles from thousands of sources in 194 countries between January 2013 and December 2024, Vianini et al found that coverage is heavily dependent on major geopolitical events, with peaks around Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion in 2022. Evidently, as the shock of the initial event wears off and people get accustomed to the new status quo, news media no longer sell as many copies or generate the same number of clicks, so they switch to other topics.

Perhaps it is therefore unsurprising that, as a percentage of GDP, northern European and Baltic countries have been leading in bilateral aid to Ukraine. The danger of Russian expansion is, after all, more acute the closer Russia is, especially given the threat that Russia has posed to many of these countries' sovereignty in the past.

This is in no way meant to imply that other countries, such as the US and the UK, have made less valuable contributions, as their aid to Ukraine has been immense. It is just that with the much



greater geographical separation from Russia, there is also a mental detachment. It is much more difficult for people here to understand the urgency – not just of February 2022, but every day – almost five years into Russia's full-scale invasion. For us, this is not just a war; it is a threat to our very existence.

Countries like Lithuania are mostly powerless in bringing about any sort of resolution to this war, but countries like the US and UK are not. It is therefore particularly concerning to Lithuanians when, for instance, the will of these countries' leaders to continue enforcing sanctions on Russian exports and individuals benefiting from Russia's war appears to dwindle. This becomes especially disconcerting when coupled with implicit or explicit statements that Russia's illegal war can only be resolved if Ukraine agrees to give up a portion of its territory. The United Nations' new Equal Earth world map, adopted in September 2026, for instance, depicted Crimea in a different colour – not as part of Ukraine, capitulating to Russia's expansionist aspirations. Crimea, which Russia illegally occupied and annexed in 2014, remains Ukrainian territory under international law.

Such acts of complacency give Russia the confidence to violate boundaries further and further. If the world goes on as it has, Russia will kill more people in Ukraine, will continue to establish its concentration ('filtration') camps, which have already been used to abduct more than 20,000 Ukrainian children, and will expand its hybrid war. Just in the last round of peace talks in mid-November, Russia reintroduced its demands that NATO remove its forces from its eastern flank, leaving Poland and the Baltic states profoundly vulnerable, halt all supplies of Western military support to Ukraine, as well as permanently rule out further enlargement.

The urgency that we as Lithuanians feel is because we know that in any sort of escalation, the Baltic states are very likely the next targets, an urgency that people in the UK, US, and western Europe have the privilege of not feeling. But if Ukraine, the Baltics, Poland, Finland, or any other country targeted by Russia falls, then the UK and western Europe will be forced to remember a lesson that should have been learned 80 years ago: appeasement does not work. The threat of annihilation is at their doorstep – like it has been at ours, for centuries.

Image credit: David Iliff via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

Intoxtigation 2026

A not-so-sobering investigation into Oxford students' drinking habits



Seven hundred and three students, a drinking survey, and some uncomfortable truths for Balliol. Cherwell investigates who drinks the most, where Oxford goes out, and why Merton remains where fun goes to die

CHERWELL FEATURES

In the interests of serious investigative journalism, *Cherwell* asked 703 students to disclose their drinking habits, favourite clubs and pubs, and most embarrassing alcohol-related experiences. The results are in, and the Features team has spent an entirely unreasonable amount of time examining the drinking habits of people who really ought to be doing their degrees.

At 2:46am, one member of the Features team was still conducting fieldwork at Park End, despite having a grammar class at 9am. Another finished this article up over a glass of wine. We can think of no better qualifications for this article.

First drink of the night

First, the fundamentals. Of the 703 respondents, 91% reported having drunk alcohol in Oxford. The remaining 9% have either made a principled commitment to sobriety or simply possess a degree of self-control unfamiliar to *Cherwell*'s editorial team.

Among the 591 respondents who answered questions about their drinking habits, nearly half (49.3%) described themselves as moderate drinkers, while 25.3% considered themselves light drinkers. A further 18.5% identified as quite heavy drinkers, and 2.3% as very heavy drinkers. In other words, over three-quarters believe their consumption is relatively restrained. Whether their tutors or porters would agree is another matter.

The most common drinking frequency was three days a week, reported by 162 respondents. This was likely much to the chagrin of a respondent who argued that "colleges should do things to boost alcohol intake". Another 129 drink twice weekly, while 103 drink four days a week. Meanwhile, 12 respondents reported drinking every single day. One can only admire their consistency, if not necessarily their judgement.

There are some concerning signs, with 33.14% of respondents reporting that they consume more than 14 units of alcohol on at least one day in an average week – exceeding the UK Chief Medical Officers' recommended weekly limit in a single sitting.

Still, two-thirds say they drink exactly as much as they would like. Another 12.4% actually drink less than they would prefer. When asked whether Oxford social events revolve too much around alcohol, 63% said the balance was just right. A further 5.9% thought there was too little drinking. Those 40 respondents are presumably campaigning for a "Shots in the Sheldonian" event on matriculation.

For most, drinking is social: 91.8% identified either socialising with friends or attending social events as their primary motivation for drinking. Only two selected essays as their principal reason. Frankly, given the reading lists, this seems suspiciously low.

All talk and no tequila

For years, Balliol has cultivated the image of Oxford's drinking capital. Asked which college drinks the most, 110 students nominated Balliol, comfortably ahead of St Peter's on 66 and St Catherine's on 42.

And yet, when *Cherwell* examined how frequently respondents actually reported drinking, Balliol didn't even crack the top ten (among colleges with at least five valid numeric responses). Balliol respondents reported drinking on an average of 3.26 days per week, compared with 4.50 at Queen's.

Of course, some had rather low response rates, including Queen's with just six respondents. But the reputational damage to Balliol is already done. When the question turns from frequency to particularly heavy drinking days, St Edmund Hall leads among colleges examined, with approximately 7 in 10 respondents reporting at least 1 day per week consuming over 14 units. Perhaps Balliol students are simply better at talking about drinking than actually doing it. Given Balliol's intellectual traditions, this would not be entirely surprising.

Every competition requires a loser, and, in Oxford's drinking reputation contest, that distinction belongs to Merton. Asked which college drinks the least, 119 respondents nominated Merton. What's particularly shameful is that Merton beat out colleges like All Souls (109) and Wycliffe Hall (22). There are Oxford colleges where fun is encouraged, colleges where fun is tolerated, and Merton, where fun presumably requires a risk assessment, a governing body resolution, and three references from former tutors. When asked to comment, our Mertonian Editor-in-Chief said: "This is fake news propagated by those whose college drinks cannot match the Merton Power Pint." Unfortunately, this statement could not be independently verified by *Cherwell*.

On the rocks

In 2025, Engineering Science claimed the title of Oxford's booziest degree. This year, engineers have suffered an astonishing fall from grace, replaced by Earth Sciences, whose respondents reported drinking on an average of four days per week. There is, however, an important qualification: this result is based on just six respondents.

Classicists follow at 3.93 days per week, based on a much more substantial 30 responses. This is hardly unexpected. The ancient Greeks invented the symposium, an institution in which educated men gathered to drink wine and discuss philosophy. Two and a half millennia later, Oxford classicists have apparently decided that the most authentic way to study antiquity is to recreate it.

Human Sciences follows on 3.86, with History on 3.58. Chemistry and Economics and Management tie on 3.43, while PPE manages 3.36. How 'Easy and Manageable' and 'PPEasy' have come so close to the Chemists is a bit of a mystery. Engineering Science, last year's champion, recorded just 2.89 drinking days per week. We can only assume the engineers have discovered their problem sheets.

> "This is fake news propagated by those whose college drinks cannot match the Merton Power Pint. – Mertonian Editor-in-Chief, on where the fun goes to die"

At the opposite end, Physics and Philosophy averaged 2.20 days, Modern Languages and Linguistics 2.43, and Biology 2.60. One respondent, however, protested that "mathematicians are unfairly presented as boring non-drinkers", insisting that "there are alcoholics everywhere for those with pints to serve".

Mind the (drinking) gap

The survey also revealed substantial differences between men's and women's drinking habits. Male respondents reported drinking on approximately three and a half days per week, compared with roughly three for both female and non-binary respondents. More strikingly, just over half of male respondents reported consuming over 14 units at least one day per week, compared with roughly a quarter of women. The Features team has informed the substantial contingent of matcha-drinking, Clairo-listening (self-described) feminist men and has been told that they are working diligently to end the gender drinking gap.

Despite the drinking gap, approximately one in five respondents in both groups said they drank more than they would like. Men, in other words, reported substantially heavier consumption but were no more likely to consider their drinking excessive.

Champagne tastes, student budgets

The most revealing financial finding is not simply that students spend too much on alcohol. It is that many are perfectly happy with how much they drink but unhappy with how much it costs. Of the 439 respondents who said they drink exactly as much as they would like, 185 nevertheless said they spend more than they would prefer.

One respondent complained that Oxford needed more house parties because "the alcohol is so expensive", while another offered the succinct assessment: "Too expensive." One suspects that a £14 double-with-a-mixer price tag (like certain pubs frequented by *Cherwell* for Editors' Drinks may offer) doesn't help this.

Most respondents, however, are not spending astronomical sums: 54.8% spend £20 or less per week, while 74.7% spend £30 or less. Only 10.9% report spending £50 or more. Nevertheless, 45.7% say they spend more than they would like. Respondents in higher spending brackets also generally report drinking more frequently. One might conclude that drinking more costs more. *Cherwell* is pleased to have made this groundbreaking contribution to economics.

Raising the bar

Balliol may not be Oxford's booziest college by reported frequency, but it remains the undisputed monarch of college bars. Its bar received 233 votes for Oxford's best, almost twice St Peter's total of 120, while St Catz came third with 82. Balliol also won best college drink with 206 votes and best BOPs with 129. It appears Balliol is an institution more successful at running a bar than its alumni are at running the country.

Some 539 respondents reported having visited Balliol bar, compared with 309 for St Peter's in second place. Perhaps that's why, unlike competitors, its popularity cannot be explained solely by home-college loyalty. Of Balliol's 233 best-bar votes, 153 came from students at other colleges. St Peter's, by contrast, received 91 of its 120 votes from its own students, while St Catz received 61 of 82. Notably, more than half of all best-bar votes across the survey went to respondents' own colleges. Oxford students, it seems, possess a fierce loyalty to their local watering holes, regardless of their objective merits.

At the other end, Wadham received 68 votes for worst bar, followed by Pembroke on 43 and Christ Church on 39. Pembroke's showing was unfortunate. One respondent described its bar as "a café with beer taps", complaining that it

had "zero atmos [sic], zero entertainment, 100% fluorescent lighting". Another compared it to "a cross between a coffee shop and a primary school classroom". Pembroke appears to have achieved the remarkable feat of creating a drinking establishment where nobody wants to drink. You'd think a certain Editor-in-Chief of *Cherwell* who happens to be an Entz rep for Pembroke would get on that!

Elsewhere, Wadham's bar was compared to a "hospital canteen" and an "NHS waiting room", while Oriel's was described as "the Premier Inn breakfast lounge". Students were overwhelmingly clear about who should run their bars: 486 preferred student-run establishments, compared with just 103 favouring professionally run ones. Evidently, Oxford students prefer their alcohol served by someone equally likely to have an essay due tomorrow.

BOP 'til you drop

If college bars are Oxford's preferred drinking establishments, BOPs are surely their most questionable contribution to British nightlife. Balliol once again emerged victorious, receiving 129 votes for best BOPs. St Hugh's followed with 86, while Somerville secured a respectable third place with 59.

There is, however, a rather unfortunate coincidence. *Cherwell*'s Deputy Editor for Features is both a Somerville student and its JCR President. We have been assured that this had absolutely no influence on the results, although the relevant editorial oversight appears to have been conducted by the person in question.

Wadham received 57 votes for worst BOPs, followed by Oriel on 48. Perhaps their Entz teams might consider a fact-finding visit to Somerville. Naturally, our Dep Ed would be delighted to provide an entirely impartial tour.

A pub crawl through the data

Beyond college walls, Oxford students can usually be found occupying one of the city's many pubs. The Lamb and Flag emerged as the favourite for the third year running, receiving 147 votes, while the Turf Tavern also proved popular, with 16.2% of the vote.

The club rankings were considerably less decisive. Plush emerged victorious with 176 votes, followed by Bridge with 118, Bullingdon with 99, and O2 with 88. Oxford students have apparently decided that the city's finest nightlife experience involves descending underground into a room with limited ventilation.

Indie Fridays topped the club-night rankings with 116 votes, ahead of Reggaeton on 71 and Thursday Night Bridge on 67. Jukebox followed with 56, while Wednesday Park End secured a comparatively modest 5% of the vote. One of our writers, having returned from that very establishment at 2:46am, has requested that *Cherwell* register her formal dissent.

Now, *Cherwell* was feeling rather nosy at the time of distributing the poll and so asked you for some anecdotes: times when you acted a little bit too silly. One respondent recalled a spontaneous "overnight bus trip to Heathrow Airport" with "coursework due the next morning" – sending prayers. Another felt like sharing a little too much and admitted to utilising their "constitutional law essay" when they found themselves with "no toilet roll in Bully on Halloween". In another heartwarming tale, Oxford famously restricts term-time employment, so one student evaded the rule by "working a shift in a kebab van", whilst another owned up to pushing the fountain statue of former Balliol Master Helen Ghosh "off of its plinth".

But no Oxford night out is complete without the post-club pilgrimage. Hussain's (lovingly known also as Nadiya's) dominated the late-night food vote with 198, ahead of Hassan's (111). After hours of disagreement, Oxford students have at least managed to reach a consensus on the importance of cheesy chips.

Drunk on knowledge?

The Oxford tutorial system is designed to develop independent thinking and the ability to defend an argument under pressure. What better pressure is there than being horribly hungover after being out until four in the morning – or perhaps still being drunk? One respondent admitted arriving at a tutorial "4 pints deep", while another recalled trying to solve quantum physics problems without fainting or vomiting. Perhaps most impressively, a student attending a tutorial after a night out attempted to explain realism and idealism, concluding that "realism is when things are real and idealism is ideal". Somewhere, an international relations tutor is still recovering.

Others reported falling asleep during tutorials, attending classes still intoxicated from the previous evening, or leaving seminars to vomit. But perhaps the finest anecdote belongs to the respondent who, after taking full advantage of free wine at a freshers' formal, misunderstood their tutor's explanation of a research project on bird flu. They assumed the tutor had personally contracted the disease and wished him a speedy recovery.

Not every academic encounter ended in disaster. One respondent reported that their tutor was also drunk at subject drinks, while another claimed that their tutor "used to show up clearly drunk to tutorials", adding: "One of the best I ever had." *Cherwell* cannot verify these accounts, although they raise interesting questions about whether the University's teaching excellence assessments adequately account for the availability of wine.

The radical experiment of remembering your evening

By far the most popular reason for teetotalling was personal preference, answered by 74.4% of non-drinking respondents. Family history was the answer for 7%, and religious reasons for a further 4.7%. For one respondent, they "used to drink but i got health problems so i cant anymore 🥀 🥀 🥀 🥀 🥀" – our sympathies have been extended.

Alcohol, it seems, is not an integral part of the Oxford student's night out. 79.5% still frequent college bars, 70.5% pubs, 52.3% BOPs, and a stunning 36.4% still brave Oxford's clubs. For 54% of non-drinkers, soft drinks are their alternative beverage of choice. A further 22.7% choose to consume water. A single lactically-inclined respondent answered "milk".

Asked whether they feel excluded for not drinking, 45.5% said "rarely". 29.5% said "sometimes" and 15.9% "never". Two respondents respectively answered "often" and "all the time". One respondent argued: "As someone who doesn't drink I have found the social culture here really fun … in fact not drinking is an excellent test for whether or not the night/the company is genuinely worthwhile." We'd love to see them debate a respondent who said, "People who don't drink [piss me off.] like there's no way you're having any fun watching the rest of us drink and you're actively making us have less fun". Ouch.

Last orders

After 703 responses, dozens of rankings, and an alarming number of stories involving tutors, one conclusion is unavoidable: Oxford students like drinking. They like their college bars, pubs, BOPs, and post-night-out kebabs.

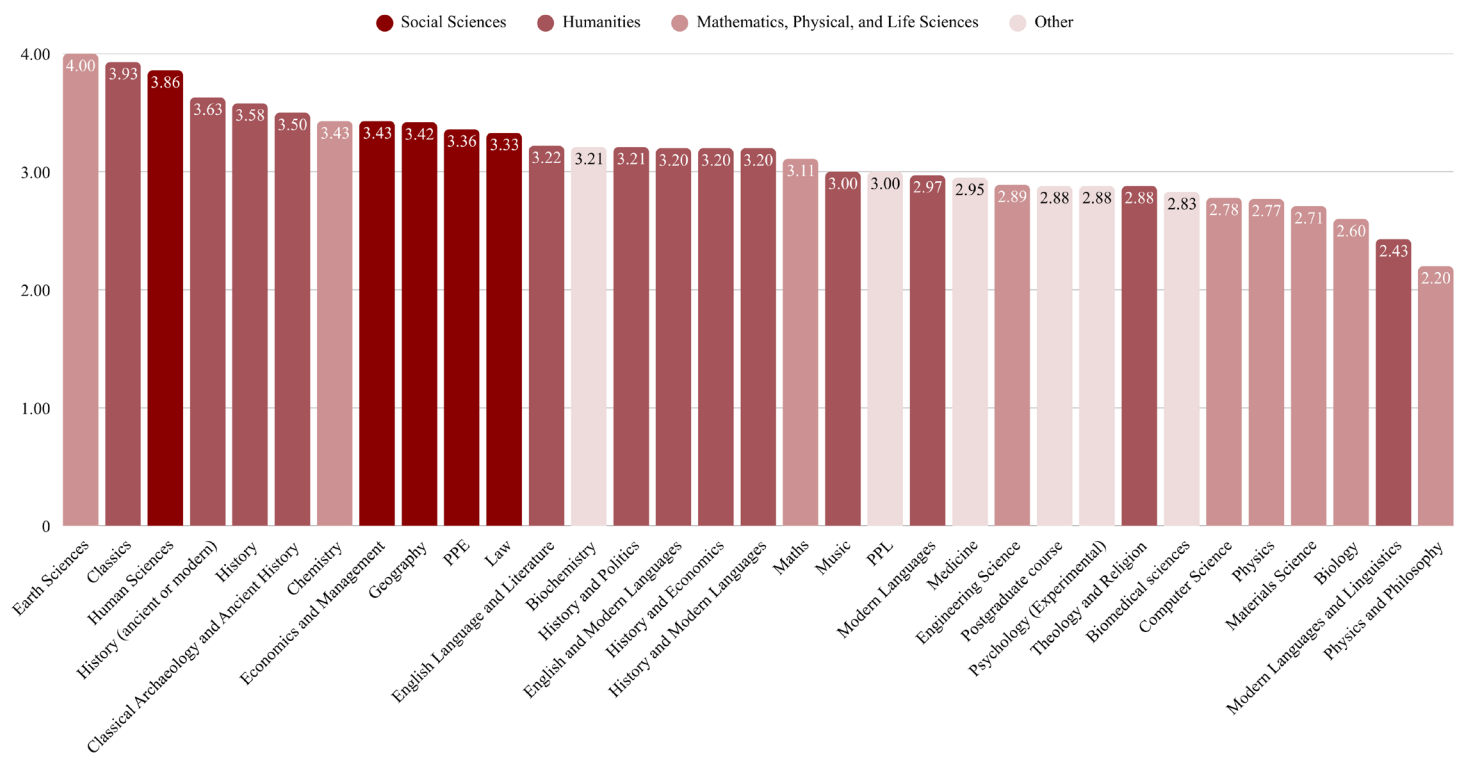
The investigation has also produced some uncomfortable findings. Balliol, despite its considerable reputation, appears better at attracting drinkers than producing them. Earth Scientists have been conducting rather more fieldwork than anticipated. Pembroke's bar has been mistaken for a primary school classroom, while Merton continues its centuries-old experiment in determining whether academic excellence can compensate for the complete absence of fun.

As for *Cherwell*, our journalistic responsibilities have been fulfilled. The data has been analysed, reputations have been damaged, and several college Entz teams will presumably be demanding a recount. Whether any of this changes how Oxford students drink remains doubtful. Whether it provides ammunition for the next argument in a college bar is considerably more certain.

Image credit: Anish Vedantham, with permission.
Graph credit: Oskar Doepke for Cherwell.

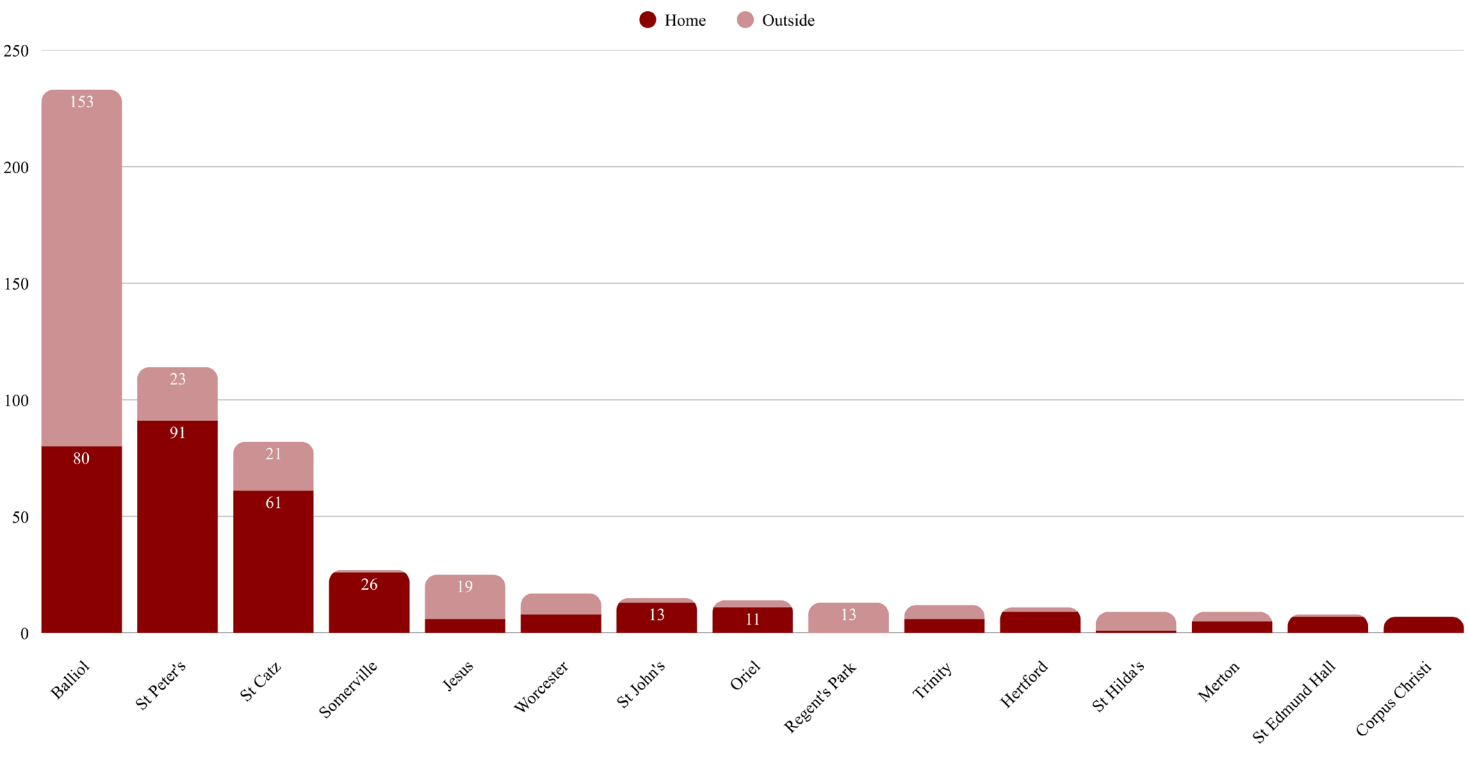
Which subjects drink the most?

The average days per week respondents reported drinking, according to Cherwell's survey of 703 students



Balliol's bar wins, but whose bar is it anyways?

Votes for favourite college bar, split by whether respondents were members of that college, according to Cherwell's survey of 703 students



Oxford's curdling tutor-student relationship

So how did a relationship that is meant to be at the heart of Oxford fall so far? And what, if anything, can be done to rehabilitate it?

KIANA DE BELLAIGUE

As a young tutor at Magdalen College, CS Lewis had a famously strained relationship with one of his students: John Betjeman, the future poet laureate. "I wish I could get rid of this idle prig", Lewis wrote of the student, who had turned up to a tutorial in "eccentric bedroom slippers". Betjeman's dislike of Lewis was mutual. In the preface of his 1937 collection *Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgeois Verse*, he thanked his former tutor, "Mr C.S. Lewis for the fact on page 265". The book is only 45 pages long.

It's an extreme case, but a revealing one: Lewis's contempt was recorded in a diary; Betjeman's resentment outlasted his time at Oxford. That such emotions form part of their respective biographies is simply explained: the relationship between student and tutor was the key relationship at Oxford, and, when it failed, it was a big deal. Very frequently, as can be gleaned from the memoirs and biographies of scores of Oxford graduates, it was formative for the student and enriching for the tutor. But that relationship – its intellectual and social complicities, its sometimes awkward or downright inappropriate intimacies – is now close to extinction. This much is clear from the grousing of my friends about our much-vaunted 'tutorial system', and from my own experience with a fixed-term tutor whose indifference to us was all too apparent.

So how did a relationship that is meant to be at the heart of Oxford fall so far? And what, if anything, can be done to rehabilitate it?

Let us start with the causes of decline. One is casualisation: the shift from permanent posts to temporary, fixed-term and hourly paid work. In a 2024 *Cherwell* article, it was revealed that 61% of tutorials were taught by non-permanent academics, with 20% taught by hourly-paid tutors. The University and College Union (UCU) say that many staff spend years, even decades, on fixed-term contracts. "Usually," they say, "this is not through personal choice, despite the law which means any employee who has 4+ years of continuous employment should... become a permanent member of staff." One current stipendiary lecturer told *Cherwell* that even after five years on a fixed-term contract, he was wary of asking his college to make him permanent, for fear of giving them an excuse to let him go. "Oxford is supposed to be a place of open inquiry," he said, "and yet when it comes to these kinds of questions, it's absolutely not."

The UCU's general secretary has called the arrangement "Deliveroo-style". Like a delivery rider, an hourly-paid tutor is paid for the time in front of the customer rather than the work that makes the tutorial possible. In theory, the basic rate already covers college-based teaching, preparation, and marking. In practice, the UCU says, the "allocated time is laughably small and remunerated at Grade 5 on the University's salary and pay structure, which is not an academic grade. Apparently, Oxford students do not deserve to be taught by academics". The lecturer I spoke to described having to move back home and commute during his year of hourly-paid tutorials. "The only reason I could still keep my foot in the door is because my parents lived nearby. If you're doing hourly teaching, you can't afford to pay bills." He describes noticing a big difference in his current relationship with his own students now that he's in a permanent position: "Tutorials are intellectually intimate spaces, and when you're teaching a set of three to four on hourly pay, you drop in on the cohort and have no chance to establish a rapport. The whole thing can get quite cagey in a way."

> It is hard to resent, or to be fond of, someone you meet for an hour a week, and who may be gone by next Michaelmas.

This is the gig economy imported into the tutorial room. Figures are stark too; according to a 2023 UCU report, the real hourly wage of a college tutor falls between £8.42 and £12.63, below the Oxford Living Wage of £14.06. It is little wonder that a tutor who is underpaid and works term-by-term has little incentive, and even less time, to get to know the students in front of them. Tutorials and the mythology behind them rest on continuity: a tutor who knows you across three years and is invested in your long-term development. While this investment was historically built into the job – with Oxford dons being required to be unmarried and live in college – that attitude is now a dwindling ideal: it is hard to resent, or to be fond of, someone you meet for an hour a week, and who may be gone by next Michaelmas.

Another factor to take into consideration is 'elitist Oxford'. For much of their history, the Oxbridge students and tutors were drawn, overwhelmingly, from the same, narrow slice of British society. The nine 'Clarendon Schools' – a group of elite schools including Eton and Harrow – often functioned as a direct feeder pipeline into Oxford. This was more than a matter of informal preference; as *The Oxford Student* writes: "Eton was created as a feeder school for King's College, Cambridge, and so was built to mirror the college. The same applies to Westminster School and New College."



Tutors and students would have sat at the same rung of society, sharing both a social and gendered world: women were only admitted as full members of the University in 1920. Perhaps you'd even have been linked by a web of acquaintance – as is the case in Anthony Powell's *A Question of Upbringing*. "How is your mother?", the eccentric don Sillery asks his student, "Do you know, I have not seen her since the private view of the Royal Academy in 1914". It is a comic exchange, but also demonstrates what David Palfreyman identifies as the system's real foundation: "Oxbridge was a place where the intellectual elite could train the next generation of social elite, and so both tutors and students knew what was expected, why they were there, and what the rules of the game were."

That shared grammar has significantly eroded. Oxford now draws its students from a far wider social map – despite the extent of that change still remaining contested. David Lammy, in 2018, called Oxford "a bastion of entrenched, wealthy, upper-class, white, southern privilege". Nonetheless, the figures mark a dramatic shift: in 2025, 66.5% of UK students admitted came from the state sector, compared with just 9% in 1928. None of this is an argument for returning to the old Oxford, whose intimacy was bought with exclusion. Yet the tutorial was built for a world of shared codes and permanent dons, and while the first has rightly gone, the second has gone with it. What remains is a relationship asked to do the same work without those foundations – it is hardly surprising that it has curdled. Lewis and Betjeman, at least, cared enough to loathe each other.

What has replaced that informality is, depending on your view, either professionalism or distance. Pastoral care has become more formalised and arms-length, and the old mentorship has largely gone with it. One current tutor, who was herself an undergraduate here, recalled a tutor who would sometimes offer sherry at the end of a tutorial. "I remember discussing this a long time later with a colleague, but you couldn't do that now because it would be deemed inappropriate. The boundary between teaching and informal sociability is much more rigid now than it used to be."

Sexual harassment is hardly a new problem, but it's one that the University can no longer leave unchecked. In the last year alone, an Oxford university chaplain was removed following a student sexual complaint; the former Dean of the Saïd Business School was found to have sexually harassed a female academic; and a Bloomberg investigation alleged a pattern of the University responding to complaints against senior male academics "slowly, quietly, or not at all." This is unsurprising: in 2017, *The Guardian* found that, amongst all UK universities, Oxford had the highest number of student allegations of sexual misconduct by staff.

> Clearer boundaries have made Oxford safer, yet they carry a price: a tutor who knows where the line sits is a tutor who keeps well back from it.

In an earlier Oxford, with no formal definition of harassment and no clear route for complaint, such behaviour would rarely have been reported – or even noticed. A current modern languages tutor, himself an undergraduate here, agreed: "In the 1990s, there was no such thing as a code of sexual harassment which defined things. That is the biggest difference. You can point to something in writing and say it is clearly appropriate or not."

"Boundaries haven't changed," he claims, "but the clarity with which they have been expressed has." He recalls there being several instances from his own undergraduate years when "things were said which would nowadays be absolutely under question, at the least inappropriate, or almost certainly sexual harassment". So, when Powell's tutor character – Sillery – in *A Dance to the Music of Time* is described as "playfully pinching the nape of [his student Mark] Members's neck", the moment, to the contemporary eye, can be read less like affectionate eccentricity and more like the kind of casual physical liberty that today's safeguarding frameworks exist to prevent. Movements like It Happens Here and The 1752 Group have rightly pushed the University towards a culture of formal safeguarding, mandatory training, and risk assessment that Sillery's day would have lacked.

Clearer boundaries have made Oxford safer, yet they carry a price: a tutor who knows where the line sits is a tutor who keeps well back from it. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto puts it bluntly – if not harshly – in *The Spectator*: "Undergraduates and their tutors were poised to be friends when they met. Now the diversity of backgrounds is better, but, in consequence, the old system no longer works... Social and generational gaps yawn in the tutorial, making it tedious and unrewarding. Unlubricated by sherry, which underpaid tutors can no longer afford to splash around, the relationship never takes off. Friendly overtures are likely to be mistaken for sexual harassment."

Underneath all this sits the more mundane pressure of academic work. Oxford students are tested by exams and burdened with unmanageable reading lists, and we – like many others – fall back on AI to fill the gaps. *Cherwell* reported on a 2025 survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute, which found that 92% of students had used AI in some form at university, up from 53% in 2024. Rather than resisting the tide, Oxford has chosen to ride it: in September 2025, it became the first university to offer ChatGPT Edu to all students. Tutors, understandably, are wary. The modern languages tutor I spoke to understands why students use AI as an aid, but admits it does erode his trust: "It raises genuine problems relating to originality of thought and victimless plagiarism, as you're not stealing items from an identifiable authority, you're plucking them out of thin air." That erosion matters because trust is the currency of the tutorial. It asks a student to arrive with a half-formed argument of their own, to be dismantled and rebuilt in conversation. That exercise is fruitless if tutors are fielding essays that are polished and hollow.

CS Lewis tutored at an Oxford barely recognisable today, one whose intimacy was both real and unregulated. Today's safeguards, while making the relationship safer, have also made it more guarded.

At its best, the tutorial system offers both intensity and mutual benefit: students get an expert's undivided attention while tutors can see how young people think and be granted a fresh perspective on their own subject. It gives university life a texture impossible to imagine in a large lecture hall. It is time for the University to recognise what has been lost and end the uberisation of the tutorial system, while wary students need to acknowledge that the most rewarding relationships are never risk-free and that by navigating unfamiliar social terrain we learn and mature. So bring back the old system without the groping – and the sherry, too.

In response, a University spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "Oxford's tutorial system is at the heart of the University's distinctive approach to undergraduate education. The latest National Student Survey results underline the strength of Oxford's teaching and academic experience, with students continuing to report exceptionally high levels of satisfaction. In 2026, 94.4% of students responded positively to questions about teaching on their course – Oxford's highest score since 2023 and six percentage points above the average for the rest of the Russell Group.

"Students were particularly positive about the academic challenge and intellectual stimulation of their courses: 97.7% said their course was intellectually stimulating, while 94.8% felt it challenged them to produce their best work. Students also praised the accessibility and support of teaching staff, with 94% saying they could easily contact staff when needed and 92.8% agreeing that teaching staff supported their learning well."

Image credit: Levan Ramishvili, public domain via Flickr.

I sconce anyone who: Oxford's obsession with social rituals

ROSA BARUCH HARRISON

I sconce anyone who hasn't heard of a crew date, BOP, or Barty. Words which have no real meaning beyond the high stone walls of Oxford University and its colourful college social term cards; students here clearly have a propensity for always doing it a tad differently, beyond just exam attire and bizarre names for our semesters. God forbid we call a party in a bar a party in a bar. Why must we expose our lack of spontaneity so unashamedly? For although it is hard to admit, a BOP does not refer to the action of 'bopping' to music but rather an assertion that the party is both big and organised. Maybe it is simply the love of a ritual which trickles down from centuries-old University-wide traditions into the modern-day Oxford student's social schedule.

A 'social' history

I highly doubt that back in 1096, the University's founding year, students of theology and canon law were daring one another to drink beer from their shoes or toss pennies into one another's glasses. Granted, there is little evidence to say they absolutely did not partake in such games; so let's not write off the social scene of the High Middle Ages just yet. However, a series of traditions, recognisable today, soon began to emerge. For instance, 'pennying', first debuted by dons and students in the 14th century, is still a familiar ritual at rowing formals and crew dates.

Merton College dining hall was built in 1277 and, following suit, each college built a form of this dedicated social and dining facility to provide a space beyond lecture halls and teaching rooms. Many traditions, notably 'pennying', 'doing a shoe', and 'sconcing', find their roots in such hallowed halls. The latter dates back to 1617, when a small monetary fine was imposed for a mispronunciation when saying grace, no doubt a major faux pas in that era. Today a dreaded sconce promises to expose your most embarrassing secret to a football team's worth of recent strangers.

Since the medieval period, Oxford's love of rituals, especially when aided by cheap alcohol, has come to be part of the very fabric of its reputation. For better or for worse, students here are readily associated with supposed debauchery, as they had but 'no choice' but to indulge in the rituals of their predecessors. The Bullingdon Club instantly springs to mind when considering this facet of the University, with members famously including Boris Johnson and David Cameron. Known for questionable treatment of staff and premises, using sport as a respectable front, and outrageous drinking habits, the club is no longer recognised by either the University or Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA). It almost certainly explain why students have gained a reputation for obnoxious and entitled behaviour. Even though crew dates today at Angrid Thai are more BYOB and cold chips as opposed to duck confit and port, this air of impunity still remains strong. Similarly, their respect for tradition does not waver.

Obsession from night to day

This reliance on ritualistic structure is still seen across university events. Multiple times a year, an army of penguins donned in academic dress marches towards Examination Schools. Many can be seen adopting the white, pink, and red carnations symbolic of their exam progression. The carnations are not mandatory; however, many still rush to the Covered Market, frantically hunting for replacement pins when theirs is lost, all in the name of a retro tracking system. Whilst expected for exams, I personally have never seen anyone refused entry for not wearing sub fusc. Oxford students were even given the option to remove the demand for academic dress in 2015, but 75.8% chose to keep it. The panic of what to cram last minute, as well as deciding what to wear, was clearly too daunting for students at the University. I, for one, am grateful. Albeit monotone and a tad school uniform-esque, the shirt, skirt, gown, ribbon combo means one less decision must be made.

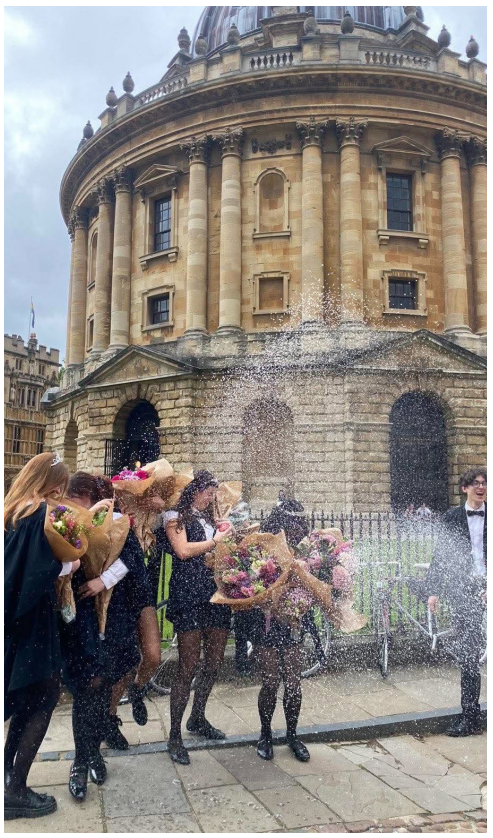
Even after exams, there is a step-by-step process to celebration. Upon exiting Examination Schools, one is met with flowers from the Garden of Oxford if they are lucky. Although banned, many still partake in the tradition of 'trashing'. A low-level 'trash' would see students douse cheap prosecco on a freshly pressed shirt: a mother's nightmare but not particularly damaging to the environment. However, more extreme examples could see finalists covered in coloured powder, eggs, or confetti, which often end up in Oxford's waterways. The University has, of course, caught wind of this post-exam ritual and implemented a £150 fine for any student found partaking as part of its Celebrate SMART guideline. Oddly enough, this ritual does not see extensive roots in Oxford's social history; the Oxonian's affinity for making a mess seemingly did not take form through the 'trashing' tradition until recently. Therefore, one is left questioning as to why it occurs. We cannot simply blame tradition. Perhaps this is but a further example of our need to mark every occasion - entering the University, finishing an exam and so on - through the means of ritual. Its mode is almost baptismal, albeit far less sacred.

The crew date

A crew date, or a 'swap' in Cambridge, usually consists of a male and female sports team from different colleges enjoying a joint social at Angrid Thai or Jamal's (and as of recently, Bridge and Plush). One must mention that women are a new addition to this unique Thursday ritual. The 'laddish' culture that would have been commonplace prior to the entrance of women has thankfully started to see its demise (#ThursdaysAreForTheGirls). However, one can still witness instances of it permeating the social scene in recent years. In 2013, the Pembroke College rugby social secretary was found to have circulated emails amongst members encouraging them to spike the drinks of fresher girls prior to a Thursday crew date "with a substance of [their] choice". The captain stepped down, and a statement of apology was released. However, the only tangible punishment was a two-week playing ban from the first round of the league and a relegation to Division 3. I would argue a couple of weeks off is unlikely to teach a strong enough lesson.

Thai, the son of the owner of Angrid Thai, told *Cherwell* about his extensive experience hosting Wednesday and Thursday crew dates in his family's restaurant. He explained how Angrid's was not the original location for such socials; however, due to students requesting use of the premises for crew dates, they began offering them in a slightly more official fashion and soon became the widely understood spot

Read the full article at cherwell.org.



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Dr Nathaniel Brunt on photography, archives, and how to understand and represent conflict

'It is becoming increasingly complex to even visualise what modern war is'



ALICE SPENDER

The photographs that accompany Dr Nathaniel Brunt's talk are both beautiful and harrowing, as scenes of daily Yazidi life are interspersed with images of the funerals of young Kashmiri men caught up in militant insurgency. Brunt observes: "Anybody can look at a photograph and draw something from it." His work certainly elicits a powerful emotional response.

I sat down with Brunt a day before his talk at the Weston Library, in which he discussed his work as a documentary photographer and scholar working primarily in Kashmir and Northern Iraq.

He first visited the Kashmir Valley in 2013, where the long-standing territorial dispute between India and Pakistan has led to almost eight decades of violence.

Encountering family photographs that offered an alternative perspective of the conflict and the lives shaped by it led Brunt to reflect on how these "vernacular archives" intersected with his own photographic practice.

His PhD research brought together various disciplines – photojournalism, historical research, and archival practice – to interrogate how conflict is represented visually.

We begin our conversation by discussing what makes photography such an effective medium for understanding conflict. For Brunt, its potential lies in its apparent simplicity: "It is a very simple medium, a very simple means of communication."

The immediacy of a photograph and its affective power over the viewer is perhaps also explained by the medium's ubiquity in today's world. With smartphones having vastly expanded access to image-making and sharing, Brunt sees images as an integral "part of our language and our day-to-day lives", allowing them to speak across languages and cultures.

Yet in the complex reality of war, photographs can distort as much as they can illuminate. A single image, Brunt explains, can flatten the nuances of conflict: "There is probably a binary between good and evil going on, victim and perpetrator, these kinds of things. And the reality of any sort of conflict is it's often far more complex than that."

Later in our discussion, Brunt expands on the problems with the ways that Western media captures war: "We want conflicts to be clean in the sense [that] we want a good guy, and we want a bad guy. We want to be able to support one side and see the other as an enemy. Whereas in the kind of conflicts that I've covered, like Kashmir, it's changed very much over time. Especially in an insurgency, with the blending of insurgent groups with civil society groups and human rights groups, it is very hard to pick out who's necessarily a good guy or a bad guy. It is all very murky."

By bringing his images into dialogue with other visual materials within a culture, Brunt's projects seek to resist these kinds of overly simplistic and reductionist interpretations: "I've started to think about it over time as this process of stepping back and trying to understand the position of my image as a very small contribution to the broader ecosystem of photography that may go on in a conflict."

This commitment to a richer, more multifaceted understanding of conflict is central to The Sersal Project, which focuses on the Yazidis in Northern Iraq and its diaspora population. Brunt founded the project with his colleague Marc Marin Webb in 2024, after Marin Webb unearthed a collection of photographs of daily Yazidi life, which were taken on an American archaeological expedition in the 1930s and held at the University of Pennsylvania's museum. Their aim was to repatriate these photographs from an inaccessible institutional archive and reunite them with the Yazidi community by exhibiting them in the places where they had originally been taken.

In the context of the genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) against the Yazidis in Sinjar in 2014, these photographs carry immense significance.

During the atrocities of the two-week campaign, where more than 5,000 Yazidis were executed and over 6,000 women and children were trafficked into slavery, family photo albums were abandoned as people fled their homes, resulting in much of the personal visual history of the Yazidis being lost.

ISIS also actively targeted the Yazidis' cultural heritage, destroying the places through which collective memory is sustained in their oral culture.

Brunt explains: "ISIS went around and blew up all the shrines, which are the core aspects of the ways that history is communicated to younger generations."

By displaying images of everyday life in the streets of places such as Bashiqa-Bahzani, where the walls still bear the scars of the brutality of 2014 through bullet markings and murals depicting the abductions of children, The Sersal Project introduces an alternative depiction of Yazidi life into these spaces.

> There is probably a binary between good and evil going on, victim and perpetrator, these kinds of things. And the reality of any sort of conflict is it's often far more complex.
> **– Nathaniel Brunt**

Brunt describes how more than a decade after the genocide, many Yazidis want to be seen as more than victims: "Most of the people in the West know the Yazidis only for those two weeks that they were stuck on the mountain or for the women who were captured and sold into sexual slavery."

Whilst having photographic documentation of ISIS' crimes is important as a form of evidence and recognition, Brunt explains how the project creates space for a different kind of visual representation, one where the Yazidi community can see themselves beyond and distinct from the horrors of their recent history.

The photographs from an archaeological dig over a hundred years ago now take on a new meaning and purpose in this context: "Something they can be proud of in their culture, a positive aspect of their culture."

For Brunt, one of the central questions of his work is thinking about the ways in which archival materials can be activated and put to use in places like Iraq and Kashmir.

"Preservation in a weird way is not our major priority," Brunt explains. "We're really interested in the potential of what an archive represents." Indeed, the project collaborated with a local music group in Sinjar, the Mirzo Music School, whose members performed traditional folk songs at the exhibition and developed new music in response to the images.

Brunt describes how this multidimensional encounter between visual and oral culture enabled an "interesting dialogue between past and present" and transformed remembrance into an active, collective process in the Yazidi community.

One example that has clearly stayed with Brunt powerfully illustrates the project's tangible impact in these communities. When someone recognised the groom in a series of wedding photographs from the institutional collection, Brunt and his team were led to the very house in Bashiqa depicted in the images, which had miraculously survived the 2014 attacks.

There, they were introduced to the groom's grandson, who had never seen the images of his grandparents' wedding. Just a few months ago, Brunt met the groom's son, now living in Germany, and used these photographs to open a conversation about his family's story. It is exactly this kind of encounter that Brunt's work makes possible.

I ask Brunt about how he establishes the relationships necessary to undertake a project of such weight and with such delicate sensitivities.

His response reflects the truly collaborative and participatory methodology that he has spent decades cultivating: "These kinds of projects are not things that you could do through a Zoom call. You've got to be there on the ground, meeting people, developing relationships ...

> We want to be able to support one side and see the other as an enemy. Whereas in the kind of conflicts that I've covered, like Kashmir, it's changed very much over time.
> **– Nathaniel Brunt**

you're often sitting down for a million glasses of tea and smoking a million cigarettes, especially being in Iraq."

Time is essential not only to ensuring that a project remains strongly aligned with the community it represents but also to allowing Brunt to reflect critically on his own approach: "I keep coming back to the idea about time, but it's the idea of slowness. I have been able to come back each year, back to work that I've been doing in the field and spend a lot of time with it and really think about what I'm doing."

This pace, he explains, creates room to consider the ethical questions at the heart of his practice: "What are we trying to actually achieve here, and how are we actually trying to do something positive for the community that we are working with?"

The digitisation of the photographs is central to this ethos, reflecting the project's commitment to activating the images beyond the project itself.

Through a QR code, anyone can access a digital drive containing the images, enabling them to circulate throughout the Yazidi diaspora. As Brunt explains, the photographs are repurposed in new contexts, shared across platforms and even made into AI-generated videos, allowing people to connect with these images on their own terms: "It is about making things usable, so that people can use the raw resources of the photographs and do something with them."

For younger generations of Yazidis, and especially those displaced by ISIS' campaign, this is particularly important. Brunt observes how young people growing up in internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Iraq, and in Germany, where Brunt is currently working, are curious about their history and culture: "They have a lot of questions about where they came from, and there's been a real drive to really dig into this kind of stuff." The Sersal Project responds to this need, offering a way to reconnect with a heritage brutally disrupted after 2014.

Looking ahead, the next phase of the project will focus on scaling its work globally. Brunt hopes to expand into Syria, where there is a significant Yazidi population, and in 2027, funding will support initial exploratory work in the United States and Canada, where substantial diaspora communities also offer opportunities to extend the project's reach.

Ultimately, the ambition is to develop an adaptable model that can operate beyond the Yazidi context and support other communities seeking to engage with their visual heritage.

Towards the end of our discussion, Brunt observes: "It's becoming increasingly complex to even visualise what modern war is."

Indeed, the images emerging from the battlefield of Ukraine, where drone footage enables every aspect of war to be recorded, or from Gaza, where the sheer scale of the destruction challenges the limits of representation, underscore the difficulty of making contemporary warfare comprehensible.

For Brunt, a possible solution lies in shifting the focus towards the personal and familial realities of conflict, looking at "the way that war or mass violence completely disrupts the domestic space and families. There's something really powerful about that for me at least".

Brunt's work not only offers a means of comprehending the nature of modern conflict, but also serves as an important point of connection and recognition for the communities whose experiences it seeks to represent.

Image credits: Nathaniel Brunt and Sersal Project, with permission.





OXFORD SPOTLIGHT



Stanley Arlidge *talks to* ***Edward Harcourt*** *about AI ethics, human intelligence, and autonomy*

Barely 30 seconds into my conversation with Edward Harcourt, I have egg on my face. In my preamble to the first question, I somehow ended up questioning the importance of "academic philosophy". The academic philosopher shot me a stern look.

It is an ironic error. The real-world relevance of philosophy was exactly why I wanted to talk to Harcourt, the director of the University of Oxford's Institute for Ethics in AI. The institute itself is a product of philosophy's importance in the age of AI, and was founded in 2021 thanks to a donation from Stephen A Schwarzman. It aims to offer "independent, informed perspectives on AI – spanning multiple disciplines but anchored in philosophy and humane learning".

I had witnessed this in action days earlier at the institute's summit on Human Rights and AI. The summit, with its focus on the importance of applying human rights frameworks to artificial intelligence, showed the value of the "open-ended inquiry" Harcourt says the institute promotes.

Harcourt is not a "specialist" in AI. Rather, he is an expert in the philosophical questions AI poses. It has provided a focus for "questions [that] have been on my mind for a long time". Questions like: "what's special about human beings?" or "why is the mind not a mechanical thing?" Public discourse on AI "seems to bring all these questions alive".

These are problems the AI companies are aware of themselves. Arguably, there has never been a better time to study philosophy. AI labs are hiring philosophers en masse, and recent American statistics show that philosophy graduates are more likely to be employed than their computer science peers.

Harcourt, however, offers a very different approach to ethical AI than the frontier labs. He criticises the "constitutional" model applied by Anthropic, the company behind the AI chatbot Claude.

Anthropic's approach to ethical AI centres on training. Its constitution encourages Claude to engage in its own philosophy: "We encourage Claude to approach its own existence with curiosity and openness." Harcourt argues: "It is a mistake to think that AI ethics and ethical AI is all about what you train models on."

It assumes a "consensus" that is almost impossible to reach in practice. "Just casting your net very, very wide and thinking, 'well, what do all humans agree on?'" might not produce anything. It also neglects the importance of "reasonable dissent" in reaching ethical goods. An AI model like Claude is, self-evidently, unable to argue with itself.

Anthropic's constitution also misunderstands human values. "There's a lot of pious talk about training models to share our values. Well, it's true that Saint Francis and Mother Teresa are fondly remembered, but another surefire way for human beings to get themselves immortalised is either to amass huge piles of money or to conquer huge swathes of other people's territory... So when they say, 'Oh, we want Claude to share our values, they mean some and not all.'"

Harcourt's approach is about "the way in which humans and AI inhabit an ecosystem together", not just the values AI is trained on.

I understand the true significance of this approach better when we discuss the possibility of AI being conscious later. He tells me we need to move away from the vexing question: "I think it misplaces the question because almost nobody doubts that dead human beings are non-conscious. Yet dead human beings are extremely special, whereas dead computers are rubbish."

AI ethics, then, is not just about filing the rougher edges of AI adoption. Rather, it is about recognising what is special about humans as we adapt to an "ecosystem" where machines are more capable than we are in many fields.

Establishing philosophy's importance is one thing; achieving impact is another. Harcourt thinks that setting his institute's targets on big tech is ambitious, and while a conversation is necessary, he recognises that they "can buy their own philosophy if they want philosophy".

Individual AI adopters are "the real soft spot". In industries like banking, insurance, management consultancy, education, and many more, market pressure means "people are adopting at a faster rate than they can quite keep up with themselves, so they are very keen on understanding what they're letting themselves in for". He tells me about a survey released just that morning saying 46% of financial firms only "partially understood" the AI they had adopted.

What would his advice be? "Make sure there are adequate human controls." This differs from just having a human in the chain of command: "It is no longer adequate to keep a human in the loop."

Doing so ignores the risks of "epistemic deference" to AI models. This, he explains, is akin to being a 7-year-old going on an outing with your 16-year-old brother. "You're going to do everything he says, right? Even if he asks you to do stupid stuff. Your decision isn't worth much because you're not the authority in the pair."

Cognitive atrophy, the decline in human critical thinking skills, is an even bigger risk, especially for the generation of Oxford students getting to grips with AI for the first time. It also has scary implications. If AI leads to a decline in human intelligence, we will have the most control over the technology in the current moment. As Harcourt puts it: "the more the world contains a preponderance of AI natives, the less there will be that kind of critical intelligence or scepticism around."

Read the full article at cherwell.org

Image credit: Ian Wallman, with permission.

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Data Consultant: Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Trophy Husband)

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Emmaculate Unc-in-Chief

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John Evelyn



We have won. Our victor has pinky promised us that something will happen! We have on good authority they will: sit in a chair (maybe the big one in the chamber), invite their 'friends' to debate dinners and try to wear the correct white tie. We are told they will definitely do this better than their opponent would have. Apparently the members are satisfied with the 'choice' they have made.

As with every 'victory' it is vital we remember how we got here. Both Presidential candidates made it onto the ballot with one valid nomination between them. Burnedout nearly fell foul of his public speaking requirement however, his lawyer declared that a last minute after-debate speech was far beneath a man who has "given MORE speeches" than any other candidate. John Evelyn despairs at the double standard applied here between Burnedout versus his forty-seven seccies. With Olaf, 51-May and That 'DJ' guy making up the rest of his privately educated pop-group, it seemed Burnedout was the sure favourite to win.

Blank Slate also found herself backed up by quite the Megagroup. Macbeth swore he would not nominate if she did not take on the International Defender of Farce. This left her with no choice but to give her newest officer candidate another Bash at victory. John Evelyn admires her commitment to charity work. Backed up by The Narrator, Macbeth and The International Defender of Farce, Blank Slate has had one of the political runs of all time. John Evelyn wonders if she was able to #RISE above the hand she claims to have been dealt.

Everyone's favourite Electoral Nepo-baby has now become the Cinderella of elections. Having fled her role as the clock struck twelve during both scrutiny and The Ball she left behind a cursed glass slipper. Whoever the shoe seemed to fit most at the time carried out the election however it remained a mystery as to who this would be to all the hacks until the very last moment. It's a first to wait for the revelation of the winning Presidential candidate and the head electoral official during an election. Such fun!

I send my regards to both sides whether they are feeling #JOY-ful or hoping that the sun will #RISE again and remind all candidates that in this election, there can only be one winner.

EDITORIAL



Oskar Doepke
Editor-in-Chief

The day you'll see this issue – Thursday, 26th November – also happens to be Thanksgiving. Although easy to overlook, wedged between the all-too-important Halloweekend and Christmas vacations, the holiday has long been special to me: a time to reconnect with family I don't often see, over a warm meal.

This year, I won't be home for it. Instead, as I write this, it is 5am and I have spent nearly 12 hours on InDesign. Welp, I'm sure the turkey will be lovely.

Still, Thanksgiving is about gratitude – and if this past year on Cherwell has given me anything, it's plenty of that. Whether it's covering protests live (now two terms running!), spending time with friends at a 'chocial', or producing a print you're in awe of, Cherwell has given me so much. As the end of term nears, it feels bittersweet to be leaving so soon.

To Emma, I want to say a special thank you. Working alongside you these past months has been a joy – I'm not sure how I would have kept sane without you (or, of course, your home-baked cookies).

At home, we end Thanksgiving by pulling the turkey's wishbone, and whoever gets the bigger half has their wish come true. Annoyingly, I have yet to win. Still, I can't help but feel that my wish has already come true.



Emma Heagney
Editor-in-Chief

As term draws to a close, I can't help but feel immensely sad that I'll be leaving *Cherwell*. I'm certainly not looking forward to actually having to lock in for my finals, nor to the growing familiarity I'll have with the term 'Neet', but most of all, I'll miss seeing the fruits of my hard work as well as the wonderful friends I've made along the way.

The sheer range of topics that I've become a near expert in through *Cherwell* has been astounding. From fringe Catholic sects and Union gossip to AI startups and biohacking parties, I've had a part in covering the most weird and wonderful parts of Oxford life. While, among my friends, I'm famously cynical about Oxford most of the time, I've come to appreciate the strange stories I've encountered at university, no matter how weathered I may sometimes feel.

What keeps me going are the amazing people I've met at *Cherwell*. Nowhere else, in my opinion, could you find such a dedicated group of people, sacrificing sleep and social lives to make this paper the best it can be. In truth, I was scared that with most of my year graduating in 2026, I'd feel a sudden onset of loneliness, but the weekly SET social pulled me through. Oskar, most of all, has been a lovely and hilarious constant in my life as of late, making me cry with laughter even in the most stressful of times.

So, even though I do feel sad, I will leave with beautiful and unexpected friendships, newfound confidence in my abilities, and memories that will define my university experience for the better.



Willow Jopp
Deputy Editor: Culture

There is something rather appealing about hibernation. As Michaelmas draws to a close, Oxford seems to enter a collective state of exhaustion, and the prospect of doing absolutely nothing becomes increasingly tempting. I would be lying if I said I hadn't spent much of this term retreating to my room, emerging only when absolutely necessary, and spending most of my time by myself. I found comfort this term in being a recluse, and watching the world continue outside your window while you make little effort to participate in it.

The Beatles understood this extremely well. In 'I'm Only Sleeping', John Lennon makes a case for letting the world carry on without you, refusing to feel guilty about spending a morning in bed. Not everything we do needs to be new or exciting to be worth enjoying. As I approach the end of my time at Oxford, it's helpful to experience moments which aren't as intellectually stimulating.

For me, this print also marks the end of my time as Deputy Editor: Culture. It has been a privilege to celebrate Oxford's creative life and work with such enthusiastic contributors. Culture has reminded me that some of the best things we do are those we pursue simply because we love them.

And so a quiet term ends quietly. At a time when everything feels stressful, I choose to do nothing. I shall return to hibernation for the cold months, and I hope you do too. The world will still be there when you wake up. In the words of John Lennon: "Please, don't spoil my day / I'm miles away / And after all / I'm only sleeping."

Flesh: The Oxford graduate who just won 'Drag Race UK'

Willow Jopp speaks with a rising drag star on her journey from Oxford to TV

Everybody who has spent any extended period of time around me will know that I have a strange obsession with *RuPaul's Drag Race*. So when I got the chance to interview Flesh – legendary Soho drag queen, Hertford College alumnus, and winner of the most recent season of the UK spin-off of RuPaul's beloved show – I was first and foremost quite nervous. Seeing Flesh on TV and Instagram is like staring into the sun. Talking to her, however, was like catching up with an old friend. Both in and out of drag, Flesh is beautiful to an almost intimidating point, but I quickly discovered through speaking to her that she is neither standoffish nor unapproachable. She was funny, warm, well-spoken, and intelligent, and over the course of an hour, I got to pick Flesh's brain about the contradictions of university life, the liberating possibilities of drag, and learning to become the person she always wanted to be.

There is perhaps no better place for a drag queen to reflect on the performance of identity than Oxford. A university where intellectual confidence and carefully cultivated personas are extremely commonplace, Oxford is very theatrical in its own way. Yet for Flesh, her time here was not always a particularly comfortable performance. "I have been a realist on the verge of pessimism for most of my life," she tells me. It is a surprising admission from someone whose public persona is characterised by glamour and self-assurance. Having been crowned so recently, though, Flesh is now looking towards a future in which, as she puts it, she can start believing in the seemingly impossible. But the journey towards that confidence was considerably less straightforward than the TV persona might suggest.

Before *Drag Race*, there was Hertford. Flesh studied English at Oxford, although she admits university was not necessarily where she wanted to be. Having discovered drag at just 15, after stumbling across performances by American drag queen Willam on YouTube, she spent several years harbouring what she describes as a "secret obsession". It was not until she was 19, towards the end of her first year at Oxford, that she began experimenting with makeup and drag herself. She had anticipated the distraction. "I knew, really, that if I gave myself the tools to start learning these things, I would not stop," she recalls. "So I was like, it will be a distraction from my studies. And I was right. It absolutely was."

Flesh credits Oxford drag collective Hot Mess with giving her her first-ever performing opportunity, as well as inspiring her to reconcile being hardworking and intelligent with being uninhibited and having fun. She recalls attending their Halloween party, which was also her first time going out in drag alone. She describes the performers as some of the most intelligent and hardworking people she knew, who could then get into drag and become completely uninhibited. What she took from interacting with them particularly stuck with me: "I want to be competent, intelligent, hardworking, and also totally uninhibited, almost like everyone thinks you're the loose cannon, but you're actually running the whole show."

Flesh describes her arrival at Oxford as something of an obligation. Having achieved the grades required to secure her place, she remembers opening her A-level results with a sinking feeling. "I was like, I have to go. I have to go because I've done it." The ensuing years were marked by a persistent conflict between academic expectations and her increasingly clear creative ambitions.

Of course, it was through drag that she began to reconcile the different parts of herself. When asked whether Flesh is a character she created or an extension of her own identity, she describes the persona as an aspirational version of herself. She speaks of what she calls "diva worship": the importance of powerful female figures in giving young queer people models of empowerment and self-expression. "For me at least, drag was a way of acting out that empowerment and therefore experiencing it in a way that I had never been able to just as myself," she explains. Yet the ultimate ambition was never to keep Flesh and her everyday identity entirely separate. Rather, drag offered a way of developing the confidence to bring them together. "My intention was always: I want to live a life where I'm myself all the time."

There is something particularly interesting about this idea in the context of Oxford, a place where students are often encouraged to take themselves very seriously. For Flesh, however, drag's apparent frivolity should not be mistaken for a lack of intellectual or artistic substance. She is quick to challenge the suggestion that drag is somehow less deserving of serious consideration than other art forms. "I think a lot of it actually lies in misogyny," she argues. "The minute that a lot of people are presented with the image of a woman or femininity in a way that isn't being sterilised to be taken seriously, they kind of assume that it's not important or serious or intelligent." For her, drag's capacity to combine comedy, glamour, and political messaging is precisely what makes it effective. A serious message, she suggests, can sometimes be more readily received when it is concealed beneath a layer of humour or spectacle. Her understanding of drag's political potential is also informed by the way it exposes prejudice within queer communities themselves. She speaks candidly about the misogyny, trans misogyny, and misogynoir she has witnessed throughout her career, arguing that experiencing the world through drag has given her a greater appreciation of the vulnerabilities faced by others. "We're falling at the first hurdle if we aren't protecting each other," she says.

This relationship between self-expression and social expectations also informs her recollections of being queer at Oxford. Despite studying alongside queer academics, Flesh remembers feeling reluctant to incorporate her own interests into her university work. She had written one paper on Polari, the gay slang historically associated with queer communities, but wishes she had explored more of her interests academically. "I felt for some reason that it would not be taken seriously," she says. "In Oxford, as a student, it absolutely felt like there was no room to be expressive." She recalls deciding, during a particularly difficult period in her second year, to go to Plush in drag with friends. Having heard that other Oxford drag queens sometimes attended to promote their events, she hoped to embrace a more visible version of herself. "I've never felt more invisible," she says. "I remember thinking, people are standing on my toes. Someone spilt their drink on me. I feel almost like making myself more visible has made people ignore me more."

Yet her relationship with confidence has not simply been about adopting a larger-than-life stage persona. Flesh speaks openly about struggling with insecurity and body image as a teenager. One of the earliest steps towards developing self-confidence, she remembers, was looking in the mirror every night and forcing herself to say something nice. "It sounds vain, but it's not, because it's not about looking at yourself. It's about acknowledging that you're a person," she explains. Drag, she suggests, gave her a sense of agency over both her appearance and the way she moved through the world. Changing how she looked changed how others responded to her, but it also changed how she perceived herself. Confidence, in this sense, became something she could practise rather than simply either possess or lack.

For someone whose career has been built around the art of transformation, it is perhaps fitting that her greatest ambition is not to become someone else, but to feel increasingly comfortable being herself.

Read the full piece online at cherwell.org

FILM & TV

What's Oxford watching?



Willow from Christ Church doesn't recommend *The Hunger Games: Sunrise on the Reaping* (2026):

"The latest instalment in the Hunger Games franchise is like beating a dead horse and milking a dead cash cow at the same time. Two-and-a-half hours of my life I won't get back."



Rüya from St Hugh's doesn't recommend *Solaris* (1972):

"The first depiction of a man wearing a mesh shirt and pleather pants to ever put me to sleep. Three hours of my life I will never get back. Please stop making your poor English students watch this."

Image credits: 'The Hunger Games: Sunrise on the Reaping' and 'Solaris' via imdb.com

'You Can See Everything' with a blind eye and an open heart

RÜYA ORAL

If it won't completely discredit me as a reviewer, I would like to start this by making an unqualified comparison to disgraced YouTuber Cody Ko. Before Tana Mongeau came forward with allegations that Ko assaulted her when she was 17, there was one instalment of his and Noel Miller's 'That's Cringe' series that, at 13, I thought was the height of humour. In it, they react to a video entitled 'you', which is essentially a VSCO-colour-graded montage of a couple living together in LA, overlaid with an awkwardly unscripted conversation about love, art, and entrepreneurship (by which they mean finger-painting and making smoothie bowls). The couple recount how they met: a month ago at Whole Foods, when she was buying celery, and he was buying rosé. "I always knew I would meet my soulmate at Whole Foods," she rasps, completely serious. They seem utterly high and deluded about their love for each other, convinced that they see the world differently than everyone else, and that their 'work' has the capacity to change everything. At one juncture, there is an extended shot of the shadow of a hose dripping water, the phallic nature of which prompts Ko and Miller to joke that they get it now.

Early in Nathan Fielder's *You Can See Everything*, we watch Elizabeth Holmes' romantic and business partner Billy Evans in the shower while Fielder stands outside with headphones on. He doesn't seem to know where to look, or what to do with his hands. The audience doesn't fare much better, as the wide shot of Evans' naked body occupies the screen for an oppressive amount of time. This is when the uncanny feeling that I had seen this film before finally realised itself. What Fielder captures throughout the first half of the documentary is that when Holmes and Evans talk to one another, no actual constructive dialogue ever happens. Instead, they stare unblinkingly into each other's beady, blue eyes and rattle off these therapy-speak neologisms that seem to put up more barriers than they take down, all under the guise of compassion. "I know *exactly* how you feel," Evans tells Fielder repeatedly, as he near-literally pulls it out and slams it on the table. Later, it becomes clear that he would also purport to know exactly how Holmes feels. About everything. To the point that she doesn't need to be around, and if she were, it would only decrease the efficiency of their product – sorry, relationship.

What I mean to say is, much of *You Can See Everything* feels like a mockumentary. Some viewers, whose eyes are more trained to Fielder's quirks than mine, claim that it actually is, and that many of the interactions are scripted to max out on absurdity. Perhaps because it was a midnight showing, perhaps because I had just had two cocktails, or perhaps because I was sitting in the fourth row on a friend's recommendation, so the possibility of Holmes and Evans crawling out of the screen *The Ring*-style felt low but not zero; that was not the impression I got. The absurdity felt eerily real. Parts of the three-hour-long footage are plain, laugh-out-loud ridiculous: Evans tells Fielder he did not recognise Holmes upon their first meeting because she was wearing a hat and a bandaid, Holmes claims not to understand the gag in Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first?" routine, which somehow proves her innocence, and the couple spend pretty much their entire screen-time with dry lips and red-rimmed eyes, sniffling between every word they speak. Other parts, however, are akin to something from A24's horror catalogue.

The question the film asks (and fails to answer) is whether Elizabeth Holmes is innocent. What it proves is that anyone can become a conspiratorial maniac under the right circumstances. Holmes and Evans are convinced that the world is out to get them, and they feign a failure to understand how they ever got into this situation in the first place. As a result of this self-victimisation, Evans begins to lash out – he eventually reveals that Holmes has granted him power of attorney, which he has been using to post deranged political takes on X under her name and make an AI bot of her likeness. He shrugs when Fielder asks how he would feel if someone used it to create a pornographic video. "If anything happens to me, this needs to be out there," he says. He declares that this is what Holmes would want; if she were free, she would spend all her time building "monuments of love" for him. So what's the difference if he exploits her will when she is unable to speak for herself?

Fielder's position remains unclear for most of the film, but by the end he has developed a fondness for Holmes that is clouding his judgment. He wants the truth, but he also wants to avoid making Holmes look like a villain. The most interesting position is that of (spoiler alert) Amanda Seyfried, who Fielder consults on the project after Holmes begins serving her sentence. Arguably the most well-adjusted of the whole lot, even Seyfried seems stir-crazy at times. She expresses some guilt over her portrayal of Holmes in the 2022 Hulu show *The Dropout*, but she continues to assist Fielder in 'reenactments' of his interactions with Holmes that he could not get on camera. One particularly poignant re-enactment is of Fielder's visit to the prison – we watch Seyfried-as-Holmes lament Seyfried's depiction of her, and (irony of all ironies) say that she never wants to be portrayed that way again. The re-enactment is cut with a scene where she and Fielder read the 'script' together, and she appears frustrated at Holmes' gripe with her. "I was playing a character!" she exclaims. Seconds later, she walks it back: "But she *did* do that." She, like Holmes, doesn't want to be the villain of the story.

We aren't exempt from the cabin fever either. At about the halfway point, Fielder reveals to Seyfried that before they began filming, Evans struck a deal with the A24 executives so that he and Holmes would receive a portion of the profits that the documentary made upon its commercial release. Fielder argued that on top of being uncustomary for documentary subjects, this deal would look uniquely terrible for Holmes and Evans, as it would put into question the objectivity of the narrative. Evans threatened to pull out of the project, so the filmmakers were forced to agree. This puts the audience in a position where, for the next hour and a half, we are forced to reckon with the fact that we've made a transaction not with an independent film studio but with a money-laundering fascist. We are only released from this moral anxiety at the very end, where some postscript tells us that Evans decided to cancel the deal right before the film's official US release. The relief of this reveal is so immense that for a moment we sympathise with those that are actually complicit.

In the prison visit reenactment, Fielder asks whether Holmes knew about Evans' deal, or about anything else he has been doing under her name since her imprisonment. Seyfried-as-Holmes tells him that she doesn't know, and doesn't care. She has never felt closer to Evans; they are constantly "building monuments of love" for each other. Fielder never points out this verbal parallel – in fact, he is convinced of her sincerity. The only thing that is clarified by the time the screen fades to black is that Holmes and Evans certainly were, are, building monuments. Towards what, it remains to be seen.

ART & FASHION

What's Oxford looking at?



Willow at Christ Church recommends the New Guard fashion show:

"Oxford Fashion Society put on a fashion show of admirable ambition in Regent's Park College. The atmosphere and looks were both equally exciting, and it's very admirable that they chose to highlight up-and-coming designers."



Lara at Wadham recommends *Paula Rego* at the Courtauld:

"I've been looking forward to the upcoming Paula Rego exhibit at the Courtauld. Featuring her 'Dog Woman' series, the collection expresses the power of female physicality and ferocity."

Image credits: 'The New Guard' and 'Grooming' via Courtauld.ac.uk

Ashmolean's 'Colonial Views of India' in review

***Ti-Jean Martin** debates the nuances of exhibiting post-colonial art in the UK*

A Bengal tiger, strangely docile, stares vacantly out of the surreal sepia-grey of an albumen print. A heavy chain snakes from its neck to a nearby tree, whilst the shadow of a photographer with a tripod looms larger-than-life from the left. Such is the view that opens *Colonial Views of India: Photographs by Eugene Clutterbuck Impey*, now in its final month at the Ashmolean. The fact that I managed to drag myself out of Fifth Week blues to see this exhibition is testament to the promise I thought it held. But much like the figure, presumably Impey himself, overshadows the photograph of the tiger, the shadows of imperialism and its legacies loom large over the exhibition, at times clouding its merits.

For the museum's one million annual visitors, the exhibit is, in theory, a treasure trove of insights into how pioneering mid-19th-century photographers propagated the ideologies of British imperialism through visual culture. Impey and his contemporaries produced some of the first images Britons saw of the subcontinent their 'mother country' had subjugated for over a century. Visitors to the exhibition see India through Impey's lens, in the same way that readers of his 1865 *Delhi, Agra, and Rajpootana Illustrated* (note the Anglicisation!), an early collection of 80 of the displayed photographs, would have done.

As the exhibition's curator Mallica Kumbera Landrus stated, the works displayed are "visual representation[s]… of imperial purpose". Impey's passion for photography, the captions note, developed during a transitional period of colonial rule, in which he served as a soldier, official, and political agent for the East India Company and, after 1857, the Crown. The desire to reinforce the Orientalist stereotypes that justified the imperial 'civilising mission', therefore, conspicuously permeates his work. It is the same upper classes that Impey 'managed' as an agent that his portraits depict in stage-managed poses of almost-narcotic greed. It is the same masses that Britain 'divided and conquered' that his framing forces into displays of imagined primitivity.

All of the above makes *Colonial Views of India* seem an invaluable resource, with the potential to stimulate direly needed conversations about British imperialism and its present-day aftershocks. Why, then, did it disappoint me so much?

The first problem is its location, a flaw already observed in many museums' attempts to decolonise their collections. The exhibition is tucked away in Gallery 29 on the first floor, usually reserved for 'Eastern Paintings', but you could be forgiven for missing this information in the only place it is visibly available: the revolving digital display behind the ticket desk. By contrast, the museum's *Aphrodite: The Making of a Goddess* exhibition imposes classical splendour on almost every entrance.

Does this prioritisation suggest an ulterior motive? Maybe not, but the exhibition's physical space is certainly underwhelming; one would think that such a vast and previously unseen collection would be displayed on a grand scale, not stuffed into a seemingly random room. It displays only a select few of the 247 Impey photographs the museum possesses, and does so in a way that doesn't render them any less mysterious than the works that remain archived. The presence (or lack thereof) of context for the photographs leaves much to be desired.

Captions are not absent, but they hide on tiny plates tucked into nooks, and barely scratch the surface of the complexities that the photographs illustrate. It is of course true that Impey's photography "reinforced stereotypes… to justify colonial efforts", "profiled perceived indigenous criminality", and, in the case of the allegorical tiger, "reflected views of Indians as cunning and deceptive". But, according to the exhibition, that's it. No further analysis is provided, and there are some questionable comments, too; one caption seems to take as fact the idea that imperial hill-stations, the setting of some of the portraits, provided "safe havens… from heat, diseases, and *local populations*".

Such a comment, if one even manages to find it beneath the monotone rows of identically-sized frames, makes implicit the assumption that the racist views Impey and his contemporaries held of their photographic subjects remain salient. One needn't even look beyond Oxford to see the issues this poses. I often regret buying a Union membership, but it did allow me to witness a debate last Michaelmas proposing that "The Sun Should Have Never Set on the British Empire", nothing if not an overt exposé of the fact that imperialist ideas remain insidiously persistent in modern Britain.

In response, the Ashmolean said: "Colonial Views of India is the first exhibition at the Ashmolean dedicated to photography in colonial India. It is the result of extensive research led by Professor Mallica Kumbera Landrus, the Ashmolean's Keeper of Eastern Art and a leading scholar of Indian art. The exhibition presents previously unseen photographs by Eugene Clutterbuck Impey, a British colonial officer, and examines the role of photography in documenting India and serving the interests of British imperial rule.

"The exhibition is displayed in Gallery 29, the Museum's dedicated gallery for Eastern Art works on paper. This purpose-designed space provides the controlled lighting and environmental conditions necessary to protect objects such as the sensitive photographic material featured in this exhibition. Its location is determined by the conservation requirements of the works, not by their subject matter.

"The exhibition's interpretation explicitly addresses the racist ideologies of British colonial rule and the use of photography to reinforce stereotypes and justify colonial dominance. The reference to hill stations as 'safe havens' describes how British colonial communities regarded these places and should be read in the context of the full caption, which examines the inequalities and prejudices of the period.

"The exhibition is accompanied by the first Ashmolean publication dedicated to the use of photography in colonial India. This substantial scholarly volume, with contributions from eleven specialists, examines the photographs in greater depth, including the Ashmolean's own historical connections with British colonial institutions. A copy is available in the gallery for visitors wishing to explore the subject further."

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

College scarves: Out of fashion or out of reach?

KENNETH WONG

May I feel it?" one wide-eyed postgrad asked; a curious undergrad next to her soon took her turn to run her fingers over the fabric. Suddenly I felt like I was one of those alpacas that occasionally get trotted out for 'welfare' events around this university. The object of their fascination was none other than my wool college scarf. For something that used to be a rather pedestrian accoutrement in the wardrobe of many students at Oxford and the other place, I get quite a few compliments about it.

The college scarf, traditionally made from Saxony wool, dates back to at least the 1940s. Said to be a product of wartime rationing, these roughly six-foot-long scarves feature vertical stripes which differ in size, number, and colour depending on the college or university. For decades, they were probably as ubiquitous around Oxford as college puffers are today and at Cambridge; almost every student used to buy one, according to staff at Ryder & Amies, the official outfitters of the University of Cambridge. They used to adorn the sets of *University Challenge* too. College scarves proved to be equally popular on the other side of the Atlantic. In the 1950s, if a young lady enjoyed the warm embrace of a college scarf from an Ivy League school, it often signalled that she also enjoyed the warm embrace of an Ivy League fellow.

Today, despite still being sold in shops such as Walter's and The Varsity Shop, the venerable college scarf is scarcely seen around Oxford or British universities more broadly. *The Independent* sounded the alarm in 1994: "The college scarf, that jolly symbol of undergraduate life, has disappeared from our campuses." One Surrey man wrote a letter to the editor of *The Telegraph* in 2013 asking: "SIR – Whatever happened to university and college scarves?" Indeed, I have been here nearly five years myself, and, in my college, I have only seen three others wear our scarf. However, those who do wear it, wear it passionately. One postgrad I spoke to told me that her Balliol scarf was her "most treasured possession", given to her by an old member. With unmatched college zeal, she dons the scarf even though "the violet stripe clashes with my hair and most of my clothes".



Evidently, pride in one's college does not seem to have declined – if anything, students nowadays are even more ostentatious in how they show their college affiliation through their dress. What then explains the decline in popularity of the once omnipresent college scarf? Are they out of fashion, or perhaps out of reach? It might be a bit of both.

I got in touch with Mark Amies, the shop floor manager at Ryder & Amies, his family shop in Cambridge. He told me: "Ten to fifteen years ago, I'd estimate 30-40% of new undergrads would buy a college scarf. I think the main reason for their decline in Cambridge has been the popularity of the college puffer jacket."

I suspect it is no different here in Oxford. Naff as they are, the college puffer is simply a more versatile piece which has practically become the uniform here. If subfusc, cap, and gown were the full-dress uniform at the University of Oxford, the college puffer is undoubtedly the everyday battledress. Moreover, with students ever more enthusiastic to show off their college belonging, the common puffer, emblazoned with college arms and bold-faced lettering, does much better than the understated college scarf, which sports colours that most students even within the college no longer recognise, let alone those outside the college. "This is actually our college scarf," I insist. "But aren't our colours red and blue?",\ they reply, mystified. Freshers today are in dire need of a Trooping the Colour-style event in the quad where the college colours can be paraded around. Until that happens, those who are curious will have to look up their college scarf colours in the Wikipedia article on academic scarves.

While the appearance of the college puffer jacket might have sounded the death knell for the college scarf, the cost of the latter today will perhaps be the final nail in the coffin. Just over a decade ago, a college scarf from Walter's cost about £27 to £29, depending on whether you were garish enough to flaunt your college arms on it. When I first went up to Oxford in 2021, they were £34.99 to £44.99, which at the higher end is roughly the cost of a college puffer today. Now they go for an eye-watering £69.99 both at Walter's and The Varsity Shop. Ede and Ravenscroft, somewhat surprisingly, is the most affordable option at £29.99, but most of their college scarves are out of stock (and have been for some time, it seems).

With the soaring price of college scarves in Oxford, it is no surprise that cash-strapped students have opted for the more utilitarian and ever popular college puffer. "Most students just don't have the funds to buy both,", Amies told me. Cheaper 'college scarves' do appear regularly in stash drops for under £20, but do not be deceived by these petroleum-based fibre simulacra. While they bear the college arms, they do not bear the college colours; their horizontal running stripes, typically in an unthinking white or navy, betray their origins as an absent-mindedly mass-produced accessory, divorced from time-honoured college tradition and wedded to the pernicious cult of fast fashion.

If you can afford one new or acquire one second-hand, there is still nothing quite like a real *Made in England* wool college scarf. Stylish, warm, and wrapped up in history, it is a subtler, gentler mode of disclosing your college ties. Old members of the college will recognise those sacred colours while new members will at least take note of your 'vintage', 'preppy' style. Scratchy as college scarves might be, I can certainly imagine many less pleasant ways of having your college around your neck!

Image credit: Kenneth Wong for Cherwell

Exploring Oxford's experimental music scene

Leandro Landolina talks to the founder of Experimental Music Oxford

Mia Windsor harnesses hydrophones to siphon the restless murmur of effervescent liquid into delicate feedback loops; Mariam Rezaei deftly jolts, smears, and garbles vinyl records into warbling caricatures of themselves; Isidora Edwards coaxes her cello strings, overlaid with crumpled foil, to utter brittle rasps and wiry squeals. At the Experimental Music Oxford (EXMO) concert series, the possibilities of sound are pushed to their limits.

EXMO's inaugural event on 23rd January 2025 was hardly a tentative step into the UK's experimental music scene for the series' founder Zack Di Lello. Bringing together turntablist Mariam Rezaei and pianist Pat Thomas for their first-ever improvised collaboration, the series couldn't have started with a louder bang.

This ambition grew out of Zack's enthusiasm for Oxford's growing experimental music scene. He recalls his excitement for collaborations between Modern Art Oxford and the University of Oxford's Electronic Music Practice Research group (EMPRes), concerts by the Oxford Improvisers, and the annual *audiograft* festival by Oxford Contemporary Music (OCM) and Oxford Brookes' Sonic Art Research Unit (SARU). "You don't have to go to London, you don't have to go to Manchester, it's all happening right here in our backyard", he enthuses. Starting EXMO, then, was less an attempt to fill a gap than to throw another voice into the mix of Oxford's experimental music scene.

But what exactly makes music 'experimental'? EXMO's eclectic programming – spanning improvised drone sets, music theatre, and contemporary classical music – resists any neat stylistic unity. For Zack, "experimental is more of an ethos", an impulse to spill out of the boundaries of convention and rework expectations of what a performance can be.

He also recognises the audiences who, welcoming uncertainty, unsure of what a concert may entail, are just as experimental as what's happening on stage. It's no wonder that he recalls an audience member remarking after a concert: "Huh, I didn't know that was possible."

Zack's lack of a rigid curatorial formula behind EXMO's programming is refreshingly informal. Put simply, when unique musicians catch his ear, a concert takes place. His openness also extends to emerging artists: at virtuoso cellist-improviser Isidora Edwards' concert, a student band took the opening slot. "It's not about reputation, necessarily. If you're making music that's cool and interesting, then that's what it's all about", he tells me.



Curiosity for the unexpected, Zack suggests, knits experimental music to the ecosystems it inhabits. A forest, like an improvised performance, entails an unruly soundworld – neither is entirely predictable. EXMO's first trio of concerts, Growth, Decay, and Sustain, constituting the *Natural Envelopes* series, manifested this ecological thinking. Indeed, the same sensibility surfaces in Zack's own work as a composer, his pieces including *Worm Together!* and *your HOUSEPLANT is a DINOSAUR*. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that an outdoor concert would be his *ne plus ultra*. With humming traffic, birdsong, and passing conversation no longer intrusions but part of the sonic landscape, the distinction between performance and environment dissolves. Perhaps an outdoor EXMO concert is not far off; as Zack told me, "everything is up for grabs".

With the backing of St John's College, which generously funds and hosts the series in its auditorium, EXMO has one particularly important feature: all its concerts are free to attend. "I never want to do a concert that isn't free", Zack insists. Drawing large audiences of local residents, alongside students and staff from both universities, the series functions as a bubbling social hub. In a city where cultural experiences often take place behind college walls or come at a price, EXMO proudly throws open its doors to everyone.

At the series' latest concert on Thursday 19th November, Kari Watson gave their UK premiere of *Fuse*, a drone-heavy work for analogue modular synthesisers and programmed drum machines. Donning custom wearable electronics, Watson appeared as a kind of cyborg performer, enmeshed within the very circuitry of the performance. Blurring boundaries between performer and instrument, human and machine, Watson's performance neatly embodied the experimental ethos Zack seeks to centre in EXMO's events.

Ultimately, EXMO is less concerned with defining experimental music than with keeping its possibilities open. Zack hopes audiences leave with "a little bit of a sense of wonder", charged with a newfound curiosity for sounds, ideas and experiences beyond their expectations. Perhaps that is the series' most radical ambition: not simply to stage experimental music, but to encourage us to tune in to the world with a greater openness to the unexpected.

Image credit: Ian Hanham, with permission.

MUSIC

What's Oxford listening to?



Fanny at Oriel recommends 'take me home (4 christmas)':

"A super fun song which people have been taking too seriously in the media. It's warm, upbeat, and gets me in the Christmas spirit. I hate anyone who calls this derivative – live a little!"



Toby at New recommends 'On This Christmas (It Only Gets Better)':

"Gay Jesus has returned and blessed us with this beautiful Christmas track. Absolute peak."

Image credits: 'take me home (4 christmas)' and 'On This Christmas (It Only Gets Better)' via albumoftheyear.com

A tale of two tongues: 'Iphigenia at Aulis' in review

JOE HAYES

Oxford Classical Drama Society's triennial Greek play, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, was performed at the end of Fourth Week in the grandeur of the Oxford Playhouse theatre. Directed by Wally McCabe and their associate, Kelly Yu, particular attention should be paid to the production's efforts to speak in two languages simultaneously, Greek and English. It was incredible; at a moment's notice, actors would effortlessly switch between modern English and ancient Greek, and I was left rather speechless at the achieved, layered response this evoked. The production invoked the visual and musical language of Celtic Ireland, further complicating the tension between Euripides' tragedy, thought to be written and left unfinished between 408 and 406BC, and its modern theatrical interpretation. This was a curious collision and, although I was rather perplexed to begin with, it seemed to provide the scaffolding that allowed the drama to transcend the geographical and temporal delineations often connoted with classical drama. However, beneath this cross-section of languages and cultural traditions remained a truly moving human narrative, one which by the play's finale was hard to shake off. After the curtains were drawn, and while I wandered back home, an interlude of reflection came upon me: underneath the consequences of sacrifice, the emotional intimacy of familial relationships, and how these become perfectly strained, ultimately grounded the tragedy. Hence, McCabe and Yu's *Iphigenia at Aulis* did not simply revive classical drama; it seemed to morph into an exploration of how love, duty and loss might continue to speak to an audience across both temporal and geographical borders.

Although not immediately present on stage, the relationship between Clytemnestra (Michelle Rodrigues) and Iphigenia (Ademide Obagun) ostensibly provided the production's emotional foundation, tying the grand political motives and mythological conflicts within a concentrated familial space. Obagun's Iphigenia fluttered onto the stage, a true picture of innocence that was as visually beautiful as it was morbid; the dramatic irony looming over her entrance imminently gave rise to her impending sacrifice, thus rendering this initial display of youthful exuberance rather unsettling. In a way, her innocence became hard to distil from the tragedy awaiting her. Something was certainly cruel in this spectacle, yet Obagun's performance complicated the course of the production in what became a truly palpable redefining of Iphigenia's innocence. Refusing to be boxed into a category of passive naivety, Obagun's Iphigenia gradually evolved into a figure who challenged the assumed weakness of her innocence through which she was introduced. It began as a seemingly simple antithesis between innocence and experience, yet as the tragedy unfolded, this relationship became mingled and hard to sustain. This especially piqued my own interest when Iphigenia was forced to confront her fate, and decipher the political and patriarchal forces which ushered her towards death. Ultimately, it became clear that Iphigenia's strength was grounded in her apparent gentleness, redefining the borders of her agency whilst the rest of the cast acted upon violent impulse and heightening tensions. Maybe what made this so emotionally stirring was that Obagun's Iphigenia never entirely abandoned her gentleness, but it instead became the very method through which she asserted herself. Obagun's performance built a frontier against the temptation to become overly aggressive, presenting a tragic heroine whose accumulating firmness rooted itself in the supposed vulnerability which initially defined her, swirling onto stage in a billowing white gown.

That being said, the resurgence of agency here was not independent of its contradictions and complications; after all, how liberated could Iphigenia be when her fortune was anticipated by the audience and her sacrifice almost predestined by the people around her? This ambiguity was hard to reconcile with and became notably affecting when considered alongside Rodrigues' Clytemnestra. Her maternal desperation thudded in direct contrast to Iphigenia's acceptance, and it was this ongoing tension which struck me as a member of the audience. The relationship between the two was inherently complex and somewhat doomed, and this unresolved tension was offered to the audience to figure out – in what became a moment of sharing between cast and viewers. Within this discomfort, the spectacle of sacrifice itself emerged, and it was not limited to mere execution; as Rodrigues' Clytemnestra clung to the life of her daughter, Obagun's Iphigenia seemed increasingly content with ending her life on her own terms, and this tug-of-war between the two shed light on how members of the cast were inseparable from each other, and therefore were forced to sacrifice their own perspectives, as well as negotiate their own emotional response, in the name of a tragic compromise. Overall, it was this painful competition between maternal love and individual agency, already complicated by a wider family network, that rendered Obagun and Rodrigues' theatrical dynamic so compelling.

However, this constant, unresolved negotiation between perspectives was not limited to the intense relationships between characters. Indeed, McCabe and Yu extended this tangible dramatic tension into the production's aesthetic. Drawing on the visual culture and musical tongue of Celtic Ireland, Euripides' ancient world was reimagined in both a surprising and satisfying way. Whilst the cast switched between ancient Greek and modern English, another intersection emerged between two initially separate cultural traditions: Greek and Celtic. This peculiar intersection allowed the audience to witness a conversation between two seemingly disparate worlds, bringing forward a medley of philosophies, sound and costume. For example, the traditional Greek Chorus manoeuvred around the stage, singing in both English and their native tongue, whilst cavorting to the instruments of a Celtic past – rather than their own. Tristan Morse's infamous Achilles was draped in tartan and fur, nostalgic of a much colder, bleaker environment than that of Aulis. This curious juxtaposition was particularly effective in disorienting the audience's, and my own, expectations of what classical drama should manifest as in the modern-day theatre. Yet within this suspension between two distinct cultures, there seemed to be a wider resolution. Whilst the Chorus communicated their own anxieties through the music of a fiddle, and not a lyre, the initial unfamiliarity of the production transformed into something more recognisable. It seemed to be that McCabe and Yu were deliberately questioning whether tragedy, and the themes it entails, could be exclusively manacled to one geographical, cultural, or historical context. Therefore, the consequent dissonance did not read as entirely confusing, but instead it felt productive. Throughout the melange of inherited traditions that the production performed, the thought-to-be prescriptive boundaries and limits of what Classical theatre ought to be were stretched, revisited and eventually reimagined. Thus, as the tragedy resounded throughout the walls of Oxford Playhouse, the theatre itself seemed to echo back a new idea: perhaps the emotional and philosophical concerns of ancient Greek drama might find an equally moving form through the artistic traditions of another culture.

Ultimately, the Oxford Classical Drama Society's *Iphigenia at Aulis* became an eye-catching movement towards theatrical reinterpretation and subsequent reinvention. McCabe and Yu's work appeared to rebel against a prescriptive formula, refusing to confine itself within the walls of ancient origin. Underlying the mixtures of language and culture dwelled a substratum of profound truth, one which was inherently human. As I left the theatre that evening, I was surely reminded of how the form of tragedy is inextricably founded upon the human experience, and how emotional bonds between terrified individuals are often nearly impossible to reconcile. Its raw reception struck me the most, and whilst I was eternally grateful for the translations to modern English on the screens above the stage, leaving the theatre I knew that Euripides' tragedy needed no translation – it spoke to me as a human.

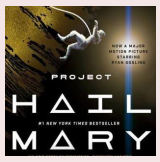
BOOKS

What's Oxford reading?



Michael at Wadham recommends *Infinite Jest*:

"It's the ultimate performative male book but also THE great postmodern novel."



Theo at St Peters recommends *Project Hail Mary*:

"Kudos to Andy Weir for being a rare sci-fi writer who actually likes science."

Image credits: 'Infinite Jest' and 'Project Hail Mary' via waterstones.com

Falling back in love with books

FREYA ROBSON

From the age of six, it was almost a given that if no one could find me, I would be tucked away in a corner reading a book, blissfully unaware of the world around me. Reading before school, reading between lessons (and sometimes during lessons), and – of course – reading under the covers by torchlight. I simply couldn't get enough, and I tore through books fuelled by a hunger for more fictional worlds to lose myself within. However, the great love story between me and reading soon faced an almost insurmountable obstacle: the University of Oxford.

When applying to the University, almost every piece of advice featured the same phrase: "As long as you like reading, you'll be fine!" While there were many daunting things about the prospect of coming to Oxford, this was never one for me. Reading was a part of me, so natural that it felt like breathing, so I would have no problem being faced by treacherously long reading lists week in and week out.

While I entered my first Michaelmas term bright-eyed and with aspirations of reading classic novels in the Botanical Gardens during study breaks, I finished Eighth Week not wanting to even see a book in my vicinity. Despite promises to myself that I would reignite my passion for reading over the vacation period, and would set aside time in term to pick up a book, the Christmas holidays seemed to melt into Hilary term, and then into Trinity, and before I knew it I no longer felt qualified to call reading my favourite hobby.

The problem was that my relationship with reading had changed. Reading was no longer something magical that could fill long stretches of time on a lazy Sunday; reading was now something entrenched in deadlines, critical analysis, and the ever-pressing weight of an unwritten essay. Instead of being my source of relaxation, reading had become an activity that I needed a break from. No longer could I read a book without having to trawl through secondary sources, just to realise that maybe I didn't quite understand the text at all. And so, I thought, this was the end of the beautiful romance that reading and I had once shared.

But over the summer, as I slowly made my way through the slog of yet more reading lists for the approaching year, I saw a familiar title appear: Voltaire's *Candide*. Seeing an old favourite of mine in my required reading immediately flooded me with nostalgia as I remembered reading the novella for the very first time, racing through the chapters as fast as I could. So I picked my copy back up from the shelf, wiped off the thin layer of dust that it had collected, and began to (re)read.

The classic 18th-century novella follows the story of the lovable yet infuriatingly naïve Candide, who is cast out of the kingdom of Thunder-ten-Tronck when he is discovered in a romantic embrace with Cunégonde, the princess whom he is not worthy of in rank. His tale then consists of a series of misfortunes – or rather, catastrophes – in his quest to find and win back his true love. Along the way, Candide is conscripted into the Bulgarian Army against his will, threatened with execution, and forced to watch his philosophy master be hanged. He encounters natural disasters, shipwrecks, betrayals, slavery, rape, murder, and a whole assortment of other tragic events.

For much of the novel, he bizarrely maintains his Leibnizian philosophical position that this world is the "best of all possible worlds", making the horrific events that unfold strangely comical for the reader. The tale ends with Candide finally finding Cunégonde to marry her, only to find that she has become incredibly ugly (despite his powers of political commentary through storytelling, clearly battling misogyny was not on Voltaire's agenda). Candide reflects on the immense journey he has undertaken and all that he has seen, deciding to at last reject optimism as an approach to life to focus on personal pursuits: "but let us cultivate our garden" ("*il faut cultiver notre jardin*").

Though it is certainly not a perfect novel and is evidently filled with outdated ideas, rereading *Candide* imbued a passion for reading that had long been dampened. After turning the first page, it wasn't long before I found myself laughing along with Voltaire at Candide's utter naivety, rolling my eyes at the stubborn philosophy of Pangloss, and gasping with horror as the characters underwent countless brushes with death. I finished the book in record time and felt almost disappointed that it wasn't longer, a feeling that I hadn't experienced in far too long. Whilst arguably written as a crude objection to a complex philosophical theory (one that would not stand up in a philosophy tutorial), the action-packed satire that centres this novel is what truly brought my love of reading back to life.

After nearly a year, I had rediscovered the joy of racing through a novel – and because of a reading list no less! I was reminded that reading can be something that fills me with excitement, rather than dread, and that I had been looking for it in all the wrong places.

Instead of focusing on the minimal free time that is the unfortunately inevitable side effect of an academically rigorous degree, I'm choosing to enjoy the pockets of time spent in the library, tucked away with a book. After all, the reason I'm here is a passion for my subject; so why not enjoy it?

While I'm not suggesting that the path to falling back in love with reading is only possible via 18th-century French texts, there is value in reconnecting with your old favourites to bring back a literary passion. Your love of books is not dead; it is simply buried underneath deadlines, essays, and a general busyness that is hard to shake in Oxford. So wander over to the bookshelf and pick up a story that used to keep you hooked until the early hours of the morning – that feeling just might be revived once more.

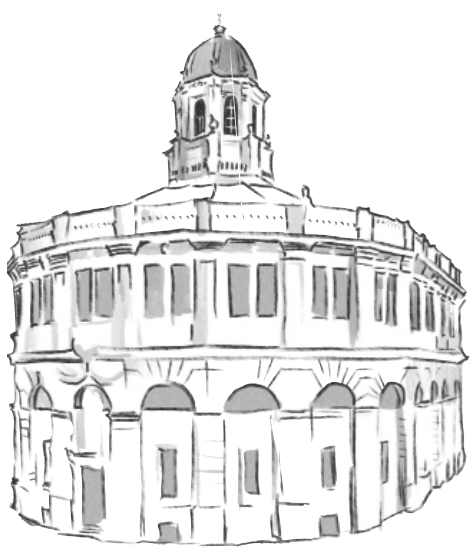
Image credit: Philippe Trière, public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



WHAT'S ON

STAGE
Snow White
Oxford Playhouse
24th November–3rd January

1984
d'Overbroek's Cohen Hall
1st–4th December



MUSIC
Basslayerz
O2 Academy Oxford
5th December, 11pm

FILM & TV
The Hunger Games: Sunrise on the Reaping
Curzon Oxford
From 20th November

BOOKS
Catherine Clarke: A History of England in 25 Poems
Blackwell's
1st December, 5:30 pm

ART
Saad Qureshi: On Paradise' Trail
Various locations around Oxford
Until 6th December

Artist talk: Robin Danely – Rendering Light on Form
Hunsdon House
6th December, 4pm

Going to a concert, play, film, or exhibition?

Email culturecherwell@gmail.com to write up a review.

The Source

On Reflection

belly deep
a fish slapping its wet sides
against the soft side of my ribs
nowhere to go
i press my palms
to feel it turn
and feel the lovely sickness rise
to prise apart the little cage
and lift the thing out dripping
and hold it to the light
to lay it in my lap
and stroke its tender head
and say there, there
you dreadful thing
quite innocently
with blood all over its hands
its silver belly narrowing to the chalk
white spiral of a whelk
the soft pearly lip parting
on the quick of a word
which drowns
in the bloody rush that fills the hollow
of my head
and licking the salt from the creases of
my hands
line by line
i taste the whole enormous sea—
just earlier you said
i think the milk's gone funny . . .
to find it in a book!
some great fat anthology on the highest
shelf
and pull it down
with a finger hooked about its spine
let it fall open
somewhere in the middle
there!
put it back
step away
then snatch it down again
like a magpie with a sixpence
quite beside itself
with the shine of the thing
with the sin of wanting
quite unable to fly

for looking
for i should like to keep it
to bury it, or carry it,
or simply sit beside it
admiring
as i begin to understand
why criseyde was moved by words

Marie Boardman-Dempste, *Harris Manchester College*

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Sanctuary is a habit, not a plaque

Priya Burrow discusses the realities of displacement and belonging at Oxford

Three Oxford colleges now hold College of Sanctuary status. But who gets to feel at home in a university where belonging can seem like a privilege?

I edit the food pages of this paper, so perhaps it is no surprise that my first lesson in sanctuary happened in a kitchen. Nobody used the word. I was standing over a chopping board in Manchester, volunteering with Refugee and Asylum Participatory Action Research (RAPAR), at cooking sessions that doubled as English practice. Someone held up a bunch of coriander. We repeated the word, then cheerfully disagreed about how much belonged in the pot. Nobody delivered a lecture on inclusion. We were making lunch, learning from one another, and getting on with it.

I often think about those afternoons whilst in Oxford, a city very good at plaques. We put them up for poets, scientists and prime ministers, then hurry past them on the way to tutorials. Studying history has taught me to read them as arguments about who counted. Oxford knows how to tell us who belonged here. It makes it harder to ask who feels like they belong here now.

Sanctuary is not new to this city. Lotte Labowsky, a Jewish classicist who fled Nazi Germany, came to Somerville College in the 1930s and stayed as a fellow until her death in 1991.

In May 2023, Oxford became the first collegiate university to be recognised as a University of Sanctuary by City of Sanctuary UK. Colleges can earn recognition in their own right. Mansfield College and Somerville came first, setting up fully funded Sanctuary Scholarships with support from the University. This September, Reuben College became the third: the first graduate college to receive the award, and the first to go through the University's new process.

Three colleges receiving the award is progress. But it leaves most without an award of their own, even though the University's status covers all of Oxford. A college without a certificate is not necessarily doing nothing, just as a college with one has not finished the work.

The award rests on three principles: learn, embed, and share. Understand what seeking sanctuary means; make welcome part of how an institution works; pass on what you discover. Scholarships are crucial. According to UNHCR, just 11% of refugees were enrolled in tertiary education in 2025. A funded place is not a symbolic gesture – it is a door.

But the word I keep coming back to is embed, because it asks a less comfortable question: what happens on an unremarkable Tuesday in November? Consider the small assumptions woven into college life: that you have documents to hand, a family to call in an emergency, somebody to help you move in. Yet sanctuary might also mean a porter who learns to pronounce your name, a hardship fund that is genuinely easy to reach, or a freshers' week that takes none of these things for granted. Kindness matters, but it cannot replace systems that work.

> Sanctuary is not new to this city. Lotte Labowsky, a Jewish classicist who fled Nazi Germany, came to Somerville in the 1930s and stayed as a fellow until her death.

There is a danger, too, in imagining sanctuary as something generous Oxford gives to passive recipients. People who have been displaced are students, researchers, and neighbours, not simply stories of hardship. The question is not only whether Oxford lets them through its doors, but whether they get to shape what happens inside.

This is why I have spent Michaelmas trying to bring a College of Sanctuary bid to Pembroke, and I should declare my interest: I am one of the students pushing for it. I came to Pembroke through its outreach scheme, which is nothing like being forced to leave your home, and I do not want to flatten the difference. But it taught me that a door open on paper is not the same as feeling invited through it. What I have learned is less glamorous than writing a proposal. I would rather Pembroke's commitment outlast me. A plaque is fixed to a wall. A habit has to be practised by everyone.

None of us needs to wait for a college vote to begin. Student Action for Refugees has an Oxford branch, which I applied to join this year. Asylum Welcome, with up to 300 volunteers, offers roles from teaching English to mentoring and advice. June's Sanctuary Fair at Florence Park Community Centre in Oxford took that welcome beyond college gates. And if your college has never discussed sanctuary status, ask your JCR to put it on the agenda.

Oxford is skilled at preserving the names of the people who came before us. It could be just as ambitious about the people trying to find their place here today. I still remember that chopping board: someone passing the coriander, somebody else making room. Nothing was unveiled. Nobody posed for a photograph. We just kept cooking. Perhaps that is what sanctuary should look like once the ceremony is over.

Gwerth y byd a'r Betws

LARA MURPHY

Sleepovers at my grandmother's always had a common thread: Mam Betws would make me a hot chocolate to take to bed as I listened to stories about our family. Wrapped in the cotton-wool duvet of childhood, we would explore the branches of our family tree; from tales of relatives hiding money in their gardens to vampires and flour-covered dogs, I developed a quiet fascination with the past. As I questioned and probed, layers unfurled, and my understanding of our identities expanded. More complex themes crept in: hunger, strikes, and lost ambitions – our bottomless seam of history that we would excavate before bed. Years later, these stories still play on my mind, especially as I settle in at Oxford, a world I could scarcely imagine from my hometown in rural Wales.

A palimpsest is a surface written upon repeatedly, each new inscription obscuring but never quite erasing what came before. My home, to me, is something of a palimpsest. Beneath its rugged landscape and seemingly unambitious exterior lie extraordinary lives. In Betws, my village, the 1984-85 Miners' Strike remains one of those inscriptions. Its legacy was not simply one of solidarity and strength, but of division. Families were fractured, and picket lines became both political and personal battlefields as communities confronted competing loyalties. My own family was deeply affected. My grandfather, the captain of four coal faces at Betws Colliery, travelled to London to campaign for the miners and, according to family accounts, became one of the most frequently arrested miners in the region for refusing to leave picket lines. My grandmother was a steadfast supporter, going without meals so my dad could eat, saving up any and every penny. Through their stories, history became something more immediate: neither something to romanticise nor ignore, but something that embeds itself in the contours of our everyday lives.

Perhaps the most important part of this palimpsest was the woman who taught me to read it. My grandmother wrote her way through life in a small Welsh town, tracing our family history back to Cornish pirates. However, in the most ordinary family anecdotes, she found the remnants of something much larger. Her work made me realise that family history is not simply tracing names and dates backwards. It is an attempt to understand the people behind the names, and to discover how their lives have quietly found their way into those that have come after them. I realise now that my values, my aspirations, and even my traits are not entirely my own, but rather are infused with the experiences of my ancestors.

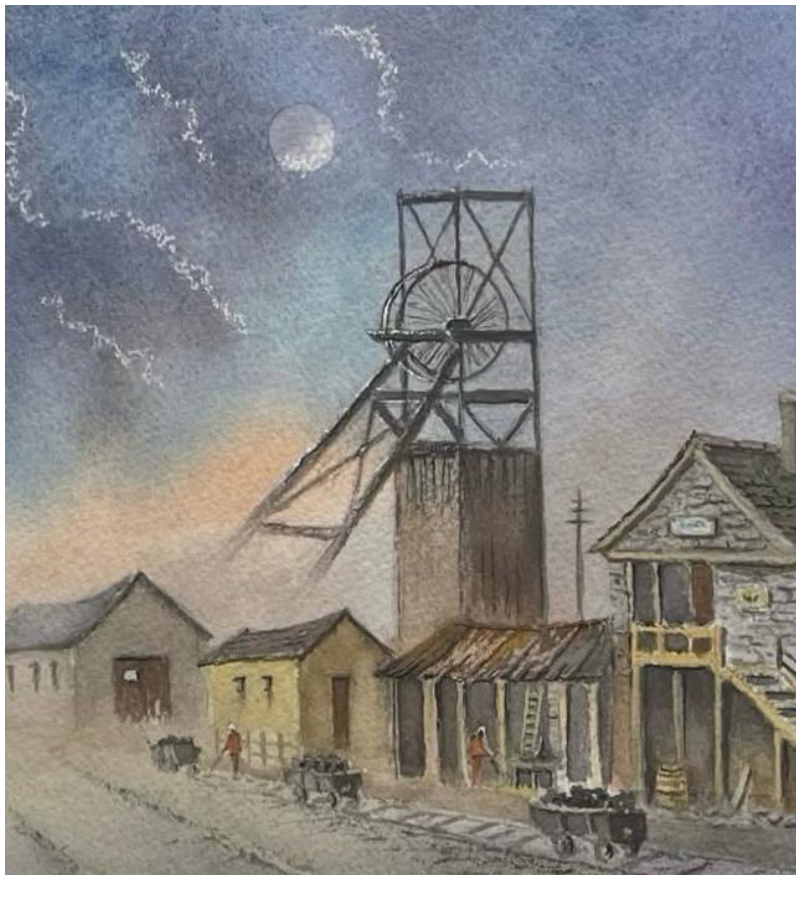
Coming to Oxford has made me more conscious of the many ways history can be understood. Here, the past refuses to remain in the past. It clings to the stonework, stares back at us from portraits lining college walls, and gathers in the dust of rooms that have witnessed centuries of conversations. It lives on in the names above doorways and the ceremonies carried forward, unbroken, unchanged and unyielding. On my second night here, I sat in an Elizabethan hall as Latin was read before our meal, and past and present seemed to collapse into one another. Yet sitting there, I found myself thinking about the histories that rarely have buildings or portraits to preserve them. They survive in family photographs, stories, old letters, and conversations repeated at family gatherings. These are not competing versions of history, just different ways of understanding it.

Family history offers a perspective that broader historical narratives cannot always provide. We might know the dates of a war, the outcome of an election, or the significance of an industrial dispute, but family stories tell us how these events found their way into people's homes and their outlooks on life. They remind us that history is experienced by countless people whose contributions may never be formally recognised. There is something reassuring in discovering that the lives we consider ordinary are often anything but. It encourages a curiosity that extends beyond our immediate relatives, making us more attentive to the experiences of people whose circumstances, beliefs, and opportunities differ from our own. It can also challenge the temptation to judge simplistically. The Miners' Strike, for example, is not merely a story of one side against another, but of people making impossible choices under extraordinary pressure. However, in a place like Oxford you can feel a disconnect between the way you have been shaped and the grand historical narrative of academia.

Although Mam Betws' stories were, in the beginning, little more than a means of appeasing a child who could never quite bring herself to sleep, they gave me something far less fleeting: an understanding that none of us arrives in the present unaccompanied. In our village, to tell someone they are "gwerth y byd a'r Betws" is to tell them they are worth the world and Betws alike – a reminder that there is as much worth discovering in where we come from as in where we are going. We inherit more than names and stories. We inherit the consequences of lives lived before our own, the circumstances they left behind, and the histories that continue to make themselves felt in ways we do not always recognise.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

Image credit: Patrick Murphy, with permission.



HOROSCOPES



Aries

Now is the perfect time to have that talk with your situationship…



Taurus

It's only Oxmas dinner once a year… don't hold back.



Gemini

If you thought you were cured of your Fifth Week blues, you thought wrong.



Cancer

Yeah… you SHOULD rethink your Secret Santa gift.



Leo

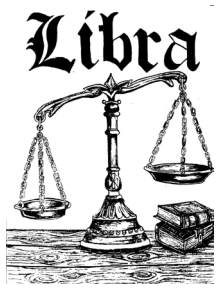
Your constellation tells me that you may need to revisit this term's readings.



Virgo

Go on.. visit the Swan and Castle one last time before Christmas.

HOROSCOPES



Week 8 lectures don't count, right?



You are the most perfect zodiac sign. Don't listen to Leo.



Stop telling everyone that *Die Hard* is your favourite Christmas film.



Your tutor would probably quite like a Christmas card.



Don't think about collections over the vac.



Start your insect diet now. You'll be ahead of the trend, I promise.

CHERWELL-FED

Why is the fridge always empty?

ELLIE PEMBERTON

I am always quite impressed by the people who seem to have it together. You know the type: coffee in one hand and a tote bag draped over the shoulder, perfectly placed. A new marker, I have noticed recently, is the appearance of a chunky scarf that perfectly matches your outfit. Like a Christmas present, this is all wrapped up nicely with a new water bottle, or at least one that looks new. It waits for you just in case the coffee isn't enough. I find that having one drink with me at all times to be just about difficult enough. After getting out of bed, washing my hair, and packing my chargers sometimes my water bottle gets neglected having been left snug in my bag overnight.

I am fine with this; I don't need to walk around with a nice coffee cup every day, which, in truth, may be more of an ideal than reality. But I do wish that I were organised enough to cook meals like the people I see online, or like the people around me.

There are only so many times in the week having half-price Pret is acceptable. It is a great thing undeniably; their sandwiches and baguettes are wonderful, but this is probably not enough to constitute proper self-care. This year, I live in a flat with a kitchen, which is a significant improvement compared to last year when I was limited to a small fridge, with my only kitchen literally inside the JCR.

In an ideal world, I would use the space all of the time, making fancy meals with a whole selection of herbs and spices, but this never quite seems to happen. Whether it's a society event that I just have to go to (a dilemma often of my own making, having conveniently organised an event to be at the perfect time to cook dinner) or the prospect of going home to make food, only to have to leave again to lock in, I never seem to find the time.

Somehow, trying out a new recipe seems to me the epitome of organisation. I romanticise having everything done by 6pm. I sometimes tell myself I'll get everything done earlier today, then I can head to Tesco to pick up ingredients, try the recipe, feel fulfilled, but somehow, every time, something more fun or interesting or important comes up and suddenly going shopping is delayed again.

> "I do wish that I were organised enough to cook meals like the people I see online. There are only so many times in the week having half-price Pret is acceptable."

Even now, I tell myself that by this weekend I should have time to make something because my essay is already handed in for the week. But we both know what the outcome will probably be: before I know it, I'll have a flurry of Canva posts to make and I'll decide that I'd rather have a long shower so I can forget about the cold outside.

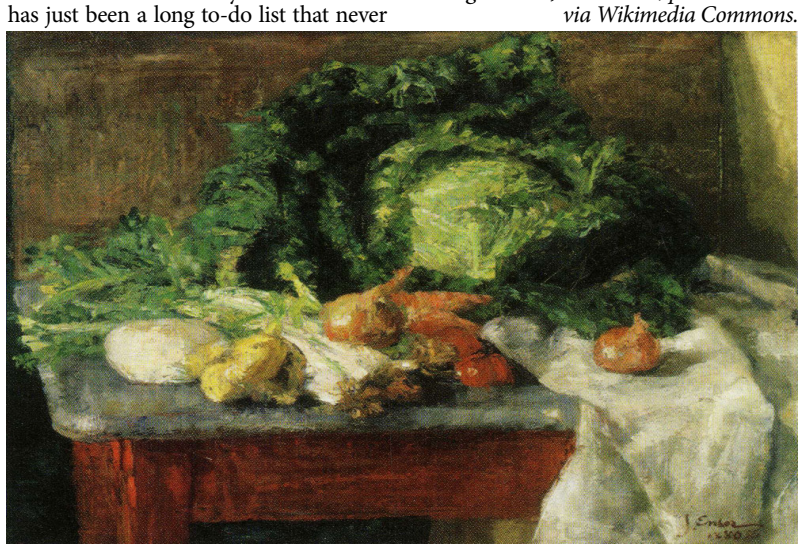
It sounds like I should just give up, that this is an unrealistic ambition and that my brain power would be far better spent worrying about everything else that occupies it: applying to things and writing things and going to new places.

However, I keep finding myself thinking guiltily of my fresher self who used to make the most of just her kettle and fridge, concocting gorgeous salads for lunch and telling herself how next year she would be able to make anything she could imagine. My desk was a kitchen counter. My tiny fridge was overflowing with tomatoes, salad dressings, feta cheese, rocket, but this year my enormous fridge lies almost empty, except for a half block of butter, and the frozen remains of a loaf of brown bread.

The simple fact is, last year I was far less busy; I was involved in far fewer things, and so it wasn't unreasonable to do these things each day. More to the point, I was a lot less tired. Second-year Michaelmas has just been a long to-do list that never seems to end and, as it regenerates each day and each week, cooking never seems to reach the top. Would I rather stop doing things to have a more normal mealtime routine? I don't think so.

I want to be able to do everything, see everyone and then at the end of the day come home to make a lovely meal that I can take a picture of to send home and say: "Look what I made!" As the year crawls toward the end and the days get shorter, rain falls harder, my diet is telling me to make some new plans for next year. Therefore, I'm putting forward my New Year's resolution early: instead of constantly spectating, jealous of others' aesthetic study sessions with their lunchboxes, I should find that bit of time in the day to make food to enjoy. What screams self-care more than a warm meal at the end of a bleak winter's day?

Image credit: James Ensor, public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Visiting every country without leaving Oxford

EMMA HEAGNEY

If you have any sort of connection to London, or simply an appreciation for good food, you may have come across cultural journalist @samaspeaks_ on Instagram. On a mission to document London's unique blend of communities, Sama explores cultural enclaves, hosts multicultural club nights, and archives different areas before they are gentrified. She has most recently documented a 48-hour journey through Jewish London and vlogged her way through Tooting – the very area in which I grew up. Proving that London is inseparable from its diversity, her viral series shows that you really can "visit every country in the world without leaving London".

Inspired by Sama's focus on food, I decided to test whether the same can be done in Oxford. Beyond the University, Oxford is the third-most ethnically diverse city in the South East, and several different cuisines come together on the famous Cowley Road. Whether you want to try something new or feel right at home, Oxford has something for everyone.

China: Taste Tibet

Hidden in the depths of Iffley, Taste Tibet is worth the trek, especially for its cost-effective meal deal. Diners can enjoy two main dishes, a portion of dal, basmati rice, and a momo (Tibetan dumpling) – all for as little as £15. I went for their famous chicken curry as well as their spinach and chickpea curry – both absolutely mouth-watering – and like every Pinterest-oriented young adult, I kept my bottle of Lucky Buddha Beer to be used as a makeshift candle holder. The menu at Taste Tibet changes every week, so there's always something new to enjoy.

Japan: Edamamé

Nestled between Holywell Street's colourful houses, you may not notice Edamamé at first glance. Once inside, however, the Japanese restaurant welcomed us into a cosy, communal dining experience – so don't be shocked when you and your date are sat at a table with three other couples! The eatery's fixed menus offer delicious and authentic katsu curries, karaage, and their signature edamame, but my personal favourite has to be the beef yakiniku: a "stir-fry of thinly sliced beef steak marinated in garlic, spices, and sesame". Be sure to keep an eye out for Edamamé's specials, including a delightful potato dish I regretfully do not know the name of. Those especially inclined towards sushi should certainly visit on the popular Thursday sushi nights, but get there early to beat the queue!

Spain: Al-Andalus

I don't usually go for tapas, but it was the perfect choice for a Valentine's Day set menu. Al-Andalus on Little Clarendon Street combined classic Spanish dishes with some unfamiliar delights, setting the scene for such a romantic occasion. Highlights included patatas bravas, cooked in a spicy chilli tomato sauce with aioli, and espanicas a la catalana, a Catalan-style plate of sautéed spinach alongside chickpeas, garlic, and paprika in tomato sauce. Best of all, the set menu at Al-Andalus was truly generous – given the choice between a dessert and a glass of wine, we could not fathom eating anything more, having consumed my entire body weight in pollo y chorizo con patatas.

France: Pierre Victoire

My trip to Pierre Victoire was, unusually, not restrained by a student budget, having visited the restaurant with my boyfriend's generous family. This inevitably meant that I was able to fully enjoy the French dining experience, complete with copious amounts of wine. The wine list at Pierre Victoire was truly curated, and even came with a tasting guide that matched the rich flavours of the restaurant's cooking. I opted for the bouillabaisse 'maison', a Provençal fish stew with croutons, gruyère, rouille, and saffron-spiced potatoes. Your student loan might suffer at Pierre Victoire, but your taste buds will be enthralled.

Italy: Bbuona

Don't go to Bbuona expecting pizza. At the cosy Gloucester Green trattoria, you'll find authentic, Rome-style pinsa, which makes use of a longer fermentation process for a "crisp exterior and fluffy interior." I went for a classic margherita pinsa to line my stomach before a night out, and, by my standards, the pinsa passed the test – I enjoyed the comforting pinsa before safely enjoying my several Merton Power Pints. Bbuona is a spot for any occasion, from a casual girls' night to a first date, and I'm definitely excited to try their sister restaurant next door, 100% Pasta.

Malaysia: Zheng

In 2015, food critic Giles Coren described Zheng in Jericho as "possibly the best authentic Chinese-Malaysian in the country". It's safe to say that my hopes were especially high when I stepped through the doors, as someone who also takes rendang incredibly seriously. To my delight, Zheng offers not one, not two, but three different rendang curries – two with beef and one with chicken, the latter of which I eagerly went for. Since first dining at the restaurant on my birthday, I have returned to Zheng multiple times, falling in love with their satay skewers in the process. I recommend sharing a few curries between friends, so that you too might fall in love with Zheng's excellent Malaysian dishes.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

RECIPE

Madeira trifle

Ingredients:

- 300g Madeira cake
- 70ml Madeira wine
- 750g frozen fruit
- 250g caster sugar
- 75g custard powder
- 9 sheets of leaf gelatine
- 1.2 litres of milk
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

Instructions:

1. Put the frozen fruit in a pan with caster sugar and 1 litre of water, then bring to a simmer.
2. Cook for two minutes then blitz and sieve the fruit.
3. Soak nine sheets of leaf gelatine in cold water.
4. Squeeze excess water from gelatine and cool it.
5. Add sugar and milk to the custard and prepare.
6. Cool the custard by covering it with a tea towel.
7. Add cubed madeira cake into a trifle bowl and spoon through the berries.
8. Add madeira wine and a thick layer of custard.
9. Leave to cool and set until ready to serve.
10. Optional: whip up double cream with vanilla extract to enjoy homemade cream.
11. Enjoy!

Do the 'good old days' really exist?

DELANEY KIM

Please mind the gap between the train and the platform. As I wait on the gritty station sideline, I realise there is something rather fitting about being repeatedly reminded of the existence of a gap, especially when I seem to spend so much of my life inhabiting one. Between countries, languages, expectations, and realities. Originally from Seoul, I've grown up across different parts of the UK and spent the past two years studying at Columbia University in New York. This October, I arrived in Oxford as a visiting student for the year, leaving behind newfound familiarity for another year of novelty, determined to make the most of my youth. Yet somewhere between the anticipation of coming here and the reality of actually being here, I began to question what 'making the most' of anything really means.

We are told, restlessly, again and again that our twenties are the best years of our lives, that we must accumulate experiences like gemstones in a game, pursue opportunities, and live in such a way that we will have something extraordinary to look back on. Ah, the Good Old Days. But what constitutes an experience worth having? Why does living life to the fullest so often seem to demand constant movement and change? I've increasingly begun to wonder whether, in trying to make these years worth remembering, we are overlooking the quieter, gentler forms of happiness that make them worth living. Perhaps the gap we should be minding is not simply between our expectations and reality, but between the lives we think we ought to be living and the ones we actually want.

21. New York. A balmy summer evening.

Surrounded by friends on the rooftop of my first apartment, I blew out the candles in haste, worried that the soft but palpable breeze would beat me to it. In my long, silky dress of purply-plum – instead of a girlish, shorter one of lacy black – I felt a validity in my emerging sophistication. I imagined myself resembling a woman with a sleek name, possessing tidy drawers, ironed shirts, and a weekly routine of buying fresh flowers. Yet the frosted rainbow cake in front of me made me feel juvenile, perhaps even younger than before. My drawers were rarely tidy, my shirts seldom ironed, and my apartment probably saw more rats than flowers. Then, as I mindlessly consumed a slice of sprinkly, spongy decadence, I suddenly remembered: I hadn't made a birthday wish.

Ever since I developed an affection for superstition, around the age of ten or so, I have projected a long list of desires onto every eyelash, every dandelion, every full moon. So the reality of not having made a wish for my 21st birthday caught my heart by surprise. Unlike the concrete ambitions I firmly grasped at 12 or even 18, my dreams and possibilities now felt more nebulous, more sandy. My wishes, if I possessed any in particular, seemed to slip through the gaps between my fingers. Despite the cheery conversations swaying between old and new friends, their roaring laughter and rosy faces of boozy glee, the biggest thing I felt – admittedly, guiltily – was a pit in my stomach. I was meant to be happy.

Strikingly, I felt a bit like Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. No, I'm not going to mention the famous fig tree analogy, but rather the beginning of the novel, where she explains: "I was supposed to be having the time of my life." She, too, was experiencing a "queer, sultry summer" in New York, interning at a magazine, which was what I was coincidentally also doing. Although I didn't quite feel the harrowing intensity of Esther's unhappiness, I recognised the discrepancy between the life I appeared to be living and the life I felt I was experiencing. Everything was supposedly in place for happiness. So why did I feel its absence?

With retrospective clarity, I've tried to deconstruct the feelings of that birthday night, the one I still hold onto during certain nights of loneliness.

To begin with, I was moving again when I had finally created a home in New York, not only in finding a physical, liveable apartment but in carving out a space of emotional belonging. Pushing past the superficiality, bright lights, and urgency to collect social currency that I had sometimes encountered at Columbia, I had found my best friends (we call ourselves the 'sparklemuffins') among whom I could be sandwiched and nestled up forever, eating soup around a table, and drinking ciders on crisp evenings.

These were the friends who came to my rescue when, on a Saturday morning, I called helplessly, unable to assemble IKEA furniture. They spent six hours building my needlessly complicated bedframe so I could sleep on a foundation of love for a year. And I was letting it go. Not forever, but for a year, which may be short in the grand scheme of things, but quite long in the context of university, because I was determined to 'make the most of my youth' and come to Oxford.

For me, making the most of things has always meant being in constant movement. Between sky streams and fickle grounds, I moved and moved and moved. Shifting identities, languages, characters. Weaving in and out of myself. Korean to British. British to American. American to Korean. For a long time, I thought I was energised by this momentum, instinctively equating change with progress and stability with stagnation. If I stopped, I would not only slow down, but fall off.

Coming to Oxford was, in part, another expression of that impulse. I wanted something different, something exciting, something that would make these years worth remembering. Yet, on leaving New York, I began to wonder why the quieter happiness I had unexpectedly found there – the soup, the cider, the six-hour bedframe – hadn't seemed like enough of an experience in itself.

But that isn't to say I regret coming to Oxford. Quite the opposite. I wanted to be here, and I still do. What I've begun to question is not the desire to experience something new, but the obligation to make every experience extraordinary, worthy of being retold as an amazing story – whatever that means. There is also a peculiar pressure that comes with knowing I have only one year here, as though every afternoon spent doing something unremarkable is an afternoon squandered. Yet the Oxford I imagined before arriving, and the Oxford I am actually inhabiting, are inevitably different places. And perhaps that's not necessarily a disappointment.

Please mind the gap between the train and the platform.

I imagine I'll continue to hear this announcement throughout my year at Oxford, just as I'll continue to find gaps between the lives I imagine and the ones I actually live. Perhaps the mistake is expecting those gaps to disappear, or believing that happiness must look the way we imagined it would.

We are often chasing something shown in scenic films or in the pages of our beloved books of teenagehood, but what I've found I treasure most is the love that doesn't make it into the movies. Calling a friend for an extortionate eight hours whilst cleaning my room. Studying together until mutual delirium. The joy of discovering a shared dislike of a particular class.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

Image credit: Michael Discenza (Unsplash), public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



OXFORD — TINY LOVE STORIES

He kisses her so that she
cannot see his face.
So those last illuminated
windows across the street,
which feel somehow like
spotlights in the dark, will not
be on him if, as he wants to,
he begins to cry.
Her lips are soft and warm.
And when they pull apart
he wants to say everything;
but he can only repeat what
he first said when he was in
that rocky valley where trains
hooted and she was lying,
a continent away, in that
sleeping city.

Lloyd Doré-Green, *Magdalen College*

CHERPSE.

Oxford's blind dating

A table for two but a date for three – will an uninvited ex ruin this first date at The Victoria?



Miss Carraway

First impressions?
Chill and friendly, we both acknowledged the strangeness straight away and conversation was easy.

Did it meet your expectations?
I wasn't expecting to find the love of my life, so yes. It was clear that he's already found his.

What was the highlight?
Having a smoke in the rain.

What was the most embarrassing moment?
Finding out that he's clearly still obsessed with his ex.

Describe the date in three words:
Unfinished business elsewhere.

Is there a second date on the cards?
Not between us.

Mr Gatsby

First impressions?
After establishing with Cupid that, despite whatever my anonymous matchmaker had put in my form, I was not gay, I went through the various remaining protocols over email and found myself on a date. But I was filled with pity knowing that whoever was waiting for me had no chance. How could they? I could only think about one person.

Did it meet your expectations?
It was pleasant. The conversation was easy and she was perfectly sweet. But I was expecting to feel empty, to want another. So yes.

What was the highlight?
Laughter.

What was the most embarrassing moment?
Knowing deep down nothing could remedy my angst. It was unfair on her.

Describe the date in three words:
Please come back.

Is there a second date on the cards?
I don't think so.

Temporary teammates: Visiting students on Blues



ALEXIS ROGERS

Dean Liang dedicates hours each week to the Oxford University Volleyball Club, practising, conditioning, and competing at the highest level of the sport that Oxford has to offer. However, when Liang dons his uniform and takes to the court for a Blues match, he represents a school that he has never matriculated into. That's because Liang is a visiting student, competing at Oxford for only one term before returning to the US to finish his economics degree at Stanford University.

Each year, Oxford hosts undergraduate students from across the world through the Visiting Students Programme. On top of taking on an Oxford student's academic workload, a select few visiting students, especially those involved in athletics at their home institutions, find their way onto Blues teams.

When Liang arrived to spend Michaelmas term at Magdalen College, he knew volleyball was an important activity to fit into his schedule. The tryout process struck him as much more relaxed than the highest level of sport in the US.

"Here, obviously, there still is some weight behind [varsity sport], but it's kind of just like any tryout for a club team in terms of: 'here are the openings, let's try you out a few times'. You talk to the coaches, and then you show up", Liang says.

Varsity squads in the US are divided between Divisions I–lll, with Division I programmes competing at the highest level, receiving the most funding, and sending the most athletes into professional leagues. In the US, 'club' teams are a step below varsity. When applying to university, Liang opted for an academically rigorous Division I school where he could play club sports, instead of undergoing recruitment for Division III institutions.

For Whye Li Ong, a visiting student at Mansfield College, the path to Blues was less straightforward. After getting in touch with the captains of the Oxford University Football Club, Ong, who plays club football at Boston College, was invited to a month of preseason training before trying out for a spot on the team. The early arrival gave him a foundation to build from when settling into life in an unfamiliar country.

"When you're playing with a new team, you have around 20 new friends immediately," Ong says. "When everyone started coming to school, I already had people in Oxford itself to hang out with and rely upon. It made the transition really smooth for me."

Though visiting students are limited by the length of their program, many Blues squads already see significant turnover year-to-year due to postgraduate participation, and some rely heavily on international talent. From a coach's perspective, the tradeoff may be worth it.

"It's a calculation that the coach has to make", Liang says. "The coach knew that he would need another outside [hitter] to replace me when I left, and that was part of the conversation that we had."

> When you're playing with a new team, you have around 20 new friends immediately," Ong says. "When everyone started coming to school, I already had people in Oxford itself to hang out with and rely upon.

Unlike Liang and Ong, other visiting students had opted for recruited spots on Division III squads prior to their time at Oxford. Athletes on Division I–III teams must treat their sport as a part-time job. Dennis Welte, a visiting student at Mansfield College who is playing Blues squash, recalls having to discuss with his coach whether he could take a full year away from the varsity team at Bates College.

"I wanted to make sure that wherever I would go, there's some opportunity for me to keep playing and keep up my level," Welte says. "I had a welcoming coach, and she supported it. I know that that's not the case for all teams. Some [visiting students] can only stay for a term and then have to return once the season starts."

Not every student-athlete can afford to miss an entire season. Stacy Chen will rejoin the varsity basketball team at Wellesley College for the final three-quarters of the season when she returns from Worcester College in January, after playing for the Blues during Michaelmas. Though she didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to study abroad, basketball at Wellesley was a significant enough commitment to shape her decision about how much time she could afford to spend away from her home institution.

"Especially since our conference play is towards the end [of the season], that's really when it matters", Chen says. "Usually they don't let students who study abroad come back and play a partial season, but I was lucky. [My coach] wanted to be supportive of this process."

The differences visiting students can name between US and UK varsity sports are numerous: fewer games, fewer practices, and more flexibility with their schedules. While US teams have many full-time employees dedicated to different aspects of practice and wellness, Blues squads are heavily managed by the student athletes and captains.

For Welte, the organisation of Oxford sport is notably more self-organised, reliant on athletes to be driving their own improvement.

"The [Blues] team we currently have is very ambitious, so they push each other in practice", Welte says. "But in general, especially during match days, it's way less intense. Although it's a competition, it feels more friendly, because the players have to organise game day themselves."

Though transplants often face a disparity between the popularity of their sport in the US and in the UK, Chen notes that university teams highlight the international backgrounds of the student body and celebrate the sports that don't have a strong hold in the UK.

"[Women's basketball] has really grown in the United States, but it honestly is nice coming to a place where it's a little bit smaller, because what that means is a lot of the people are either international students or people that played around the world", Chen says. "It's cool to see that shared experience."

Image credit: Whye Li Ong, with permission.

SPORT SPOTLIGHT



***Oskar Doepke** speaks with Sophie Bailey, founder of Pembroke Run Club*

On a Wednesday morning during Pembroke College Freshers' Week, Sophie Bailey, founder of Pembroke Run Club, scheduled a social run. At first, she says she "wasn't sure many freshers would turn up". In the end, more than 20 did. "I had to get more pastries from the shop as there weren't going to be enough," she says, adding: "It was just amazing to see so much enthusiasm for running!"

For Sophie, running has long been a passion – ever since coming "first in the sprinting race" of her reception class. Throughout much of primary and secondary school, she competed in short-distance running, such as 100m races and relays. During sixth form, she became girls' cross-country captain and began long-distance running.

Sophie says she enjoys running mostly for its spontaneity, and also because she loves "the feeling of being outside and enjoying new landscapes and areas I might not otherwise see".

Now a second-year student, Sophie founded Pembroke Run Club last January, partly to ease herself back into running – after a knee injury as a fresher – and partly to share her "love of running with others". With support from the JCR, she applied for funding for socials, race entries, and t-shirts, with the JCR also helping spread the word about the club.

Before the first run, Sophie says she "was quite nervous" as she "wasn't sure if anyone would turn up". Seven people came, and she says: "It was really fun to be running again and to meet people I didn't know from different years!"

Through a social event with St Hilda's Run Club and "the promise of free kit", Sophie says she "helped motivate people to keep coming", even though there were a few weeks when she thought she wasn't "going to get enough people to keep the club running". The two clubs have organised socials every term since.

The Bannister Community Mile in Trinity was "definitely" the moment she is most proud of so far. Pembroke had more runners than any other college at the event, which celebrates Roger Bannister, an athlete who ran the first sub-four-minute mile and was later a Master of Pembroke. "It was amazing seeing all the Pembroke students out running with their pink ribbons for Pembroke," she says.

She adds that bringing new people into running and building "a community of Pembroke runners" have also been key achievements for the club.

Looking forward, she says she plans to organise more social running events with other colleges, and put together teams for the Teddy Hall Relays. In Trinity, she says she hopes "for another good turnout" at the Bannister Community Mile.

As for anyone interested in starting a club, Sophie's advice is clear: "Well, obviously you should go for it!"

Image credit: Sophie Bailey, with permission.

UPCOMING

Cross-Country Varsity

2pm 5th December
Iffley Road
Oxford vs. Cambridge Varsity

Tennis

11am 2nd December
White Horse Leisure Centre
Men's Blues vs. Exeter

Rugby

2.30pm 2nd December
Iffley Road
Blues vs. Major Stanley's XV

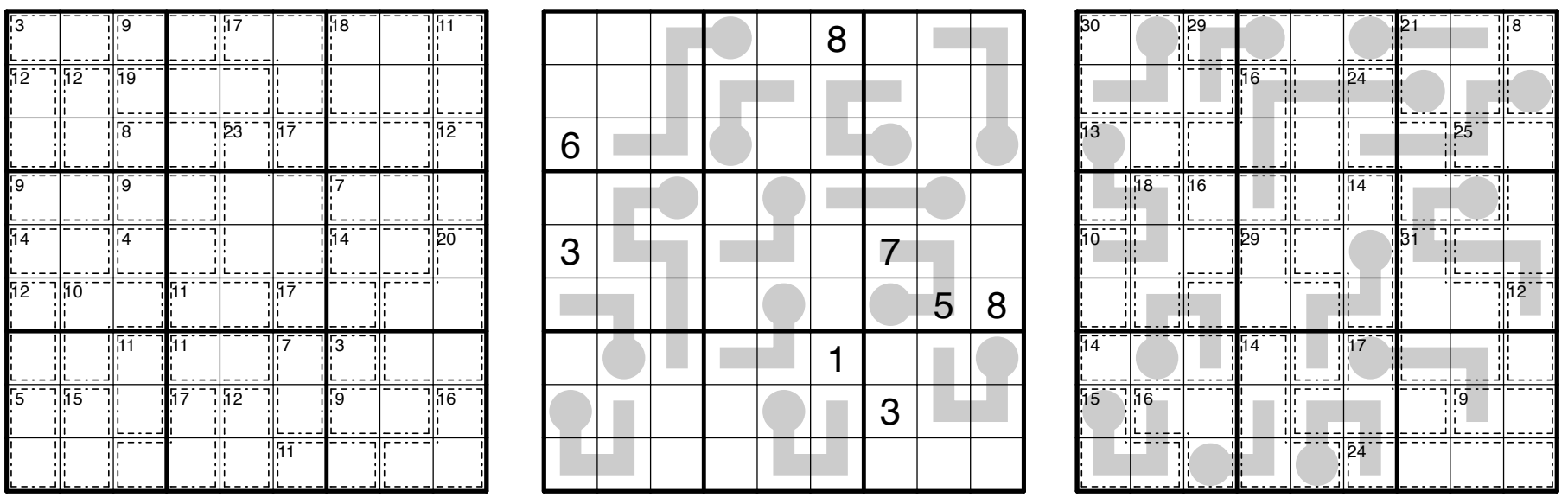
Going to watch a Varsity or Cuppers match?

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

PUZZLES

Sudoku Buffet by ZOË MCGUIRE

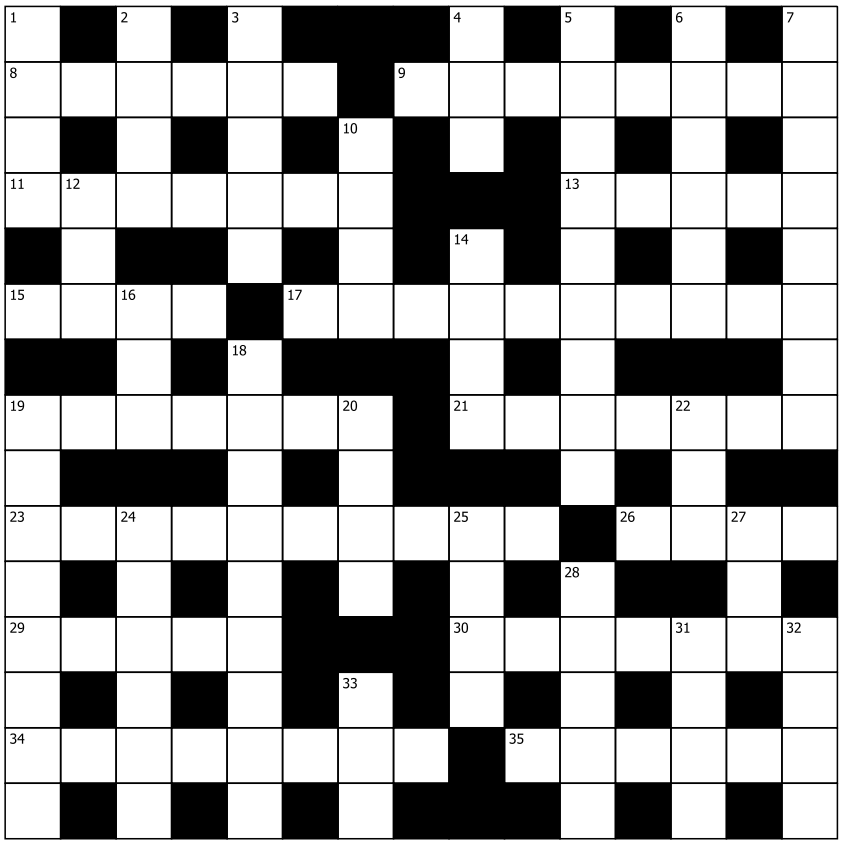
The Puzzles team has heard you loud and clear: You love the Killers and Thermodokus. Well then, have at it!



Digits in a Killer Cage may not repeat and must sum to the value in the upper corner. Digits along a Thermometer must strictly increase, starting from the bulb. Normal Sudoku rules apply.

Cryptic Crossword by Tegef

Difficulty: 3/5



ACROSS:

8: The tip of the heights melts away in the summer (6)
9: Bodleian's E–I section taken over and rearranged by Nobel laureate (3,5)
11: Lois clumsily enters ball, leaving Sierra outside college (7)
13: Testing spirits in Germany? "Yes, but first in France," we said (5)
15: Union speech acknowledges they're "desperate for votes" (4)
17: Patients reported initial intra-muscular injection preceded restlessness (10)
19: College president (7)
21: Ask me anything about rice from across the Atlantic (7)
23: Singing "Summer in the City" in college (10)
26: A united "yes" from those in favour (4)
29: Taylorian's second and third sections said to become a large transport vehicle (5)
30: Revising!? Try it in final term (7)
34: This and motor show differ by the amount of time? (8)
35: "Jolly good" academic! (6)

DOWN:

1: Part of speech's ending removed for brevity, then totally rephrased (4)
2: French equal following loss of regal right! (4)
3: Calm solicitor offended, but not roiled (5)
4: Library at close turns into University party (3)
5: Home admin reconsidered following personal attack (2,7)
6: No – bail revolutionised ancient Britain (6)
7: Private photographs? (2,6)
10: Matriculation – citation – halfway – revision – graduate (4)
12: Ace drawn after Big Slick (as it's also called) (3)
14: Transposing a tad of information (4)
16: Fudge found in the centre of teacake? (3)
18: Quad tautology? (9)
19: Bored with no required reading (8)
20: Gets hit on the head and on the toe (4)
22: Harvard infiltrator seen climbing 18A? (3)
24: College creative writing mentor (6)
25: Lauded Oxford tutor's research leads to Oxford fellowship (4)
27: Consume some treats (3)
28: Oxford's current events by *Cherwell* and Isis? (5)
31: Caught inside Radcliffe Camera not doing any work (4)
32: Gaping hole? No way back! (4)
33: The stalwart electoral candidate is rarely, or never, first (1,1,1)

Week 5 answers:

Sums: TNS; BLZ; MLDV; YMN; CDR; STN; CSTRC.
Cryptic Crossword: Across: JONI MITCHELL; SICK BED; LUSTFUL; E-CIG; EGADS; NICE; SCALES; BANG BUS; BULLIED; MOSAIC; LEER; MACAW; STAY; SPOILED; BLUEFIN; NAUTICAL MILE. **Down:** ONCE IN A BLUE MOON; ICBM; INDIGO; CALL DIBS; ELSA; LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL; BALLERS; ISLEYS; GENIE; INBOX; EDWARD VI; BELUSHI; CRYING; GAMBIA; BLEU; GUAM