Cherwell

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This House believes the Oxford Union can debate better

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In conversation with Palestinian Ambassador Husam Zomlot

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Oxford University Press announces pilot integrating academic content with ChatGPT Edu



- Oxford students to trial OUP content inside ChatGPT Edu
- Three-month pilot also at Harvard and Wharton
- Follows OpenAI deal to use Bodleian texts to train ChatGPT

FREYA ROBSON

Oxford University Press (OUP) has announced the start of a three-month pilot scheme which will allow Oxford students to search licensed academic content from OUP inside ChatGPT Edu. While current ChatGPT Edu is generally trained on freely available information on the internet, this project will have access to academic scholarship.

Students on the pilot project using ChatGPT Edu will receive responses informed by peer-reviewed books, journals, and reference content published by the world's largest university press and its partners. OUP's press release states that students in the project will receive AI outputs "grounded in trusted, cited scholarship with links to content hosted on the Oxford Academic platform".

In emphasising trusted content, they highlight the results of a recent survey carried out by the Press which showed that 64% of researchers report benefit from using AI but only 20% trust its outputs. The pilot aims to provide a solution to this problem.

The pilot period also involves two other academic institutions: the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University. While the Oxford trial is limited to 30 students, Wharton and Harvard have opened the trial up to all students and staff.

It will last for a three-month pilot period from October to December, with the intention to gather evidence on the use of Model Context Protocol (MCP) tools that link AI models with OUP content in the real world.

In their pilot announcement last week, OUP stated that their aim is to use "both quantitative and qualitative data from the pilot to gain insight into researchers' behaviours within AI research tools". Oxford students involved in the project are keeping a diary to log their experiences.

OUP is especially focused on how motivated researchers are to use such tools, and how large language models (LLMs) improve their outputs when connected to OUP.

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Over 800 families demand inquiry into Oxford hospitals' maternity care

MAIR ANDREWS

CW: Childbirth, baby loss

A campaign group made up of more than 800 families harmed during their care at Oxford University Hospitals (OUH) has called for an independent investigation into its maternity services. Parents have raised concerns that a national inquiry conducted earlier this year failed to "capture the complexities of families' accounts and the recurring pattern of harm described" because of conflicting interests and the use of AI to complete the investigation.

Parents whose care and delivery were organised by OUH say that their concerns "were not being adequately investigated or taken seriously" during their treatment at the hospital.

An affected parent recalled how, during a complicated and distressing labour, a member of staff "entered the room and handed me paperwork asking what we wanted to happen to our baby's remains. There had been no bereavement discussion. Nobody had explained that my daughter was going to die. Yet I was being asked to consider what should happen to her body before she had even been born." Her baby was successfully delivered and did not die. She told *Cherwell* that her labour and the miscommunication were "one of the most traumatic and devastating experiences of my life."

She told *Cherwell*: "At times I felt procedures were being carried out before I had even understood what was happening. I remember a midwife having to remind the other professionals in the room to introduce themselves."

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Three local authorities top applications for 52% of undergraduate courses

NED REMINGTON

Three local authorities top domestic applications for over half of undergraduate courses at the University of Oxford, a *Cherwell* investigation has found.

Barnet, Buckinghamshire, and Wandsworth provided the most domestic applications for 52% of the 44 analysed courses. Over 70% of courses received the most applications from a London borough in the 2023-2025 application cycles, with 27% of courses receiving the most applications from the same London borough, Barnet. No local authorities outside of England housed the highest number of domestic applicants for any subject.

While Oxford publishes data on the total number of applications for each course, and the total number of applications to all subjects by local authority, this is the first time it has broken down applications by the geographical makeup for each subject. *Cherwell* obtained data for the 2022-2025 admissions cycles, grouped by subject code, through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request. The data excludes figures where fewer than three applications for a course came from a particular local authority over the three-year period, for privacy reasons. *Cherwell* analysed data for 44 Oxford undergraduate courses, excluding subjects for which figures were available for fewer than five local authorities. Most of those excluded were dual-honours Modern Languages degrees.

London and the South East dominate applications

With Barnet providing the most applications to 12 of 44 courses, the borough ranked in the top 3 local authorities for applications to half of the courses analysed (22). The south-eastern county of Buckinghamshire accounted for the most applications to nine subjects, including Classics, Human Sciences, and Music. The London borough of Wandsworth topped applications for five, including History (Ancient and Modern) and Theology and Religion.

London and South East England continued to dominate across almost all subjects. The exception was Birmingham, which provided the most applications for four popular Oxford subjects: Jurisprudence, Medicine, History and Politics, and Biomedical Sciences. Some subjects received a joint-highest number of applications from multiple local authorities.

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Oxford University Press announces pilot integrating academic content with ChatGPT Edu

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Richard Ovenden, the current Bodley Librarian at the University of Oxford, highlighted the need for collaboration between libraries and publishers to make studies as reliable as possible in the age of AI.

In OUP's press release, Ovenden said: "This collaboration will allow us to review how readers use AI technology in their studies and to help develop approaches to ensure that students and researchers can confidently rely on the information they discover."

The decision by publishers and libraries, like OUP and Bodleian Library, to explore AI tools comes at a time in which AI usage in research is sky-high. The prevalence of AI in student spaces has never been higher, with a Higher Education Policy Institute study in February 2025 finding that 92% of students used AI in some form, up from 66% in 2024.

This pilot follows Oxford's recent partnership with OpenAI that allowed rare Bodleian texts to be used to train ChatGPT. The pilot scheme allows Bodleian texts, chiefly 3,500 dissertations from 1498-1884, to be digitised through OpenAI software.

The trial is made possible by a Model Context Protocol (MCP) server produced by Silverchair, an American tech company that provides digital services for publishers. Silverchair have previously collaborated with OUP to create Oxford Law Pro, an AI research assistant designed as a "specialised legal research product" based on over 9000 journal articles and 600 books provided by OUP.

After undergoing a pilot period, Oxford Law Pro is now a fully established AI tool that is available for organisations and libraries by subscription.

Silverchair told *Cherwell*: "Our goal is to help publishers serve peer-reviewed research through AI channels on their own terms, maintaining the integrity of the scholarly record and supporting students and other users in accessing world's best research."

Image credit: Remi Mathis, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



All Souls fellow elected to International Court of Justice

MADISON GARRETT

All Souls College Fellow and Law Professor Dapo Akande has been elected to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Akande will sit on the world's highest judicial body following his election by the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council.

The British-Nigerian professor will serve for nine years, bringing experience from his tenure as an advocate, advisor, counsel, and expert in international tribunal court cases. On the court, he will tackle cases such as South Africa's accusation of genocide against Israel.

He is the first British judge on the court in nine years. His appointment was celebrated by UK Prime Minister Andy Burnham, who said in a press release that "Professor Akande will bring integrity, legal rigour and independent expertise to the International Court of Justice and I am incredibly proud that he is representing the UK". Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband added that Akande's election was a "victory for the UK's commitment to the rule of law and our ability to stand up for our values on the world stage".

Akande currently acts as the oldest chair in Public International Law within England as a Chichele Professor of Public International Law, a role he has held since 2014. He also holds a fellowship at All Souls College, a role he was elected to due to his extensive academic profile.

Aside from serving as a lecturer, Akande is also the co-director of the interdisciplinary research programme: The Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict (ELAC) at the Blavatnik School of Government.

Akande is the second All Souls Fellow to be elected to the ICJ, after British justice Humphrey Waldock. The Warden of All Souls, Professor Sir John Vickers, told *Cherwell*: "The college feels very honoured that one of our fellows has been elected to this position… We'll be very sorry to lose Dapo, but what he's moving on to is the absolute pinnacle of his profession."

Founding Dean of the Blavatnik School, Professor Ngaire Woods, told *Cherwell*: "Dapo Akande has been an outstanding colleague at the Blavatnik School of Government, and the world is lucky to have such a voice of reason and fairness serve on the ICJ."

Awaiting Akande's arrival at the court in February 2027 are regional case conflicts between Belize and Guatemala.

Image credit: Mair Andrews for Cherwell.

Law degree under review after report finds college teaching disparities

CARA HENE

Oxford University's BA Jurisprudence (Law) degree is under faculty review following concerns raised by external examiners and echoed by students, about teaching disparities between colleges.

In a 2026 report seen by *Cherwell*, examiners outlined concerns about disparities between Oxford colleges that could affect law students in Final Honour School (FHS) examinations. They questioned whether coordination between colleges was adequate and critiqued a "lack of process" in ensuring students are taught in a "roughly consistent way".

"There seems to me to be a real possibility of unfairness depending on the topics chosen by the individual tutor in the College and the difficulty of individual questions on the paper," the report said. One examiner suggested that these issues might not be resolved through simply broadening questions on the paper, while another questioned whether action was needed "to ensure a level playing field across the students in the University".

Speaking to *Cherwell*, a final year law student described the situation as "problematic" for students. They said: "The faculty just don't have enough control over what tutors put on their reading list."

They told *Cherwell* that there is no set order for law tutors to teach topics. With the faculty reading list sometimes containing 10–12 weeks of content, this forces some students to teach themselves, especially if the topics not chosen by tutors are easier to score highly on in exams.

They also claimed that in rare instances, some tutors will not include mandatory cases on their reading lists. While these are available to find on the faculty reading list, "it's on you to make sure you've been taught correctly", according to the student.

A student at one college claimed that in last year's Administrative Law exam, finalists at their college were significantly disadvantaged because they were only taught the first eight weeks of content. They claimed that at colleges where tutors were more versed in administrative law, students were taught more content which was less complex and more likely to come up in exams.

Another law student who graduated in 2025 told *Cherwell* that they found the tailoring of teaching to exams and the quality of essay feedback varied greatly between colleges.

A University spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "Undergraduate law teaching combines lectures and classes provided by the Faculty with tutorials arranged by individual colleges. While colleges are responsible for their own tutorial provision, we recognise the importance of ensuring that students are appropriately prepared for their examinations, regardless of their college.

Cherwell understands that the Faculty of Law is currently reviewing the course and its teaching provision in a working group.

Over 800 families demand inquiry into Oxford hospitals' maternity care

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OUH makes up four hospitals, including the John Radcliffe Hospital, which works with the University of Oxford to deliver education and training to doctors. The University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Irene Tracey, is co-chair of OUH Strategic Board. It was one of 14 NHS Trusts identified by then-Health Secretary Wes Streeting in September 2025 as requiring urgent review.

Baroness Valerie Amos, Master at University College, was appointed the chair of the investigation, which intended to make recommendations to improve care and safety in maternity and neonatal care, and promised to "put families at the heart of the work". Amos' National Maternity and Neonatal Investigation was published in June.

Amos' investigation concluded that there was "evidence of a willingness to ignore national guidelines based on evidence in favour of what Oxford clinicians think is the better way". One staff member called this "the Oxford way", adding that "it is the best. Woe betide you if you challenge it".

The team behind the Amos investigation remain concerned that families who have recently given birth at OUH "are still being dismissed and staff are not listening to them". The report also flagged staffing issues, finding that overnight medical cover at the John Radcliffe Hospital was "not an appropriate staffing model for a unit of this size" and that leaders have "limited insight" into staff distress and its operational causes.

Initially, OUH was not considered for the Amos investigation because their perinatal data did not necessitate "urgent measures". However, grassroots campaigns by Families Failed by OUH Maternity Services (FFOUH), Keep the Horton General, and lobbying by local MPs raised attention to severe patient complaints surrounding communication and consent.

A report made by FFOUH, containing testimonies from more than 700 patients, was submitted for consideration in the Amos investigation last November. However, it appears that expert advisers within the Amos investigation did not even view the report, according to Dr Bill Kirkup.

Kirkup resigned from the Amos investigation prior to its publication, stating that the review was changed just days before publication to remove criticism of natural birth ideology where patients were discouraged from caesarean sections and using pain relief.

Parents are criticising the reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse sensitive family testimonials and evidence submissions in the Amos investigation which failed to recognise the complexity of the families' accounts and the recurring patterns of the harm they detected, in particular "the influence of birth ideology and the conduct of key staff members".

"This means that the harm in Oxford has never been properly analysed", the letter states. "Lessons cannot have been adequately captured and women and babies in Oxfordshire remain at risk." The affected families who submitted evidence did not consent to their personal testimonies or sensitive health data being analysed by AI.

An affected parent told *Cherwell:* "Families like mine have relived deeply traumatic experiences to provide evidence, hoping our voices would finally be heard and meaningful changes would follow. Learning that artificial intelligence was used to assist in analysing testimonies raises concerns about whether important details, patterns of poor care and patient safety warnings may have been overlooked."

One mother told *Cherwell* that while she was initially told that her daughter was in relatively good condition for her age, she has since discovered information indicating that respiratory equipment malfunctioned during her daughter's resuscitation, and that she was subsequently placed on alternative respiratory equipment because the intended machine was unavailable.

She continues to attend investigations and specialist appointments at OUH, including sleep studies and neurological assessments, to monitor and treat the life-threatening conditions which her daughter has incurred since delivery.

"One of the most difficult aspects of this journey is the uncertainty," she says. "We are constantly trying to understand whether her symptoms represent changes in her neurological condition, whether further intervention will be necessary, and what this could mean for her future."

Parents have criticised unequal treatment between hospitals involved in the Amos investigation since its publication. An independent investigation has been ordered at Leeds Teaching Hospitals after a report of at least 56 potentially preventable baby deaths, meanwhile a review commissioned for University Hospitals Sussex after at least 55 preventable baby deaths were identified.

The open letter asks why Oxford has not received equivalent scrutiny, despite a similar BBC investigation reporting that 58 baby deaths were potentially avoidable at OUH between 2019 and 2024. Speaking to *Cherwell*, an affected parent who volunteers at FFOUH said "we have to address the elephant in the room: reputation and protectionism."

Image credit: Bill Boaden, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

Read the full article at cherwell.org



Oxford Union overhauls voting rules after back-to-back election scandals

MAIR ANDREWS

Two forms of identification will be required to vote at the Oxford Union following consecutive instances of electoral fraud involving impersonation. Voters will now need to provide their membership card and one additional form of identification, after the Standing Committee accepted a rule change earlier this week.

Union President Gareth Lim told *Cherwell* that the change aims to protect the accuracy and integrity of the electoral process, especially to avoid the impact of counterfeit and illicitly obtained membership cards. The proposal to the Standing Committee described the previous system as "open to abuse" and added that the new rules are written under the principle that "the election system should be fully defensible against attempted fraud".

Impersonation and false membership cards disrupted the two most recent Union elections.

In Trinity Term 2026, the election count was suspended after a Returning Officer identified evidence of substantial interference before boxes were opened. CCTV showed individuals attempting to cast votes using membership cards which were not their own.

In a subsequent Election Tribunal, several members alleged that they were impersonated during the vote. *Cherwell* understands the matter was reported to Thames Valley Police as fraud and criminal impersonation.

Similar electoral fraud occurred during elections in Hilary, as President-Elect Catherine Xu was removed after a separate Tribunal found she had distributed membership cards belonging to other people for voting.

After both elections, membership cards were seized, and those found guilty have been suspended from the Union.

Lim proposed the new double-identification system over the summer. The Standing Committee recommended the changes, and the Union's 'house' affirmed them on Thursday.

When asked why these measures have only come under consideration after the second instance of attempted fraud, the President told *Cherwell* the rules follow suspected large-scale counterfeit voting in June, whereas the Hilary election was suspected to be the scheme of one individual at the time.

Guidance on what will be accepted as secondary identification has not yet been confirmed. *Cherwell* understands that student identification, including Bodleian cards, will be sufficient.

In addition to the changes to voter identification, the Standing Committee originally proposed changing the process through which candidates are selected for election. These changes, however, were withdrawn before they were put to a vote in the Union's chamber.

The ditched changes, meant to start from the elections in Hilary term 2027, would have required candidates for Secretary's Committee to have three unique nominators who are not candidates themselves to stand. The change was suggested to "help reduce the unfair and unnecessary burden placed on electoral officials by the frivolous nomination of candidates with no interest or support in winning".

A mock election to trial the new system was conducted by the Returning Officers during the Union's US midterm election event last Tuesday. The new rules will take effect for the next election on 27th November.

Image credit: Marie Lapuridi for Cherwell.



Oxford University property venture with Legal & General stalls

JEREMY AZZOPARDI

A £4 billion joint venture between the University of Oxford and Legal & General Group Plc (L&G) has stalled, according to *Bloomberg*. The report claims that the venture has invested less than 15% of the amount first pledged. The ten-year agreement from 2019, which created the 50:50 entity Oxford University Development (OUD), aimed to develop affordable housing for staff and students, upgrade the University's Department of Engineering Science, and establish new science and innovation districts in Oxford.

Completed projects include the £200 million Life and Mind Building opened in October 2025, the expansion of the Begbroke Science Park, and upgraded graduate student accommodation in Iffley.

However, other proposals, such as a new facility for the Department of Engineering Science at the Osney Mead Industrial Estate, remain in the works, with three years left under the initial partnership agreement.

The joint venture also plans to construct a wider Begbroke Innovation District that would encompass the area's existing science park, aiming to create 1,800 new homes and add 1.6 million square feet of research and development space. This project has received planning consent, but has not yet been built.

In April of this year, the University's Proctorial Team described the state of the 1960s-era Thom Building on Parks Road, the current site of the Department of Engineering Science, as one where "the decay within the building has been metaphorically masked, as damp academics did their best to keep things functioning". They also said a lack of investment in University buildings risks Oxford's reputational strength and top positions within global rankings.

Asked about Thom Building, an engineering undergraduate at the University told *Cherwell*: "It's the worst looking building in Oxford and I've never seen it without scaffolding."

An L&G spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "Oxford University remains a key strategic partner for L&G. We have already delivered several significant projects together, across research facilities, local infrastructure and housing, and the partnership continues to progress and develop."

L&G is the UK's largest asset manager, with £1.2 trillion in assets under management at the end of 2025. Involved in the insurance and pension markets, the financial services firm recently announced cuts to roughly a tenth of its workforce, while committing to return at least £5 billion to shareholders between 2025 and 2027. Acknowledging its restructuring, the company spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "This approach is strengthening the business for our customers and clients, supporting long-term investment in the UK economy, and creating sustainable value for shareholders."

While Oxford was ranked as the third most intensive innovation cluster in the world in 2023, the region has since declined to fifth place in 2026. The Global Innovation Index published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) also shows that Oxford recorded the sharpest drop among UK clusters in 2026, driven by a 9.4% decline in venture capital activity from the previous year.

A University spokesperson defended the joint venture's progress. They told *Cherwell*: "This should not be characterised as 'scaling back' of the partnership. The investment in the partnership so far is higher than £290m and will continue to rise as projects progress." The spokesperson did not dispute Bloomberg's claim that "the venture has invested less than 15%" of the amount first pledged.

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



SU criticises government graduate visa uncertainty

ILYA ROSENBAUM

Post-study graduate visas will be extended from 18 months to 2 years for "high-performing institutions", following a UK government announcement.

The post-study graduate visa allows university students graduating from UK universities to stay and work in the UK after completing their course. In May 2025, the government announced that the visa would be reduced to 18 months; however, the recent change reverses this for "high compliance institutions". For PhD students, the visa remains 36 months.

It is unclear which universities are included in this category, with officials stating they must be institutions with "strong labour market outcomes".

The policy leaves Oxford graduate students in limbo, uncertain of whether it will apply to the University. Students applying for visas before January 2027 will receive a two-year visa, whereas those who apply after may only receive 18 months. In an update posted to its website, Oxford University said that it "strongly recommend[s] being prepared to submit an application by 31st December 2026 at the latest, in case further details are not announced in time or there is a delay before the new arrangements come into effect".

Student representatives have raised concern over the confusion the visa policy may create. The Oxford SU President for Postgraduates, David Quan, told *Cherwell*: "For postgraduates on one-year courses, the Graduate visa is an important part of planning what comes after Oxford. The Budget said graduates of some universities will keep two years, but not which universities or from when, and every international student deserves to know where they stand."

Quan added: "Under the current rules, master's graduates who apply from 1 January will get 18 months. The University has confirmed that as soon as they know the details, they will update the website and communicate with affected students at the appropriate time."

The visa extension comes amidst a general tightening of immigration rules regarding students. Last year, the government announced a visa brake blocking students from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan from applying for student visas. At the same time, the Home Secretary also increased the time many immigrants must have lived in the UK to qualify for indefinite leave to remain.

NEWS SHORTS

Fowl language

PETA has urged the Oxford English Dictionary, run by Oxford University Press, to abandon a harmful word against animals. Animal rights activists at the organisation say that 'chicken' should not be colloquially defined as 'coward', as chickens can be "remarkably brave".

The Rest is Tortoises

Rory Stewart, a former cabinet minister, shared an unusual nickname from his student days with *The Times*. While studying at Balliol, Stewart was elected 'Comrade Tortoise', making him the student responsible for looking after the college tortoise for the annual Oxford University Tortoise race. Stewart's position proves that slow and steady might not always win the race.

Senate-sational

Abdul El-Sayed, an Oxford DPhil graduate in public health, has become the first-ever Muslim senator to be elected to the US Senate. El-Sayed completed his DPhil at Oriel College in 2011 and earned a Full Blue as captain of the men's lacrosse team; a 2010 *Cherwell* match report described him as a "defensive master". El-Sayed will represent Michigan in the Senate in January. *Cherwell* cannot wait to ask where the political culture is worse: Oriel or Washington.

In this town...

Oxford has come to Roblox after programmers Kam Mughal and Neo Mendes created a virtual version where players can cosplay Oxford life. The game spawns in at the Said Business School, repurposed as a car dealership, and allows players choose a life of crime, join Thames Valley police, or engage in other shenanigans. So far, 7.4 million people have played, or 12,000 a day. The game has earned 16.1 million Robux (£45,000).

CROSS CAMPUS

A4-gone conclusion

Law students at the University of Cambridge are "frustrated" following the announcement that they are no longer permitted to bring a ring binder of unlimited pages into their final exams. With the undergraduates given a new allowance of only ten A4 pages, a letter from Wolfson College highlights the disparities students may face with different print resolutions between colleges. It is not yet known how the students will cope with the changes, and more importantly, printer-based injustices.

AI-vy League

The provost of Dartmouth College has resigned following a report that he failed to disclose use of artificial intelligence in his writings. After running Santiago Schnell's work through an AI detector, the student newspaper *The Dartmouth* found that his column in *The Washington Post*, titled "Universities are fighting AI cheating. But there's a deeper problem", was entirely written by AI.

Cowley cinema nominated for top award amid campaign for survival against Oriel

KIERA O'CARROLL

The Ultimate Picture Palace (UPP), Oxford's only independent cinema, has been shortlisted for Cinema of the Year at the British Independent Film Awards (BIFA).

The cinema on Cowley Road is one of five contending cinemas. The cinema is in the midst of a battle with its landlord, Oriel College, to secure its tenancy.

In reaction to being shortlisted, the UPP told *Cherwell*: "We're absolutely delighted. To make the final five, from more than 70 cinemas across the UK, is a huge achievement... We'd like to thank everyone who nominated us, who visits the cinema and has supported our campaign to protect its future.

"The UPP exists because of the people who care about it. We're community-owned, supported by more than 1,200 shareholders made up of locals and film lovers, and everything we do is driven by a belief that independent cinemas matter and that community matters."

BIFA's Cinema of the Year is the only award celebrating UK cinemas at the heart of their communities. The award is decided by a public vote of 50,000, which decides the shortlist and nominees alongside a jury of industry professionals.Other finalists this year are Abbeygate Cinema in Suffolk, Campus West in Hertfordshire, Hippodrome Cinema in Scotland, and The Kinema in the Woods in Lincolnshire.

Open seven days a week in an Art Deco single-screen auditorium, the UPP screens a mix of foreign-language and classic films. With nearby suppliers like Missing Bean and G&D's Cafe, it offers locally sourced drinks and snacks before the film.

One voter featured on BIFA's website said: "I'd gone on my own, but the UPP has such a strong sense of community that I felt like I was in a room full of friends." The UPP collaborates with student initiatives like the Oxford University Filmmaking Foundation and aims to connect individuals and communities through social inclusion.

After its last owner, Becky Hallsmith, passed away in 2018, the UPP became community-owned through a fundraising initiative. Their screening of Hamnet with Dame Pippa Harris, the film's Golden Globe-winning producer, BAFTA CEO, and longtime UPP fan, helped the cinema gain attention.

The building needs repairs, which investors refuse to fund because of the current lease's 2037 expiry date. It would need a lease of at least 20 to 25 years to secure funding. In 2025, a National Lottery grant was withheld from the UPP as it did not meet the lease conditions. The UPP has said that Oriel "won't commit because our building is in the footprint of their plans for a 'Fifth Quad' to accommodate graduate students".

Concerning the current status of their campaign to secure their future, the UPP told *Cherwell*: "Our landlord, Oriel College, has so far been unwilling to commit to the long-term future we need. However, we're currently in positive discussions with Oriel about a way forward, and we're hopeful that we can reach an agreement that allows the UPP to stay in its historic home.

"Our Save the UPP posters seem to be in every other window on some streets around Cowley Road and East Oxford. Being shortlisted for this award just shows how much the cinema is valued, and we hope it will help reinforce the case for protecting the UPP."

Oriel did not comment on the impact that this award could have on their negotiations; the College told *Cherwell*: "The Ultimate Picture Palace is one of the country's historic cinemas. We are very proud that it has been shortlisted for the BIFA Cinema of the Year award."

One of last year's entrants for Cinema of the Year said that they "saw a 20% increase in ticket sales" after their nomination. BIFA notes that "votes are weighted taking into account the footfall through your cinema over the course of the preceding year". With a petition of over 24,430 verified signatures to save their cinema, the UPP say it is an exciting time for them.

The UPP told *Cherwell*: "We'd love to bring the Cinema of the Year award back to Oxford when the winner is announced on December 6th."

Image credit: Stanley Smith for Cherwell.



King Charles III appoints Laura Swift as first woman Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford

EMMA HEAGNEY

King Charles III has approved the appointment of Professor Laura Swift, Professor of Greek, Fellow, and Tutor in Classics at Magdalen College, as Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Oxford.

The Regius Professorship of Greek is the third-oldest of Oxford's nine Regius Professorships. It was established in 1541 by King Henry VIII alongside the chairs of Divinity, Medicine, Civil Law, and Hebrew, before being joined by the Regius Professorships of History, Ecclesiastical History, Moral and Pastoral Theology, and Mathematics, respectively. These academic positions are considered the most prestigious in the UK and are only appointed by a royal patron.

Swift is the first woman to be appointed to the position, and is the fifth woman to hold a Regius Professorship in the University's history. In a comment to *Cherwell*, Swift said: "When I was an undergraduate at Oxford, very few of the people who taught me were women, and it did make an impact on me when I had female tutors as role models. Oxford and academia in general has changed hugely since that time, and I do feel my appointment is testament to how, even though there are still barriers that women in academia face, we are making progress in tackling them."

Since 2022, Swift has been a tutorial fellow in Classics at Magdalen College, and in 2024 became a professor of Greek in the Faculty of Classics. Prior to this, she taught at the Open University and University College London, as well as at Oxford. Swift studied at Magdalen for her MSt and DPhil, graduating in 2007.

Her research focuses on literary criticism of ancient Greek tragedy and lyric poetry, having written the first complete commentary on the Archaic poet Archilochus. She has received several academic prizes, including the Hellenic Foundation Thesis Prize, an Alexander von Humboldt postdoctoral fellowship, and a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

As an advocate for increasing access to Classics, Swift has contributed to the A-Level Classical Civilisation curriculum and makes frequent media appearances. She also works with contemporary theatre practitioners to explore how ancient texts can inspire modern work.

Swift told *Cherwell* that "the role is not just about teaching and researching Greek (important though that is), but also about championing the value of the subject more broadly. Of course my students and the Classics Faculty will be at the centre of what I do, and I'm looking forward to supervising more graduate students and running research seminars".

She also spoke of the national importance of her role, "at this time where the Humanities are under threat in so many institutions. Public engagement has been really important to me through my career, and I am excited to be taking on a role where I can devote more time to that".

Swift will succeed former Regius Professor Gregory Hutchinson, who held the position from 2015 until his retirement in 2023. Like Hutchinson, Swift will undertake the Ordinary Studentship (professorial fellowship) at Christ Church with which the Regius Professorship is associated. She will take up the post in October 2027.

The Dean of Christ Church, the Very Revd Professor Sarah Foot FRHistS FSA, stated that "Professor Swift's appointment is excellent news. Her distinguished work on ancient Greek literature, alongside her commitment to widening engagement with Classics, will enrich the academic life of Christ Church. We look forward with great pleasure to her taking up the Regius Professorship."

Swift is the second woman Christ Church fellow and Regius Professor appointed this term. She follows Menna Clatworthy, whom the King appointed as the first woman Regius Professor of Medicine this October.

Oxford semiconductor research leads to solar energy breakthrough

ANYA TINDALL

A collaboration between scientists at the University of Oxford and Wuhan University has made a major breakthrough in solar energy efficiency.

Researchers found that bismuth sulphide can absorb light strongly without losing the electrical charge it produces, making it a promising material for semiconductors, the part of a solar cell which converts sunlight into energy.

When a semiconductor absorbs sunlight, it uses its energy to free electrons and leaves tiny, positively charged 'holes' in their place. To produce electricity, these positive and negative charges must be rapidly harvested before they meet and cancel each other out. However, laws of physics state that a good absorber of light must also be a good emitter, and therefore the semiconductors that absorb light most strongly are also the ones that lose their charges most quickly.

Solar energy research has long been slowed by the difficulty of finding materials that balance semiconductor absorbency and efficiency.

The finds on bismuth sulphide, published in Nature, unlocks a solution. The researchers discovered it has a rare quantum arrangement that allows it to absorb light efficiently while also making it harder for excited electrons and holes to recombine.

Solar energy constitutes only 6% of Britain's electricity. Primarily because of Chinese investment, 91% of new global solar and wind facilities are cheaper than the cheapest available fossil-fuel power. However, weather, grid infrastructure, and technological limitations have created a firm ceiling on the UK's solar energy harvesting. This comes as Prime Minister Andy Burnham has announced the launch of a new government body to invest in the national electricity grid, as concerns mount over the durability and capacity of the UK's energy infrastructure.

The government projects that the solar sector will support 35,000 jobs by 2030. This includes roles within the solar technology company Oxford Photovoltaics, which contributed to the study. The company was founded in 2010 as a spin-out from the University and now claims to be "commercialising the world's most efficient solar technology to power the next generation of clean energy".

Solar energy is also expected to play a major role in the government's plans for an Oxford-Cambridge 'growth corridor'. A recent report suggests the UK's premier innovation zone is falling behind its global rivals, as China continues to build as much as 74% of all solar and wind projects worldwide.

This discovery of the bismuth sulphide semiconductor may trigger changes in the renewable energy sector. Doing so, however, requires rapid commercial implementation of the technology. Researchers have yet to establish whether the increased energy savings of bismuth sulphide are enough for it to turn a profit.

Oxford City Council approves new affordable housing

ORLA MCMAHON

Oxford City Council has approved the development of 78 new homes as part of their affordable housing target.

The developments will be spread across Cowley, East Oxford, and Wood Farm, with the construction managed by OX Place, Oxford City Council's housing development company. The aim of the developments, according to the council, is to "increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing across the city".

The plans include 28 new flats in Kensington Crescent, 47 flats on 474 Cowley Road, and two houses on the Wood Farm estate. The houses and flats will either be for affordable rent or social rent, and many will act as temporary accommodation for single homeless adults.

This is the council's latest project under a rolling affordable housing target. Within this period, the council aims to provide 1,600 affordable homes.

These newest developments come at a time when demand for affordable housing in Oxford is significantly higher than supply. According to the City Council's latest data, over 4,000 applicants are on the social housing register. Planning restrictions and flood risks in and around the city make it difficult for new housing to be easily and cheaply built.

Oxford houses are also expensive in comparison with average wages in Oxford. Data published in a 2026 Centre for Cities report shows Oxford as the least affordable city in the UK for housing, with average house prices of £549,600, compared to average annual wages of £44,000. The report notes that in cities like Oxford "high house prices are not matched by high levels of housing supply, with the planning system acting as a key constraint on building both upwards and outwards".

In an online statement, Linda Smith, Councillor and Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, praised the developments as " opportunities to provide homes for people who need them at a time when demand has never been so high".

"There is a huge need for affordable housing in Oxford, and we know we cannot solve that overnight. But brick by brick, site by site, we are delivering the homes Oxford needs."

Oxford City Council's housing policy has its critics. Layla Moran, MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, told *Cherwell*: "Oxford City Council is good at making a very large amount of noise every time it delivers a very small number of houses.

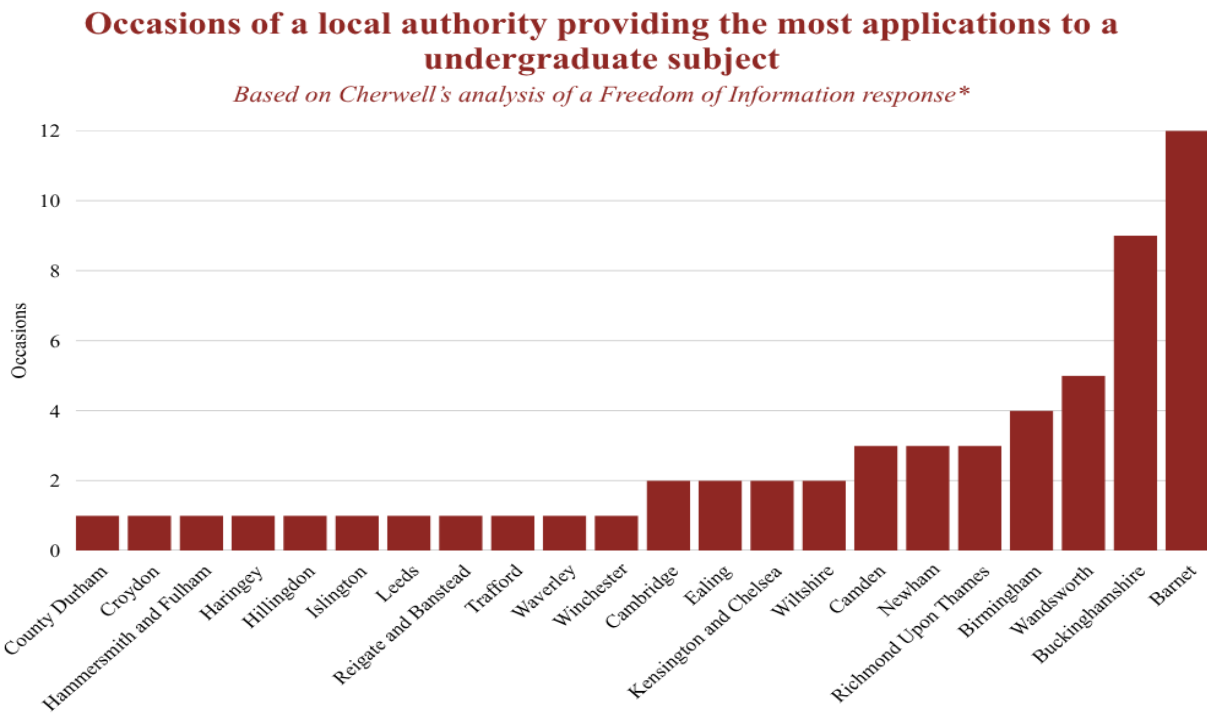
"The City Council has consistently failed to deliver anywhere near the number of homes needed and has repeatedly prioritised commercial development over housing when large sites have become available."

Moran also claimed that, in contrast, neighbouring Liberal Democrat-led councils have consistently delivered on affordable housing.

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



Three local authorities top applications for 52% of undergraduate courses



Continued from Page 1

Trafford, Leeds, and County Durham topped applications for one subject each.

Cherwell's analysis exposes the geographical disparities clear in subject-by-subject applications. The figures complement existing data published by the University, which shows that Barnet accounted for the highest number of total applications to Oxford over the same period, with 258 applications, closely followed by Buckinghamshire with 256. Birmingham came third, submitting 235 applications, whilst Wandsworth and Richmond upon Thames came in joint 4th place with 204. Eight out of the ten local authorities submitting the most Oxford applications were London boroughs.

Applications do not match A-level performance

Through using the annual figures published by the Department for Education, *Cherwell* can compare Oxford applications to the total number of A-level students in each English local authority, and to the percentage of students in each local authority achieving AAA or above in their A-level exams, the most common entry requirements for an Oxford undergraduate degree. This data does not account for domestic students studying other Level 3 qualifications, for example the International Baccalaureate.

In 2025, Barnet had the 13th highest number of state school students sitting A-levels out of English local authorities, at 3,504 students, with Buckinghamshire in 9th place at 3,839, and Birmingham in 6th place at 4,725 pupils. In the same year, Barnet had the 8th highest percentage of state school students achieving AAA or above in A-level results in England at 25%, with Buckinghamshire coming 7th at 28% and Birmingham in 28th place at 17%.

Despite topping applications for the third highest number of Oxford subjects and accounting for a significant number of total applications, Wandsworth was only ranked 58th in England by number of A-level students, and ranked 69th for percentage of students achieving AAA or above. Richmond upon Thames was ranked 14th for percentage of A-level students receiving AAA or above at 21%, but 110th for total number of A-level students at 934 pupils in 2025. The local authority with the highest percentage of students achieving AAA or above, Sutton, was ranked 36th in total number of Oxford applications for 2023-2025, and did not top applications for any subject.

While many of the areas responsible for the most Oxford applications are also home to high numbers of A-level students with the grades to apply, it is clear a disparity remains between the two. Oxford's latest *Annual Admissions Statistical Report* highlights the disparity on a larger regional level, with 28.3% of the University's applicants coming from London in 2023-2025 and a further 20.3% coming from the South East, compared to just 2.1% from the North-East and 4.9% from the West Midlands.

> With Barnet providing the most applications for 12 out of 44 courses, the borough ranked in the top three local authorities for applications to half of courses analysed.

Barnet tops applications

Oxford's most popular subject by applications in 2025, Mathematics, received 60 applications from Buckinghamshire from the 2023-2025 application cycles, followed by Barnet with 53, the London borough of Richmond upon Thames with 50 and Birmingham with 44 applications. Physics, Oxford's next most popular STEM subject in 2025, received 46 applications from Barnet over the last three application cycles, followed by 43 from Buckinghamshire and 42 from Bromley.

Oxford's PPE degree, which received the second-highest number of total applications last year, received 74 applications from Barnet alone from 2023-2025, followed by 54 from Redbridge and 49 each from both Kensington and Chelsea and Harrow. Economics and Management also received the most applications from Barnet at 57, followed by Buckinghamshire at 52 and Wandsworth at 51.

However, Jurisprudence, Oxford's third most popular subject, received the most applications from Birmingham by a large margin, with the UK's second-largest city submitting 86 applications, followed by Buckinghamshire on 51 and Redbridge on 47. Birmingham similarly submitted the most applications for Engineering Science, followed closely by Ealing on 21. For Medicine, Birmingham submitted 102 applications, the highest number of applications from any local authority for any subject, followed by Buckinghamshire on 69.

London and South East lead across subject divisions

Of the 24 analysed undergraduate courses in the Humanities Division, only 2 received the most applications from a local authority outside London and the South East, with 16 out of 24 receiving the most applications from a London borough. Similarly, in the Social Sciences Division, ten out of twelve analysed subjects received the most applications from a local authority in London or the South East. Cross-disciplinary dual honours degrees were counted for both relevant subject divisions.

In the Mathematical, Physical, and Life Sciences (MLPS) Division, two out of nine subjects received the most applications from a council outside London and the South East. Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, two out of the four undergraduate courses in the Medical Sciences Division, received the most applications from Birmingham, with Buckinghamshire topping the list for Experimental Psychology, and Biochemistry receiving its highest number of applicants from Richmond upon Thames.

Disparity between UK nations continues

Local authorities in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales do not provide the most applications for any subject, according to data obtained by *Cherwell*, correlating with figures published by the University showing that only 3.4% of Oxford applicants were from Wales from 2023-2025, 1.8% from Scotland, and 0.7% from Northern Ireland.

> Of the 24 analysed Humanities courses, only 2 received the most applications from a local authority outside London or the South East.

Responding to the findings, the Oxford University Scottish Society told *Cherwell*: "It is very difficult for people to think of Oxford as a place where you could belong – even just for a couple years. To have this build-up of certain geographical areas means that students from other regions can often end up feeling on the outside, even after having made it to Oxford, or will be uneasy applying in the first place.

"The job of outreach should be to help applicants see Oxford as a possibility, regardless of where they come from, which would then help create a less geographically concentrated student body."

Cymdeithas Dafydd ap Gwilym, the University's Welsh society, told *Cherwell*: "It's hardly surprising that Welsh students remain underrepresented when the University and its colleges continue to fall short in supporting Welsh students. Jesus College, historically regarded as Oxford's Welsh college, illustrates this contradiction. The Meyricke Endowment, established in 1713 to maintain Welsh scholars, is now worth over £20 million. Yet in 2024/25, £631,000 was released into the College's general income, while the only surviving Welsh-gated graduate award is worth just £900 a year, with a maximum of two recipients … an institution cannot celebrate its custodianship of Welsh heritage while failing to invest in the scholars who sustain it."

In a response, Jesus College told *Cherwell*: "Jesus College is extremely proud of its Welsh heritage, and supports and celebrates the Welsh members of its community… The College's financial report for the year 2024/25 shows that £421k of the £631k in unrestricted funds drawn from the Meyricke Endowment went directly towards grants, bursaries and prizes for both its undergraduate and postgraduate students – including those from Wales. Other (unpublished) funding directed to Welsh education comes from within the College's core budgets."

A variety of factors may affect application numbers, including the availability of free university study at Scottish universities for Scottish students. Among Scottish local authorities, the City of Edinburgh submitted the most applications for all the most popular Oxford undergraduate courses, including Mathematics, PPE, Law, and Medicine. In Wales, Cardiff topped applications for Mathematics, Law, Economics and Management, and Medicine, while Swansea accounted for the most applications for PPE, and Rhondda Cynon Taf was home to the most Physics applicants. The picture was more mixed in Northern Ireland, with Belfast topping applications for Mathematics, Antrim and Newtonabbey housing the most Physics applicants, and Ards and North Down topping the list for Law.

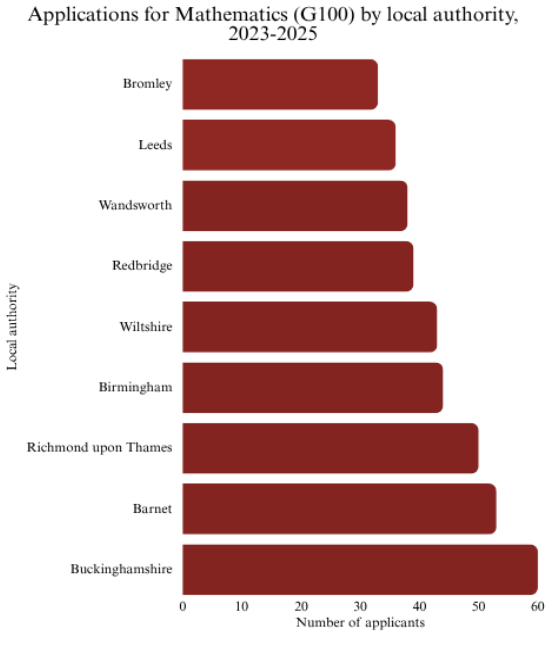
University Response

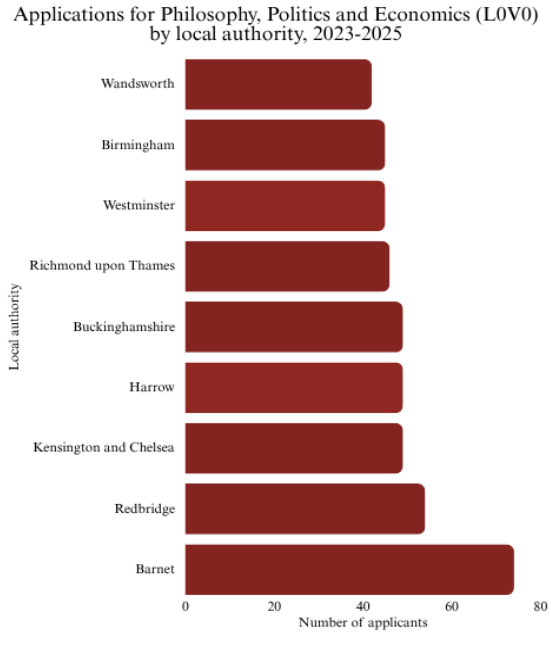
Responding to the findings, the University told *Cherwell*: "Oxford's students come from a wide range of backgrounds and from across the UK. The regional distribution of applications to Oxford is influenced by a number of factors, including population size, educational attainment and regional differences in university application patterns."

The University added: "We are committed over the long term to supporting educational aspiration and potential across the country, and engage with partners, schools and students through regional outreach and access initiatives to encourage more applications from under-represented parts of the UK, including through our Oxplore Festival which has recently visited Cornwall, Bradford and Birmingham, and BeUniq in Bradford, Birmingham and Oldham."

Additional reporting by Anisha Mohammed.

Graph credit: Ned Remington





OPINION

Allow term to change you

ELIZABETH MILLET

It is well known that pride comes before a fall – an excessive assurance in one's own invulnerability is a likely recipe for disaster. At university, however, an impenetrable facade and a certain self-conviction appear to have become the norm. My issue with this culture is how rarely – if ever – I hear about a desire to improve our skills. It often feels as if the term becomes about what one can prove, with social currency often being earned in the process.

The drama scene at Oxford frequently epitomises how student output can become more about personalities than prioritising the art itself. The Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) venerates certain student actors, often drooling over the idea of a student elite. The most recent Playhouse production went so far as to name its own project as the "height of student drama", while another recent play featured a rotation of chosen students acting on different nights, presumably intended to have the feel of 'celebrity-guest' appearances.

The BNOC list produces another obvious example of this obsession with student reputation. Sure, revealing the campus' popular names is just some light entertainment. But there is a danger in viewing students as "Oxford's most famous – and infamous – characters". This preoccupation sets a precedent that students are not in a process of growth, but rather formed figures to be put on a pedestal.

This unnerving attitude of projection over progress produces more smoke than fire; it becomes more about the 'who' than the 'what'. The opportunities term holds appear to be approached by many with self-promotion or social kudos in mind; to me, they lack earnest desire to develop a passion. Students often act as if they and their peers are final products, as if we're professionals already – we're not. In the racket of this desire to prove ourselves, self-reflection appears to be a lost concept.

Our academic studies require a willingness to change – without humility, we would consistently be chained to our old methods and opinions, and would never grow. You would look ridiculous walking into a tutorial trying to prove yourself, rather than submit to being broken down and remoulded. Yet, try to find this attitude outside the vulnerable confines of the tutorial room, and you will find that Oxford culture lacks this genuineness.

Stubbornness also shows up in the chaos of student life. Oxford is rife with poor management and even self-deprecation; admissions of poorly written essays or various social regrets echo around daily. The assumption that students here are put together is wildly incorrect. But amongst missed deadlines, cancelled plans, and failed projects, a genuine desire to learn and improve from experience is rarely talked about – at least not publicly. It is acceptable to be in an 'essay crisis', or to not care about making your 9am lecture (or any other plan, for that matter), yet a sincere want to change habits or fix your failings is looked down upon; transparency is a weakness.

It's important to clarify that I am in no way taking issue with excellence. High standards are ideal, and Oxford consistently witnesses excellent student work that should absolutely be acknowledged. I'm also not saying that we shouldn't have self-conviction and be aware of our talents – my issue is not with confidence, nor is it with skill-based hierarchy. It's the lack of servitude. There's a profound difference between timidity and humility that Oxford students appear to be unaware of. There is an immense grace in possessing talent (and knowing it) and still constantly submitting yourself to being changed and reformed for the better. Skill and personality should not be about reputation and popularity, but about using skill for greater purpose. Fostering natural talent in this way is an ultimate form of self-respect.

A genuine desire to constantly reshape and reform what you pursue will take you far. Treating term time like a showcase for your facade of impartiality or self-assuredness in the hopes of external validation has made Oxford's student culture about protecting and perpetuating one's image – throughout the spectrum of students parading their skill to apologising for a lack of it, it appears to be devoid of genuine humility and desire to improve. Passion has been confused (or at least overshadowed by) prestige, and a desire to serve true purpose and apply oneself seems rare. Why can't we transfer the humility needed in the tutorial room to all aspects of our time here, whether socially, artistically, or practically?

Ultimately, if student culture continues to work against the virtue of self-improvement, and we carry on being quite so unapologetic, the fall from pride may not be public, but will be a personal one – the loss of the most developed version of yourself. Immense strength can be found in allowing the term to change you, no matter how weak this is made out to be.

No, I won't buy a scholar's gown

BEN WOODWARD

On the day I arrived in Oxford, my college mother gave me one piece of advice: "Oh, don't worry, Prelims don't matter at all". Of course, on paper, she was right: for most students at Oxford (provided you pass), Prelims or Mods don't affect your degree classification nor what you can pick in second year. In theory, for the humanities, they are a chance to practise the art of essay writing under time pressure. But, as an ancient academic institution, Oxford risks forcing division between students by encouraging rivalry between the best of the best. Thus is the philosophy behind the scholar's gown: a "black gown of Russell cord or synthetic material in full style with a gathered stiffened yoke behind and short open sleeves" (according to the University guide to academic dress), bulkier than the modest commoner's gown, and given to those who achieve a distinction in their first set of exams.

I am no scholar. I made the humble mistake of merely passing my Prelims. It therefore came as a surprise when I received an email saying that I'd been given an exhibition – an award given by certain colleges for reasons ranging from good Collections results to simply being in the favour of your tutors (which one I fall into remains, as yet, a mystery). Both awards entitle recipients at my college to wear the scholar's gown as part of our sub fusc, alongside a host of other rewards that vary between colleges. Yet I refuse to subscribe to this privileged and elitist attitude towards academic achievement.

All of us worked hard to get into this university: we endured months of prep for the personal statement, put together written work, and faced the intensity of the interview season. Behind that are good GCSE results and likely years of seeking academic validation from teachers. Every person at this university deserves their place; we do not need to prove ourselves further. Some, naturally, work harder than others, and that is reflected in the variety of degree classifications handed out alongside academic prizes. But we must remember that academic reward is not the end goal, and that Prelims are just that: preliminary examinations. When simply settling into the rhythm and social circles of university life is hard enough in first year, must we pile on the pressure even further?

I do not, and cannot, consider myself above my academic peers. Neither the English cohort at my college, all of whom worked hard during exam season and both struggled and shone throughout the year, nor anyone else in other faculties, where marking criteria and the number of Distinctions handed out vary massively. So why would I draw attention to this with a billowing gown? During Finals, as you gaze around the marquee full of hundreds of students in sub fusc, I imagine the last thing you want to be fearing is your own academic inferiority.

The way some colleges reward scholars seems disproportionate to how most are won. At my own, St Hugh's, I have been invited to "make a short Declaration" at the Governing Body meeting, as well as to attend a free formal and drinks reception with my tutors. All for only one week's worth of exams! I am only thankful that, unlike central colleges, gowns are discouraged at our formal halls, so there is no obligation to parade around your luck in first-year exams for the next few years. The scholar's gown is an overt sign of academic comparison, fostering jealousy and rivalry between friends and coursemates – it has no place in what should be friendly, encouraging communities.

Another major issue is the disparity between scholarships across courses and colleges. This is apparent in the criteria for a Distinction: in English and History, candidates must achieve an average mark of 67 with two papers above 70. In Modern Languages, an average of 70 is required, although History and Modern Languages need one mark above 70 and no mark below 64. The boundaries for the sciences are far more vague, since marks are scaled depending on the difficulty of each paper. Meanwhile, in Medicine, tutors at each college decide scholarships. The prevalence of certain subjects amongst lists of scholars speaks to an inconsistent approach to Distinctions, and so it is hardly fair for their reward to have such a large financial and material benefit for students.

Between colleges, there are all sorts of discrepancies: Pembroke displays a list of scholars and exhibitioners near the porters' lodge whilst subtracting £1000 from scholars' battels and inviting them to a scholars' lecture and dinner. At St Hugh's, the sum is £300 a year for the rest of their course, whilst at Somerville it is £500 and at Hertford it is £250. Such large monetary gifts as incentives for good academic performance are surprising but also out of proportion. My tutors informed me in Freshers' week that they valued the growth of my academic voice and development through tutorial essays far more than exam performance, yet the rewards for the latter speak volumes as to what the University values: prestige for the institution.

Of course, it is important to recognise and celebrate academic achievement, and this article ignores the not inconsiderable number of choral and organ scholarships given for talent and dedication to the colleges' music scenes. And yet it is perfectly possible to skip most lectures and not bother with class or tutorial work, and come out with a Distinction in Prelims and a shiny scholarship to go with it. The way scholarships and exhibitions are awarded at Oxford is an out-of-date system, not recognising true academic talent outside the limited examination system.

The fact that I am here at Oxford, the place I spent so much time and effort to get into, the university I both desired and feared, should be good enough for me. Wearing a fancier gown in front of my friends does not make me cleverer, nor does it make me feel superior to the coursemates who have taught me more than many lecturers could. The friendships I have made at university, the experiences I have had, the joy (and tears) in tutorials, the love and human connection – all these mean so much more than a piece of fabric. No one here should ever feel inferior because they didn't excel at a set of, quite frankly, mocks. And so, if you see me in the marquee during Finals, I will be wearing my commoners' gown proudly. I have nothing to prove to others: simply being at this university is reward enough for me.

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



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Beyond the Oxford bubble

As one of the fortunate minority who awaits a year abroad, Leo Jones' 'A year abroad for all' was both a reassuring and thought-provoking piece which reaffirmed to me why that experience in another country was such an enticing part of why I chose the degree I did. The article neatly summarises why the experience is such a valuable and exciting one, as while Oxford life is certainly a rollercoaster, there is something to be said for taking a step back and inserting yourself as a total newbie into a foreign culture and context. While those who have plunged themself into the wilderness that is Oxford University are no strangers to feeling way out of their comfort zone, it nevertheless seems a universally fruitful exercise to experience new surroundings, if not for academic reasons then for personal growth and development.

Charlie Aspinall, History and Spanish, *Trinity College*

Unlearning love languages

From the short excerpt posted on social media, I was immediately drawn to read Sahana Narayan's perspective on love languages ('Acts of time, physical giving, and words of touch'), a topic which in my view, is overrated and permeates too much of the discourse on relationships. Such discourse is definitely a hot topic in many young people's lives, and ultimately, love languages, as Sahana highlights, does tap into that BuzzFeed-esque, slightly too introspective desire to categorise our identities and personalities. Nevertheless, I don't think this language is inherently unproductive, and I'm sure many of us have had similar experiences to the anecdote Sahana relays. For me, it veers too close to therapy-speak and an excessively intellectualised quantifyication of affection. Sahana's consideration of the in-betweens of these categories and even the way in which this language can, in fact, limit what is described was elaborated upon in a very measured way. Love languages can be helpful for some, and it is clearly a popular idea, but I never categorise actions and time this way.

Hartley Ramsden, Spanish and Linguistics, *Hertford College*

THE COMMENTS SECTION

See what our readers make of our social media posts

This is an incredible article, thank you for reporting on this and giving a voice to those who've been silenced by the university ('Oxford Proctors accept one in eight sexual misconduct reports for investigation')

chlopromfret via Instagram

People want good time stories and endings in a world too filled with anger. ('The midterms and the YA novel: Impossibly happy endings)

Glenn Calderwood via Facebook

I call bs, eeg requires you to be still (and not sweaty) to be accurate. Either they're projecting a bunch of artefacts above the dj booth or it's just claudeslop. ('Live DJs and projected brainwaves light up Oxford's first 'biohacking party")

daniyvl via Instagram

As they knock down important buildings for the community??? The university only does for the university ('Four colleges invest in revitalising local businesses')

amyloustein via Instagram

Such a shame.... Why are we regressing rather than advocating for more access to facilities that enable professional people (women and men) to work as well as have a family? ('St Anne's to close nursery called a 'lifeline' for women at Oxford')

rozzy.linda via Instagram

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Do Oxford's admissions statistics tell the full story?

EMMA HEAGNEY

In June, the University of Oxford published its Annual Admissions Statistics Report, an extensive document detailing the domicile, region, disadvantage, school type, gender, ethnicity, and disability of most undergraduate applicants from 2021 to 2025. It found that the proportion of state-educated, UK-domiciled undergraduates admitted between 2021 and 2025 decreased from 68.2% to 66.5%. This is perhaps cause for concern for many outreach departments across the University, but I propose that there is an even broader issue: the way we define 'state school'.

The Admissions Report splits the English education system into two wide categories of 'state' and 'independent'. These categories broadly align with the simple question: did you pay to go to school or not? It is clear to me that the distinction in the report is intended to answer said question, and in that sense it does fulfil its purpose. In reality, however, England's education system is far more complex, encompassing faith schools, free schools (state-funded but not run by the local authority), and academies. But when it comes to university admissions, the corresponding distinction in secondary education is that of state comprehensive, grammar, and private schools. Both the definition and importance of the three owe much to their shared history.

The system we see today stems from the Tripartite System, a product of the 1944 Education Act. Those who passed an exam akin to the 11+ were able to attend a prestigious grammar school, while those who failed had to choose between a secondary modern or a technical school. While at first praised for creating opportunities for the working class, who previously had to pay for education, the Tripartite System soon became controversial, owing to the admissions test which often barred the working class from entering grammar schools. Private and public schools, which cost a hefty fee, were still options for the wealthy.

The Tripartite System was replaced in the 1960s and 1970s by comprehensive schools. These schools did not select students based on income or academic merit, and instead admitted students in the local catchment area. As with most aspects of English society, the tides turned yet again in the 1980s, with Margaret Thatcher's 1980 Education Act. 'Marketisation' of the education system meant that parents had greater choice in which school their child went to, and we still live with this system today. Comprehensive and private schools are still actively established across the country, but grammar schools have been abolished – it is no longer legal to set one up, but those of the past often continue with the grammar school name.

The historic divide between the secondary modern (roughly akin to the modern comprehensive) and the grammar school endures still today. There is a lot to praise the grammar school system for, such as high standards of education that do not come with a price tag. Nevertheless, several material factors affect a child's access to grammar schools. While in theory any child can take the 11+ exam, this may be an impractical burden for those not living near a grammar school, and like any exam, those who can afford private tuition are placed in a better position than those who cannot. According to the UCL Institute of Education, children from higher socio-economic backgrounds are far more likely to attend a grammar school than a child from a lower socio-economic background.

Once at school, social factors begin to shape each child's future. Simply being in a classroom with high-achieving peers is a significant motivator, and primes students for study at a top university. While each person has a different view of their own time at school, I can say for myself that going to a comprehensive school did make me feel inferior, especially in terms of the facilities and resources offered at grammar and private schools. Why did fortune mean that I couldn't access them? Growing up in that environment, I had never met someone who went to a grammar or private school until attending Oxford, and I admittedly thought very badly of those who did: being out of touch, posh, and entitled were stereotypes I fully believed in. But with these stereotypes also came the feeling that these people were better than me, as beneficiaries of fortune's natural favour.

These factors translate into university admissions statistics. A report by the Sutton Trust found that of the top 100 schools with the highest Oxford admission rates, 78 were independent, 21 were grammar, and only 1 was comprehensive. There are only 163 grammar schools in England, but talking to students at Oxford may lead you to think that they constitute a far higher proportion of the country's 6,000 secondary schools. However, there's simply no way of discerning just how many of Oxford's state-educated students went to grammar schools, because this information is not reflected in the data.

More importantly, without a more detailed impression of school type, it is much more difficult for departments and colleges to gauge the success of outreach and access initiatives. The 66.5% of Oxford students who attended a state school may actually be a combination of 90% grammar and 10% comprehensive, but we do not have access to this information, leaving us unable to determine if an initiative is actually working.

Other measures do exist, including Free School Meals eligibility and Index of Multiple Deprivation, but if the aim is to increase the number of applicants from state comprehensives, these alternative measures do not map neatly – roughly 90% of pupils in the UK attend a state comprehensive, while around 26% are eligible for Free School Meals. It is important that outreach be extended to both groups, and they often do overlap, but the University's current state-school measure is unhelpful in this context.

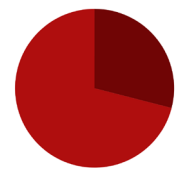
I want to emphasise that this problem is not unique to Oxford. The University of Bristol, for example, uses the same broad categorisation. However, the University of Cambridge does distinguish between types of state school in their statistics. If anything, my aim is simply to open up the discussion about education. I've had peers at Oxford try to relate to me through our shared state education, but it falls flat for me when it becomes clear that this state school was in fact a grammar school.

In response, the University of Oxford told *Cherwell:* "Oxford's access effort focus on measures of disadvantage, for which school type is a poor proxy. The University uses a range of contextual information such as individual level indicators of disadvantage, postcode indicators of disadvantage, and school performance during the undergraduate admissions process."

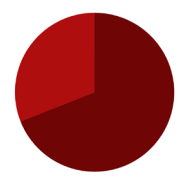
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THE VERDICT

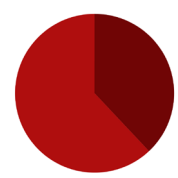
UK students should engage in protest more



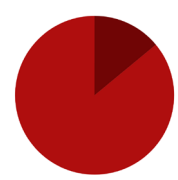
Scholars' gowns are outdated



Term time should be for self-improvement



Oxford admissions statistics should be more detailed



THE DEBATE CHAMBER

Kiera O'Carroll and Caterina Azzara discuss the wave of student protests sweeping Europe

KIERA O'CARROLL

Books, not saline solution against tear gas, are what you'd expect to find in a schoolbag. This isn't the case for most of my friends back home right now. Since September in France, a wave of protests against failing education, austerity, and the far-right has swept the country. Many talk of a new May 1968, the glorified student movement and nationwide strike. But the failed promises of a revolution are no longer echoed in the halls of Sorbonne University. High schoolers as young as 13 have shown us that political action requires less intellectualism and more strategy, using Snapchat to mobilise because it is their only social media. It's different from the movement at the end of the 60s because it's reverberating all across the globe with the speed of the internet; a Student Spring is rising.

From school to university lectures, I have always found it difficult to learn about social justice and the merits of advocacy while being violently repressed for expressing these values. I feel anger, like most students do. When we were told that fascism never shows up as itself but instead as aestheticised popular trends, I had to practice cognitive dissonance to not notice it everywhere. At a university like Oxford, this discord didn't get any better. I was directed towards Google Forms about collective grievances because "protesting inconveniences others".

On a FlixBus back from Paris, I heard someone in the next seat criticising the protests. It felt alienating to hear someone misconstrue a struggle you so deeply care about in ten seconds. I thank this person, however, for calling the movement part of a wider Student Spring. Taking its name from the Arab Spring of 2011, those protests fundamentally changed how youth social movements interact with political power in a digital age, with platforms like Facebook helping millions to mobilise against dictatorship. The current Student Spring testifies to the resilience of our generation and the convergence among social struggles.

As I watch unarmed and peaceful students choke on chemical irritants in the water cannons aimed at them, I recall my own experiences of getting tear gas grenades thrown at my feet. Tear gas has recently been scrutinised for its long-term effects like miscarriages or total blindness. The illegality of all of these violent methods is what strikes me; most of the weapons used in France are classified as wartime artillery. UN experts have expressed their concern about the crackdown on these student protests, as France recently deployed the army as reinforcement. Medical reinforcement does not seem to be coming through; in October, my friends and I, along with a volunteer student medic, were the only ones available to help a man struck to the bone by a grenade.

As disproportionate as these measures may seem, they prove just how powerful students are. In under two years of daily protest across the country, students in Serbia achieved the resignation of their populist leader who had been in various positions of power for 14 years. I remember visiting my cousins during the holidays, and nothing had paused. We chanted through the streets of Novi Sad every single evening. The 'Cockroach Janta' student party in India, as in France, called for the resignation of their education secretary. Repressed by lathi baton charges, a colonial-era tactic where police use batons to scatter crowds, reports from Reuters have shown that pellet guns and Varifocal bullet cameras are not territorially confined.

At times, my university feels like a self-contained universe, a playground for ideas, not action. Our moral and communal responsibilities are delayed by learning their history or debating their justifications. My tutorials on utilitarianism and contractualism have taught me this. Universities are both the machines and the victims of the ideology we are taught about. But fear not, a Student Spring is blooming.

CATERINA AZZARA

I was always told to study. Education, the story went, was the price of a voice: learn enough, and one day people would have to listen. But what happens when the state forgets its side of that promise?

The first answer came from France. Students at Lycée Saint-Exupéry in Créteil, a suburb just south-east of Paris, joined a strike called by their teachers on 21st September and blocked the school, which had gone months without enough teachers or support staff. Within around ten days, the vacancies had been filled, and the blockade in Créteil came to an end. By then, however, the discontent had travelled via social media to other high schools around Paris, and by early October more than 1,000 schools across France had been disrupted. The main pupils' union set out its demands: more teachers, safe buildings, smaller classes, and the abolition of Parcoursup, the platform that has controlled access to French universities since 2018. By 17th October, joined by teachers and trade unions, the movement had merged with a national protest against the cost of living, which brought nearly 800,000 people onto the streets according to the unions, while the Interior Minister put the figure at 550,000.

Inspired by the French, Italian students took to the streets on 16th October, marching through Milan, Turin, Rome, Naples, Bologna, and Genoa under the banner of "No Meloni Day", in reference to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. They were protesting against crumbling school buildings, a decree imposing a 30% cap per class on students with non-Italian citizenship, and an inadequate education budget. The timing gave their protest particular force as it coincided with the government's spending plans for next year: while Cittadinanzattiva recorded 68 structural collapses in Italian schools over the past year, the draft budget for 2027, approved by the cabinet on 13th October, makes room for roughly €7 billion in additional defence spending. Hence the central demand of the student collective Osa: that the €13 billion earmarked for new weapons be converted immediately into funds for school buildings.

As the marches grew, so did the violence. In France, 24 schools were burned or ransacked, while protests in Milan and Turin ended in clashes with police. I will not justify it for two simple reasons. The first is that it does nothing to help the cause. In *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011), a study of 323 campaigns between 1900 and 2006, political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan found that nonviolent movements succeeded twice as often as violent ones, because they attract far more participants and because repressing peaceful crowds tends to cost a government support. Omar Wasow's 2020 study of the 1960s American civil rights movement reached a similar conclusion: peaceful marches won public sympathy, whereas riots frightened voters into backing candidates who promised 'law and order', tougher policing rather than the reforms protesters demanded. The second reason is that violence buries the cause it claims to serve. Media scholars call this the protest paradigm, in which cameras linger on the burning bin rather than the classroom without a teacher. In France, the Education Minister called the movement "taken hostage by ultra-violent groups", and the debate shifted from missing teachers to public order.

Yet to dwell on the violence is to miss the more pressing question: why do so many young people feel that protest is the only way to be heard? The question matters because being heard is what democracy promises, and both the French and Italian constitutions place power in the hands of the people. Political theorist Robert Dahl argued that a democracy is judged not only by its elections but by how well it listens to its citizens in between. By that standard, a 16-year-old who barricades her school in order to get a teacher is not attacking democracy; she is exposing its failure.

This House believes the Oxford Union can debate better



The Oxford Union attracts some of the world's most prominent speakers to argue over its most contentious motions. But are they actually debating?

ANISH VEDANTHAM

There is a familiar moment during an Oxford Union debate. One speaker finishes, the chamber applauds, and the next speaker approaches the despatch box, likely prepared with several pages of remarks. They thank the President, perhaps make a joke, and begin their speech.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this. If one is stepping into a chamber that has a 200-year history of hosting monumental debates, it would be foolish not to have come prepared. Nevertheless, after attending several Union debates, I started to get the sense that nothing anyone said could substantially affect what came next.

The speeches were sometimes interesting. The speakers (obviously) disagreed. Sometimes, they even directly challenged one another. But I increasingly found myself wondering whether I was watching an actual debate or simply listening to several people deliver their individual arguments on the same subject.

This is not an entirely new complaint. During the Union's debate on youth activism, Oliver Carter criticised audience members who left after hearing the particular speech they came to see. His objection was straightforward: members were supposed to be discussing a motion, and leaving halfway through meant missing the entire argument.

While his point is certainly well taken, it invites another question: if every speaker had filmed and submitted their contribution the previous afternoon, how much would the debate actually change?

What is a Union debate supposed to do?

The Oxford Union was founded in 1823 and developed as a forum for discussion independent of the University's constraints. Its establishment provided students an independent space to debate subjects they could not otherwise discuss freely. Two centuries later, the Union continues to place freedom of expression at the centre of its institutional identity.

That history still shapes how people inside the institution understand its purpose. Arwa Elrayess, a former Union President, described a gap between what the wider Oxford student body rewards and what she believes the office of the President demands. A President could organise a term around relatively 'safe' debates and probably receive less criticism. But, she argued, this would miss the point of running a "historic debating society, whose entire purpose is to be able to have those discussions, have those debates, that you would otherwise never be able to have".

> If every speaker had filmed and submitted their contribution the previous afternoon, how much would the debate actually change?

Controversy, therefore, is not an end in itself. However, it can be the consequence of taking disagreement between viewpoints seriously. "If a motion leaves everyone in the room in agreement," she says, "then nobody held a view strong enough to argue".

Antonio Reis, President-Elect of the Oxford Students Liberal Association (OSLA) and a member of the Union's Secretary's Committee, offered a useful distinction. Inviting Einstein to give an individual address would be justified by his expertise alone. Inviting him to a debate would promise something else: an argument tested against opposition.

As Reis put it: "If they're coming to a debate, it's because we want to hear an argument."

A Union debate need not consist mainly of rebuttal. Invited speakers have perspectives that deserve to be heard in their own right. Nevertheless, the opposing case should be capable of imposing demands on their speech. At some point, a debate should make what one speaker says consequential for what the next speaker has to say.

I wanted to know how often that happened. To determine whether speeches actually 'debated', I spent 30 hours (of my life that I will never get back) watching 133 speeches across 17 Oxford Union debates from the 2025–26 academic year. I examined whether speakers responded to arguments previously advanced by their opponents, introduced new arguments, repeated material already presented by their own side, and received points of information (POIs).

I rated each speech on a four-point scale, from no engagement with earlier opposing arguments to extensive engagement with several. Contrary to my initial impression, of the 116 speeches capable of responding to a previous opponent, 82 (or around 70%) were coded as containing at least one substantive response. That hardly suggests that speakers universally ignore one another.

But a headline that reads "seven in ten Oxford Union speakers substantively respond to other speakers" would be misleading. A speech qualified if it substantively addressed just one opposing argument, even briefly, with few speeches consistently engaging with previous speakers' points. Further, I could not reliably distinguish an improvised response from a rebuttal anticipated before the debate.

This revealed a problem with the question I had initially asked. Counting rebuttals could tell me whether a speaker had responded to an opponent. It could not establish whether anything the previous speaker said had materially changed the direction of the discussion.

A debate can contain rebuttals without its arguments meaningfully developing.

The problem with points of information

Ideally, this is where POIs would come in. Unlike a prepared rebuttal, a POI allows an opponent to challenge a speaker while they are speaking. It lets the argument develop in real time rather than waiting for the next scheduled contribution.

Reis described POIs as "super important", explaining that they force speakers to think on their feet. Akheel Kale, another member of the Union's Secretary's Committee, similarly identified them as an important means of facilitating direct interaction between speakers.

The figures, however, complicate this picture. Across the 133 speeches, I identified 216 POI offers. Yet 74 speeches received none at all. In more than half of the speeches I watched, there was no identifiable attempt to interrupt with a question. The Union's most concrete way of forcing a confrontation of views was alarmingly absent.

Furthermore, the distribution was highly uneven. The debate on whether the West was right to be suspicious of Islam accounted for 110 of the 216 identifiable POI offers across the entire sample. At first glance, this might suggest an exceptionally interactive debate. Yet Kale, recalling the event, described people speaking over one another and an extraordinary number of declined interruptions. His recollection highlights another distinction: confrontation is not necessarily deliberation.

An evening in which opponents repeatedly attempt to interrupt one another might be considerably more confrontational than an





evening of uninterrupted speeches. But if speakers consistently refuse those interventions, or if interruptions produce little substantive exchange, the additional confrontation does not necessarily improve the discussion. The findings say something about the purpose of POIs. Their existence cannot guarantee genuine engagement. Their effectiveness depends on whether speakers are willing to allow their opponents to interfere with the arguments they came to deliver.

Responding without debating

Perhaps an even more revealing question is whether the two sides are addressing the same disagreement in the first place.

Consider the Union's debate on whether politics should be kept out of sport. The proposition initially approached the motion relatively narrowly, concentrating on the institutional and geopolitical use of sport for political purposes. The opposition, meanwhile, repeatedly invoked a broader understanding of politics, encompassing athlete activism, national identity, and political expression. The distinction matters. The opposition's use of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who famously raised their fists at the 1968 Olympics, illustrated the importance of political expression in sport. But defending their protest does not necessarily rebut the argument that governments exploit international sporting competitions for geopolitical purposes.

The two sides could appear to be rebutting one another while operating under different definitions of the motion. Of course, arguing over what counts as 'politics' can be productive. The problem arises when speakers use those different meanings without confronting the distinction. As Jacob Rees-Mogg put it: "That is often a problem with the Oxford Union Society. That when a motion says one thing and a speaker thinks something else, he tries and talks around the subject."

Elrayess identifies a structural reason as to why this can happen. Union motions, she explained, have to be "snappy and quick to the punchline". Nuance is inevitably lost. Sometimes, she said, "the core idea of the debate gets lost on the speakers who get caught up in the technicalities of the wording". She also sees value in provocative wording: pushing a proposition towards its limits can force members to discover where their own views lie. But a motion that creates disagreement is not necessarily one that helps speakers locate the precise point of disagreement.

Paradox of the excellent speaker

There is a more fundamental obstacle to making speeches responsive: the Union's greatest attraction may also discourage improvisation.

The Union certainly possesses an extraordinary ability to attract prominent politicians, academics, journalists, and other public figures. Its members can hear from people with years of experience in subjects they might otherwise encounter only through newspapers, books or television. It would be unreasonable to suggest that these speakers should abandon their prepared arguments simply to respond to whatever the previous speaker happened to say.

Elrayess described the difficulty of assembling opposing benches when invitees object to a motion or to sharing a platform with another speaker, highlighting a fundamental constraint on any attempt to construct a debate: a President cannot create opposing benches if potential participants refuse to sit on them. Her defence of controversial invitations follows from the same principle. "Speakers are invited because their views are influential enough, are listened to enough, that they deserve to be scrutinised," she told me, "not because we wish to give them a badge of honour".

That defence depends, in part, on what happens once the speaker arrives. A debate can scrutinise a controversial argument in a way that an individual address cannot, but only if the speaker engages with the arguments made in front of them. Yet the qualities that make somebody worth inviting can also make their contribution more self-contained. An eminent guest might have spent years developing a particular argument. They arrive with a prepared speech, knowing that their performance may be recorded and scrutinised by an audience far larger than the one sitting in the chamber.

Reis suggested that these pressures can discourage spontaneous interaction. With so much riding on a Union appearance, speakers may be reluctant to depart from prepared material or accept challenges that could take their speech somewhere unexpected. Contrast that with a debate night at one of Oxford's many political societies, like OSLA's Liquor and Liberalism. There, Reis explains, the lower-stakes environment allows more back-and-forth, even if the ensuing debate may be less polished.

The answer, then, cannot simply be to replace speeches with conversation. The Union should preserve the expertise and preparation that make its guests worth hearing, while ensuring that their arguments face meaningful scrutiny.

Importantly, these ambitions are not mutually exclusive. Prepared speeches and spontaneous responses can coexist. Kale recalled an India-Pakistan debate in which a speaker delivered an effective prepared speech while also responding substantively to challenging POIs. For him, the combination illustrated what the Union's format can achieve: the benefits of preparation without sacrificing direct engagement.

> "The question is whether anything that happens in the chamber can force the person holding those pages to depart from them."

Debate by design

Asked what she would change if she had unilateral power over the Union, Elrayess suggested experimenting with "different debate structures that allow for more fluid back-and-forths, rather than the speeches we often see". A more fluid format, she argues, "prevents monologuing that does not serve the instrumental purpose of debate".

An instructive historical comparison can be made. The famous 1858 debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas were political spectacles, attracting enormous audiences and considerable press attention. Nevertheless, their structure protected something that the Union's format does not always guarantee: time specifically allocated to responding to an opponent. Each encounter began with a 60-minute speech, followed by a 90-minute response from the opposing candidate. The opening speaker then received 30 minutes to reply.

The Union need not reproduce a 19-century two-person contest. It could experiment with a short, protected response period after opening speeches, or a moderated exchange between opposing speakers before the floor debate. Neither would require abandoning prepared remarks. Both would make it harder for speakers to avoid the strongest argument against their position.

Such changes would carry risks. More interruptions could reward theatrical confrontation; rigid rebuttal periods could crowd out expert explanation. But the Union already experiments with whom it invites and which motions it chooses. There is no reason for its format to be beyond experimentation.

A platform for free speech or a forum for debate?

Ultimately, the Oxford Union's Thursday nights bring two of its institutional ambitions into tension.

The Union takes great pride in repeating former Librarian of the Union Harold Macmillan's claim that it is "the last bastion of free speech in the Western world". It also, however, claims to be the "world's most prestigious debating society". These two aims need not be inherently contradictory, but one does not automatically fulfil the other.

Allowing somebody to express an argument fulfils an important free-expression function. Inviting somebody else to express the opposite argument creates ideological diversity. Choosing a sufficiently contentious motion ensures they have something meaningful to disagree about. A debate adds one final requirement: those arguments should meet.

The Union is remarkably good at creating the conditions for disagreement. It chooses contentious motions. It invites people from opposing political traditions. It tolerates views that other institutions might refuse to host. It puts those people on opposite sides of the same chamber.

The prepared pages in a speaker's hands are not the problem. Nor are prominent guests, provocative motions, rhetoric, or preparation. The question is whether anything that happens in the chamber can force the person holding those pages to depart from them.

Elrayess argues that the Union possesses a rare freedom to host conversations that otherwise might not happen. But creating the conditions for a conversation is not the same as ensuring one takes place. The Union has proved exceptionally good at getting opposing arguments into the same room. A better debating society would make them collide.

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Forced unveilings in academic spaces are why I wear my hijab at Oxford

Forced unveiling not only removes our identities from educational spaces and public life, but also reinforces the stereotypes of us as intellectually deficient or absent in public life and service

SABA AHMADZADEH NOUGHANI

"If they tell me to take it off, I won't do that, and I will leave the school because the hijab is more important to me than the school. It's the most important thing in my life."

– Hijab-wearing schoolgirl Florinda Zeka, in a 2010 BBC interview about Kosovo's hijab ban in schools.

For me, one of the most challenging aspects of wearing a veil is being on the receiving end of attempts to unveil you. I personally first encountered this at age ten, when Ofsted decided to target visibly Muslim primary school girls across the country and ask them why they wore the hijab in front of their peers. Many other visibly Muslim girls and I grew up being the target of interrogations while facing demands to condemn the two countries which imposed veiling on women. Meanwhile, we endured watching more European countries like France, Austria, Norway, The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Kosovo, Russia (in areas like Stavropol Krai and Mordovia), Spain, Italy, and Switzerland banning the hijab or niqab in educational institutions.

While our peers in these countries were fighting for their religious freedoms and right to an education, we grew up very aware of the stereotypes attached to the hijab, including being thought of as uneducated or less ambitious. We grew up being told that the hijab is a backward, alien, or unnatural practice despite the fact that women veiling is as old as civilisation itself. I cannot think of a practice that unites more women globally than veiling. From England to Assyria to Greece to India and even further afield, women have traditionally veiled for either cultural or religious reasons.

The stereotype of veiled Muslim women lacking basic skills, basic education, or being confined to their homes is the one that has had the most impact on my self-image as I began to veil. I have had to remember to stop viewing myself through a lens of 'double-consciousness', a sociological term meaning to constantly measure and view oneself through the prejudiced eyes, stereotypes, and contempt of the dominant culture.

When I decided to wear the hijab in primary school, I was ridiculed and excluded by close friends. On World Book Day, for instance, I was told that I could not be Matilda, like all the other girls in my class, because "she never wears a scarf". Gradually, I stopped many activities like drama, as well as ice skating, since I was influenced into thinking that certain activities look silly in a hijab. Giving up on hobbies, however, is not much in comparison to girls who are denied an education, or offered a conditional education that compromises their religious freedoms and choice.

During my first year, when someone at the Oxford Union was speaking in an emergency debate about feminism and women's education, I reminded him that such education does not extend to women like me in many European countries. In reply, he said: "I think it is a great privilege you have to be speaking in a place like this."

While the international community and women's rights activists look the other way, veiled Muslim girls are fighting one of the hardest battles to attend school. The psychological trauma and violence of forced unveiling is a lived reality for so many veiled Muslim girls, both throughout history and across the world today. There are more countries in the world that force Muslim women to remove our veils than those that impose them, yet we grew up very aware that most people assume that we are unable to make our own choices about our own bodies and are forced.

At a society event I attended in Oxford during my first year, someone asked me why I still wear a scarf and whether I was forced to. I told her, mindful to do so gracefully, that this is never forced. She replied: "No, you are, because if you don't you go to hell." I told her that Muslims do not weaponise or invoke hell upon each other and that God is the ultimate judge. She carried on following me across the room, insulting me and questioning me about Iranian law, despite me telling her that I am not only not Iranian but that there are many women in Iran who no longer veil. As expected, nobody else in the room told her to stop harassing me.

I think about this moment most, because while today the hijab or niqab is banned in educational spaces across Europe, the overwhelming majority of people not only do not condemn this, but do not question it either. Only 50% of Western Europeans favour allowing Muslim women to wear religious clothing in any setting (with this still excluding face coverings), while 23% favour a ban on all religious clothing.

Forced unveiling not only removes our identities from educational spaces and public life, but, as a result of our absence, also reinforces the stereotypes of us as intellectually deficient or absent in public life and service. The most recent country to enforce forced unveilings in educational spaces is Azerbaijan, shortly after Austria and Kosovo.

However, discrimination, mockery, attempts to remove us from academic spaces, and aggressive attempts to unveil us are not recent. My Iranian great-grandmother lived under Kashf-e-Hijab (the Shah of Iran's ban on all veils in public spaces to promote Western-style attire for both men and women). My grandmother once told me that her mother and grandmother like many women at the time would avoid going out altogether and if they had to they would go early mornings or late at night where there was unlikely to be authorities on the street. If they were stopped by authorities they would say that they were tourists visiting from neighbouring Afghanistan, she said.

This forced unveiling mimicked soft power tactics to unveil Muslim women in Türkiye under the presidency of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who viewed veiling or any traditionally Islamic clothing as backward. In his public speeches, he argued that traditional head coverings humiliated Turkish women and hindered national progress. Such beliefs and comments are not too different from verbal insults directed at veiled and visibly Muslim women today. During Kyrgyzstan's campaign to pressure Muslim women to unveil, the government displayed billboards of women in niqabs, with the question, "My poor people, where are we going?" In 2016, then-President Almasbek Atambayev repeatedly targeted veiled women in a press conference, also saying: "Women in mini skirts do not become suicide bombers".

Tunisia, for instance, like India, Belgium, and other countries, no longer implements its hijab ban in academic spaces, but discrimination and ridicule directed at veiled women continue. On one occasion, Tunisian actor Mohamed Kouka publicly remarked that "the hijab makes women inferior and less worthy" and that "when I come across a veiled woman, I wish to tear the headscarf up". Hand in hand with their fantasies to unveil us, Mohamed Kouka has also made hand gestures showing himself ripping off an imaginary hijab on air and saying that the hijab "takes the value of women to the lowest". When later asked why he said he would rip the hijab off, Kouka said it was "a joke" and refused to apologise.

On another occasion, when I asked her whether she felt discriminated against at university for being a young mother, as I had to sometimes accompany her to university, she told me that she did not feel discriminated against or judged for that at all in front of her professors, but instead for wearing the hijab. "I always felt they look down on us, as if we are uneducated and ignorant, as if we are inferior and do not know anything."

We are still thought of as lacking basic skills and education. At Oxford, after I had told someone where my grandmother had studied for her master's, they said: "Wait, what? So she's actually smart?" In her blog, a British school teacher, by the name of Miss Moga, wrote of one of her experience of working in UK schools: "When I attended the interview I was to first have a short meeting with the headteacher to be welcomed to the school and have a little tour, the initial moment she laid her eyes on me, she looked surprised and grasped her necklace and turned to her assistant and whispered (quite loudly!), 'I thought she was the most educated candidate?!'"

Strangers on the street have asked me, "can you speak English?" before they stop me to ask something. Perhaps you could argue that they have asked in good faith, but what about the strangers that have stopped me on the street to say "you are not welcome here", "aren't you hot?", and even during my year abroad, "this is Armenia, you do not need to wear your… your bandana" and "you are in Armenia, you should respect our laws". What about strangers who threw newspapers at my cousin's face on the tube, and received thanks from onlookers as a result? Living through this daily puts pressure on young girls growing up to unveil. As journalist Mohamed Hassan wrote in his award-winning poem 'The Muslim women who raised us': "When us men hide in shirts and jeans, shaved jaws, and blue eyes, nobody asks us where we are going, why we are here, what we are trying to prove with our insistence to go to school, to get degrees…"

Forced unveiling in women's sports is also commonplace. At a press conference, Tunisian runner Habiba Ghribi told a young hijab-wearing runner to "choose between the hijab and running", to which she later burst into tears. This also echoes France's attitudes to hijab-wearing athletes, who are not permitted to partake in competitions unless they unveil. For myself, it was only after I came across ice skater Zahra Lari, who wears a hijab, that I started ice skating again. It reflects the profound impact that representation has, and the need for young Muslim girls to be exposed to veiled women in different roles. Forced unveiling, apart from causing great psychological distress, places a glass ceiling upon the potential and dreams of young veiled Muslim girls.

I spoke to Elif Feyza Dinc, an MPhil student reading Development Studies. She came to Oxford after graduating from Boğaziçi University, one of Türkiye's most prestigious institutions. Though only a generation earlier, her mother "lived through every hardship that the 28 February decisions produced". She is referring to Türkiye in 1997, when the so-called postmodern coup carried out by the secular military establishment set in motion a sweeping hijab ban across universities and public institutions. She tells me that 29 years later, its effects still resonate among Muslim women in Türkiye, and in their social attitudes and sense of belonging in public space.

"The ban was enforced brutally", and her mother was forced to leave the school where she had spent four years. She instead had to complete her education through an open high school. "The second blow," she says, came at university gates after women wearing the hijab were barred from entering campuses and "told to remove it if they wished to receive the education they had already earned, having passed a national exam from an unequal starting point".

Some universities set up what came to be known as Ikna odaları, or 'persuasion rooms', which were spaces of psychological pressure and isolation where veiled students were coerced to uncover their heads. Her mother was among those caught in the system: "She came from a small town, where people had fewer resources and fewer alternatives once these restrictions took hold. In the end, she was unable to enrol in her faculty."

Eighteen years later, however, after becoming a mother of three and at the age of 36, Elif's mother prepared once again for the national university entrance exam. She was admitted to the Department of History at Marmara University in Istanbul and graduated second in her cohort, yet she "still speaks of those years as the time her rights were taken from her, and of her degree as a way of fulfilling the dreams she held at 18".

The legacy of 28 February lies not only in the coup's decisions, but also in the everyday language now engraved in women's social memory. Throughout our conversation, Elif had deliberately avoided the word 'victimhood'. She told me that this is because "the language for describing the suffering imposed by a top-down secular authority has itself been shaped, and weaponised, by parts of secular society". In Türkiye, for instance, the phrase 'bitmedi mi mağduriyetiniz?' ('will your victimhood never end?') is routinely used to silence anyone who speaks about the injustices of 28 February in public conversation.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

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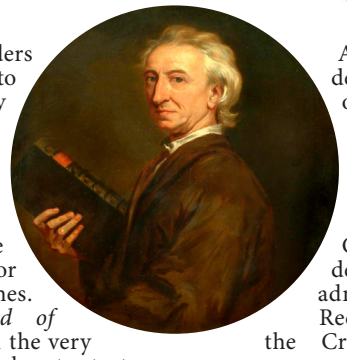
ARCHIVES
Emma Heagney

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John Evelyn



My dear readers I'm afraid to report that my darling little hacks have been running me ragged particularly in our glorious Crashout Committee. The weekly meeting seems to have become a forum for additional paper speeches. To quote *The Sound of Music*, let us start from the very beginning, a very good place to start.

Andy Burnedout led the charge by throwing his toys out the chamber. Red-dull pointed out that perhaps burned-out should "be nicer to his friends" to stop this. Boo-hoo.

John Evelyn thought that would be the last of it. Alas no.

The Slatecrasher made a feeble attempt at a righteous 'gotcha' moment against Lee Kwan Yewsless in his sunrise standing committee. Whilst he admitted to his mistakes regarding the invitation procedure of last Friday's speaker, his 'and what' aura left The Slatecrasher lost for words. She was seen sulking with her blonde ponytail between her legs. John Evelyn is happy to provide some words to The Slatecrasher… get got.

[Redacted] and his paper speech was struck from the record. Following the Unc-WarsTM, Ex Chief Advisor Crowmell has won this particular fight. Despite leaving Blank-Slate's team entirely *cough* bleak, sorry, blank.

Although Cromwell declares he's "not one to crash out" our correspondents beg to differ. His chastisement of hacks during the Crashout Committee fell on deaf-ears. John Evelyn admires his gusto.

Red-dull's business in the Crashout Committee was my personal favourite, as he continues the age-old legacy. Upon his declaration, John Evelyn is proud to baptise him anew as… young-standing-never-running-again.

Meanwhile, Burnedout's band of thieves advances by the day. Transforming from #Titanic to Andy et all one wonders how much of this is the work of Milk and co and their motley crew and how much of it is victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. 51-May or Olaf are running as chief party planner in a set up by Burnedout to take on next term's Money Man.

The membership are wondering if this is the emergence of an Omnislate or a legacy. The older readers of my correspondence may remember what happened the last time such a foundation was laid, in fact I can hear them turning in their finalist graves (shaped suspiciously like a library). Only time will tell us what happens next but remember Andy, what goes up must one day come crashing down.

ARCHIVES



Just as *Saltburn* was set roughly 20 years before its release date, this 1983 *Cherwell* article explores the lives of Oxford students in the 1960s. Seemingly not satisfied with a world-class education, the article details the oppressive measures imposed by the Proctors and the city, including a curfew to "prevent excessive revelry in Cornmarket". Perhaps, in the face of the '2026 Plush Renaissance', we'll be seeing the return of the Cornmarket Curfew and the "subdued and genteel" undergraduate life of the 60s.

The swinging 60s also saw a ban on men being in women's rooms after 7pm. "No sex after 7pm", the author cries, a particularly worrying prospect given the assertion that "Oxford males were more interested in sex than politics". Oh, how times have changed.

However, not all was doom and gloom. The author of this particular article seems especially clued up on the price of weed in the 60s – how they acquired this information is unknown, but could be useful for an extra special addition to *Cherwell's* upcoming Intoxtigation.

EDITORIAL



Stanley Arlidge
Deputy Editor: News

The last wartime edition of *Cherwell* (published in Hilary 1942) contains a haunting line. Its editors wrote that the paper would "continue to serve you... with such talent as the Recruiting Board leaves us."

Evidently, the board did not leave enough. *Cherwell* did not return in Trinity. The editor, Alfred Mond, who wrote the very editorial, was killed in 1945 while serving in the RAF. His co-editor at the time was wounded twice while serving.

Remembrance can often feel immaterial. To me, it's always been that odd two-minute silence at Loftus Road before a QPR game or the photos of the Cenotaph on the news. It's only through these stories of students that it has begun to hit home.

This month's commemorations remind me that the 'Oxford Bubble' can burst. The freedom to pursue activities that ultimately don't really matter like they are the most important thing in the world is not a given. This is true even for those who made it back after the war.

Take the Oxford experience of Michael Flanders. When he went off to the Royal Navy in the Second World War, Michael was thriving in the student theatre scene and writing drama reviews for *Cherwell* on the side. In the war, he contracted polio after his ship was torpedoed in the North Sea. Upon his return to Oxford, Christ Church refused to re-admit him due to the wheelchair his illness confined him to.

This November, struggling to balance *Cherwell*, my degree, and a 'social' life, I'll be thinking of those students who did not get to enjoy the bubble.



Freya Robson
Deputy Editor: Opinion

During a particularly pressing essay crisis, I used my precious (procrastination-fuelled) time to scroll through the Opinion archive. Of course, there are many well-trodden paths in the history of *Cherwell* Opinion, from criticising rising battels to debates about every Oxford tradition under the sun – with an unsurprisingly heavy dose of Oxford Union articles. But between the controversies and carefully worded arguments I found an article from 2013 titled 'Oxford Maladies'. This tongue-in-cheek write-up details numerous niche Oxford-related ailments, of which many still plague students today: "benchicide", a scientist's overwhelming desire to murder their lab partner, and "vacture", the debilitating failure to do anything productive over the vacation. One ailment that stood out to me was "discoursclerosis", the complete failure of a student to adequately communicate the beauty and clarity of a particular thought, instead presenting the idea as an "incoherent heap of tangled nonsense". As a philosophy student, this immediately spoke to me, and as a dedicated Opinion-lover it practically screamed out of the page. Writing Opinion articles involves far more than meets the eye, and trying to translate a brilliant idea into a polished article is truly an uphill battle. The opinions that you see on the page begin as mere thoughts, and the desire to do them justice can be daunting. At face value, Opinion articles do what it says on the box – they give an opinion. But delve a little deeper, and you'll see a harmony of thoughts, facts, and argumentation that is hard to pull off.

So the next time you find yourself struggling with "discoursclerosis", know that this paralysing ailment gets us all. But the only cure is to put pen to paper and give it a go; who knows, that "incoherent heap of tangled nonsense" might just be genius waiting to happen!

‘The world has a lot to do with our agony’: In conversation with Palestinian Ambassador Husam Zomlot

‘Diplomacy is about really presenting the interest and the story of your people, no matter what’



NATASHA DRAKE

An unassuming building lies in the depths of a West London suburb. It is indistinguishable on a residential street, marked out only by a red, white, black, and green flag protruding from its entrance, a rectangular burst of colour against an otherwise monotone backdrop.

Yet this unassuming building is historic. It houses the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the United Kingdom, officially inaugurated in January 2026 following the government’s formal recognition of Palestinian statehood. At its head stands Dr Husam Zomlot, Palestine’s ambassador to the UK.

As I enter his office, Zomlot offers me tea and welcomes my imperfect Arabic greetings. He suggests that we move from his desk to the more comfortable sofa and armchair for the interview, refilling his Iqos as we speak.

Despite his relaxed manner, he is reluctant to make himself the subject of our conversation. He rejects the idea of a profile piece focused on him as an individual, with the weight of his responsibility as a representative of the Palestinian people evident in his insistence that there are other pressing issues to discuss. So, we do.

Zomlot’s parents were displaced from their home village of Simsim, northeast of Gaza, during the mass expulsion of Palestinians in the Nakba in 1948. Born a generation later, he spent his childhood in a refugee camp in Rafah, southern Gaza. “[It] was a happy childhood. I was a happy child. We did not have normal homes. It was makeshift homes and tents… but for a child, that’s home.”

Zomlot recalls a “very strong sense of community” in the camp, forged through the shared experience of displacement, remembering “the warmth of our parents, our families and our extended community, because all of them have gone through the experience of the Nakba. Our parents and grandparents made sure that we were, in a way, insulated from the tragedy of some years earlier”.

However, his family’s efforts to shield him from the political realities of displacement were impossible to sustain once he became exposed to life outside the refugee camp.

His first experiences of travel, visiting Egypt and Palestinian cities, exposed him to a world which stood in stark contrast to his own. “Something was not right. To see life beyond the refugee camp – definitely, something was not right.”

By his early teens, Zomlot began to understand the source of this unease. The outbreak of the First Intifada beginning in 1987, a sustained Palestinian resistance against Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, brought the realities of occupation into sharper focus.

He participated in the uprising, experiencing the imposition of curfews and witnessing the arrests of classmates. “As we grew up, we came face to face with reality… the political reality started to really hit home.”

Alongside this growing awareness of the occupation, Zomlot’s childhood was shaped by a different external presence: the international community. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which provided him with education and other essential services, was central to his upbringing.

“As a child I always thought that there was the bad – the bad was those with green military uniforms – and there are the goods with the blue hats and the blue flag and the 4x4s.” This distinction was, in his childhood understanding, a simple one. “The good people are the people who provided for us education, health, you know, a better future, cared for us. There was international care.”

“But there was also a bad aspect of the international community,” he adds, referring to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which the British government promised a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. “The world has a lot to do with our agony, starting with Britain… promising our land to another people without consulting us.

> As I was growing, I also started realising with this First Intifada in the backdrop, no matter what we do as Palestinians, without changing the international arena, and international conscience about us, and action about us, we cannot do it on our own.
> **– Husam Zomlot**

“As I was growing, I also started realising with this First Intifada in the backdrop that, no matter what we do as Palestinians, without changing the international arena, and international conscience about us, and action about us, we cannot do it on our own.”

This conviction in the international community’s capacity to protect Palestinian self-determination would shape Zomlot’s career, beginning with his first professional position as an economic adviser to the UN’s Middle East peace process coordinator. “My first job was with the United Nations. And that was by design. That was on purpose… thinking about the 4x4 as my army. So I wanted to join my army.”

Despite this early determination to engage with the international community, the ambassador’s path into diplomacy was far from straightforward. “Diplomacy, for me, is such an accidental evolution of who I am,” he remarks, describing a conception of diplomacy shaped more by Palestine’s struggle for self-determination than traditional statecraft.

The ambassador experienced firsthand the limitations of conventional diplomacy in the Palestinian context during President Trump’s closure of the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s delegation in Washington, which he headed at the time. As a result, his diplomatic visa was revoked, and his family were forced to leave the US. Given this experience, Zomlot explains, his responsibility extends beyond the diplomatic sphere.

“Our situation is a little bit different. We are under occupation and struggling for our freedom and our rights. So, for me, it is a combination of diplomacy… we have many diplomatic relations, diplomatic agreements, memoranda of understanding, trade, what have you – but also part of our work is advocacy. We see ourselves as the voice of our people, whatever and whenever we are posted.

“That’s what diplomacy is. Diplomacy is about really presenting the interest and the story of your people, no matter what.”

Engaging with and mobilising the public is, in Zomlot’s vision, central to achieving progress. “I, as an ambassador, who usually does not

take part in demonstrations and marches and whatnot, I was marching almost every time.

"This is unusual in diplomacy, but we live in very unusual times. If you want to ask what most of my time was spent on, it's the bottom, bottom as in the base, particularly the young generation."

In light of the suppression of pro-Palestine protests on UK university campuses in recent years, Zomlot is passionate about highlighting the importance of youth participation within the Palestinian movement, situating student activism within a long history of popular pressure for political change.

> "There was that heavy responsibility of a Palestinian who's in London, who needs to speak to the English-speaking world and to the international media. It was not easy, and I know the responsibility."
> **– Husam Zomlot**

"The youth are the moral compass in any equation. You are oriented by one thing: humanity. You don't have all the calculations the older generations have. You know, you're just about to begin your journey in life. And the younger you are, the more moral, the more principled, the more social and just in your thinking about others."

In particular, he emphasises Oxford University's significant global influence in protecting students' right to protest. "It's not a responsibility of universities. It's an obligation. The whole idea of these institutions that were established like yours, almost a thousand years ago, is to give the young the space to breathe, and to develop, and to evolve into the leaders we want for our societies."

But for Zomlot, the obligation incumbent upon universities extends beyond upholding the right to student protest, as he calls for divestment from "any institution that is implicated in the genocide.

"They have an obligation to make sure that they do not invest in illegalities. We're not talking about individual settlers or individual organisations here. We're talking about the entire ecosystem of occupation. Universities have to pay attention. Otherwise, they are no longer a place of learning, a place of good."

The question of institutional responsibility also applies to the Western media, where the ambassador sees Palestinian representation as equally consequential. Reflecting on his first interviews as head of the Palestinian mission to the UK, he emphasises the weight of representing Palestine to an international audience.

"There was that heavy responsibility of a Palestinian who's in London, who needs to speak to the English-speaking world and to the international media. It was not easy, and I know the responsibility."

Zomlot's early encounters with the British mainstream media left him frustrated with what he perceives as a persistent double standard in its coverage of Palestine. He accuses the media of "disfiguring the Palestinian struggle" by "stripping the story out of context all the time" and "trying to dissolve Israel of any responsibility".

In particular, he highlights a viral interview with Piers Morgan, in which he was repeatedly pressed to condemn Hamas.

"Hamas has committed crimes during these events. Targeting civilians is unacceptable. But the mainstream media, the BBCs and the Skys and the CNNs and all those, wanted to play the game of the last 80 years… to paint a picture that the aggressors are the Palestinians, and then Israel is just in a state of constant self-defence."

"The game is always to extract from you that admission", he explains. "Because then, once the question is asked, it doesn't matter. You are guilty. You see? You are guilty. So we didn't play that game."

But due to a shift in British public opinion, Zomlot asserts, "there has been change under the pressure and the pushback. Things have begun to change. But this change is not enough for you to make sure that the main media outlets are there to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. They haven't done that for a long time."

His frustration with powerful British institutions, however, does not diminish his conviction in Britain's capacity to shape the international response to Palestine.

Speaking at the UK Foreign Affairs Committee in 2024, the ambassador stated that the UK was "one of the few nations in the world in a position to step forward to fill a vacuum of global leadership". When asked whether he maintains this position today, he responds with conviction: "One hundred per cent."

"The UK is the penholder in international diplomacy," he continues, highlighting its unique relations with both European countries and the US. "[It] has such a historic responsibility for the mistakes that were committed and the wrongs that were done, but also has the knowledge and the convening power.

"Washington is the head of the Western system… but London is the neck. When the neck moves, it's moving definitely after a thorough assessment, moving in the right direction."

The UK's recent announcement of a proposed sanctions regime on 8th September, targeting entities involved in Israeli West Bank settlements, illegal under international law, marked an important development for the Palestinian ambassador. Having spent decades of his life campaigning for tangible measures like this, he recalls the significance of hearing the announcement.

"I was there when Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband said, 'We hear you.' … Now, that is such a statement. Such a statement."

At the same time as the UK's announcement, eleven other countries announced similar measures, including France, Canada, Australia, and Spain. Zomlot sees this international mobilisation as evidence of the influential power of British diplomatic efforts.

"If the UK leads, and we have a global regime of sanctions, and we have a coordinated effort to raise the cost of the illegality, then the calculus will change."

But from the ambassador's perspective, this hope for progress does not extend to the Trump administration, describing the US president's political career as being characterised by "knee-jerk reactions". Having represented Palestine in both the UK and US, he is uniquely positioned to compare the two: "The world does not consider Britain to be in that category. Britain is much more solid on the professional, legal, political assessments and the credibility of whatever decisions they make."

Zomlot is equally reluctant to consider the announced sanctions a personal triumph. "I don't live on expectations. I live on delivery and work. This is not the end of the road. It's the beginning of the road. But it's a powerful beginning, and we need to build on it. And we need to make sure that the government continues on this track."

His insistence on delivery reflects a broader scepticism about the capacity of political change, on its own, to confront the scale of Palestinian suffering. At the time of our conversation, Israeli elections were approaching, yet the ambassador remained sceptical that a change in leadership would translate into meaningful progress.

"There is almost a political consensus among the political Zionist parties in Israel not to recognise the Palestinian people and Palestinian rights, including the rights of determination."

"Netanyahu is not the cause. Netanyahu is the product," he adds. "The only difference would be that he would not be seen as the devil in the world. So the world might say, 'okay, let's give them a chance'. That's the biggest issue."

For Zomlot, the question of Palestine's future cannot ultimately be answered by a change in Israeli leadership, nor solely in the conditions imposed by international actors. Rather, it rests on the Palestinian people's own right to determine their political future.

Yet the recent postponement of elections under Mahmoud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine and Palestinian National Authority, has been widely criticised, leaving Palestinians without a national election since 2006.

"Elections are a crucial thing, and the Palestinian people have the absolute sacred, inalienable right to elect their leaders. It's long overdue, and we must do it. I was personally hoping that it would be done in November this year, as was promised and announced. But how can we do the elections under the current circumstances?" Zomlot says.

"The world needs to understand that we do not function in a normal situation. We function under the most severe segregation of apartheid system. How do you do real elections? Perfect elections, democratic elections, inclusive elections, under occupation?"

As our conversation draws to a close, Zomlot turns his attention to the generation that will inherit the consequences of today's political decisions. He urges British students "to live up to the expectations and the reputation and the history of their parents and grandparents. The student movement of this country has always been at the forefront".

For a man who has spent his career urging the international community to uphold its own principles, his parting words are a pointed reminder of the responsibility that falls on the next generation: "Fear nothing if what you're doing is sticking by the values."

Image credit: Husam Zomlot, with permission.

OXFORD SPOTLIGHT



Alice Spender talks to Sally Collins about Oxailis, maternity care, and entrepreneurship

We begin our conversation somewhat unconventionally, discussing Professor Sally Collins' love for acting. Striking a deal with her father, anxious about her future security and wanting her to have a "proper" degree to fall back on, Collins studied chemistry at the University of East Anglia: "It was always acting, but science kept my father happy." After three years, however, her need to perform remained. With her father's support, Collins completed a postgraduate diploma in theatre arts and spent her twenties working across film, television, advertisements, and theatre.

Then came what she calls a "Damascene moment", a turning point familiar to many navigating early adult life. While watching a play in Oxford, she overheard a highly successful actor complaining about his Hollywood career, agent, and pay. Even so many years later, Collins relates this anecdote with a palpable sense of indignation, still aggrieved by how the actor's dissatisfaction sat against the circumstances of her friends in the industry, talented people who had devoted a lifetime to theatre, yet remained on minimal pay.

His discontent led to unexpected self-reflection: "He's got everything I think I want. He's got this career that I think I want. Am I just going to end up as sad and self-interested and horrible as he is?" This encounter marked a radical change of direction, and Collins found herself pulled back towards science: "The only other thing I'd ever wanted to do in my life other than be an actor was to be a doctor."

Collins' career has been shaped by unexpected turns, each a testament to her willingness to embrace challenges and venture into new territory. Graduating from Oxford Clinical Medical School in 2002, Collins trained in obstetrics and gynaecology at the Thames Valley Deanery. When choosing her speciality, foetal medicine held a special attraction: "My mum was a lifelong nurse and midwife, and she made no secret of the fact that midwifery was her love… and I suppose that just lodged in my soul."

Looking back, Collins sees her work as an actor as an important preparation for her clinical career: "I am glad I didn't do medicine at 18 because I had a lot of growing up that I had to do. Being an actor, living on income support between jobs, helped me understand why people make the dodgy choices in life that they do", something she felt her colleagues from more privileged backgrounds sometimes struggled to appreciate. Nor does she see the arts and medicine as opposed as one might expect: "You've only got to go to the hospital orchestras and see the medical school student shows to just know there is something about performance and caring that crosses over… there is something that I think is giving of yourself in performance and medicine that is very similar."

Having her first child shortly before her final medical school exams, Collins says people assumed she would become a GP, a path that perhaps lends itself more to family life than obstetrics and gynaecology. However, Collins knew that general practice wasn't for her: "GPs have to know a little about everything, and that's not really my forte. I'm much better at knowing a lot about much less."

Her self-knowledge has proved invaluable to medicine. Collins is one of the world's leading experts on placenta accreta spectrum, a potentially life-threatening pregnancy complication in which the placenta attaches too deeply to the uterine wall. Her doctoral research focused on using ultrasound to examine the placenta in the first trimester of pregnancy in order to predict foetal growth restriction, one of the leading causes of stillbirth: "If you've had to look a woman in the eye and tell her baby's dead, you know you really don't want to do that very often."

The challenge, she explains, is to identify women whose babies are at risk, monitor them closely in the later stages of pregnancy to decide to deliver the baby in the case of growth restriction. Yet clinicians lacked an effective way to identify these pregnancies early enough.

This is where Oxailis comes in. The culmination of more than 17 years of research and 2 large clinical trials involving over 7,500 women, Oxailis is an AI-based decision-support platform developed by Collins and her team. It uses ultrasound images alongside a risk stratification algorithm to detect vascular perfusion, which Collins found to be a critical marker of disease.

Crucially, Oxailis is a "very simple technology. It's just software that analyses ordinary images. We don't need any extra or different hardware. We just use the ordinary ultrasounds that come off ultrasound machines". In a health service where financial constraints and limited access to equipment can pose significant barriers to adopting medical innovations, this is a significant advantage. And the results so far are highly encouraging. Collins speaks proudly of the software's performance against current screening tests: "For the same false positive rate, we detect almost twice as many growth-restricted babies." Collins' initial breakthrough in obstetrics now also has potential applications beyond pregnancy, in ovarian and prostate cancer screening and in nephrology.

Oxailis officially spun out of the University late last year, and it is nearing the close of its first angel investment round while making progress towards regulatory approval. This is a significant milestone for Collins and her husband, who have poured their life savings into the venture, demonstrating their commitment and belief in its value.

Image credit: Sally Collins, with permission.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

Great chaos under heaven: Fennec Fox's 'The Welkin'

Jas Mauj speaks to the cast and director of 'The Welkin' about the politics of judgement

It's 1759. A comet threatens the sky, portending the death of kings and princes. But we're far from such royalty, very far from them, as we watch the deliberations of a female jury in rural Suffolk. It's 2026. The sky isn't very good for stargazing, but we've grown to expect calamity without celestial aid. It was this calamity of politics, how it impacts women, drives them apart and can push them back together, that I discussed this Thursday with some of the crew behind Fennec Fox's production of Lucy Kirkwood's historical drama *The Welkin*.

As a historian, my immediate question concerned how the play pulls together its 18th-century setting with its palpable commentary on the treatment of women today. Rosie Sutton, who plays midwife and juror Elizabeth Luke, holds that it doesn't need to assert its modernity and relevance to be relatable. Kirkwood's script lets its characters stay true to their time. Still, we all agree that more has remained the same than has changed. Women are still typecast as overemotional (with hysteria, of course, meaning 'of the womb') compared to sound, male rationality. Director Joshua Robey adds that the play, like many of Kirkwood's pieces, seeks to redeem emotionality as something productive in politics without necessarily gendering it: "How do you live with that emotion and move beyond it into something that is politically productive?"

I, prone to tangents, say that this reminds me of the concept of Samvega, something a Buddhist friend taught me, where one's shock at the intensity of suffering in the world leads them to right action. Robey remarks that, in a way, "theatre and Buddhism are both approaches to the same question: how do we cope with being alive?" I think this is a beautiful way of looking at the social function of theatre, something which *The Welkin* calls close attention to.

This is a play immersed in the discourse of its time, in which witches, comets, and devils are all valid political actors. I ask Robey if he thinks there's still something of that superstition, the sense of the occult or hidden, in politics today. He tells me he is reading *End Times Fascism* by Astra Taylor and Naomi Klein, which argues (roughly) that there is death-cultish apocalypticism underlying much of the far right. Maybe there is something there, no matter how rational we've convinced ourselves we've become. Caitlyn Fraser, who plays the wealthy matron Ann Lavender, takes the question another way: in the play, the jury form blocs around their interpretations of the trial, echo chambers that worsen mistrust and paranoia. We see this very cultic dynamic repeated in politics today.

Two important and deeply interconnected themes that cropped up were the female body and violence. The 18th century was a violent, bloody time, especially if you were a woman. Everyone knows about the horrors of witch trials in Europe and North America. But even for the unaccused, life from childhood to childbirth was deeply precarious. Sutton's character Elizabeth views her role as a midwife neutrally, seeing childbirth as a process with either a negative or a positive outcome. Sutton calls it "not a particularly sensitive outlook on the world", but it is based in the historical reality and "fresh" in a world that places such moral value on the maternal body. Fraser adds that she appreciates this honesty in the show: "We don't talk about our bodies without morals attached." But everything from menstruation to miscarriage is laid bare and bloody in *The Welkin*.

> "This is a play immersed in the discourse of its time, in which witches, comets, and devils are all valid political actors."

This moralisation of womanhood and especially motherhood weighs down like a nightmare upon the jury of women as they make their decision on whether to execute the accused, Sally Poppy, or commute her sentence. She is accused of the ultimate inversion of motherhood: the murder of a child. I mention the case of Lindsay Clancy, an American woman who strangled her three children in 2023 in what she argues was a result of postpartum psychosis, and the subsequent bloodlust and anger against her for the crime of filicide. While any death is a tragedy, I felt that the attention we gave to this case in particular showed how we still see crimes of women against children in a particular light as evidence of a world turned upside down.

In the context of *The Welkin*, no one is



horrified at the prospect of a public execution. But in Sally's case, Fraser says that many can't believe she did it, but those who do see her as "true evil," the devil. Robey says he thinks Sally is perceived as she is because her crimes transgress against the established monopoly of violence, of a state that executes its citizens, and of men that beat their wives, which Sutton views as a search for control "in a world where violence is equated with power".

Of course, Robey qualifies: no one is advocating for the murder of children. But still, he sees an unanswered question at the centre of the play: "Is Sally enacting a radical class politics or rebellion, or is she just a murderer?" I think it's good that this question remains unanswered, that the audience steeps in the discomfort of the terrible question that weighs on the minds of all revolutionaries: Do we need to adopt the world's brutality to change it?

This conversation, on a chilly day in Jericho, with the waning crescent over us and coffee mugs by our sides, left me excited for *The Welkin* not only for its important commentary, but also to see for myself what would come of the evident love and care put into this play by the crew members I met. Sutton and Fraser both said they truly got to know their characters as living, breathing women. Fraser expressed the feeling that, "you could change the costumes, a bit of the language, and it would still make sense for women to be having these conversations today." How long do we need to carry on making the same mistakes?

Image credit: Fennec Fox Productions, with permission.

Oxford's theatre scene and negotiating social media

JOE HAYES

What was initially a chat about our mutual experiences within Oxford's theatre scene, specifically our past roles within production crews, soon pivoted to something much more expansive. Sophie Skye Sexton told me that, during last Trinity, she joined the crew of Crazy Child Productions' *Guys and Dolls* as the lead marketing director. This role involved, of course, promoting the show, advertising it, and achieving greater outreach amongst the Oxford community – and this is not limited to the student body. I paused, considering the quantitative framework in which a role like this operates; after all, as Sexton recalled, there were "x number of seats, and we were expecting to fill all of them". For a craft so focused on artistic expression, musicality, and the openness of outdoor theatre, an odd restriction seemed to loom over the topic of conversation. An overt compulsion towards numbers, profit, and quantification all seemed to be present within the marketing role, and I could not help but wonder what this says in relation to the pragmatic foundation behind theatre – for something so free being bolstered by processes and pressures so, well, not free seemed rather jarring.

"It's definitely a bit stressful, but I also think it's really quite a new frontier, the use of social media," Sexton remarked. Social media altered the way productions advertise and market themselves, most likely to a wider audience. This thought branched our conversation into a comparison. Historically, how did student productions advertise and market themselves? Analogue methods, we agreed, were probably the go-to, and the theatre community still uses posters and word-of-mouth to this day. The fact that this article will be published in print makes it clear that physical media as a cultural currency of sharing information remains valid. It's no wonder that the emergence of social media has contributed to a marketing shift, albeit not absolute. As Sexton continued, "it's hard when you're confronted, I'm thinking of Common Ground Cafe". For context, Common Ground is a community-centred establishment where you can pin up posters of all sorts. These boards tend to be completely filled, and one can see this everywhere in Oxford; notice boards, cafes, anywhere with a pin-board or meek walls become victims of what is physical advertisement. Production companies create social media accounts to promote shows and sell seats. Teasers, behind-the-scenes, and cast and crew profile content can all engage an audience without the constant need to nail an A4 piece of paper into a scarred wall, or potentially a window. "It's like you're an archaeologist, with all the multiple layers," Sexton chuckled – and so did I. From this perspective, it becomes difficult to ignore the limitations of analogue advertising. Yet this does not simply mean digital advertising holds superiority. After all, whilst physical posters compete for a space on Oxford's walls or notice boards, their digital counterparts must navigate increasingly popular social media feeds. Therefore, both methods arrive at a similar difficulty: how does one make their production stand out amidst an overwhelming surge of information?

We both mused over the intricacies of social media marketing, and the constant drive to apply trend cycles efficiently and effectively to one's material, or selling point. Of course, it is objectively easier to transition to social media with respect to the "unpredictability", as Sexton mentioned, of physically traipsing around Oxford; imagine it is pouring down with rain and you have to deliver posters around the city. Whilst it is necessary, it can also hinder one's day. But somewhere within this struggle, I believe there is a lost art. Maybe that is dramatic, maybe there are larger issues at hand, but I think it's important to consider the tumultuous movements of social media and what that speaks towards the presentation of art. Everyone should certainly be encouraged to be unique and engage their audience who might otherwise experience the slightly awkward-to-say "screen fatigue". But what happens to the demonstration of an art form such as theatre, when it has to bend to the insatiable trend cycles we all see online? I wonder if the integrity of the material diminishes in the eye of the ever-hungry online joke or quip, or maybe I am just being a bit stuck-up. Talking to Sexton, I found myself shrugging quite often; not due to boredom or a lack of interest, but purely because of the uncomfortable straddling I found my mind to be enduring. Social media is an effective way of marketing a show, and yet there is a stressful energy lurking somewhere beneath the surface (dare I say), the pressure to conform to a wider network of fleeting trends considered humorous by the masses.

This phenomenon is both rigid and fluid: one can follow a 'trend' that becomes a somewhat reliable action, yet the ephemerality of said 'trends' removes any sense of security. No longer funny, or entertaining. Sexton told *Cherwell* that this pressure is imminent: "Do you try and start a new trend, or join an old one?" The existence of account 'take-overs' provides a production opportunity to market themselves for a given amount of time, and often during this period marketing directors must be efficient and, as Sexton remarked, "how many posts can we fit within twelve hours?" Here, online marketing can appear rather intense, quantified, and manipulated. Given that art is typically associated with creative liberation, the reality is striking, and I want to press into it and muse upon it.

Sexton looked at her mobile and realised she had to take a call, and so I halted the recording – it had been half an hour in what felt like ten minutes. The chat we had, originally rooted in something perhaps less provocative and moving, morphed into something which left me, and continues to push me towards, a question which seems difficult to navigate and almost impossible to truly answer, without constantly stepping backwards and forwards in your response. Yes, one could easily untangle these thoughts with a measly, 'is it that deep?' and maybe they are right. It's just a thought, and I think it is one worth considering in today's age of phone obsession and online language: that is, what do art and theatre become when it is, at times, fuelled by something seemingly antithetical to it – social media?

One thing after another: 'The History Boys'

Saul Grenfell on what the revival of Alan Bennett's most controversial piece means

Grab your motorcycle helmet. Sharpen up on the subjunctive. And cue the synthetic pulses of 'Blue Monday'. *The History Boys* is back.

Alan Bennett's 2004 play followed a cast of candidates vying for an Oxbridge place. Last month it was announced that the play is set to return to the London stage at the Theatre Royal Haymarket early next year. But we may ask: what's the point of this revival?

I have to confess that I'm not quite a dispassionate observer of what a 2013 poll found to be Britain's best-loved play. Bennett numbers among my favourite playwrights, and *The History Boys* among my favourite plays. When applying to Oxford, I didn't consider Jesus or Corpus, as Irwin failed to get in there. I'm aware this is hugely embarrassing.

Despite my love for it, it's hardly an uncontroversial work. AQA chose to remove the play from its GCSE syllabus in 2022. The frequent gripe for a contemporary audience is the play's disturbingly frequent gropes. The idolised general studies teacher Mr Hector fondles his pupils on the back of a motorcycle. Whilst they're all adults (just about), the pedophilic behaviour is deeply uncomfortable, especially so given Bennett's initial wish for student Posner's voice to be unbroken.

Though Bennett acknowledges this as a fault ("a grope is a grope. It is not the annunciation", the terrific Mrs Lintott bites), he treats it as no more than a foible in an otherwise idealised picture. The final scene glorifies Hector with a funeral no less exalting than that of his mythic namesake. In another particularly delightful line, the "big man" can refer either to God or Hector. This issue aside, the play also undoubtedly has an air of entitled schoolboy arrogance, though I think Bennett is partly aware of it. Think Dakin's cocky declaration: "We are so fucking clever."

Perhaps more compelling than these reasons not to stage the play is the seeming absence of any reason to stage it. What's it for? Just a cash grab? Would *Forty Years On* not be a better choice, his moving school-play-within-a-play that reappraises a postwar, post-Suez Britain? Why *The History Boys*? Why now?

A tenuous case could be made for its particular relevance today. In Burnham's Britain, burdened by housing crises and championing vocational education, it's apt that the most brilliant success of the play is Rudge's business building homes for first-time buyers, whilst Posner (the only one who took all Hector's teaching to heart) is unhappy at Cambridge, and persists in parasitic nostalgia for his schoolboy days. However, when speaking to *The Times*, even director Sir Nicholas Hytner couldn't stomach a "specious" claim about its pertinence to today's conversations about the education system.

> In all its blemished brilliance, *The History Boys* has lessons to add to the store. It speaks to us about the value of education, and "the sheer randomness or history".

The revival seems to be Hytner's idea. Sir Nick is brilliant. *Balancing Acts*, his memoir on twelve years as artistic director of the National Theatre, is a tremendous read. His 2013 production of *Othello* is electric, and *One Man, Two Guvnors* is deftly delightful. His film direction of The Madness of King George (1994) is excellent if only for the climax: "I am the King!", George declares, strapped into a chair. "No, sir, you are the patient!" returns the doctor as Zadok the Priest swells in this perverse anti-coronation. But can't he do better? Following The Standard of Living earlier this year, is rehashing this old work the best Hytner can bring to the West End?

Perhaps Bennett suffers from a similar condition. His last effort was the film *The Choral* (2025), which, whilst moving, was a touch derivative. It became a tick-box list of Bennettisms: passions unfulfilled, power of art, Yorkshire. A scene towards the end echoes Bennett's admittedly devastating *Talking Heads* episode, 'Waiting for the Telegram'.

But try as I might to scoff at it, I can't help but be excited by the return. Crowther's elegy for Hector may work well as a verdict on the play itself: "He was stained and shabby and did unforgivable things." But "even his death was a lesson that added to the store".

In all its blemished brilliance, *The History Boys* has lessons to add to the store. It speaks to us about the value of education, the struggles of growing up, and – perhaps most fascinatingly – the "sheer randomness of history". Dakin's discussions of how history happens, the unpredictability of Halifax's teeth winning Britain the war, Rudge's declaration that it's just "one f***ing thing after another", even the boys' playing around "in the subjunctive mood"; these are all questions that play out in the narrative itself, with Hector's potential expulsion, and the plot (and motorbike's) lurch.

Whilst it's easy to mock the play's soppy view of literature, it's both intensely moving and true. A poem can be that hand across history, reaching out and holding yours. The cast of characters is vividly sketched, from the plight of love-sick Posner serenading his unrequited sweetheart with Ella Fitzgerald, to the swaggering arrogance of Dakin, the razor-sharp satire of revisionist Irwin, and the no-nonsense and brilliantly perceptive Rudge.

It's also great fun. Bennett captures the playful musicality of schoolboys teasing teachers: "Are jokes gonna be a feature, sir?" The film adaptation (a guilty pleasure) is similarly charming. It adds Penelope Wilton as an Art History teacher brushing the boys up in culture, and Adrian Scarborough as a devoutly religious press-up-demanding PE teacher ("give me 20!", "what? Hail Mary's?").

These lessons might not be much, but, to butcher AE Housman's words: all plays are worthwhile whether or not they serve the slightest human use. *The History Boys* numbers among them.

"Why now?", we may ask. "Why not?", we may answer. I'll see you at the Royal Haymarket.

BOOKS

What's Oxford reading?



Amber at Lincoln recommends *Young Mungo* (2022):

"The last book that made me cry. Douglas Stuart is the most evocative author of this generation, and the first I've encountered who has breathed life into the margins of Scotland in such a memorable way. TLDR I love sad gay people."



Beatrice at Somerville recommends *The Leverett* (2026):

"There are a handful of common themes emerging within the lesbian horror genre: rural towns, maternal instincts, posession, weird primal body stuff. It's really no surprise; David Lynch set the tone for it 25 years ago. Needless to say I'm a massive fan."

Image credits: 'Young Mungo' via Waterstones.com and 'The Leverett' via Penguin.co.uk

The midterms and the YA novel: Impossibly happy endings

RÜYA ORAL

Given its intense media coverage and everything that seems to be on the line, I feel as though I have been anxiously awaiting the results of the 2026 US midterm elections for weeks, months – maybe years. Having lived in Central America in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential elections, I had become utterly disillusioned with the idea that shared identity could ever guarantee political solidarity. I had watched people around me sport MAGA hats and post AI-enhanced pictures of Donald Trump as Jesus on their Instagram stories; people with skin like mine, who spoke English with an accent (or not at all), people who joined me in holding up the passport queue at the Houston border. It made my stomach turn to think that the win had been secured with the help of people I considered my kin and, no matter what they had been led to believe, people I knew Washington would quickly alienate if they were to ever step out of line. The horrific acceleration of ICE activities across the country, but particularly around the Mexican border, had been a predictable, but nonetheless more upsetting development under the current administration. So, despite Zohran Mamdani's landmark win in New York (which I saw announced in an A&E waiting room in Oxford at 2am, heart beating out of my chest unrelated to any medical issues), I did not have high hopes coming into the midterms.

My political pessimism, however, has not extended to my taste in literature. I don't know how many of my coursemates would admit this, but my decision to study English was partly propelled by my love of young adult (YA) literature. If I ever find the time in between reading lists, I am most likely to be found with my nose buried in some trashy Harry Potter fanfiction with the names changed for copyright purposes. I enjoy unadulterated fluff. I yearn for inconceivable happy endings. I don't want realism in my YA – I want happiness against all odds, and refractory periods that bend the rules of biology. As such, Casey McQuiston's 2019 novel *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, with its queer romance and almost aggressively optimistic vision of American politics, has been my comfort read for many years.

For the uninitiated, *Red, White, & Royal Blue* tells the story of Alex Claremont-Diaz, son of the US president, and Prince Henry George Edward James Fox-Mountchristen-Windsor (average Oxonian number of middle names), fourth in line to the British throne. Despite long-standing animosity, after an incident that could threaten the president's re-election campaign, Alex and Henry are forced into a PR friendship that soon unravels into something more. The enemies-to-lovers façade is shattered, as the two come to realise they have loved each other all along. The fictitious stakes for their relationship are very high – Alex doesn't want to put his mother's career at risk, and Henry fears being estranged from his family. However, the story is sold on its lack of realism: though it's impossible not to invest in Alex and Henry's relationship, just a quick scan of the list of characters tells you that something like this could never happen, so it's easy to infer that everything will work out in the end. Alex is half-Latino, and his mother Ellen is the first female president in US history. She is a divorced, middle-aged woman, and the Democratic candidate from Texas. She has one trans and one pansexual Secret Service agent on her security detail. One of her closest allies is Rafael Luna, an openly gay, Latino senator from Colorado. Henry's older sister is a recovering cocaine addict. McQuiston imagines a true woke-gone-wild, blue-hair-and-pronouns takeover. In the book's final chapter, Ellen wins her re-election. Her home state, Texas, is the last to be called: "Texas is grey for five more seconds, before flooding beautiful, beautiful, unmistakable, Lake LBJ blue." It is utter nonsense, and the only conceivable end to a narrative filled with things going right at the last second for the most unexpected people.

The Venn diagram for literary scholars and queer activists overlaps when it comes to tangible prejudice against gay pop-lit. It's not entirely uncalled for; there is a concern that people write about a community they aren't part of in ways that don't adequately depict queer lived experiences or aren't conducive to relatability for those peering in from outside the bubble. The medium seems too flat to convey the varied lives of people within the community without making caricatures out of them. I sympathise – it is difficult not to perceive stories like *Red, White, & Royal Blue* as indulgent and mocking, particularly at a time when it feels like stereotypes are being used to demonise and legislate against us. But I also think there is value in shameless positivity and, much like mainstream music, I charge the elites to approach the corny YA novel poptimistically. To turn a blind eye to the suffering we have long endured would be a disservice to the progress we have made in being unashamed of who we are and of the people we love, but part of that progress is also learning to be comfortable in the idea that we can be happy, in the same cheesy, tooth-rotting way as anyone else. We are not doing ourselves any favours by self-flagellating, and just as we shouldn't be expected to justify our identities to anyone else, we also shouldn't have to justify any fantastical romances we revel in to ourselves.

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The Democratic platform for the midterms was built almost entirely in reaction to the decreasing quality of life under the Republican administration. Candidates emphasised the cost of living and claimed unaffordability to be a direct result of corruption in the White House. For once, it was almost impossible to claim what the right always does, which is that liberal candidates sideline economic issues in favour of trivial social problems that affect only a minority of people. Still, the character list for Democratic wins in the midterms rivals the diversity of *Red, White, & Royal Blue*. Chris Pappas became the first openly gay man elected to the US Senate in New Hampshire; Abdul El-Sayed is the first Muslim man to win a seat in the US Senate in Michigan; Keisha Lance Bottoms, in Georgia, is the first Black woman governor of any US state. Hakeem Jeffries remains the frontrunner for Speaker of the House of Representatives, a position that is second in the presidential line of succession. And of course, as the prophecy of *Red, White, & Royal Blue* foretold, James Talarico won the Senate seat in Texas, flipping the state blue for the first time since 1988. We now live in a world where deep-South, Bible-belt Texas is being led by a man who five years ago claimed that God is nonbinary. Who would've thunk it.

So, despite her cartoonish faith that the good guys will always win, McQuiston has won this particular battle in the culture war. The ideological optimism that *Red, White & Royal Blue* upholds has been reaffirmed by real changes in the American political climate, and though there is still a long way to go and now is certainly not the time to relax our hold, I think that we have at least reminded ourselves that hope and solidarity go a long way. I'm embarrassed to say that I had forgotten. And if the next time you see me I'm reading a book with a bright pink cover, maybe you'll hold off the ridicule for a couple of seconds longer.

MUSIC

What's Oxford listening to?



Mikey at New College recommends *The Fork and Knife*:

"Skepta proves once again that he is an absolute master when it comes to delivering a cohesive, heavy-hitting UK rap album."



Bonnie at Kellogg recommends *SWALLOW!*:

"This album was extremely consistent, very experimental, and very pretty! This was a lot like FKA Twigs, and Shygirl like FKA's twin sister in a way. It had ethereal and beautiful moments, it was very unique!"

Image credits: 'The Fork and Knife' and 'SWALLOW!' via albumoftheyear.com

A guide to Oxford's music scene

***Leandro Landolina** takes us on a whistle-stop tour of Oxford's musical offerings*

Setting foot in Oxford three years ago felt a little like looking through a kaleidoscope: its music scene – sprawling, dynamic and eclectic – revealed so many more colours and shapes than I had expected to find. What follows, though not exhaustive, is an introduction to this remarkably varied scene.

Whether housed within individual colleges or organised by Oxford University Music Society (OUMS), the numerous classically oriented orchestras and choirs constitute a cornucopian landscape. OUMS alone encompasses two symphony orchestras, a jazz orchestra, and a choir, alongside numerous other ensembles catering to a range of abilities and commitments. Performances take place across the city, from college chapels and auditoriums to historic venues such as the Sheldonian Theatre and the Holywell Music Room.

Yet, contrary to many students' expectations, while classical music-making flourishes, it does not dominate the scene. In fact, there isn't really a single genre or style that does. Budding DJs can perform their debut sets at low-stakes college bops and hone their knob twiddling for open decks nights run by the Electronic Music Society; *Pitch Perfect* and *The Sing-Off* enthusiasts can sing their hearts out in one of the University's seven a cappella groups; and those who revel in the jubilant clang of pitched percussion can ring bells with the Society of Change Ringers or try their hand at Javanese Gamelan with the Oxford Gamelan Society.

The theatre stage offers yet another musical outlet. Primarily spearheaded by Oxford University Dramatic Society, numerous musical theatre productions take place each term, with casting calls posted on Facebook and Instagram. Yet, if singing under the spotlight isn't quite for you, playing in a production's band might be more up your street.

Oxford's experimental music scene is equally well served by groups like the Oxford Improvisers and Professor Walshe's Creative Labs, an open forum where anyone can share works in progress to workshop with others. For those more inclined to listen, however, the termly Experimental Music Oxford (EXMO) concert series hosted in the auditorium at St John's College is your best bet.

Of course, no music scene is complete without nightlife. Thankfully, there is no shortage of clubs, bars and pubs hosting live music events. In the city centre, student clubbing staples include the LGBTQ+ venue Plush, the Varsity Club, and Bridge, most popular on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights. Friday nights have more to offer, with Reggaeton Nights every week at the Oxford Retreat, and, for those willing to walk a little further to Cowley Road, monthly Indie Fridays at the O2 Academy or Bossaphonik's jazz-world events on the third Friday of every month.

Cowley Road's offerings don't end there, with the record shop Truck Store and the pub The Library hosting regular live music, alongside The Bullingdon, a popular clubbing destination for Oxford's students. Meanwhile, venturing towards Jericho might land you in the longstanding Jericho Tavern, where Radiohead played their first-ever gig; Common Ground, a community hub and café with a great vinyl collection; or the recently opened The Nest, home to the Young Women's Music Project in Oxford.

A special mention deservedly goes to the recently formed Hot Mess Project, an intersectional feminist arts collective blending music with everything from poetry to dance. The project's musical offerings include themed club nights proudly powered by all-female DJ line-ups.

Finally, for those who prefer putting pen to paper rather than bow to string, Oxford offers numerous opportunities to write about music. *Phaser,* the University's student music magazine, publishes in print once a term, posts regularly on Substack, and hosts its own nightlife events. Meanwhile, *Oxfordshire Music Scene* looks beyond the university bubble, profiling local bands and promoting gigs across the city. Though free to read online, I much prefer picking up a copy over an ice cream at G&D's on Little Clarendon Street!

I'm certain that Oxford's colourful music scene can offer at least one thing to tickle your fancy. Ultimately, though, if what you're looking for doesn't exist, then take that as your green light to start it! After all, a music scene is what you make of it.

Image credit: Jeremy Segrott, CC BY 2.0 via Flickr.



The nightmare before Halloween bop: What on earth do I wear?

TILLY STANLEY

You are 19, 20, perhaps 21 at Oxford: it has been a long time since you knocked on your neighbour's door asking for sweets. The meaning of Halloween seems to have shifted since childhood. It is no longer about being the most frightening, or (for most) the opportunity to stock the cupboards at home with confectionery. It is, whether you like it or not, an immense fashion contest among young people. Terms like 'Halloweekend' are strewn across social media, accompanied by endless streams of costume reveals, and group chats centre on co-ordinating outfits. It is almost impossible to escape. You must cleverly anticipate the competitive Instagram photo-dump by planning your costume well in advance. Even those who profess they know nothing about fashion, suddenly find themselves trawling Pinterest for inspiration or pestering friends to borrow a particularly convincing colourful wig.

For one night, dressing becomes an acutely conscious activity. At once, you become highly aware of inhabiting something uncharacteristic, but with it also comes a strange sense of freedom in being someone that you are not. Perhaps it is reminiscent of childhood: raiding your mother's wardrobe to try on high heels that don't quite fit, but still give you a thrill because they make you feel different. The culture of dressing up in costumes offers us a momentary escape from the reality of our own lives – and a window into something, or someone else's.



Oxford's bop culture is a particularly interesting microcosm of this international phenomenon. Bops create a social environment where you are likely to know the people around you, and therefore consider even more carefully how you want to deviate from your normal identity. The tension between safety and originality feels pertinent in this context. Something like a black cat or a superhero is an endlessly recycled option, and pressure seems to mount on the individual to find something more innovative each time. What you decide on seems to reflect a certain degree of how you wish to be perceived. Is your goal to be frightening, sexy, or hilarious? Can any of these categories overlap? The element of horror now seems to have been replaced by a desire for absurdity: over the weekend, students transfigured themselves into skilful *Very Hungry Caterpillar*s, jägerbombs, and even a rogue Durex wrapper. Under these conditions, it is interesting to see what Oxford rewards as a 'successful' costume. The college bop temporarily suspends the usual criteria for good taste. Instead, you are evaluated for your creativity, originality, humour, and attractiveness.

> "For one night, dressing becomes an acutely conscious activity. At once, you become highly aware of inhabiting something uncharacteristic, but with it also comes a strange sense of freedom."

There is also a certain horror latent in arriving at a bop only to discover that somebody else has had precisely the same idea for a costume. Worse still, they have executed it better. The costumes we wear become a creative achievement that is subject to public comparison. Oxford costumes also carry a further dimension of inwardness, as they can often reference college personalities, university politics, or perhaps even an unfortunately targetable tutor. Dressing up requires a certain degree of cultural knowledge, be it large-scale or on the level of the university itself. To appreciate a costume, you must be inducted into the private world that constructs its humour or intelligence.

However, temporary dress-up is not without its problems. For some, it becomes a source of financial anxiety. Normally, the better the costume, the more money has been spent on its fine details. This encourages some people to supplement a lack of resources with their own creativity: whether that be through artful makeup or a bit of last-minute DIY. Yet the very notion of dressing up in another's skin implies it will soon be shed and abandoned. The mounting pressure to always wear something new fuels an environment of fast fashion, often pushing people to purchase something gimmicky and equally useless annually. Perhaps we should work towards a culture of exchange and adaptation. Rather than throwing out last year's costume, consider whether you could reinvent it for next year, or whether it might be the perfect addition to your friend's costume.

Halloween offers us the rare opportunity to abandon our usual identities. Yet the effort expended in doing so suggests we invest in our appearances more than we care to admit. The desire to become somebody else, even temporarily, reveals something about the self we spent the other 364 days constructing. Perhaps the relief or excitement we feel hijacking somebody else's identity betrays that our ordinary clothes are a costume of sorts – just one with which we are more familiar.

Image credit: Rüya Oral, with permission.

Windrush exhibit opens for Black History Month

MADISON GARRETT

Amidst recent political tension provoked by the government's refusal of slavery reparations to the Caribbean, this year Black History Month is celebrated uniquely in Oxford. The inaugural exhibition at the newly opened African Caribbean centre, The Island, honours the thousands of Caribbean constituents the government invited to the UK in post-war efforts to rebuild the country. The exhibition at 16 Park End Street offers an Oxonian perspective on the historical transit of the Windrush generation.

The path to opening Oxford's African Caribbean centre has been lengthy, as Euton Daley, a curator and community researcher of the exhibition, shared: "The idea of The Island concept has come about over many years with us as a community not having a place." Spearheaded by a group of organisers for the last four years, the passion project *A Place for We* sources and shares the history of the Black community in Oxford. The main objective is not only to share the suffering endured across the Oxford community, but also to immortalise it in an archive, as the organisation aims to map spaces no longer available to the community and to advocate for a permanent cultural centre.

As The Island launched, it was with support from an Oxford college which enabled its historical presence. Owned by Nuffield College, the Park End Street location was previously a Staples. However, after over a decade of vacancy, the stationery store space has been transformed into a realm of Caribbean culture for community use. With a two-and-a-half year lease, the aspiration is that the exhibition's success will guarantee the permanence of a global cultural centre there, serving as a communal workspace and public forum.

Now serving as an archive of Caribbean-Oxford history crafted by descendants of the historically oppressed, rather than a story woven by colonial enslavers, the community space provides an opportunity for communal fun and historical engagement. The exhibition serves as an anthropological backdrop of West Indies living, staged as the interior of a 1960s Caribbean home. Throughout the space, informative posters educate viewers about Oxford's Black history, such as the Windrush generation nurses who served the NHS in Oxford, staffing local hospitals and GP surgeries. Displayed on the chestnut living room table is a community collection of artefacts, photographs, and stories donated by Windrush-descended families and curated by researchers at Oxford Brookes University. Interactive activities are also available, including a passport postbox and

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map where Caribbean community members can pin their local neighbourhoods across Oxford. "We've made it such that people can actually sit here and relax. We've got a selection of books that people can read and browse through. Some people even come in here to work during the day. They volunteer [or] work up doing their own admin work. Rather than sit at home on their own or go to a cafe, they come here. We've got Wi-Fi so people can sit and work and do things," Daley adds, highlighting the importance of community building he hopes will stem from the space.

The first weekend of The Island's opening launched with a social gathering featuring a talk led by Michael La Rose, the director of New Beacon Books. The North London-based bookshop is one of England's first Black publishing houses and specialist bookshops, with longstanding community activism across the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement, and Supplementary Movement, as well as advocating against communally-believed racially-motivated atrocities such as the New Cross Massacre. Alongside the talk, New Beacon Books held a bookstand selling a selection of Caribbean novels. Acknowledging the recent hostility between the government and Caribbean islands regarding the debate surrounding reparations, La Rose said: "Britain is a special place in Europe, and that is because Black people have struggled here in Europe, in Britain, and has changed the society. But it is a constant struggle because we know Prince Charles don't want to say nothing [sic]. Andy Burnham wants to keep things the same, so we got to have a constant struggle. We got to reinvent ourselves and use the tools we have nowadays to battle for the new battles ahead [sic]."

In a similar tone, Daley, whose parents are members of the Windrush generation, calls for progress through unity within and beyond the Caribbean diaspora: "If there's one thing I'd like us to be a bit more united together, we're all doing lots of different things in our own patch and for different people. But as a group, as one community, we don't always come together. And that's hopefully by having a space. I think that will make a big difference. Oxford students should visit to be informed, to help support it, to help advocate for a permanent space and a permanent building for the community."

The community space, open to the public free of charge, featured events including workshops, community talks, and performances until the end of October. It is a collaboration also involving Oxford-based arts and social justice charity Fusion Arts, African community-led group African Caribbean Cultural Heritage Initiative, UK charity Oxfordshire Community Education Group, and theatre and cultural arts group Unlock the Chains Collective.

ART

What's Oxford looking at?



Lola at Jesus recommends *Untitled* (1981) by Barbra Kruger:

"There is not a single day I don't think about and/or reference this piece. It's one of those load-bearing artworks that, through it's sheer simplicity and conciseness, opens the door for dense sociopolitical commentary. Everybody should see it, think about it, internalise it."



Rüya at St Hugh's recommends a winter scarf (or two):

"With the weather dropping to single digits, the universe is practically calling us to head to Oxfam and thrift some winter scarves. It's *Bridget Jones* season, so might as well embrace the frazzled British woman aesthetic to the fullest."

Image credits: Art21.org and Rüya Oral

What are you looking at? The Ashmolean's Aphrodite exhibition

ABIGAIL RILEY

The woman crouches, nude. A gauzy blue certain hangs where she hides her chest; behind it I can just see the other artefacts. She isn't looking at me. Over one white shoulder, she stares into the distance. This is Aphrodite, or perhaps the later Venus – not Mesopotamian Inanna, or Assyrian Ishtar. I know she couldn't be the Cypriot Aphrodite either.

The plaque calls her *Crouching Aphrodite*; she's the first of many images in this room that depict the goddess bathing. Some Romans sculpted her in the second century, but she is really only a copy; there was a Greek original. In many ways, the image of her is a succinct summary of the Ashmolean's exhibition. The voyeuristic pose, the elaborate up-do, her naked back; these are the marks of beauty and desire. She implies sex, perhaps looks towards love. When I sit down later to write about her, however, I realise I didn't truly notice much at all about her date, her body or her history. All I know is that she looked right past me.

The first room of the exhibition, *Aphrodite: The Making of a Goddess* at the Ashmolean, is painted a dark blue. Statues and friezes glow, though they were originally brightly-coloured, and the vases shine above their small lights. We have begun in media res, if you like to think of the goddess' journey through time as one long story – which I, and presumably the curators, would. The next room takes us from the second century to around 3000 BC. We are now with Ishtar, Inanna, the goddess of love, as she began in the Middle East and, later, as she was in Cyprus; the goddess when she wasn't a goddess of love at all.

It makes sense to begin there, though, with the classical: we know her image the best. When I walk into the second room, I see that familiarity cast against the strange. Small fertility statues line the left wall. Etched into their features are some of the same rough lines I made in clay at school, using wooden pottery tools. A huge pink circle illuminates the space from the opposite end; everything is bright and quite literally rose-tinted. The sense of time is enormous, only matched by the weight of the goddess' gaze; here, she looks right at me.

Where the classical goddess looked away, her Middle Eastern ancestor was almost always facing straight ahead. Of course, there are logical explanations. Classical sculptors had consistent ideas about which poses best displayed the body, and thus statues rarely looked straight ahead. Similarly, the function of these older statues fits a straight, forward-facing structure far better. Many were made for small shrines, for personal luck.

> I do not believe that the sole purpose of an exhibition like this should be education. There is something valuable in how we respond to it, which parts stand out and why.

But I do not believe that the sole purpose of an exhibition like this should be education. There is something valuable in how we respond to it, which parts stand out and why. I know it is probably a coincidence that the more powerful the goddess is in her culture, the more ancient and remote from my own imagination, the more direct her eyes are. It still feels a little like we have lost something there, and I cannot quite put my finger on it.

The final room reinforces my vague sense of loss. A replica of the *Venus de Medici* stands there, nude and shy as *Crouching Aphrodite*. On the opposite wall hang drawings that detail her precise measurements. They believed, in the Renaissance, that the *Venus de Medici* portrayed the perfect feminine form. The drawings thus measure out every limb, every joint. Little numbers and dotted lines scatter her body; drawn from the front, drawn from the side. I know that these were made, at least ostensibly, for artistic education. And yet, I can only imagine that these men were getting ready to cut the goddess open and sell her body for parts, like a pig or a side of beef. And, if she can be cut open like this, as though *Venus de Medici* lay on the table of the butcher's shop and not on a pedestal in The Uffizi, then Aphrodite must no longer be a goddess. Now, she is only another woman.

Hanging next door is *A Girl Drawing* by Peter der Werff, small and perhaps even unassuming. Of everything I have seen, though, I feel the closest to that little girl. She sits at a table, drawing the *Venus de Medici*. Between her and the statue, a boy holds the bust of another woman and tries to distract her. The girl's gaze is unchanged and her mouth a little slack. I can't see what's on her page, but something tells me she isn't trying to measure the goddess' breast size. As always, Venus does not look back. Like the *Crouching Aphrodite,* the goddess looks over her shoulder and into the background. In this little painting, I feel maybe we have found something of what we lost from the statues of Inanna and Ishtar.

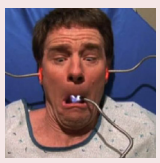
Aphrodite might not be looking back at us just yet, but we at least are trying to catch her eye.

Image credit: Abigail Riley for Cherwell.



FILM & TV

What's Oxford watching?



Fatima at Magdalen recommends *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006):

"There's something about being a college parent that makes Lois' character resonate really strongly with me. It's not easy to have to put up with the antics of five boys in the pink of their scallywaggery. Hopefully, like Francis, they can find it within their hearts to legally emancipate themselves."



Rüya at St Hugh's recommends *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007):

"Upon my (don't say 'damnnn') 15th rewatch, I have lost the sense of association that the show culturally has with autumn; that is, until I circle back to the first episode and hear the dulcet tones of 'There She Goes' by The La's."

Image credits: 'Malcolm in the Middle' and 'Gilmore Girls' via imdb.com

A fond cinematic farewell: 'Ghosts' (2026)

***Alice Rubli** on the seasonal revival of a beloved British television classic*

When I sat down to watch *Ghosts: The Possession of Button House* at the Phoenix Picturehouse, I was just as excited as the other cinema-goers to see the beloved characters from the TV series *Ghosts* one more time. I was not disappointed – the film offers another opportunity to see the well-loved characters in both familiar and new contexts as the ghosts explore the world beyond Button House.

The film continues the story of the TV series *Ghosts*, which began in 2019 and ended in 2023, following the lives (so to speak) of a group of ghosts who are trapped in Button House, having died at the site. Married couple Alison (Charlotte Ritchie) and Mike (Kiell Smith-Bynoe) move into the country house at the beginning of series one; to the ghosts' initial horror, Alison can see and interact with them. Across the five series, Alison, Mike, and the ghosts adapt to living side by side and get used to each other's quirks and habits; Fanny (Martha Howe-Douglas), for instance, has a daily habit of unconsciously reenacting her death by jumping out of her bedroom window. Each ghost comes from a different period of history – Robin (Laurence Rickard) is a caveman, Pat (Jim Howick) is a jolly scoutmaster who died in 1984 after an archery incident, and The Captain (Ben Willbond) is an officious Second World War army captain. Despite the tensions among the characters, we see deep friendships form.

If the relationships on screen feel warm, another level of comfort might come from the fact that six of the principal actors starred in the film's original *Horrible Histories* series. A popular children's educational comedy, the cast of the first few series of *Horrible Histories* were important figures in the childhoods of many current university students. You only have to look at the incredible welcome Mathew Baynton received in 2022 when he spoke at the Oxford Union to a chamber full of keen fans who sang Charles II King of Bling in unison.

The film is set shortly after the final TV series, when Mike and Alison, with their newborn baby, have moved out, and Button House is set to become a hotel and golf resort. New life is quite literally breathed into *Ghosts: The Possession of Button House*. A group of teenagers, including Jack (Scott Ellis Watson), attempt to communicate with the ghosts, resulting in Jack and Julian (a Tory MP ghost played by Simon Farnaby) switching bodies. This new ability, unseen before in the TV series, creates an intriguing plotline and allows all of the ghosts the opportunity to experience being alive again.

It is amusing to see the ghosts in the clothes of modern teenagers, rather than the outfits they have worn, in some cases, for hundreds of years, and which make each character so distinctive. What's more, their wonder and shock at aspects of modern life, for instance Julian's bewilderment at the cost of train tickets or The Captain's surprise at seeing how computer files are organised, is heartwarming and comedic.

The film's humour comes, for the most part, from the ghosts' naivety, and it is this innocent pleasure that makes the audience warm to the characters. Kitty (Lolly Adefope), a Georgian noblewoman ghost, gets pleasure from friendship, dancing, and singing; her attempts to befriend Jack might initially be unsuccessful, but at the end of the film he puts on music and dances with her, delighting Kitty, who is able to indulge in a new hobby and enjoy a new friendship. While it is amusing to witness her foolish attempts at 'getting down with the kids', it is overall a moving plotline.

In fact, Jack, a teenager living with his foster parents, is evidence of one of the film's aims – to show that we can learn from one another, in spite of our differences. We might not expect a 21st-century teenager and a Regency-era poet ghost to engage in a meaningful conversation about love and trust, but they do. The choice to depict a group of ghosts from disparate parts of history enables some of the key comedic moments as the ghosts are often aghast at or in admiration of each other's traditions and technologies. On a deeper level, however, they also learn from one another and become more well-rounded, developed characters.

Although the other ghosts often underestimate caveman Robin, he consistently shows them that he is not, in his own words, "just a pretty face". As the oldest ghost in Button House, Robin has a certain wisdom and resourcefulness when it comes to solving the many problems they encounter. Indeed, in this film, he displays his unique methods of problem-solving, bashing a computer on the table to make it work, and his moral compass, as he succeeds in undoing the deceptive work of a local politician.

The film might be more enjoyable if you have already seen the TV series and understand each character's quirks and the relationships which have already been developed. For example, Pat's delight in eating a Scotch egg makes more sense if you have seen his oft-repeated love of this food. Nevertheless, this film is a fun, heartwarming story in its own right and one which may encourage new fans to watch the original TV series.

Image credit: 'Ghosts: The Possession of Button House' via imdb.com.



'Where were all the warnings?': 'Digger' in review

BILLY SKIGGS

In a near-empty cinema, I am delighted to be watching this film. I piece together the sparse information I already have: there's the title, and that Tom Cruise looks rather different. That the film has something to say about climate change and oil. That critics have broadly panned the film; indeed, it is a flop. That its marketing was, at best, opaque; trailers did little to entice an audience into *Digger*'s cartoonish world.

After watching, however, it becomes clear why Warner Bros did not reveal too much. The unfortunate result is that people are misled into thinking that the film is bad. This exceptional, surreal satire is the best film of the year and an intriguing shift for the otherwise apolitical stuntman – say what you like about Cruise; I never knew he could act until *Digger*.

Digger, directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu, follows Digger Rockwell, an oil tycoon accused of the "most heinous act of all time": deliberately obfuscating the reality of oil drilling's impact on the climate. The result is that an enormous iceberg begins to drift toward, and threatens to drown, Europe. Despite this cliché apocalyptic premise, it's the most original film I've seen in years. In a market dominated by franchises and re-releases, I often hear lamentations for the monotony of modern cinema. So, when a genuinely provocative and idiosyncratic film appears, it surprises me that it is looking at a loss of $245 million, complete with more than a smattering of unflattering reviews. But this is unimportant – perhaps it is even more reason to watch it. When I encouraged my father to watch the film, he suggested that its flop might be owing to its quality: "Perhaps the film is just bad." I disagree, and am encouraging all to see it.

I feel that the film took on its supposed flaws head-on. The surrealist set – walls of taxidermied animals, cavernous rooms, and moving paintings – is soon justified. Movements are theatrical, as if for the stage; people lean forward together, they salute in uncertain unison. There is never a space on the screen where nothing is happening. Digger's costumes are flawless; self-referentially evil, yet unduly stylish. He delays donning his cowboy hat until he's convinced the public it wasn't his fault, until he's winning. The dialogue is, at times, clumsy and suffocating, though this is a realistic emulation of everyday speech and reflective of a broader climate of misinformation. Digger's staff shout over one another, and in the end nobody gets heard. The caricatures, hardly caricatures, are entertaining. The film has been accused of shallowness; I encourage such critics to consider who it represents.

It is enjoyable; it is funny. Is it funny? *Digger* doesn't know if you should be laughing at this, but eventually decides that 'it really doesn't matter'. It is as if the film is having a constant argument with itself. It is a film about the failure of art to bring about meaningful change, but given that it, too, will be ignored, it is not sure of its purpose; as such, its nihilistic edge in satire is incredibly compelling. "Perception is reality", says President Compson, played by John Goodman, but *Digger* shows us that however you want to frame it – an iceberg can be a mere "snowcone" – you cannot get away from the truth.

Iñárritu flickers between different modes of storytelling and degrees of perception, aware they are all to be ignored. His direction is like jazz, an almost unbearable game of tension and release. A delightfully memorable scene sees Digger preaching to a temple of beige bureaucrats as he deflects from his undeniable culpability, cultivating a passionate swarm of confusion and loathing. He rejects the reality as he has always done and gives others a plausible reason to do the same. You begin to root for him as he overcomes the unanimous tide of public opinion for his bottom line. The sound design is sadistically triumphant; a resonant bass with the power of a foghorn heralds his entry into this beige arena, facing off against the crowd's feral animosity. Everything is loud in this film, but nobody hears it. There's never a moment of peace; there is always something steadily ticking, steadily dripping; you hear every squeaking shoe and creaking suit, every drop of another drink being poured as imperceptible masses rage outside. At the same time, you can easily tune it all out.

Digger is laden with symbolism and burdened by its ironies. The abundance of hypocrisy is barely worth noting, since in itself it never amounts to meaningful change. What is the point of satire, *Digger* asks – is it only to make yourself feel better? What does this self-rewarding serve? Oil barons do not care if they are hypocrites; green-washers do not care if you see through their façade. They do not care about this; they care about the money. They care about six million barrels of oil a day. And that's a great number.

It is not entirely clear where *Digger* hopes to sit in the climate conversation, bluntly accusatory while bleakly self-aware. It knows that there are so many films made on these topics, 'eco-satires' like *Don't Look Up* (2021), but they have yet to quell the insatiable march towards progress, towards an indescribable, intangible and suicidal future. What does progress look like? Is it bigger roads and faster cars? Is it cheaper food and better phones? Next-day delivery? More power? Less thinking? And who will you sacrifice for progress? How far away do they have to be? One of the greatest ironies of *Digger* is that Europe has to suffer before anybody truly registers the effect of climate change. As our summer has shown, these floods are not 'eco-satire' to Nepal, and are barely speculation for Europe. The imagined near-future that *Digger* looks to is scarcely removed from our present, and things are changing quicker now.

As such, we must hold authority to account for what it is doing before it is too late. The government is still planning to begin oil drilling at Rosebank, the UK's biggest undeveloped oil field in the North Sea, which would generate over 200m tons of CO_2 – more than the combined emissions of the 28 lowest-income countries in the world (700 million people), who disproportionately suffer the consequences of climate change – and is expected to continue producing oil until 2051, a year after the UK has committed to be net zero. Did Prime Minister Andy Burnham go outside this summer? Even Oxford's ordinarily verdant lawns look withered. Digger says with pride that, at the end of the day, he was thinking of the shareholders. That leaves the rest of us financially beholden to the whims of forces outside our control; gluttonous war, like the current Iran war, only ever makes us poorer, without even beginning to consider the human and environmental toll. Why are we so heavily invested in that which has the power, so imminent and so visible, to destroy us? In the UK, our short-term petty party politics are not conducive to collaborative, necessary change. No party is ever in power long enough to think seriously about the future of the planet, and as such, that future is repeatedly sacrificed for short-term gains in the present. The prevention of further damage to our climate is an issue on which we should all agree.

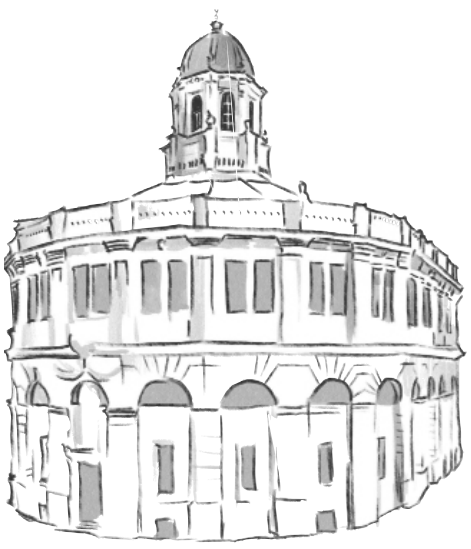
Fundamentally, this is a media issue that distorts the truth just as critics scramble to find an excuse to disregard *Digger*. Iñárritu, speaking to Business Insider, expressed great concern about its meaning being distorted by its noisy reception, as "the commentary will end up matching what's in the movie"; a prophetic statement indeed. Peter Bradshaw of the Guardian dismissed it as "an exasperatingly shallow, laborious, self-congratulatory satire", a critique ironically raised within the film itself, and consequently dealt with in a most ingenious manner. Bradshaw asks if we are "supposed to admire [Digger's] realist sense of everyone else's bad faith".

What is admirable about Digger is not his insight into the supposedly inherent selfishness and hypocrisy of those who use and rely on oil, but the conviction with which he can manipulate a narrative to make his listeners accomplices to his greed. We recognise him as an orator who enables the perpetual self-deception of the populace; thanks to him, we can safely say we never saw it coming.

WHAT'S ON

STAGE
Alice Roberts – From Cell to Civilisation
Oxford Playhouse
29th November

Anton at Christmas
New Theatre Oxford
11th December



MUSIC
Jane Chapman Harpsichord
The New Space
16th November, 5:30pm

FILM & TV
Primetime
Curzon Oxford

BOOKS
Mona Chalabi: Ten Lives
Blackwell's
16th November, 5:30pm

ART
Life Drawing
Common Ground Cafe
17th November, 6:30pm

Sculpt and Sip
Plough Inn
18th November, 7pm

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

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

The Source

Mirrors

Dress yourself to the Hancock
Standard and hesitate at the image
That stands like wet hairs
Upon a stainless-steel frock.
Rigid, as it is, let it bend
And flex with each pass of the eye.
Dulcify it, clarify it, and deify it.
Run your fingers from end to end
And whisper what you crave to hear:
You are beautiful, have no fear.

Tom Cartwright, *Harris Manchester College*



Shedding selves, one term at a time

***Eva Zielke** considers the different versions of ourselves that form throughout time*

A week after returning from visiting my friend studying in Reims, a charming city in the Champagne region of France, I sent her a text: "I miss your friends." I had known them for three days, an embarrassingly short time to claim such an attachment. And yet, there I was, staring at a reading list with an inexplicable nostalgia for people I barely knew. I missed a flat I'd visited a handful of times and the Thursday tradition at Saint Maurice bar I'd borrowed for one evening. Stranger still, I missed a person: a slightly louder, more spontaneous, French-phrase-attempting version of myself who stayed behind in France, and neglected to board the Eurostar home.

My friend was amused by my sentimentality for a city she had lately associated with mid-term preparation. Seeing Reims through my eyes, she told me, had reminded her to appreciate it. For three days, I inhabited the most romanticised version of her ordinary life. No deadlines, laundry, or the type of mundane grievances that inevitably accumulate, even in the loveliest of places. But I realised that, just as my visit had briefly changed her relationship with the city, it had changed mine with myself. I missed being me there as much as I missed being there.

I think William James would have understood my text. In *The Principles of Psychology*, he argued that a person has "as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him". This, he suggested, is just how selfhood works: we step into a different version of ourselves with each group that knows us, each a partial expression of who we are. Susan M Andersen and Serena Chen's concept of the 'relational self' suggests we carry mental models of the people close to us that shift how we behave when they're around. This isn't necessarily dishonesty or performance. Some people make you funnier, others more thoughtful, others capable of talking to strangers in broken French. It might take leaving their company to notice how much of ourselves they brought out, for better or for worse.

University, it turns out, is an extraordinarily efficient machine for manufacturing these selves, and Oxford seems particularly fertile ground for it. There is the college self, who you become when you queue for the dining hall, do your laundry, and collect parcels from the porter's lodge. There is the tutorial self, who says things like "encapsulates" with an ease that is rarely demonstrated outside oak-panelled rooms lined with books. There is the rowing self, the library self, the Spoons self, and, in due course, the home self.

Each belongs to a slightly different world, sustained by the company in which it exists. People often talk about Oxford's sense of identity as a single, unified, aesthetic experience: bookish students moving through spires and candlelit libraries. In reality, however, the selves we occupy come from the many intense, smaller components of our lives. We belong to so many different places and people that leaving any one of them behind can feel like leaving something of ourselves behind too.

I find this most apparent in Michaelmas. I'm sure I'm not alone in wanting it to promise a fresh beginning: a better work ethic, a more packed social calendar, a newfound commitment to attending lectures, and maybe, just maybe, a sustainable sleep schedule. Social media only adds to the feeling. As I scroll, the instructions to begin a 'winter arc' seep into my subconscious. Reinvention in October is a trend as old as TikTok, and it feels almost compulsory. New wardrobes, timetables, and fresh seasonal coffee options offer us every opportunity, and every pressure, to become a slightly improved version of ourselves.

People often talk about Oxford's sense of identity as a single, unified, aesthetic experience: bookish students moving through spires and candlelit libraries.

This year, the transition felt even more abrupt. I had only just returned from France when noughth week demanded an entirely different version of me.

Suddenly, I was no longer babbling rusty GCSE French over drinks, but a second-year student, expected to have acquired some wisdom, academic discipline, and general competence over summer. I was caught between affection for the self I'd left behind, and anticipation of the one I might become.

Yet, what might offer some comfort is how quickly this new self begins to feel ordinary. By fifth week, some novelty has worn off, and your routines may have settled. You know when Michaelmas-you wakes up, where they like to study, and which newly familiar faces they'll encounter on the way there. We develop our own small geography each term, and soon enough it'll become second nature for a short time.

This can make Michaelmas bittersweet. Autumn is conventionally associated with endings, retreating indoors, hibernating. Yet at university, it is the season in which so much begins. New friendships form under trees already shedding their golden leaves, and new routes back from the library will become familiar as the daylight disappears and tries to draw you home. We spend October becoming people that we get to know only in November, before December arrives to take them away.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

The early bird gets the worm

ALICE SANDERS

At least, that is the age-old adage. It is what many Oxford students, often cast as the 'ambitious type', will have heard time and time again. Whether it be early entry undergraduate applications or job interviews, we as a society are obsessed with being first at everything, and those who are first are, inevitably – so we are told – successful. However, while this may just be symptomatic of the world we live in, there is one race that I will never compete for first place in: that of waking up first.

Let me just clarify: I am, resoundingly, not a morning person. The precise moment at which my alarm clock begins to beep and my phone begins to buzz is, without fail, the worst of my day. Add a grey sky, cold room, and soft duvet to the mix, and I think few would dare suggest I am overexaggerating.

Then comes the slog: snooze, snooze, snooze, but *eventually* it has to be time to get out of bed and, in the murkiness of the delightful British autumn, start my day. It is a process certainly not unfamiliar to any student, but one made all the more pertinent today, when the proverbial 'early bird' has become an even greater icon of success than it has been before. More than ever, too, we have become obsessed with maximising our productivity in every aspect of our lives, streamlining our time to push our busyness to its capacity.

This busyness is certainly no stranger to an Oxford student, for whom 'doing everything' is not so much a choice as it is a doctrine. Inscribed in early sporting commitments, the morning essay deadline and 9am lecture are, inevitably, alarms variously beginning with a seven, six, or even five. This is often supplemented with copious amounts of coffee and usually makes for a begrudging start to the day.

For some, however, this is the ideal lifestyle: an early night, an early start, and an undeniable sense of achievement obtained before the sun has even peeled back its sheets, and ditched the pyjamas. It is a way of life sustained by the modern cult of productivity, in which the very act of doing is an invaluable social currency that feels impossible to escape. In our desperation for constant advancement, we capitalise on the doing of everything. We are told that two cooked breakfasts, a workout, meditation, a walk, coffee, and the completion of all our work is possible before the (I would argue still early) hour of 10am, and, honestly, I am sceptical.

Some call the discipline necessary to engage in this morning routine 'self-improvement', but it can hardly fail to be self-destructive in the immensity of its expectation. I don't know about you, but I will not be making any seismic decisions before breakfast. In fact, it is unlikely I will have even decided what I'll be wearing. Perhaps this is narrow-minded, for there is an undeniable (if egotistical) reward in being able to reel off the imposing list of tasks you completed all while your friends and family slept, letting the early bird start hunting.

However, I cannot help but doubt this 5am alarm and the gloating that accompanies it. Under constant pressure that this is the right, the healthy, the committed, and the successful way of life, it is impossible for guilt not to shadow those who hesitate to admit that no, they have not 'done' anything yet, even though it is 11am. There is a certain shame in accepting you haven't 'achieved' anything yet with your day, and one that is only exacerbated by the cacophony of blaring opinions on social media and 'productivity guidelines', in which we are baited with success, and teased with the ever superior successes of others.

Perhaps this comes only as some form of self-vindication for the many days that I, red-faced, have admitted to having wasted my morning, those precious hours in which time is endless and potential is limitless. And yet, I do not seem to be alone in this feeling, and we are not scientifically unjustified in it, either. It is an uncontested fact that circadian rhythm changes with age, and is set to a later schedule in the years of twenties and teenagedom, meaning it is only natural to sleep later, and to wake later in accordance. Studies have proven not only this, but also that students' performance in cognitive activities (such as taking exams) is better at 1.30pm, than either 9am or 4.30pm.

Bolstered by such evidence, this unmatched productivity and glamour of the early morning is marred: while the choice of some, this obsession with the early hours is unfounded as a miracle solution to the perfect life, and its propaganda is not enough to tempt me.

After all, while so often confounded by our academic environment, there is much more to our day than the achievements perceived as 'productive' in the traditional sense. Although a midnight essay crisis is a situation where I know I'm not alone, the evening often lies in wait with open arms for so much more. Social events, in particular, are usually hosted in the evening, stretching into the hours of the night. Evenings are not exempt, either, from those pursuits typically associated with the morning. It is only at the cost of these evening hours that the early bird can rise.

I imagine that I will always be a night owl, taking advantage of the dying light for everything that can be achieved before dawn, and more.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

Image credit: William Turner, public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



HOROSCOPES



Aries

You're over halfway through the term. Give yourself a pat on the back.



Taurus

Everyone can see you picking your nose in the library. Stop it.



Gemini

The stars say that all your questions will be answered once you pay your friend.



Cancer

I reckon you can do that problem sheet in an hour.



Leo

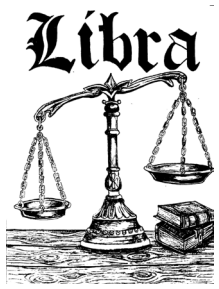
You are intelligent and wise in all ways other than your capacity to cook.



Virgo

Rihanna's song about finding love in a hopeless place doesn't mean Bridge.

HOROSCOPES



Libra

This week is the perfect time to test the boundaries of deadlines.



Scorpio

Trusting the kebab chili sauce could tip you into foolhardiness.



Sagittarius

Fortune favours those who don't sniffle in the Bod.



Capricorn

A visit to University Parks would do you some good.



Aquarius

The planets are aligning for you. Shoot your shot.



Pisces

Some stargazing could help you reconnect with your past academic self.

CHERWELL-FED

Burning the candle at both ends: Diwali in Oxford

PRIYA BURROW

Oxford has a curious relationship with time. We do not so much live through autumn as progress through Michaelmas, dividing our lives into eight neatly numbered weeks. Ask a student the date, and you may get a blank look. Ask what week it is and the answer comes instantly, usually with a sigh.

Somewhere among the tutorials, the essay deadlines and the increasingly frantic conversations about fifth week, Diwali arrives. This year it falls on Sunday 8th November, the very first day of fifth week. The festival of lights is entirely indifferent to the university calendar. It does not know that an essay is due on Friday. It simply turns up, as it always has, and asks to be celebrated.

Diwali had been looming in my calendar for weeks, heralded by a formal hall whose menu did the festival few favours. Even so, it has managed to creep up on me, and I am yet to buy a single card or box of sweets. Oxford time, it seems, runs rather faster than the lunar kind. Spend long enough here, and the eight-week term stops feeling like an administrative convenience and starts to feel like the natural unit of existence. We talk about time as though it were a countdown: "It's already fourth week", "I'll deal with that after sixth", "I can't believe we're halfway through". Each phrase measures life by how much of the term has been spent and how much remains. There is something charming about this private language, but also something faintly alarming. The Oxford calendar becomes so dominant that everything else must be fitted around it. Birthdays, visits home, and religious festivals become things to be accommodated, slotted between a tutorial and a deadline or postponed until ninth week.

The point is not that Oxford prevents anyone from celebrating Diwali. Nobody is forbidden from lighting a diya – fire regulations permitting. It is that Oxford shapes how we think about the time available for celebration. The term does not tell us what to value. It simply makes sure we are always counting. Diwali demarcates a different kind of time. Its date moves with the lunar calendar, landing anywhere between the middle of October and the middle of November, but its substance barely moves at all. It has been celebrated across generations and continents, through migration and through the ordinary upheavals of family life, and it asks for many of the same things each year: lamps lit at dusk, the house made ready, sweets shared, and family gathered. Where Oxford is preoccupied with moving forward, Diwali is built on return. Part of its meaning lies in the fact that you have done this before, and that others did it before you.

I inherited Diwali from my nani. For as long as I can remember, it has been the thing that draws our family together. My dad is English, and he has never once treated it as someone else's festival. He has thrown himself into it so wholeheartedly that it now belongs to all of us, and we all love it. This points to a quiet paradox. We tend to treat repetition as the opposite of progress, the thing you do once you have stopped improving. Yet traditions draw much of their meaning from being repeated. A ritual performed once is a novelty. Performed for a lifetime, it becomes a way of belonging.

Oxford continually urges us to advance: to read more, achieve more, and move on to the next deadline. Diwali suggests that coming back to something familiar can matter just as much. Why, then, can a festival like Diwali feel like an interruption to university life rather than part of it?

It would be rather unfair to accuse Oxford of being hostile to tradition. Few places are quite so enthusiastic about preserving it. This is a university where students sit exams in gowns and carnations, where grace is said in Latin before dinner, and where a college's age is a matter of competitive pride. Tradition is not merely tolerated here. It is the house style.

Yet there is a difference between the traditions built into the institution's routine and those students must make room for. Formal is on the timetable. Matriculation has its own day. Christmas falls conveniently during the vacation, so nobody has to ask for an extension because of it. Diwali, by contrast, is something you fit in: a society dinner, a puja between essays, a call home squeezed in before the library.

At Oxford, Diwali often feels makeshift. Last year a few of us held a puja on our staircase, with candles and a handful of murtis, small statues of the deities, balanced on cardboard boxes. It did not go especially smoothly, and it was over almost as soon as it began. But we had made the time to celebrate, and that, more than anything, was what gave it meaning.

None of this requires anyone to have been deliberately exclusive. Institutions tend to remember what they were built to remember. The question, perhaps, is not whether Oxford makes time for tradition, but which traditions have the privilege of being considered part of ordinary life. This is not an argument for abolishing the term, or for telling everyone simply to slow down. Oxford's eight weeks are useful.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

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



Too Good To Go, or too good to be true?

OSKAR DOEPKE

As Prime Minister Andy Burnham constantly reminds us, we are in a cost of living crisis, with the price of nearly everything rising. So, on a limited student budget, and hoping to vary my food beyond the occasional Tesco meal deal and late-night kebab, I decided to give Too Good To Go a go.

Too Good To Go is an app that allows users to pick up so-called 'surprise bags' of surplus food from shops and cafés at a reduced price. At Oxford, a number of places take part – including chains like Gail's and Costa, supermarkets like M&S and Co-op, and independent businesses like Taylor's and Knead. Depending on the time of day, you can check the app's map to see what bags are available, which range from leftover pastries to fully cooked meals, along with their respective collection windows.

I got my first Too Good To Go a few weeks ago, from Tortilla on my way to London. At £4.40, I picked up a burrito bowl alongside tortilla chips with guacamole, which would ordinarily cost £15.75. While the burrito bowl wasn't my typical order – since it replaced beans, corn, and salsa with grilled vegetables, grilled vegetables, and more grilled vegetables (at least it was healthy) – I couldn't help but appreciate the value of my order as I sat on the Overground, making my way home.

My next order came a few days later, at Paul on High Street. Although at £7, it was a bit pricier, I still got my fair share of goods: a croissant, a chocolate croissant, an almond croissant (just all of the croissants), a cinnamon roll, a cheese twist, and two cheese and salami baguettes. Needless to say, my meals were covered for the next few days.

Before long, I got hooked on the app, replacing my late-night Instagram doomscroll with, of all things, yellow-sticker food. I refreshed the app a few times a day, looking for what might be called a 'rare find'. For me, that was the M&S bakery bag – I mean, who wouldn't want the latest drop of Kathryn Turner-recommended cornflake cookies?

After turning on my M&S notifications and searching up M&S' drop times, I got my hands on a bakery bag after two weeks of trying – and it did not disappoint. At £3.80, I got a box of mince pies, two doughnuts, two 'Yumnuts', a cheese pretzel, a sausage roll, and an apple turnover. Although I might've missed out on the M&S cookie craze, I couldn't have been happier.

> "Before long, I got hooked on the app, replacing my late-night Instagram doomscroll with, of all things, yellow-sticker food."

In a way, the more I used the app, the more it became a game – racing other users to get the best bags (M&S or otherwise), followed by the adrenaline rush in seeing what I 'won' in my surprise bag. In an age of shrinking attention spans and AI slop, perhaps it makes sense that buying leftover food had also become a form of entertainment for me. The issue with 'gamifying' surplus food, however, is that it might defeat the very purpose of the app.

Founded in 2015, Too Good To Go was set up to fight global food waste – which, in the UK, is upwards of 10.7 million tonnes per year. When the whole appeal of the app is the surprise, there's a fair chance you won't get what you want, and the food will go to waste regardless. In my case, I learnt this the hard way after picking up a 'sweet and pastry bag' at Starbucks where I got, of all things, three boxes of porridge; if my brother hadn't been willing to take them for himself, I likely wouldn't have had them. Searching across social media, gripes similar to mine with aren't uncommon – people complain that "they really put the 'surprise' in surprise bag", while others throw away goods they don't like, whether an egg mayo sandwich or some other item. When a significant amount of the food ends up in the trash anyway, it's hard to see what the point of the app really is.

There's also evidence for Too Good To Go's wider problem. A 2025 study using mathematical models found that surprise bags, much like ordinary end-of-day discounts, could actually increase food waste. According to the study, leftovers could not only tempt businesses to overproduce – knowing they can sell off surplus later – but buyers might end up throwing away food they never wanted in the first place.

This paradox puts Too Good To Go in a strange position. Their business model relies on there being surplus food to sell – the very thing it is also trying to get rid of. But then it doesn't so much get rid of food waste as move it to our kitchens, which, given households make up 60% of the UK's food waste, isn't exactly the most promising space for it to end up.

Read the full article online at cherwell.org

RECIPE

Autumnal crumble

Ingredients:

- 575g bramley apple (3 medium-sized apples)
- 2 tbsp golden caster sugar
- 175g plain flour
- 110g golden caster sugar
- 110g cold butter
- 1 tbsp rolled oats (optional: for the topping)
- 1 tbsp demerara sugar (optional: for the topping)
- Serves four

Instructions:

1. Heat the oven to 190C/170 fan/gas 5.
2. Place 575g of tinned bramley apples, with 2 tbsp of golden caster sugar, into a round baking dish.
3. Flatten the mixture down with your hand.
4. Mix 175g of plain flour with 110g of golden caster sugar.
5. Slice 110g of cold butter and crumble it with your fingers until the mixture looks like moist breadcrumbs.
6. Add the 'breadcrumb' mix, and use a utensil to even out the surface.
7. Bake in the oven for 35-40 minutes
8. Cool for 10 minutes.
9. Enjoy!

Realisations of a country girl in Oxford

AMY CARTLIDGE

My home village, in the quiet countryside of Cheshire, has a population of 200. Within walking distance, you'll find a church, a pub, and an upscale coffee shop for passing cyclists. If you want anything else, you'll need a car – there's no public transport here, unless you're willing to tame one of the hundreds of cows scattered throughout the fields. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of damp and muddy Boxing Day rambles through the neighbouring farms, or board game nights when the weather wasn't hospitable enough to be outside. After receiving an offer to study at Oxford, local scrutiny was everywhere. I couldn't attend any local tractor run, village fête, or even birthday party without questions about my future following me wherever I went: a side effect of how few people, especially young people, were in the community.

By results day, the prospect of moving to Oxford had become a reality, and it wasn't the intimidating reading list or the prestigious collegiate system that daunted me. It was the idea of living in the beating heart of a city that never seemed to sleep, where something was always happening.

The perpetual chatter of tourists as they snake through the narrow alleyways to peer through the huge wooden doors of another college; the warble of buskers on Cornmarket Street, gathering crowds who toss pennies into their open guitar cases; the wailing of sirens as yet another ambulance drives beneath my bedroom window, startling me awake at night. It was all of these things that made the city feel more alive than anything I'd ever experienced at home.

The streets of Oxford are like rivers. You are packed shoulder to shoulder in a flowing stream of people, each rushing off down their own channel. I often found myself longing to slow down and meander, like a duck floating downstream, admiring the rich history of my surroundings. That was my first lesson upon my arrival in the city: keep moving. Just as the city never stops, neither can you. Coming to a halt to admire a monument or ancient building will result in the agitated mutters of passers-by, inconvenienced by your wonder.

On my way to a lecture at the Schwarzman Centre in my first week of Michaelmas, I remember slowing to read an inscription on a grave marker in the churchyard of St Giles' (a reminder of the old churches I regularly encountered at home, being both a resident of a countryside village and the daughter of a rural priest). My curiosity was cut short when a woman, probably 20 years my senior, knocked me sideways and delivered a strongly worded admonishment I can't replicate here. The whole interaction struck me as a little sad: humans are so focused on their own trivial goings-on that we find it so difficult to slow down and admire the things around us. Rather than let the city's relentless pace deter me, I resolved to make the most of its history. I consider myself an expert at ducking out of people's paths and taking every winding street to soak in everything I can.

The city's relative anonymity is another thing that takes some time getting used to. Where a passer-by might stop to chat with you on a rural country lane, the same privilege will not be extended to you down an Oxford alleyway. This reality hit me hard during my first time at the post office, sending letters home to my mother – perhaps an antiquated practice, but there's something unmatched about the joy of popping a letter in a postbox, or receiving one in your pigeonhole after a difficult day. I was there not only sending letters but also buying postcards for future communications, chatting away merrily with the shopkeeper about the recipient of my letter, and some of its less personal contents.

My enthusiasm, however, was met with little more than the occasional nod and a mildly judgemental stare.

Equally, many students will whip by you, completely ignoring your smile, nod, or wave. Instead, their heads are down, puffer coats wrapped tightly around them (but rarely zipped, I've noticed), backpack or handbag slung over one shoulder, rushing to the library or the coffee shop or the lecture theatre.

This surprised me at first, but now that my own classes and lectures have begun, I can sympathise with such individuals. For a student, life often seems to go faster than the average person, between laundry, meal prepping, and completing essays or problem sheets. Balancing the domestic with the academic takes a lot of energy, often leaving little to offer others.

And amid all this rushing around, there's another challenge: knowing where to go. With so many places to eat, study, and visit, it's easy to feel lost. Where before my choices were limited to my room, the garden, or a footpath, there are now countless places to explore. This newfound space will almost certainly affect how you study. Personally, this meant finding my feet incredibly quickly, without anyone to tell me quite how I was supposed to do it. The first thing you try is unlikely to be the strategy that sticks. I have played with my screen time, my study location, my social calendar, and found that my day sometimes feels like walking a tightrope between becoming a workaholic and a procrastinator. The allure of city life will distract you from work and likely drain your wallet (the thrill of actually being able to order pizza delivery still hasn't left me). But don't let the sheer volume of options overwhelm you. The core takeaway from my experience is to find your calm space amongst everything else going on. Without it, the ebb and flow of Oxford will easily sweep you away with its tide. Finding peace and quiet stabilises you, offering somewhere to drop your anchor and rest for a while.

On the subject of finding calm, if in doubt, go back to what you know. Some days, I do my reading from my bedroom desk, a familiar setting I became all too acquainted with during my A-levels. Others, I take a walk around University Parks – the closest thing I have to walking through farm fields in the middle of Oxford.

Above all, don't put too much pressure on yourself to find your feet immediately. Adjusting to city life has been as much about learning to navigate Oxford as it has been about learning to live independently. When you return home for Christmas and find yourself begging your parents for yet another lift into town, you'll miss how accessible the city can be. The freedom it brings is something impossible to find in the countryside, and something I'm sure I'll grapple with when the time comes. For now, though, I'm learning to enjoy my newfound autonomy and the academic challenges of university without getting swept up in the rush, all the while being amazed at how far I've come.

Image credit: Abigail Christie, with permission.



OXFORD TINY LOVE STORIES

Budapest, 30th May 2026.
5.06pm. Kai Havertz scores
to put Arsenal 1–0 up in the
Champions League Final.
What would I do if I could bottle
that moment?
Would I sell it for riches, or
forever be addicted to the
delirium?
The moment transformed
strangers to family; I hugged,
shouted with, and loved those
whose names and backgrounds
I'll never learn or see again.
Kai Havertz will never know me,
or any of those in the crowd.
Now I look back at the photos
of us all, and in that second,
that fleeting memory: we were
family.

Raegan Kingett, *St Cross College*

CHERPSE.

Oxford's blind dating

An evening at The Alchemist: has the chemistry already fizzled out?



Miss Chatterbox

First impressions?
It would be difficult to describe my first impression of my blind date because it ended up not being so blind after all – we did in fact know each other, being on the same course, and worked together occasionally.

Did it meet your expectations?
The date definitely didn't meet my expectations because I was expecting someone I'd never met before.

What was the highlight?
The highlight was definitely the cocktails! I ordered a 'Peach Please', which was served in a conical flask with white smoke coming off it.

What was the most embarrassing moment?
The awkwardness subsided as the date progressed, even if we mainly chatted about our subject, and it was a fun evening overall

Describe the date in three words:
Chill, conversational, friendly.

Is there a second date on the cards?
No – but even though we agreed there wouldn't be a second date since we saw each other too frequently in the department and it might end up awkward, I'm glad I gave blind dating a go.

Mr Indecisive

First impressions?
We found each other at the door, although we were already... somewhat acquainted. We concluded that in some ways it was less awkward than being set up with a fresher.

Did it meet your expectations?
I did not go expecting anything but it was a very pleasant evening of conversation (when I could get a word in).

What was the highlight?
Discussing the vaguely overlapping areas of our tastes in music and being told about underrated events and venues in Oxford

What was the most embarrassing moment?
I think we talked too much about our (common) subject and departmental gossip. And I spent far too long staring at the menu.

Describe the date in three words:
Chatty, informal, cordial.

Is there a second date on the cards?
Possibly best to keep it platonic as we share a lab.

Life of an athlete: Oxford versus the US



LARA SAHAGUN

On the side of the cricket pitch, a student revises her flashcards. Across the Atlantic, another student runs from the track to his school's academic centre, where he must stay for the next eight hours. Though athletes at Oxford and in the US operate under completely different systems, the differences between them are not so significant.

I came to study at Oxford from a private high school in the US where it is commonplace to find student-athletes recruited to top American universities based on athletic ability. At Oxford, however, the idea of sports recruiting (at least at the undergraduate level) is almost unheard of. In conversation with Oxford University Rugby Football Club (OURFC) Blues Captain Mel Morley, a student at St John's College, she tells me: "Oxford does not care what your sporting ability is. You can't be a good applicant bolstered by sport. You have to be an excellent applicant, and then you can be good at sports."

The consequence: many Oxford applications don't mention athletics, or do so sparingly. Having played four sports – rugby, football, decathlon athletics, and golf – in college, Henry Whittaker, a student at St Edmund Hall, didn't mention any sport in his UCAS application. "Except for a minor part in my teacher's reference, there was no mention of sports in my application," he tells me. "They don't care about sports here."

In the US, the opposite is true. Schools in the NCAA Division I–III leagues, the three highest levels of US intercollegiate sport, are especially known for pursuing students for their athletic ability. Joya Wang, a recruited squash player at Williams College in Massachusetts, tells me: "My admission process involved a lot of Zoom calls with coaches where they will tell you, based on your sports ranking and your grades, how likely you are to get in."

For some students, sport is also the deciding factor in selecting which university to attend. One recruited athlete, Leed Smoole, tells me he chose to commit to the University of Michigan over the University of California, Berkeley, largely because "everything is better here sports-wise, and I like the idea of a big school that is good at sports and academics".

Despite these initial differences, once they arrive on campus, every student-athlete runs into the same, age-old predicament: time. Athletes that I spoke to at both Oxford and US colleges described weekly sports commitments ranging from 8 hours to as high as 20 hours. I ask them how they manage to juggle athletics with academics. Jacqui Sanitt, a Blues cricket player from Exeter College, tells me: "You have to be very strict with your time management: knowing that you'll have training and matches that will take up a lot of time, doing work before so that you will have time to do the matches." During the Trinity exam crunch, she may bring her work to the pitch. Meanwhile,

> "Oxford does not care what your sporting ability is. You can't be a good applicant bolstered by sport. You have to be an excellent applicant, and then you can be good at sports."
> **– Mel Morley**

Kostya Huba, a law student from Teddy Hall, who is a goalkeeper for the Blues football team, says: "I feel like I will have to prioritise one over the other at some point. All the second- and third-year law students keep saying, 'enjoy your first year,' because it won't get easier." Wang, echoing that sentiment, explains to me: "It's pretty hard because both sport and academics take more time than they used to in high school. All of my time is now split between homework and practice."

When trade-offs are necessary, US students are more likely to sacrifice academic achievement for sporting prowess. Vihaan Batra, a student at Duke University, reflects that his athletic friends "might not have time to be studying for a hard class, so they will take an easier one that is still the hardest they can manage". Doing the same at Oxford has proven to be more of a challenge. "I would, if I could, ask my tutors to be more flexible with sports," Huba says. Though the balance between sport and school is a difficult one to maintain, no student-athlete on either side of the Atlantic can afford to drop the (academic) ball. "Even though you play sports, you still have to get good grades," Smoole tells me.

Time on the pitch also shapes the time off it, and here again I saw a similarity rooted in a sports truism echoed by former NBA player Jonas Valančiūnas: "Every team you play for, you meet new friends." The social lives of Oxford Blues and US varsity athletes are usually shaped by their sports. Organised sport socials and outside events, along with the friendships made on the pitch, account for a strong tie between social life and sport.

Wang tells me that "events are organised around athletes, so you end up spending a lot of time with your team. You have to push yourself to meet non-athletes". Across the pond, Morley agrees. "You do have college friends, but lots of my close friends are on the team." There's a benefit to this friendship, where shared experiences allow you to strive (and suffer) together. Morley tells me that "it gets to a point where you are all super super close and spend a lot of time together".

The real social difference lies in the "public perception" of athletes on campus. In the US, some athletes garner near-celebrity status from their peers – usually linked to their likelihood of deriving significant success from their sport. At Duke, which has produced 17 NBA draft picks in the last five years, basketball players are known by all. "Everyone knows the basketball players. These kids will likely be gone from the school in a year and be making millions in the next," Batra tells me. It's a sharp contrast to Oxford athletics. "People usually are impressed you're doing so much, or they don't give a sh*t," Whittaker says.

The life of a college athlete in the US is not one an Oxford athlete may easily relate to when thinking of the recruiting process, celebrity status, or ability to shift academics to accommodate sports. But look past it, and the similarities are profound: both share a commitment to work hard, a will to succeed, and a genuine "love of the game".

Image credit: Leed Smoole, with permission.

SPORT SPOTLIGHT



***Noah Grass** interviews Reed Prinsep, Captain of the Oxford University Rugby Football Club Blues*

Born and raised in Christchurch, New Zealand, Reed Prinsep, this year's Oxford University Rugby Football Club (OURFC) Blues captain, tells me that rugby has always been an integral part of his life. When his younger brother got into the Canterbury Academy, a renowned pathway to the All Blacks, New Zealand's national rugby union team, Prinsep felt a "fire in his stomach" that drove him to train longer and harder. Attending Christchurch Boys' High School, which has produced the second-most All Blacks of any school in New Zealand, Prinsep was surrounded by successful teams and felt the pressure to add to its legacy. It wasn't until his last year of high school that he realised his dream of becoming a professional was within reach; Prinsep made the first XV and then joined his brother at Canterbury, making the U18 team a year younger than usual. He says that he could "see the hard work paying off".

Several years later, Prinsep was playing for the Hurricanes, a team in the highest division of rugby union across New Zealand and Australia. One highlight was his appearance off the bench against the visiting British and Irish Lions in 2017. The free-flowing tourists led 31-17 with 12 minutes remaining, but a remarkable comeback earned a 31-31 draw. Prinsep remembers the "dangerous" Hurricanes as being "able to attack from anywhere" and that they had an "X factor" about them. This is no surprise, perhaps for a side whose alumni include Jonah Lomu, a legendary All Black player and widely renowned as the sport's first global superstar. I asked Prinsep what it felt like to play in front of a sold-out stadium of 40,000 fans, but he simply said that you have to "do your job" and "the magic will come".

Now retired from professional rugby, Prinsep moved to Oxford in January to begin an Executive MBA at Oxford's Saïd Business School. He is the first recipient of the Liddell Oxford Rugby Scholarship, which supports players from New Zealand transitioning to life beyond the professional game as they study and represent OURFC. Following an extensive selection process of presentations and interviews, he was chosen as captain of the Blues.

Prinsep brings the Māori heritage that shaped him as a player, and that is shared by many of New Zealand's greats. Accordingly, the Māori term 'whakapapa', which translates to "place in layers", is a key theme for the Blues this year. It refers to a "sense of belonging" and represents "everything that comes before". It has helped to build team spirit and ensures that everyone remembers Oxford's history and its significance. With the Varsity match against Cambridge at the end of February approaching, Prinsep insists that it is "not just another game"; rather, it is "the Final" for the team, and they will "leave no stone unturned".

UPCOMING

Basketball

5.30pm 18th November
Iffley Road
Men's Blues vs. Anglia Ruskin

Hockey

6pm 18th November
Women's Blues vs. Bristol

Rugby

2pm 15th November
Iffley Road
Whippets vs. Berkshire U20s

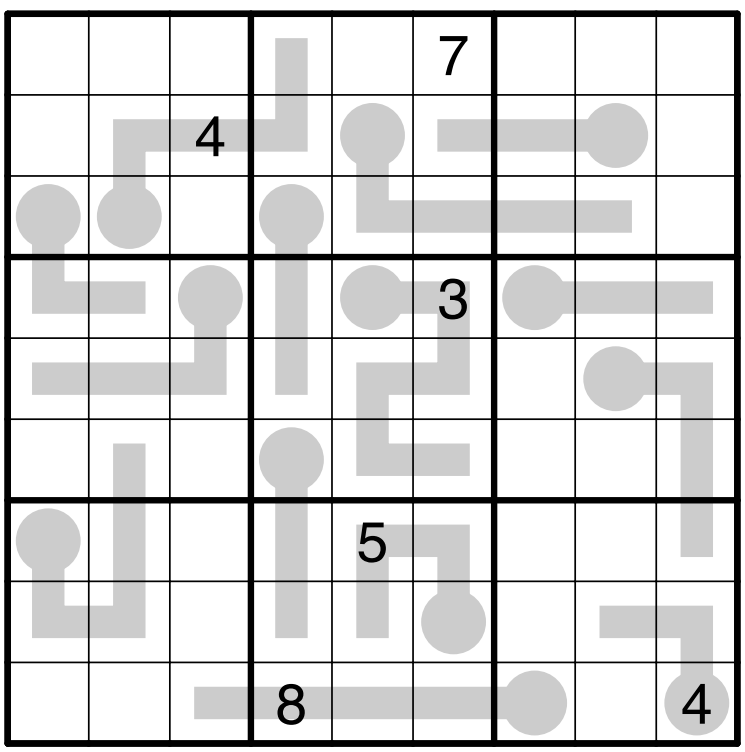
Going to watch a Varsity or Cuppers match?

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

PUZZLES

Thermodoku by ZOË MCGUIRE

I was asked this week to bring last year's Thermodoku back, so here's another. Normal sudoku rules apply; digits along a thermometer must strictly increase, starting from the bulb.



Sums by ALESSANDRA EDWARDS

Can you find the solutions to these unusual sums?

LGR + LBY = ?

GTML + MXC = ?

RMN + KRN = ?

SDRB + MN = ?

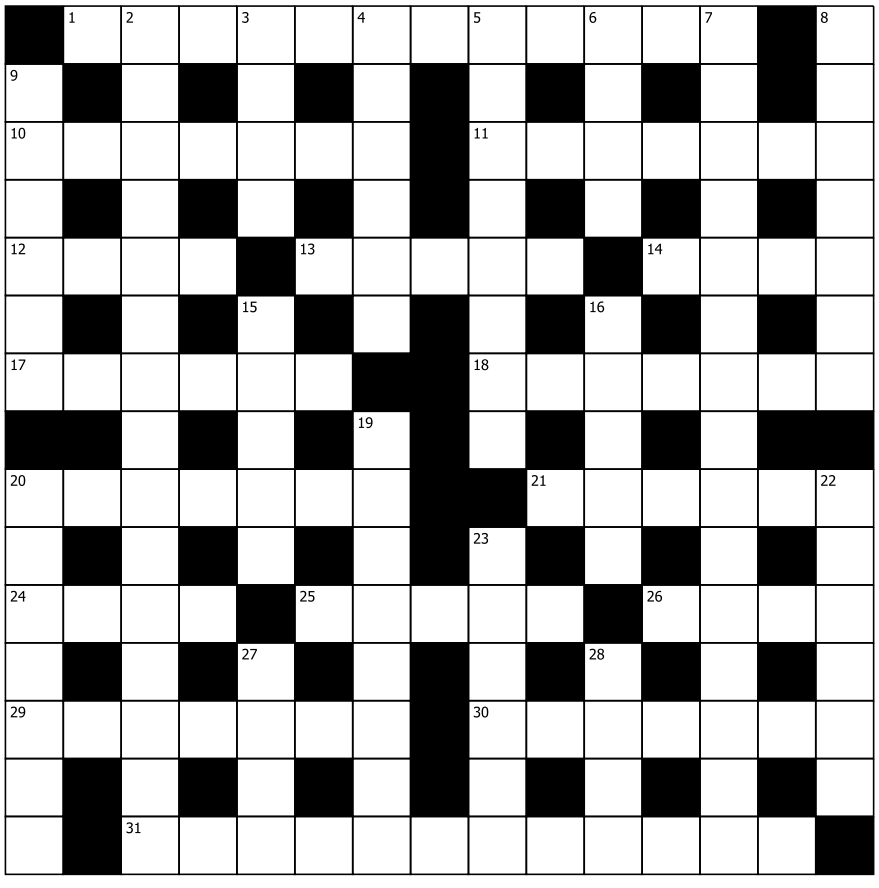
CLMB + PR = ?

RSS + LTV = ?

NCRG + PNM = ?

Cryptic Crossword – Week 5 Blues by PISKIE

Difficulty: 4/5



ACROSS:

1: Judge ruined neolithic monument originally by beginner Blue artist (4, 8)
10: Be dicks about patient's resting place (4, 3)
11: All upset of guilt – alternatively, blue (7)
12: Ice melted key Blu product (1-3)
13: Degas' interpretation of holy cow (5)
14: Pleasant biscuit (4)
17: Map features California oddly not blue amidst USA's midterms (6)
18: Hit shaved bush in Blue vehicle? (4, 3)
20: Singled out lithium in dissolved blue diamond (7)
21: Colourful arrangement operating system robot placed in Minecraft (6)
24: Look bluely at Instagram video on rewind (4)
25: Squawk after mother of blue bird (5)
26: Keep small blue flower (4)
29: Grease seeped in, rushed and rotten (7)
30: Type of tuna fuel thrown in trash can (7)
31: Blue distance was difficult until Ali came (8, 4)

DOWN:

2: Rarely heard a single evildoer gave head to body (4, 2, 1, 4, 4)
3: Deep Blue developers take charge of guided weaponry (1, 1, 1, 1)
4: Popular police officer to turn blue (6)
5: Call shotgun to get largest legroom directly in front in taxis (4, 4)
6: Flash sale for princess in blue (4)
7: Italian movie culture half-seasoned if cast in blue wash (4, 2, 9)
8: LaMelo taking final three-pointers for Minnesota Timberwolves (7)
9: "Voyage To Atlantis" brothers spend year in blue locales (6)
15: Blue wish-granter GenAI uses up atomic energy (5)
16: Message folder where Schrödinger's cat might be found (5)
19: Blue tank engine (not Thomas) (number six) (Henry's son) (6, 2)
20: Blues Butcher greeting Blues Brother (7)
22: Shouting and showing signs of blueness (6)
23: Am in a big arrangement as blue flower (6)
27: Stumble upon hidden Blue in 14A (4)
28: Pacific island water from Spain loses a grand (4)

Week 3 answers:

eldroW: GRATE/TENOR/SOUND/SPADE/SEDAN.
Cryptic Crossword: Across: UNEMPLOYMENT; HERE COMES THE SUN; SLANDER; ENCRYPT; RAINCLOUDS; STUD; PAYS; STAYCATION; TREMBLE; PLEADED; EARLY RETIREMENT; THUNDERSTORM. **Down:** NORMALITY; MOCK DUCK; LEMUR; YESTERDAY; ETHIC; TASTY; PHASER; UNITED; ON THE MEND; THIRD YEAR; FAKE MEAT; POTTED; NUDITY; EGRET; BAYOU; PRIOR.