



Only 25% of speakers at the Oxford Union are women

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Oxford University did not suspend professor investigated for rape



- The professor was investigated by the police and released on bail
- No restrictive measures were taken by the University or the professor's college

ARINA MAKARINA and GASPARD ROUFFIN

An emeritus professor at Saïd Business School, who is also a fellow of an Oxford college, was investigated for rape by Thames Valley Police (TVP). He remains in his positions at the University of Oxford despite the accusations, which were made by a female academic. Emeritus status allows individuals to keep using University premises.

Cherwell understands that the professor was arrested and interviewed by TVP in relation to allegations of rape, and was later released on bail. Based on the available evidence, the police decided not to bring a charge against him.

This decision was challenged, and

there is an ongoing judicial review into the matter. The professor denied the allegations when questioned by TVP. The professor declined to comment on the matter when approached by *Cherwell*.

Cherwell understands that the academic alerted the University of the situation, and asked for protection as well as restrictive measures to be implemented. The University did not formally investigate the professor, and did not restrict his access to premises or remove his emeritus status.

The University of Oxford told *Cherwell*: "Sexual harassment has no place at Oxford. Our sympathies and thoughts are with anyone who has experienced harassment or misconduct. We take concerns seriously, applying robust procedures. Support for those affected is a priority, and we take precautionary and/or disciplinary action where justified.

"We reject any suggestion that the University tolerates harassment or puts reputation before people's safety. While we cannot comment on individual cases, we are committed to continuous improvement and have strengthened our approach over recent years.

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Holocaust survivor speaks with student granddaughter for memorial day

FINLO COWLEY

Holocaust survivor Robert Slager shared his story in conversation with his granddaughter, Lady Margaret Hall student Grace Steinberg, at an event held at the Oxford Union on Monday 2nd February. The talk, organised by the Union of Jewish Students and Oxford Jewish Society to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, reflected the theme of this year's commemorations, 'Bridging Generations'.

Holocaust Memorial Day is observed on the 27th January each year, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp. It commemorates the six million Jewish people murdered during the Holocaust as well as the millions more killed by Nazi persecution and in later genocides in Cambodia, Darfur, Bosnia and Rwanda. This year's theme of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, emphasises that "the responsibility of remembrance doesn't end with the survivors – it lives on through their children, their grandchildren and through all of us".

Slager, who was born whilst his mother was in hiding in Amsterdam in 1943, explained that his father was deported to Auschwitz in 1942 and that his mother had only escaped deportation herself thanks to an administrative error.

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Student groups unite to tackle homelessness in Oxford

The Oxford Student Social Action Coalition (OSSAC), a merger between several student homelessness organisations, has been launched. The new organisation will co-ordinate the activities of Turl Street Homeless Action (TSHA), New College Curry Runners, and Food Rescuers.

The aim of this partnership is to help students work together to support Oxford's homeless community. They hope to increase visibility of Oxford's student volunteers' work and to flag relevant resources and services to volunteers, supporters, and those experiencing homelessness. They will also coordinate projects between the different organisations, direct resources and funding to where they can be utilised most effectively, and support the professional services helping to tackle

homelessness in Oxford. OSSAC has three main aims: to bring food and drink to homeless people in central Oxford; to provide company and listen to those facing a difficult situation; and to bridge the divide between the homeless community and students. The partnership will allow volunteers to work smoothly across OSSAC projects, both during term time and vacation periods.

Anya Gray, OSSAC's communications and engagement officer, told *Cherwell* that the coalition came about after "the TSHA committee organised the first Oxfordshire Homeless Conference in October, which brought together student and non-student groups supporting the homeless community".

Euan Warner, the chair of OSSAC, told *Cherwell* that "it became clear that we were stronger together, and could better prioritise the needs of the end user". Since then, committees from each organisation have been working together on the merger.

Warner also told *Cherwell* that "FoodRescuers and NCCR focus on redistributing leftover food... while TSHA focuses on homeless outreach, providing hot drinks, hygiene products, and signposting support where necessary".

FoodRescuers' Project Leader, Darren Lee, told *Cherwell*: "We all worked in slightly different ways, so we're hoping that coming together under OSSAC will help us collaborate, share ideas and streamline processes together."

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Holocaust survivor speaks with student granddaughter for memorial day

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In an extraordinary sequence of events, Slager's foster family would move across the Netherlands to protect him, facing constant dangers – at one point, they had a Nazi officer stationed in their house. Following the war, he was reunited with his mother and given the middle name 'Bartholomew', in honour of his foster father.

Steinberg, who is the Vice-President of the Oxford Jewish Society, then delivered her reflections on the story of her *opa* (Dutch for 'grandfather'). In a moving speech, she emphasised the role that chance had played in her grandfather's survival. She then read out two letters she had written: the first to her great-grandfather David Slager, telling him about his son, whom he never got to meet. The second was to the Protestant couple who hid her grandfather, thanking them for their bravery during the war.

Steinberg emphasised that Holocaust remembrance involves "not only learning from suffering but learning from courage" and that "living Jews are the most effective monuments" for commemorating the Holocaust. For Steinberg, the Bakels' example showed the power of small "good deeds" in saving lives.

She also recalled her shock at seeing a swastika sprayed on Oxford's David Slager Jewish Centre, named after her great-grandfather, in 2024. The mark left by the symbol after it was washed off was, she said, a "scar" for the Jewish community in Oxford.

When asked by the audience about hope, Slager admitted that he was "disappointed" about the recent rise in antisemitism and acknowledged that there is an "uncertainty that hangs over our heads" about what the future will bring. Hearing Slager speak was a particularly special opportunity for those present, since he does not regularly talk in public about his experiences, finding the process of revisiting the Holocaust too "depressing".

Oxford Jewish Society told *Cherwell*: "It was such a pleasure to be able to welcome so many people to our event commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day. Given the few opportunities to hear from Holocaust survivors, we were delighted to be able to put on this event for the Oxford student community, and we hope that the lessons of the Holocaust were clear to all those who came."

Image credit: Rafaela Colman with permission.



University overhauls undergraduate admissions examination requirements

SIYEON LEE

The University of Oxford has announced that it will discontinue Oxford-specific admissions examinations for the 2027 entry cycle.

Instead, Oxford admissions exams will now be administered by University Admissions Test UK (UAT-UK), a not-for-profit organisation formed as a joint venture between Imperial College London and the University of Cambridge. According to UAT-UK, the University will use its admissions tests for "at least the next three years".

Under the new system, UAT-UK admissions examinations will be required for 16 of the University's undergraduate courses, with admission examination requirements removed for the remaining courses.

Regarding the change, a University spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "Oxford's undergraduate admissions process is rigorous and designed to identify academic potential. The University is continually reviewing its admissions processes and practices to ensure they best meet the needs of the University, schools, and applicants. Our approach varies according to subject and considers a range of information as evidence of a candidate's ability to thrive here."

The spokesperson added that the change "will streamline the admissions process for schools and our applicants, allowing candidates to take one test that is accepted by a number of other UK universities". Seven UK universities currently utilise UAT-UK's

examinations, including the London School of Economics, the University of Cambridge, and Imperial College London.

Admissions tests were negatively impacted by technical difficulties in 2024. Students taking the History Admissions Test (HAT) experienced a two-hour delay. In the 2024-25 academic year, the University proposed to stop subsidising admissions test fees. In May last year, Conference of Common Rooms (CCR), the representative body of Oxford SU, passed a motion criticising the proposal on the basis that it might "exacerbate college disparities and disincentivise open offers".

In the 2026-entry admissions cycle, a variety of discipline-specific exams, such as the Ancient History and Classical Archaeology Admissions Test (AHCAAT) and the Mathematics Admissions Test (MAT), were booked through the Oxford Admissions Test Registration Portal and assessed at a Pearson VUE testing site.

While UAT-UK examinations will also be delivered through Pearson VUE, a private admissions testing service, UAT-UK currently offers three of its own examinations: the Engineering and Science Admissions Test (ESAT), Test of Academic Reasoning for Admissions (TARA), and the Test for Mathematics for University Admissions (TMUA).

The admission examination for medicine will continue to use Pearson's University Clinical Aptitude Test (UCAT), and the law examination will continue to use Pearson's National Admissions Test for Law (LNAT).

John Radcliffe Hospital hosts new institute for trauma, emergency, and critical care

ANGELINA WU

A new Kadoorie Institute of Trauma, Emergency, and Critical Care has been established within the University of Oxford. Based at the John Radcliffe Hospital, the new institution formalises a long-term collaboration between the Oxford Trauma and Emergency Care at the Nuffield Department of Orthopaedics, Rheumatology, and Musculoskeletal Sciences (NDORMS) and the Critical Care Research Team at the Nuffield Department of Clinical Neurosciences (NDCN).

The Kadoorie Institute's close collaboration with its host, the John Radcliffe Hospital, is designed to enable research into clinical effectiveness. Matthew Costa, Professor of Orthopaedic Trauma

Surgery at NDORMS and one of the Institute's directors, told *Cherwell* that the department aims to streamline research into Emergency Departments, trauma operating theatres, and Intensive Care Units. The institute will analyse "these three acute care specialities together so that our research spans the whole patient pathway".

Both research and education form the focus of the Kadoorie Institute. Professor Costa told *Cherwell*: "Our educational work aims to provide the 'outputs' from this research in a way that is easily accessible to healthcare professionals and patients, whether it be online materials or face-to-face teaching."

The Kadoorie Charitable Foundation, the Institute's namesake, has played a pivotal role in its financial

support. Professor Costa told *Cherwell*: "The Kadoorie Charitable Foundation has been supporting acute care research and education in Oxford for 20 years... Without their support, the Institute would not have been possible. We hope to continue this incredible relationship for many years to come."

The Institute's launch comes at a time of increasing strain for the NHS, particularly in the field of emergency medicine. Costa told *Cherwell*: "Acute care in the NHS is seldom out of the press. Research to improve the outcomes for patients who need urgent treatments is therefore a key priority for the NHS. With ever increasing pressure on NHS resources, there is also a need to make sure that all new treatments are cost-effective as well as better for patients' recovery."

Oxford cycle courier Pedal & Post closes after 14 years of operation

ANISHA MOHAMMED

Pedal & Post, a cycle courier company based in Oxford, has ceased trading after more than a decade of operating in the city, following the loss of a major client.

The eco-courier entered liquidation earlier this year. Christopher Benton, the CEO and founder of Pedal & Post, told *Cherwell*: "Despite exploring every possible avenue to continue trading, the loss ultimately made the business unsustainable." He added that following a review of forecasts and options, the company made the "difficult decision to cease trading".

The company's closure has resulted in the loss of around 60 jobs in Oxford and London.

Pedal & Post was founded in Oxford in 2013 and expanded to London last July, but the loss of this major client, which *Cherwell* understands to be e-scooter rental company Voi, resulted in the closure of its Oxford and London sites. Its involvement with Voi was to service e-bikes and e-scooters. By transporting large volumes of freight on cargo bikes or bikes with trailers, Pedal & Post deliveries reduced the volume of delivery vans entering the city centre.

Over its 14 years of operation in Oxford, Pedal & Post delivered millions of items across the city, serving residents, local businesses, and national logistics firms. Its

work ranged from local coffee and vegetable box deliveries to last mile deliveries for major couriers like DPD, Yodel, and Evri. The company also conducted critical medical deliveries such as cancer medications for hospitals and NHS trusts.

Robin Tucker, Co-Chair of the Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel (CoHSAT) told *Cherwell*: "We're very sad to hear that Pedal & Post have gone into administration after losing a major client. Their bright blue cargo bikes and friendly riders have been a cheering sight on Oxford streets for more than a decade, reducing traffic congestion and pollution, and transporting vital medical supplies through traffic jams."

Tucker highlighted the scale of the company's work, noting that Pedal & Post "transported a considerable volume of freight and packages, most notably consolidating deliveries to many Oxford colleges from several package companies on a single large cargo bike, or bike with trailer, rather than being several vans". He added that their closure "may lead to an increase in van traffic and with it congestion, pollution, and road danger in the centre of Oxford".

Tucker also pointed to the wider policy context, explaining that Oxford's Temporary Congestion Charge and upcoming traffic filters permit vans to enter the city for free, while the city's existing Zero Emission Zone incentivises the use of

electric vehicles.

In recent years, Oxford has seen the growth of publicly supported e-cargo-bike schemes, alongside private operators offering a range of delivery models. Some local courier companies, such as Velocity Cycle Couriers, operate mixed fleets combining e-cargo bikes with electric vans, allowing them to handle larger or longer-distance deliveries alongside bike-based work.

Tucker described Pedal & Post as an ethical business, where all riders were paid the Oxford Living Wage and trained to high standards. Benton told *Cherwell* that the company's current focus is on supporting its team through the transition, including "helping people find new roles, transferring contracts where possible, and keeping riders in work" within the cargo-bike sector.

Benton went on to tell *Cherwell*: "While it's incredibly hard to see the business come to an end, we're proud of the impact it had on the city, the people it employed, and the conversations it helped start around sustainable urban logistics." He added that "Pedal & Post showed that a different kind of delivery model is possible – one that puts people, communities, and the environment first. While this chapter is closing, the idea that cities can be cleaner, fairer, and more human through cargo-bike logistics is very much alive".

Image credit: Pedal & Post with permission.



Oxford University and Google Expand AI Partnership

MERCEDES HAAS

The University of Oxford and Google have announced a major expansion of their collaboration to embed advanced artificial intelligence tools across the University's academic and administrative activities. Following a successful pilot, Oxford is now rolling out enhanced access to generative AI models, including Gemini for Education and NotebookLM, to students, faculty, and staff. The full rollout will begin this year.

The initiative builds on a six-month pilot involving hundreds of University academics. During this period, participants presented case studies on using Gemini Pro, NotebookLM, and Google AI Studio to support work ranging from structured documentation and research to technical problem-solving.

Under the new arrangement, Oxford's colleges and departments can secure Pro licences through their Google Workspace for Education accounts, giving users access to more features such as Deep Research, an AI assistant capable of developing multi-step research plans, scanning hundreds of sources, and synthesising findings into detailed reports with citations. The University emphasises that all AI tools will be made available within its secure enterprise environment, a key factor for protecting data and ethical use.

A central component of the collaboration is Gemini for Education's Guided Learning mode, which is designed to promote "deep understanding".

Student groups unite to tackle homelessness in Oxford

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Any student can get involved with OSSAC, with no formal application or training process required. FoodRescuers work at lunchtime, and TSHA and NCCR work on alternate evenings. Lee particularly encourages sports groups to collaborate with OSSAC. He adds that "in the past, there has been a successful initiative from OURFC committing to covering a shift for TSHA each week" and that they want to see more initiatives like this.

OSSAC works closely with its partner organisations, The Porch, The Gatehouse, and Oxfordshire Homeless Movement – all registered charities external to the University. The Porch provides a range of services for homeless people in Oxford, such as vocational skills training, laundry and shower facilities, and a library. The Gatehouse works in a similar way, and provides a community drop-in centre for homeless and vulnerably-housed adults, offering a wide range of free services and activities.

Warner told *Cherwell*: "Their insight and support has been an invaluable addition to our work, helping us to improve our service provision, and ensure long term sustainability." He added that OSSAC is "always looking to increase collaboration, and better integrate with the professional services that play such an important role in the city".

Warner told *Cherwell* that the University needs to be doing more to financially support Oxford's vital day services for homeless individuals, which he says are a "vital, and invaluable network of support for Oxford's most vulnerable", adding that "the University needs to put its money where its mouth is". The University has been approached for comment.

Nonetheless, the coalition is working closely with the University staff and administration to expand their reach, and looking for where Oxford's student community can be best mobilised to enact positive change for the homeless community.

Homelessness in Oxford is widespread and has been progressively getting worse. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities found that there was a 70% increase in the number of people sleeping rough in Oxford on a single night from 2023 to

2024. This was significantly higher than the 27% increase across the whole of England.

Homelessness is a particularly severe issue in Oxford, in part, due to 'studentification', a form of gentrification where students dominate housing stock and local rent markets. Moreover, a significant proportion of Oxford's available housing has been purchased by colleges to be used as accommodation. This has compounded the existing cost-of-living and housing crisis.

Image credit: OSSAC with permission.



Environment Agency allocates over £8 million contract to clear illegal Kidlington waste dump



DANIELA BRAW-SMITH

The UK's Environment Agency (EA) has awarded an £8 million contract to Yorkshire firm Acumen Waste to clear an over 20,000 tonne waste pile in Kidlington, citing pressing concerns over fire safety.

The waste pile, located in between the River Cherwell and the A34, is one of at least 517 illegal dumps across England, which police say are run by organised gangs, offering landfill services at much cheaper rates than legitimate operators. The waste was dumped on multiple occasions between June and October last year. Three men have been arrested in relation to the incident, on suspicion of both environmental and money-laundering offences.

The cost of the clean-up has concerned local communities, with the residents of the constituency of Bicester and Woodstock submitting a petition to Parliament declaring that the economic burden should not be met through council tax.

A spokesperson for the EA told *Cherwell*: "The Environment Agency believes those responsible for dumping waste should pay for its clearance. We took the exceptional decision to begin removal after advice from Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service about the possibility of a fire on the site that could have a widespread effect on the community, including closing the A34, raising air quality issues from smoke, and interrupting electrical supplies."

Its National Environmental Crime Unit has said the agency would look to recoup the clearance costs via the Proceeds of Crime Act from anyone successfully prosecuted in the investigation.

The EA's direct involvement in this case is unusual, as it is not legally responsible for clearing illegal waste. However, the spokesperson told *Cherwell*: "While the Environment Agency continues to support the principle that the criminals

responsible should cover the cost of clearance, it retains the power to act in wholly exceptional circumstances."

Mary Creagh, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, explained that "the scale of this fire risk presents an overriding public imperative". However, the EA spokesperson told *Cherwell* that "a potential start date towards the end of February is looking unlikely now" due to site and weather conditions.

The 140 metre long and 6 metre high mound, located on a floodplain, poses various environmental risks to residents of north Oxfordshire and beyond. The pile is composed of processed domestic waste, shredded plastics, polystyrene, tyres and other household items. In their petition to Parliament, local residents noted that rising river levels could lead to contaminated waste entering the river and surrounding soil.

The EA has taken steps to mitigate the risk of waste entering the River Cherwell, installing barriers around the site and monitoring water quality. These efforts have found no indication of pollution entering the Cherwell so far due to the waste. The agency has also removed several damaged trees.

Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds has said that the government is committed to eradicating these types of environmental crimes by increasing funds to tackle waste crime, hiring more officers, and introducing tougher penalties for offenders.

Baroness Hayman of Ullock (Under-Secretary at the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs) has also pledged greater government efforts in prevention and disruption, particularly through the introduction of digital waste tracking to help fight waste crime. Speaking in the House of Lords, Hayman said: "It is important to say quite clearly that the government do not believe that the status quo is working."

Image credit: Les Hull, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

NEWS SHORTS

Doughnald

A resident from Oxford had a fright whilst making breakfast as she noticed one of her slices of toast bore a striking resemblance to the US President. After taking a picture, she "polished him off", and said the toast was "beautiful...it had a great crunch but didn't crumble." She fed the crust to two wild boar.

The 700riel

Oriel College has turned 700! Established in 1326 by Edward II, the college boasts 2 Nobel prize winners, 25 Olympians, 2 saints, 53 provosts, and 12 University Challenge teams throughout its 700 years. Oriel is celebrating with formals, "decade dinners" for alumni, and events across the UK, Europe and America – from Edinburgh to Oslo to Atlanta. It will celebrate its birthday weekend with an alumni ball and a garden party.

OUPeace

In stark contrast to the Oxford Word of the Year ("rage bait"), young people across the UK proved there is hope for the future by voting "peace" as the Children's Word of the Year. This was narrowly followed by "AI" (runner-up for the second year in a row) and "resilience". Children showed awareness of current affairs when explaining their voting choices.

Hot weather shifts penguin love

A decade-long study by Penguin Watch uncovered a record change in the breeding seasons of Antarctic penguins. Released on World Penguin Awareness Day, the study showed that breeding patterns had changed by an average of 10 to 13 days, with some colonies changing their patterns by up to 24 days. Temperature appeared to be one of the dominant drivers of observed shifts. Researchers said the study has global implications.

CROSS CAMPUS

Cambridge Stand Up to Racism protests in solidarity with Minneapolis

The Cambridge branch of Stand Up to Racism recently demonstrated outside of Guildhall, its civic centre, in protest against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE). Demonstrators advertised an upcoming 'March Against the Far Right' in London.

When the email finds you badly

In a widespread data and privacy breach affecting students university-wide, the University of Sydney sent students end-of-semester results belonging to other students. Whilst the emails did not explicitly name the students whom the results belonged to, they contained academic information such as grades, unit enrollments, and degree programmes.

Oxford study models future of cooling demands as the planet warms

OLIVIA MILLER

Climate researchers at the University of Oxford have published a study in *Nature Sustainability*. It shows that the population experiencing extreme heat conditions is projected to "nearly double" by 2050 compared to 2010 levels.

According to the study, 41% of the global population will live in extreme heat regions by 2050, defined by the number and severity of cooling degree days, compared to 23% in 2010. This new data will be crucial for predicting energy demand for heating and cooling buildings as climate patterns change due to global warming. The data shows that heating demands will decline while cooling demands will increase as the average global temperature rises.

The data is essential for planning climate change adaptation, assessing geographic inequalities, and identifying vulnerable populations. According to the study, the 20 countries with the most drastic increase in cooling needs are all developing nations, with the

Central African Republic, Nigeria, and South Sudan topping the chart, whose socioeconomic development will further suffer from global warming.

Most increases in cooling demand will occur by the time the planet reaches 1.5°C of warming compared to pre-industrial temperatures (i.e. within the first half a degree of global warming going forward).

The study used heating and cooling degree days as quantifiable representations of human response to global warming. Heating degree days refer to colder-than-usual temperatures, which prompt people to use heating technology such as radiators to warm buildings. Cooling degree days refer to the opposite – warmer temperatures that prompt the use of cooling technology like air conditioners. This benchmark also reflects the energy use and emissions associated with heating and cooling systems.

The researchers visualised the dataset with 30 different maps that depict heating degree days and cooling degree days around the world according to three

hypothetical increases in the average global temperature: 1°C, 1.5°C and 2°C, each compared to a pre-industrial baseline. The average global temperature increased by about 1°C between 2006 and 2016.

The data set is particularly flexible because it is temperature-dependent, rather than time-dependent: The results are not affected by when the warming happens, only by how much warming occurs. The findings are therefore especially helpful to policy-makers for planning, adapting, and preparing infrastructure in the face of uncertain futures; the data will remain relevant regardless of how quickly the planet warms.

The results can also pair with existing time-specific models of climate change. The researchers chose to cross-reference their data with Shared Socioeconomic Pathway (SSP) 2-4.5, a popular moderate prediction of future climate change which sees a decline in emissions – without reaching net-zero – by the end of the century.

Lord Hague speaks at Oxford Politics Society

ANGELA YU and EDMUND REMINGTON

Chancellor Lord William Hague addressed students at a keynote event hosted by the Oxford Politics Society last Thursday, warning of a "new chapter in the history of the world".

Discussing his early political beginnings as a 16-year-old speaking at the Conservatives' 1977 Annual National Conference and his career as Foreign Secretary and Leader of the Conservative Party, Hague addressed the "destabilising" changes in international relations, which require "the United Kingdom to re-energise itself, to use its greatest strengths to recover some of its traction, its power in the world".

Alluding to the actions of US President Donald Trump, Hague noted that "we can start to see what happens when you don't have enough power to uphold international law, and protect our allies".

Reflecting on mistakes he made as Leader of the Opposition, Hague told the audience: "I wish I'd known... that politics is not just about giving people a set of policies you think they agree with... they are interested in the story you are telling about the country, and they are interested in the values you hold as an individual."

Hague highlighted his work on the Disability Discrimination Act as the proudest achievement of his political life: "Perhaps I was wasting my time half the time I was in politics, but if you can do things like that, perhaps it's worth it, and you'll tell young people: 'Do get involved in politics'."

Speaking exclusively to *Cherwell* after the event, Lord Hague affirmed that he has had good relations with Labour ministers since becoming Chancellor,

indeed centre-left."

Discussing his former counterpart at the dispatch box, Prime Minister Tony Blair, Hague said they "can't think of anything to disagree over anymore". He noted similarities between the Conservative Party's Position now and under his leadership from 1997-2001, and compared both to the Terminator restoring itself one finger at a time, noting "it takes time to recover".

Commenting on the current government, he praised Prime Minister Keir Starmer for "doing so many of the right things" on the international stage: "I do sympathise with Keir Starmer... having to phone President Trump every few days." At the start of the event, the Chancellor was asked about his experience of student politics as a student at Oxford. Lord Hague, a former President of the Oxford University Conservative Association and the Oxford Union, urged others to have a "more varied student life than the one [he] had".

Nonetheless, he insisted it was his university experience that gave him the "practical experience of politics", with the Oxford Union offering experience "directly helpful for British parliamentary politics". "[Politics] is the one forum in which you can affect change that affects millions of people."

Hague highlighted his work on the Disability Discrimination Act as the proudest achievement of his political life: "Perhaps I was wasting my time half the time I was in politics, but if you can do things like that, perhaps it's worth it, and you'll tell young people: 'Do get involved in politics'."

Speaking exclusively to *Cherwell* after the event, Lord Hague affirmed that he has had good relations with Labour ministers since becoming Chancellor,

including regular contact with Liz Kendall, the Secretary of State for Science, and the Minister for Science, Innovation and Technology Lord Patrick Vallance. "I know Lord Vallance well, and he's very supportive of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor... they're doing some welcome things."

Lord Hague told *Cherwell* about the University's approach to preparing students for global changes, particularly around AI, and defended the University's decision to provide free access to ChatGPT Edu to students. Lord Hague said: "I think it is the right approach. We have to be at the forefront of AI. There are major issues about how we preserve the full faculties of the human mind while doing that. But the answer is not to shut ourselves off from it... a great university is where we work these things out."

"Humanities [subjects] also have an absolutely crucial role in determining how we respond to all of these things, and again, it's in Oxford that we could really bring that to bear."

The Chancellor expressed his desire to "go to student societies, as much as time allows", adding a responsibility to meet with students to the "normal role" of a Chancellor across his 10-year term. He told *Cherwell*: "It's not normally part of what the Chancellor does... I do personally, not only from a point of view of personal enjoyment but in order to be able to represent the University, I do think it's important to [interact with] students."

President of the Oxford Politics Society Ralph Armitage told *Cherwell*: "I think giving him a chance to talk to, to hear from students from different parts of student political standpoints... is super valuable."

Image Credit: Sergey Shkolnikov for Oxford Politics Society with permission.



The King appoints Wim Decock as new Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford

SIYEON LEE

Last week, the UK government announced that the King has approved Professor Wim Decock, Professor of Roman Law, as Regius Professor of Civil Law at the University of Oxford.

A Regius professorship is considered the most prestigious professorship in the nation. Positions have been historically restricted to a "handful of the ancient" universities in the United Kingdom and Ireland and appointed only by a "Royal patron". Founded in 1504 by King Henry VIII, the professorship can be endowed to scholars of Divinity, Medicine, Greek, Hebrew, Civil Law, Modern History, and English Literature.

A Professor of Roman Law, Legal History, and Comparative Law, Decock is currently teaching at Université Catholique de Louvain and the University of Liège, both in Belgium. He will assume his position on 1st October and become a Fellow of All Souls College.

Decock told *Cherwell*: "I was deeply honoured – and, I admit, rather humbled – by my appointment as Regius Professor of Civil Law. The chair carries an extraordinary historical and intellectual legacy stretching back to the time of King Henry VIII. To be entrusted with a role that has been held by scholars who helped shape the study of civil law in Britain and

beyond is both an immense privilege and a great responsibility."

He also told *Cherwell* that he aimed to "strengthen Oxford's position as a leading centre for the study of civil law in its historical, doctrinal, and comparative dimensions" and said that he was confident in realising this ambition.

He added that he was deeply committed to the chair's educational function precisely because "civil law is an essential part of the law curriculum".

The Regius Professorship is especially important for communicating the "grammar and vocabulary of law to undergraduates, while simultaneously opening their minds to the international dimension of law and to its historical, philosophical, and cultural moorings".

Having been raised in a small village in the Flemish countryside and gifted the Oxford English Dictionary as one of his first books, Decock told *Cherwell* that the honour was a "childhood dream come true".

"I have spent many years living and working abroad in beautiful and stimulating places... but I am confident that Oxford will surpass them all." Decock sees the opportunity to form part of Oxford's community of scholars and teach "some of the best students in the world" as an exciting prospect.

Image credit: Aude Alexandre with permission.

Oxford tops two sets of University rankings

ARCHIE JOHNSTON

The University of Oxford topped its European and global counterparts in recently released university rankings. Oxford came top of the 2026 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) European University rankings, released on 28th January. The University was also ranked best in the world for computer and medical sciences in the 2026 *Times Higher Education (THE)* World University Rankings by Subject, published on 21st January.

The QS rankings gave Oxford a perfect score of 100 in academic and employment reputation, which are weighted heavily by the scoring system. Oxford also excelled in the firm's assessment of the "international research network", its "faculty-student ratio", and its "employment outcomes".

The QS Europe results had Oxford outstrip British rival Imperial College London, which placed two places ahead of it in the QS World rankings released in June last year. Imperial placed third in the new European rankings, behind Oxford and ETH Zurich, a primarily STEM-focused university in Switzerland.

The *THE* World University Rankings for "medical and health" put Oxford narrowly ahead of University of Cambridge, ETH Zurich, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which topped the *THE* rankings for arts and humanities, business and economics, and social sciences. Oxford was also awarded top score by *THE* for computer science. This is the 15th year running that Oxford has been ranked top for medicine, and the 8th that it has topped the computer science tables.

QS is a for-profit higher education analysis firm which provides a variety of organisational services to higher education institutions. It was founded in 1990 to assist students looking to study abroad, and is involved in the promotion and administration of the Erasmus programme.

In response to the rankings, Oxford Vice-Chancellor Irene Tracey said: "At a moment when the UK is rightly seeking closer partnership with Europe, including renewed participation in programmes such as Erasmus, this recognition is particularly meaningful."

The prioritisation of STEM in QS rankings has been a source of criticism. Several of the rankings' measurements of institutional influence are based on citation databases which weigh STEM subjects above arts and humanities.

In 2011, an opinion article in the *New Statesman* called the QS rankings "a load of old baloney". Writer David Blanchflower criticised the fact that 50% of the survey's points come from an institution's reputation among other academics and employers, whose position to make a judgement is questionable.

Other criticisms of the QS rankings have alleged that the firm's results are Eurocentric, and that the sample size of their reputation survey, at between 2% and 8% of the available respondents, is too small to be reliable.

Between 2004 and 2005, QS and *THE* jointly published the *THE*-QS World University Rankings. *THE* cited a perceived favouritism in the QS rankings for sciences over humanities, as well as other methodological issues, as reasons for the split.

INVESTIGATIONS

University did not suspend professor investigated for rape

Continued from Page 1

Our online Single Comprehensive Source of Information sets out our approach, support and training and we encourage anyone who has a concern to raise it."

Professor's College

Cherwell understands that the college where the professor is a fellow did not place any restrictions on his access to college grounds after being made aware of the rape allegations, and did not take any measures to suspend his fellowship. The college was approached by *Cherwell* for comment.

The professor served on the Governing Body of his college for over ten years. Members of the Governing Body of Oxford colleges are also charity trustees, and have legal duties and are "ultimately responsible" for safeguarding according to the Charity Commission.

At least one Oxford college – but not his own – has placed a ban on the professor entering premises after being made aware of the allegations against him. However, the University of Oxford – which manages central buildings including faculties, departments, and libraries – has not.

The professor also holds a research position at another public university abroad. This university did not respond to *Cherwell*'s request for comment.

Saïd Business School

The academic who submitted the complaint against the professor later sought help from the Dean of Saïd Business School at the time, Professor Dutta. It was reported that, after the academic went to Dutta for help regarding her original complaint, Dutta propositioned her. He allegedly said: "I feel very attracted to you. Can something happen between us?" Dutta denied making the comment.

Dutta resigned in August following a five-month investigation by the University, which upheld three allegations that he sexually harassed a female academic. The University of Oxford had stated that "stepped down as Dean of Saïd Business School and has now left the University".

According to a Bloomberg investigation, Saïd Business School hired Dutta as Dean despite knowing that he had earlier resigned as Dean of the business school at Cornell University following a "personal relationship with a junior employee".

In a statement to *The Times* regarding his resignation, Dutta said: "I deeply regret causing any distress or offence by anything I said, and it was never my intention to be anything other than supportive of my former colleague", and declined to further comment citing an

ongoing dispute.

Last May, a letter by the faculty and staff of the Business School expressed "deep concern regarding the lack of communication and support" surrounding the investigation process.

Cherwell understands that the professor does not currently face any restrictions regarding access to the Business School premises, and that he still holds his emeritus professorship. Access to Saïd Business School is managed separately from access to other University premises, and entry to the facilities requires a separate access card.

Saïd Business School did not respond to *Cherwell*'s request for comment.

Hewstone and New College

The Times revealed earlier this month that the University of Oxford "withheld information about harassment claims". Miles Hewstone, former fellow of New College and professor of Social Psychology, resigned from his full time post in April 2019 following an investigation over alleged harassment.

"Oxford has been much slower than other universities to address accusations of sexual harassment and violence"

The University declined to share the details of the internal investigation with New College, claiming that the information was confidential. Hewstone retained his University emeritus professor status and remained an emeritus fellow at New College until last November, when his status was removed following probes from the media.

Similar to the Saïd Business School emeritus professor, Hewstone's emeritus

status allowed him to continue using University facilities and Oxford University credentials when lecturing around the world.

A number of women have shared their experience of allegedly being sexually harassed by Hewstone. They reported him making "very blunt" comments about wanting sexual relationships, and one academic reported that Hewstone touched her sexually without her consent.

The British Academy, the European Association of Social Psychology, and the Society of Australasian Social Psychologists submitted a joint letter asking whether it was safe to invite Hewstone to attend conferences given reports that Hewstone had "abused his position of power in harassing students and young scholars dependent on his guidance". Oxford declined to respond and referred the organisations to Hewstone.



She added that "staff perpetuating sexual harassment towards students or other staff has been really slow to be addressed. Oxford has really serious questions to answer about how they are keeping students and staff safe".

A 2021 study from the University of Oxford, based on over 25,000 respondents in higher education in the UK found that 52.7% of respondents experienced at least one act of sexual harassment, with most acts of sexual violence taking place at the University. It also found that women experienced the highest rates of sexual violence.

According to Thames Valley Police figures, the rape conviction rate in Oxford was around 2.2% in 2024.

Image credit: Benjamin Holland for *Cherwell*.

If you have been affected by issues in this article:

Academic staff can make a complaint to the UCU, and contact the confidential email SHsupport@ucu.org.uk or call the dedicated helpline on 0800 138 872.

Students can contact a local Harassment Advisor or the Harassment Line (Tel. 01865 270760 or e-mail harassment.line@admin.ox.ac.uk)

Only 25% of Oxford Union speakers are women

GASPARD ROUFFIN

A *Cherwell* analysis of over 560 Oxford Union speakers can reveal that only 25.1% of confirmed speakers since Michaelmas term 2023 were women. In total, the Union confirmed 424 men, versus only 142 women. *Cherwell* based its figures on the speakers announced in the last eight term cards.

The divide is particularly stark between politics and arts. For speakers from a political background, including British MPs or foreign heads of states, only 15.7% were women. According to a UN Women study, 27.2% of politicians around the world in parliaments are female, almost double the rate of confirmed Union speakers. In the UK, 40% of elected MPs in the 2024 general election were female.

Most of the confirmed women were from an arts or literary background, as the Union disproportionately confirmed female speakers from the creative industry or authors. 39.7% of confirmed arts speakers were women, including actresses, singers, or novelists, while 35.6% of confirmed media speakers were female. This includes journalists, non-

fiction authors, political commentators, or subject experts.

The gender disparity is also apparent for speakers from other backgrounds, such as business or sports, where respectively 18.1% and 16.0% of confirmed speakers at the Union were women. Over the past 8 academic terms, the Union confirmed only 4 female sporting personalities, 10 business leaders, and 12 academics – compared to 21, 45, and 53 for men from each respective category.

There is a notable difference between terms with male versus female presidents. On average, there were 20.1% of female confirmed speakers when the president was a man, and 31.2% of female speakers when the president was a woman. Over the past eight terms, there was an equal number of female and male presidents.

Two terms particularly stand out for gender parity of confirmed speakers, Trinity 2025 under Anita Okunde and Michaelmas 2023 under Disha Hegde, which both had around 40% of confirmed female speakers.

Speaking with *Cherwell*, several former Oxford Union presidents described that even when aiming to maintain gender parity in the invites sent, committees

often faced difficulties in materialising these aims. They attributed this partly to the low response rate of invited speakers and the difficulty in predicting which personalities will be willing to speak. They commented that the lack of gender parity in confirmed Union speakers reflected general gender inequality in the world.

15.7%
of speakers from a political background were women

One former female senior official also described internal biases within the Union, with male-dominated invitation committees sometimes deeming female speakers "less popular". The former presidents that *Cherwell* spoke to emphasised the need for more diverse committees to ensure better gender parity in confirmed speakers in the future.

Cherwell's analysis does not reflect speakers who cancelled or rescheduled their events, so final proportions of speakers at the Union may vary.

Cherwell found no non-binary speakers over the past seven academic terms. A 2021 national census found that 0.1% of the general population is non-binary or gender non-conforming. The Oxford Feminist Society and the Oxford University LGBT Society were approached by *Cherwell* for comment.

Last year, the Oxford Union has invited several figures criticised by feminist organisations for sexual violence. The Oxford Feminist Society previously condemned the Oxford Union for their invitation of convicted domestic abuser Dizzee Rascal, calling it an "insult to the victims of domestic violence and to women in general". The Oxford Union also invited American actor Kevin Spacey who faced several allegations of sexual misconduct, as well as Don McLean who was issued a restraining order after a

women lead behind the scenes, we see better representation on the stage."

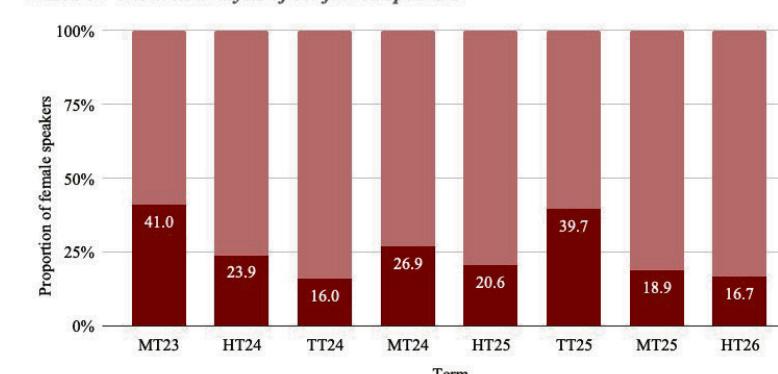
Other student societies also disproportionately confirmed men to their speaker events. Oxford Speaks' term card for instance only includes one woman and seven men, for the Politics Society it is one woman and four men. The Oxford Labour Club's term card features one woman and three men, while the Oxford University Conservative Association has confirmed three women and five men.

The Oxford Union and current President Katherine Yang declined to comment.

Graph credit: Gaspard Rouffin. Banner image credits: Malala, Russel Watkins, CC-BY-2.0, via Flickr; Nancy Pelosi, Gage Skidmore, CC-BY-SA-2.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

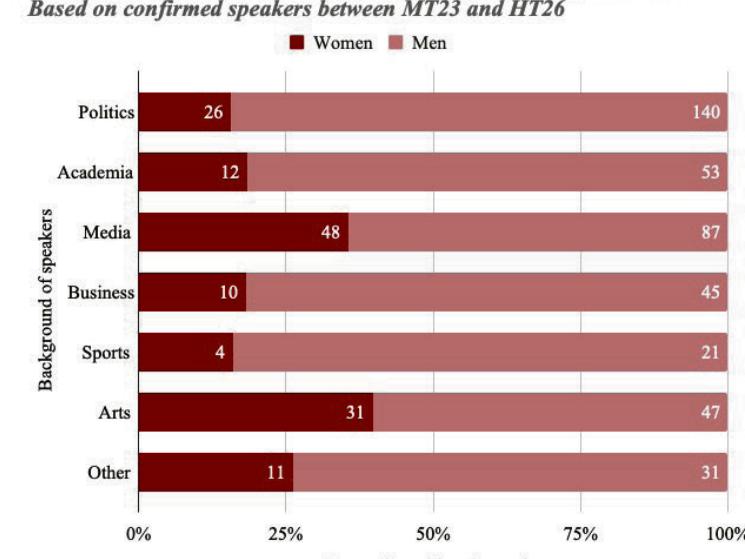
Percentage of female speakers per term

Based on *Cherwell* analysis of confirmed speakers



Number of female speakers by background

Based on confirmed speakers between MT23 and HT26



OPINION

In defence of the internship spreadsheet

ANTONIO REIS

Every few days, without fail, my friend sends me a screenshot of his cold email spreadsheet. Dozens of colour-coded rows list firms I've never heard of, tracking interviews, rejections, and the occasional win. I receive them with a familiar cocktail of guilt, stress, and vague dread. I tell myself I don't care. I came to the University of Oxford to pursue knowledge, not to optimise my LinkedIn. But hours later, I inevitably find myself doomscrolling CareerConnect.

It's easy to criticise "internship culture", with its nerves and competition, but it's worth asking why it's so contagious. At Oxford, where ambition is concentrated and comparison is practically unavoidable, the pressure to plan early isn't a bug but a feature. The question is not whether this culture exists, but whether it is entirely corrosive – or whether, handled well, it can sharpen purpose rather than hollow it out. For this reason, it's worth defending.

There's a classic line: you are the product of the five people you spend the most time with. If that's true, it explains what makes Oxford so distinct. The teaching is excellent, but the academic and curricular differences between any top university are likely marginal. What truly separates Oxford is selection. The admissions process concentrates

intense, ambitious people in one place: almost everyone has some deep passion, side project, or sense of purpose. You are surrounded by students who expect a lot from themselves – and, implicitly, from you.

This intensity seeps into daily life, amplified by Oxford's physical and social structure. Dining halls and their long tables regularly seat you by people you don't know. New connections and conversations strike up easily. This dynamic is replicated everywhere: society socials, lectures, and college bars. Networking becomes an everyday experience. You occasionally become aware that you might be talking to the next prime minister, Stephen Hawking, or Nigella Lawson.

Inevitably, talks drift towards future plans – not because everyone is soullessly ambitious, but because when everyone around you is building something, standing still feels like falling behind.

Of course, this has costs. You start measuring yourself against friends, and pressure accumulates. But, to use the cliché, diamonds are formed under pressure. Competition incentivises innovation and improvement. You see what is possible earlier, you learn faster, and your standards rise.

I hated my friend's screenshots, but they worked. They forced me to confront how passive I'd been about my own future. I joined more committees, updated my CV, and, reluctantly, downloaded LinkedIn. I discovered exciting opportunities I would never have considered otherwise. I'm no hardcore careerist, but proximity to ambition is motivating.

This isn't to deny that this culture can be toxic. If your self-worth depends entirely on employability, something has gone wrong. But not all pressure is poison. High-pressure environments have always produced excellence alongside stress. We accept this in sports and music; why not careers?

Internships are also undervalued as learning tools in themselves. It's not mere résumé-padding, but a test run to gather information about your own preferences and abilities before the consequences become dire. Discovering at 19 that you would absolutely despise investment banking is far better than discovering that at 25 with rent to pay and no alternatives.

The logic is temporal: work now reduces panic later. We accept this principle everywhere else: we revise before exams, not after results. Yet we treat internships as unnecessary stress rather than what they really are: an insurance against future panic. Thinking seriously about the future can provide vision and purpose. Insulating ourselves from the outside world doesn't preserve some purer intellectual life; we just delay an inevitable confrontation with reality.

Finally, we should interrogate the moral tone of some anti-hustle critiques. Wanting a fulfilling, well-paid, meaningful career is not shallow. For many students, it's not optional. Dismissing concern about employment as trivial is often a position made comfortable by safety nets, family connections, and wealth. It is quietly elitist, echoing an era where jobs didn't matter, and university was just a playground for the aristocracy before they returned to their family estates.

Internship culture deserves critique, but also recognition. The problem is pursuing an abstract goal without understanding what success means for you. Instead, acknowledge pressure but don't let careers become totalising. At a place like Oxford, competition is both a by-product and driver of excellence and personal growth. We pretend students shouldn't care too much about their futures, while quietly rewarding those who do.

If my friend is reading this, though: please stop sending me screenshots of your spreadsheet.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Oxford's roots in religion

Lilly Law is right: lawyers at Oxford are weird ('Lawyers are weird. Mods are partly to blame', Week 1). The Oxford system puts them under intense pressure which nobody except fellow lawyers can understand, and this results in some rather intense (but completely understandable) cliques. It is a genuine delight to see Oxford lawyers out in the wild, and Lilly Law is right to gently prod lawyers, if they have time, into doing extracurriculars. Equally, there is great external pressure to attempt to enter a worthwhile law firm, leading to (I hear) the stress of applying for internship after internship: the degree becomes a means to an end, and whilst the competition for places at law firms would add a further burden.

Morwenna Stinchcombe, English & German, Magdalen College

Postgraduate blues

I found myself agreeing with everything in Laurence Cooke's recent article on the unaffordability of postgraduate study for British students ('British students simply cannot afford postgraduate study', Week 1). Cooke rightly notes that whilst a postgraduate degree is eye-watering anywhere in the country, Oxford is particularly so. Not ready to leave the luxury of collegiate lifestyle just yet, I recently applied for two master's courses in Oxford – both two years long, one just under £19,000 a year; the other over £24,000. Suffice to say I can't afford either without a heavy-duty scholarship. The real rub, though? The £75 application fee for each one – £150 just to potentially have the privilege of getting in and being priced out.

Morien Robertson, PPE, St Hugh's College

THE COMMENTS SECTION

See what our readers make of our social media posts

An oxford student...said...meanwhile an oxford resident wasn't found coz no one can afford to live there anymore. ('Former Odeon to be demolished and redeveloped as an apartment')

Jim McKenzie via Facebook

At first I read 'ED' as 'Erectile Dysfunction' ('Between halls and helplines: Oxford's eating disorder culture', Week 1)

ian.kensington via Instagram

The main question is surely what will happen to the homeless people who currently shelter under this building at night? ('Wellington Square redevelopment plans submitted', Week 1)

Glenn Calderwood via Facebook

Who's gonna tell this guy about America ('British students simply can't afford postgraduate study at Oxford', Week 1)

alexandria.lauff via Instagram

Exactly what happened to me when I arrived from a comprehensive school to University College Oxford in the nineties. Arrived a healthy normal weight, and a few comments later (from male students) and insecurities of not feeling good enough and subtly classist atmosphere, and the discipline I'd previously channelled into academic excellence got diverted into being as thin as I could. At my lowest I was six and a half stone. Destroyed my time there, and there was zero support. ('Between halls and helplines: Oxford's eating disorder culture', Week 1)

Ruth Platt via Facebook

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

Oxford is making you more childish

FINLO COWLEY

Oxford is often separated from other universities in the public imagination, a result of this city's illustrious history of academic excellence, sporting prowess, and gleaming architecture. Perhaps we should add another reason to the list – the infantilisation of Oxford.

You arrive aged 18, ready to start your independent, adult life, and are instantly thrown into a setting that resembles a vast boarding school. The childishness is glaring. The tone is set during Fresher's Week when the standard fare of drinking and club nights is complemented by a range of non-drinking activities that bring back flashbacks of secondary-school icebreakers. Talk to an Oxford graduate of the eighties and they would be amazed to hear about a movie night in the first week of university rather than a night in the college bar. Living in halls, with its attendant niceties, inevitably means Oxford students do not undergo the typical student rites of passage. Scouts clean your rooms, put your bins out, and tidy your kitchens, not that you need to use that lone microwave available to you because your college dining hall will feed you seven nights a week. And this for the entirety of your course since nearly all colleges now offer accommodation for all years – student life sans energy bills, pesky landlords, or unblocking drains.

Oxford students are actively discouraged from having a job during term time lest it distract from their degree, leaving those students who do need

to work both academically stigmatised and socially isolated from their peers. And could there ever be a more telling sign of the willing regression of a group of nascent adults than the obsession with college puffers? Oxford students leave school complaining about school uniform and embrace the next best thing as soon as they arrive here, cosplaying tourists wearing Oxford-branded sweaters.

Perhaps the infantilisation of Oxford is part of a broader trend of 20-somethings increasingly aspiring to be more childish. A generation that prefers to work from home as it means we can watch Netflix between meetings and don't have to make small talk because we've all developed social anxiety in lockdown. A generation that needs 'adulting' guides to help us with complicated tasks like doing laundry or navigating a supermarket. A generation that just needs to get a grip, or so we are told in the press.

Or maybe what we're seeing is actually the excessive mollycoddling of university students *à la américaine*, whereby adolescents raised in an age of 'helicopter parenting' and Covid lockdowns have reached university age and found themselves unable to deal with opposing or upsetting views. Degrees are dumbed down. Trigger warnings are given for anything from Shakespeare to Harry Potter. It is not a leap too far to go from being infantilised in your college living arrangements to being patronised in your degree.

This would all make sense applied to Oxford. Describing his undergraduate years at Oxford, Balliol academic John Maier writes of his college JCR that

"many of those in power behaved with a kind of wounded officiousness that suggested they had been bullied too much at school, or perhaps not enough". Enter into this febrile mix a crushing workload and you have a recipe for an increasingly childish and self-regarding student population. The prime evidence of this are JCR meetings where the very worst stereotypes of student politics come to the fore. Funds are allocated on the basis of virtue signalling by self-important committees so pleased with themselves to be elected that they forget that the point of their roles is essentially to hand out money to students.

It is tempting to hark back to some imagined glory days in Oxford's past where students spent their evenings sipping pints instead of scrolling and discussing Tolstoy rather than Twitter. But Oxford has always been childish – then, the scouts didn't just take out your bins, they served you your port too. Might there be some benefit to this infantilisation? The university would certainly claim that scouts and college catering fosters an environment in which students can focus as much energy as possible on their academic work. After all, Albert Einstein reportedly wore the same suit everyday so that he wouldn't waste mental energy deciding what to wear. The mathematician Paul Erdős could work for 19 hours a day precisely because he never learned to cook.

It's not all doom and gloom, of course. Oxford is still full of brilliant students, willing to engage critically with their subjects and consume vast amounts of beer while doing so. But the University community would do well to remember that there is more to student life than churning out essays or winning JCR elections. There is more to life than Oxford.

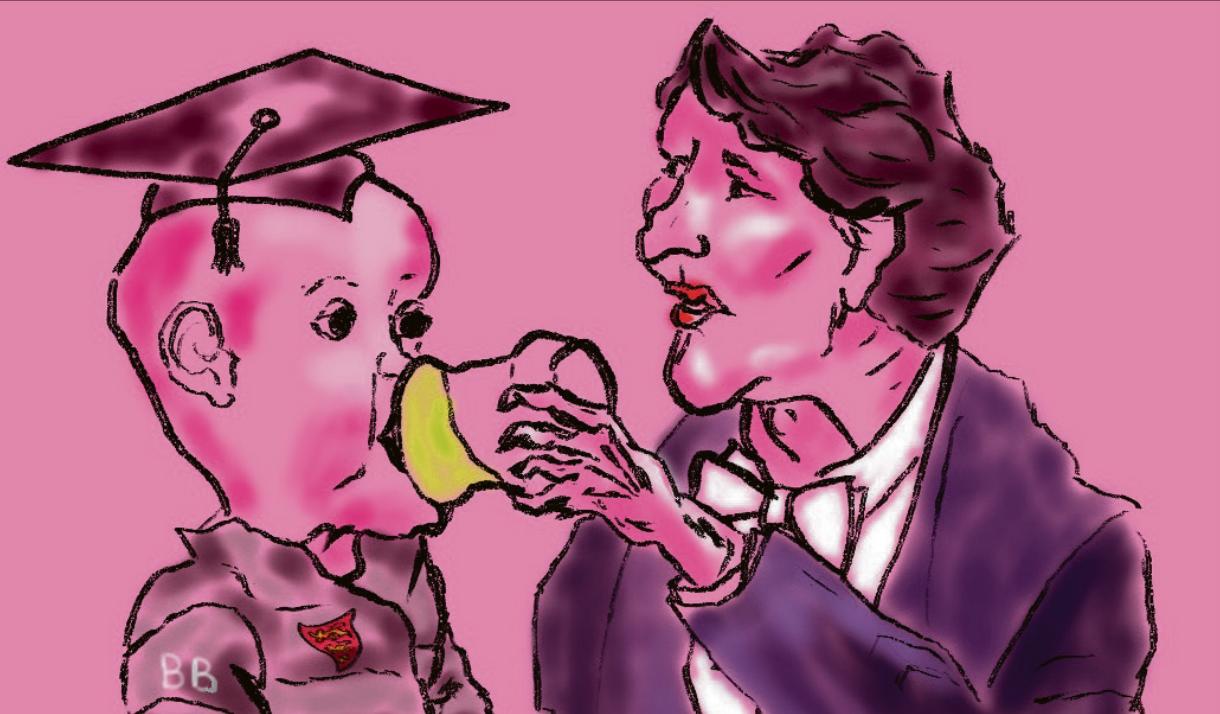


Illustration credit: Ian Coates for Cherwell.

AI applications will revive nepotism

The era of mass applications may cause the end of the accessible job

GEORGIA CAMPBELL

Over Christmas, I was chatting to a relative who works in finance. Their company, a relatively small firm, had just opened applications for its summer internship in Manchester. "We had 600 applications in less than three days, for a single internship spot", they told me. The scale was unprecedented and, most bizarrely of all, at least 200 of those candidates had applied from the same place: Texas, in the US – a hallmark of AI application en-masse.

Reports of the harms of AI in graduate recruitment are not unusual, either. According to *The Times*, UK entry-level jobs have reduced by 45% since the release of ChatGPT, and every day, thousands of bots are scraping websites and submitting applications indiscriminately. As my mind turned towards my own imminent graduation, I was disheartened to hear that even smaller companies aren't safe.

It made for a less-than festive end to our conversation about graduate recruitment. "It's a nightmare", we agreed. But then, after a shrug, my relative added: "We might just have to go back to hiring people we know."

I was taken aback by their candour. Nepotistic recruitment has never really gone away, especially in sectors like finance, but companies at least made an effort to pretend it had. Name-blind CV reviews and declarations of previous contacts at the company are interventions meant to level the playing field. To now return to an 'oldboys' recruitment method seemed like a huge step back.

But there's a bleak kind of logic to it. You, as an employer, have no way of telling which applications are genuine human effort and which aren't, and you don't have the time or human resources to even read them all anyway. Your corporation, like most, doesn't have an entire team dedicated to recruitment. It's wasted work for you and the grads that actually did put the work in and whose applications won't be given the attention they deserve.

So next year, instead of advertising the opportunity widely, you hire your next door neighbour's son, who you've known since he was six and is a stand-up lad. Or you take on a grad from your alma mater, a rigorous university which you know produces hard-workers. With any luck, your neighbour will return the favour by offering your very capable niece an internship. And so it continues. Decades of progress in widening access reversed.

The only alternative appears to be a total embrace of AI on the other side of the hiring process. The vast quantity of AI-generated applications require the processing-power only AI can provide. Recruitment becomes reduced to chatbots applying to chatbots: dead internet theory at its finest

And on top of that, companies specify that applicants shouldn't use AI in their submissions, but why would they listen? AI will almost definitely be used to judge them, and given the number of job applications needed to secure a single graduate spot, students are choosing quantity over quality. Who can blame them?

Of course, there are options besides nepotism and AI armageddon. Hiring teams could specify criteria to reduce the overall number of applications and boost those from underrepresented groups: state-school educated, BAME, those with disabilities. Such "positive action" schemes have already been implemented successfully at a number of big corporations, including NatWest, *The Guardian*, and PwC. This doesn't solve the issue for students not included within those groups.

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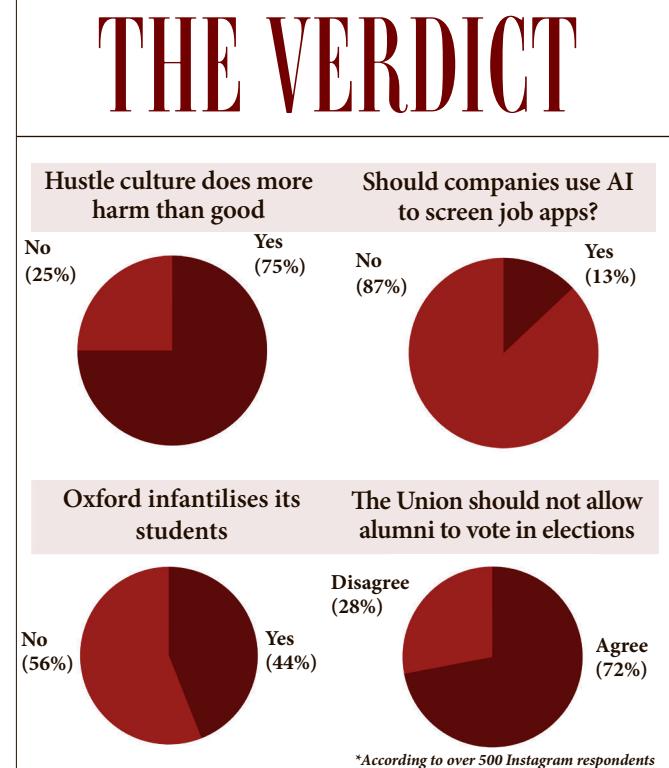
The only alternative appears to be a total embrace of AI on the other side of the hiring process.

Recruitment becomes reduced to chatbots applying to chatbots: dead internet theory at its finest

But do we really expect that most UK companies will make the effort? Their bottom line is their bottom line: they don't really care about access. Grads without connections are collateral: unlucky – try again next year. I tentatively suggested the positive action policy to my relative, who seemed to just sigh hopelessly: "AI's just wrecking the whole thing anyway."

Which leads me to my final point, we often hear people using AI as a catch-all bad guy for the UK's problems: "It's all AI's fault." But AI itself can't be at fault, AI doesn't have agency: it doesn't have consciousness (yet). For the time being, at least, humans are still behind the bots – there are people pulling the strings and making hiring policies. Just resigning to the idea that AI is taking over won't solve anything. It's more than depressing: it's disempowering, and this kind of fatalism can only result in lazy policies.

In the meantime where does that leave the grads? Is the answer really just... network more? Make nepotism work for you? It's hardly a fair or realistic conclusion. But if that is where recruitment is heading back to, there doesn't seem to be much



other choice. Oxford is privileged in the sense that its alumni networks are amongst the best in the world; many of the big societies, such as LawSoc, Oxford Women in Business, or the Union, have direct lines to some of the best in the business.

I feel uneasy suggesting such a solution, especially given the barriers to entry to those societies in the first place, and the fact that Oxford students still struggle to get grad spots in spite of the promised leg up by the university brand. To say we can do absolutely nothing to help ourselves, though, feels like giving up.

The real change can only come from employers, who must be emboldened to take meaningful action. It's not over yet, and a real solution would benefit everyone involved. Because, lest we forget, there are still humans behind the chatbots applying to chatbots: students who just want prospects. Nepotism doesn't provide that, aside from for the lucky few, and AI only complicates an already-crowded space.

Students want to put in the effort. We just need a fair chance – only human choices, not AI, can give that to us.

Is the Union's lifetime membership a perk or a problem?

The Oxford alumni assembling to vote in droves pose a question on the validity of elections by non-students

LLEUCU WILIAM

Let me take you back to when I stood in the queue on the day of the election at the Oxford Union, voting on whether George Abaronye should remain President-Elect or not. I couldn't help but notice the sea of grey-haired, geriatric, white, men (mostly), who somehow still had the right to vote at the Oxford Union. They cling to their fond memories of university days, trying to grasp onto some feeling of youth. Not only this, but I also heard an older woman, possibly late sixties, asking for confirmation for the proxy vote she was also filling in, adding to the number of voters who are not current students.

The question I pose today is: should the Oxford Union still be allowing those who have graduated from Oxford to vote? If so, what age is the cut-off point?

I don't mean to generalise, and whilst there are indeed many varying opinions held by older people, as with any group of people, the fact remains: it is statistically much more likely that older generations will vote more conservatively. We can see this clearly in YouGov polls, recording that the chance of someone having voted Conservative increases gradually with age, with 46% of 70-year-olds or older voting Conservative in the 2024 general election.

There is also an even higher chance that this is true when we remember which university we are taking into consideration. A university where the representation of privately educated, male, white students has historically outweighed the comparative representation of state-educated students, women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and more.

These figures have changed over the years, with more provisions in place to increase opportunities for more people. For example, 66% of UK students from the state sector were admitted in 2024 in comparison to the 59.2% of offers to state schools in 2016. Although representation is still an issue which needs to be

improved at our University, could the University politics now be reflecting a wider variety of opinions due to the increase in representation from various backgrounds? And can we see how opinions of the cohort at Oxford University are changing through the way we vote?

Currently, we cannot. And this is partly because those who possess lifetime membership to the Union are still allowed to use their membership to vote long after graduating, meaning that the votes are not completely made up of the current cohort of students.

In addition to this, according to the Oxford Union's website, other people who are eligible for life membership to the Oxford Union are the "spouses of individuals eligible for Life Membership". The voting group should consist of the current members of the institution. Not only to make the voting and outcomes of elections fairer, but also to reflect the opinions of the current cohort at our University. If nothing else, to keep and make for a fascinating historical record.

“

There should be a cut-off point for voting of five years after graduation

But why should we even care about Union politics? Some think Union politics is nonsense and that the Union itself is full of its own unimportant and petty drama. But, now and then, there is an incident which is so inflammatory and so major that it is enough to make waves that ripple across the whole nation, even across the whole globe.

Because of this, we need to do a better job at remembering the prowess the Union holds, as well as the fact that it is not only affecting the 'bubble' that is the University of Oxford, but



actually can spread across the entire world, causing global debate, discussions, and online abuse. So, the decisions we think have no effect actually shape the opinions of the wider public, too. I am not talking about protecting the reputation of the Union or the University here, but just about ensuring the outcome of elections represents the current opinions of the students.

Instead, there should be a cut-off point for voting of five years after graduation. They can keep their lifetime memberships for everything else, but voting should be limited to current students.

There is a notable difference between newly graduated alumni of the University and those who now have children, careers, and are 20 years our senior, or even those who are now retired, spending most of their days roaming

around their gardens. So those who do turn up to vote without a doubt have some of the most extreme opinions too. Those who have only just graduated most likely still reflect the views of the current cohort of students at the University of Oxford, still understand how the University and Union function today, and still have a clear idea of current Union and University politics.

It is only right that the results reflect the current state of the Union. The results may still not be the desired one for someone like me, with socialist, left-leaning opinions, but at least they would be more accurate.

It would be an actual insight into how the Union has changed, and whether it is still as conservative as it was. Most importantly, we could actually ensure fair elections.

Image credit: Anita Okunde with permission.

FEATURES

Bridging the gap: Oxford's fight against wealth inequality



Oxford's attempts to bridge deep student wealth inequalities through bursaries, scholarships, and hardship funds are often fragmented and underpublicised

LEO JONES

The life of a student is rarely one of luxury. Pot noodles for dinner, Vinted bids in place of new clothes, and the widely-prized Tesco Clubcard have become small but vital saving graces as the cost of living in the UK continues to soar. While today's economic strain is a national reality cutting across generations and incomes, in Oxford it operates on a different scale altogether. Routinely named the second most expensive city in the UK (the first being London), spiralling rents and rising prices magnify financial pressures for students already balancing limited incomes with an unforgiving housing market and ever-demanding workload.

The city of Oxford hosts the highest proportion of students in England and Wales. Nonetheless, not only are basic necessities increasingly expensive, but so are the most stereotypical student activities: from a night out to a simple coffee between lectures. What was once considered a rite of passage within student life is now, for many, a calculated expense, forcing students to weigh up social participation against financial survival in a city that so often feels priced beyond them.

In response to these pressures – and in an attempt to address financial inequality among students from vastly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds – Oxford offers a range of financial support mechanisms, from bursaries and hardship funds to college-specific grants. These schemes aim to cushion students against the city's escalating costs – yet questions remain over how accessible, sufficient, and well-publicised this funding

truly is, and whether it can effectively narrow the gap between rising prices and the needs of disadvantaged students.

Support often begins at a small, everyday level, from subsidised meals in hall to student-run second-hand sales. It also extends to more unique forms of assistance, including university-wide scholarships and alumni-funded endowments. Regardless of size, these support mechanisms collectively make a tangible difference to students navigating the city's high cost of living.

The price of lunch is an everyday example of this. Starting anywhere from £3.50 to £5, subsidised hall meals (offering soups, salads, and hot main courses) provide a crucial alternative to the inflated cost of groceries in the city. In Oxford, even basic staples come at a premium: a dozen eggs is estimated to cost £3.94, compared to average prices of £2.54 in Colchester, £3.55 in Brighton, and £2.60 in Leicester. Against this backdrop, college dining offers students much appreciated financial relief, softening the impact of Oxford's high living costs with the option of a warm, well-balanced meal at a low cost.

However, not only is this often only available within the limited structure of term-time provision, but food is just one of the many pervasive costs in the UK's "most unaffordable city".

On a wider scale, the financial disparities within Oxford's diverse student body has led to negative public perceptions of the University. Depicted in popular culture from Emerald Fennel's *Saltburn* (2023) right back to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Oxford's wealth gap has long been tied to its stereotype as a bastion of privilege. In recent years, however, the University has made

visible attempts to challenge this narrative.

Diversity in Oxford has certainly improved since the era of Johnson and Cameron's Bullingdon Club, which prompted the University to launch a number of schemes aimed at ensuring all students can feel at home against a backdrop of generational wealth, famous parents, and inherited networks. Yet while these initiatives signal progress, they also raise questions about how far structural inequalities can be addressed within an institution still shaped by historic privilege.

“These labels risk publicly marking students out as beneficiaries of charity rather than merit, creating an uncomfortable visibility”

The Crankstart Scholarship exemplifies this. Outlined as providing "a programme of enhanced support to UK residents from lower-income households who are studying for their first undergraduate degree", the scheme was launched in 2012 after a generous donation from Sir Michael Moritz, a Christ Church alumnus, and his wife Ms Harriet Heyman". Since then, Crankstart has undoubtedly been impactful, described by the University as "currently supporting 17% of Oxford University's full-time UK undergraduate students" with "an annual bursary of between £6150

and £5300" and access to a range of internship opportunities.

This amount, equivalent to almost 65% of a UK student's annual tuition fees, is a huge step in the right direction for closing Oxford's gaping wealth disparities. However, it does not come without its caveats.

Firstly, some students have expressed discontent at the tacit implications inherent in some of the language used to describe funding initiatives. An example of this college-bursary options, like at St Cross College, where donations for a 'Student Hardship Fund' are being actively encouraged. The central University avoids using the term 'hardship fund' preferring the terminology 'financial assistance'.

For some recipients, these labels risk publicly marking students out as beneficiaries of charity rather than merit, creating an uncomfortable visibility within an institution already acutely aware of class distinction. This is a common trope throughout much of Oxford's support for disadvantaged students, with notable parallels to the impacts of placing individuals on mandatory programmes, like Opportunity Oxford.

Such unease reflects a broader tension within access initiatives at Oxford: while financial support may alleviate material pressures, the cultural framing of such schemes can inadvertently entrench stigma. Oxford's names for these schemes also contrasts with the more general framing of support grants at many other universities which place less of an emphasis on charity – such as the University of Sussex's 'Sussex Bursary' and Cardiff University's 'Cardiff University Bursary', both for students with a household income of less than



£35,000.

Chloe Pomfret, President of Class Act, described the consequences of this to *Cherwell*: not only can “it be embarrassing to ask for financial support, particularly when you are raised in a family where talking about finances and asking for help can be a huge taboo”, but many “can feel like they’re not ‘deserving’ of this financial support, because the way these funds are named make you worry others need support more”.

“ Scholarships grounded in fixed eligibility criteria and externally funded charitable structures can struggle to respond to evolving student needs

Pomfret expressed appreciation for Oxford’s overall generosity, describing “for the first time in my life, finances weren’t my primary concern as it funded my rent and food”. However, she also pointed out the importance of support for “students who appear financially able to support themselves on paper, but in reality, are ineligible for Crankstart and other generous bursaries”.

Indeed, the eligibility criteria for many schemes tend to rely on broad socioeconomic indicators that cannot fully capture the complexity of disadvantage. Students whose circumstances fall outside prescribed thresholds – such as those from families with fluctuating incomes, precarious employment, or non-traditional forms of hardship – may find themselves excluded despite facing comparable financial and cultural barriers. This reliance on generalisation risks reducing lived experience to administrative categories, thereby undermining the very inclusivity these initiatives seek to promote.

The Crankstart Scholarship, for example, is automatically available to students whose household income is less than £42,875. However, this framework assumes that “household income” is a stable, transparent, and meaningful measure of a student’s lived financial reality. In practice, many students may receive little or inconsistent support from their families, rendering household income an imprecise indicator of need.

Moreover, the model fails to account for the sudden and often destabilising changes in circumstances that can happen at any point during a university career, such as parental job loss, illness, bereavement, or shifts in caring responsibilities. By relying on static thresholds assessed at the point of entry, the scheme risks overlooking students whose financial vulnerability emerges or intensifies after admission, thereby limiting its capacity to respond to the dynamic nature of student hardship.

These limitations are further illuminated at the college level, where financial support mechanisms are often narrower in scope and more symbolically charged. Scholarships grounded in fixed eligibility criteria and externally funded charitable structures can struggle to respond to evolving student needs. Concerns around opaque funding sources, limited transparency, and external political influence have shifted attention away from students’ lived experiences. As a result, financial aid does not only risk becoming insufficiently flexible, but also entangled in political and symbolic debates that restrict its capacity to address the dynamic realities of student vulnerability in Oxford.

To escape this politicisation, one should perhaps look beyond the city. Across the country, charities exist to support individual students with their higher education endeavours. On a local level, many of these organisations function to assist families, schools, and community-run projects, while also giving out grants and one-off payments to students applying for top universities.

One such organisation is The Magdalen and Lasher Charity, which operates in Hastings. Founded in the thirteenth century but now concerned with “the prevention and relief of poverty... among persons living in or near the Borough of Hastings”, the Charity also supports low-income students attending high-ranking universities like Oxford and Cambridge. Residents of Hastings who attend these institutions may be awarded a sum of up to £250 per academic year during the course of their degree, making a meaningful difference to those struggling with the financial burden of studying in an expensive city.

However, in order to access this support, students have to make a formal application, which does somewhat reduce accessibility. Like many Oxford grants, charities like Magdalen and Lasher are often underpublicized, reliant on referral from social services and schools to reach beneficiaries. In addition, the requirement to be “in need, hardship, or distress” can be ambiguous, and may discourage many prospective applicants who do not feel they fit this description. But each of these charities does have money to give; although time-consuming and

often hard to locate, they are certainly a significant funding alternative that makes a huge difference to student lives.

The same can be said inside Oxford, as once again a lack of publicity leads to available funds not being utilised. Lincoln College’s Student Financial Support Grant is an example of this, described by one second-year student as “very much an under-utilised pot of money”, adding: “College has the money, but could do a lot more in terms of advertising it.” They told *Cherwell* that the grant paid for a new laptop after a two-week processing period, noting that “the up-to two week wait can be a little bit difficult for students needing urgent funds, but otherwise Lincoln is very generous”.

Cases like this underline a recurring issue across Oxford: financial support may exist in theory, but without visibility, speed, and clarity, it risks arriving too late or not at all. For students navigating sudden hardship – like a broken laptop, an unexpected rent increase, or a loss of family income – timing can be extremely decisive, particularly given Oxford’s restrictions on paid employment during term time, which limit students’ ability to respond to financial shocks through part-time work.

One attempt to address this gap is the Reuben Scholarship, a university-wide scheme designed to support students from households with lower incomes throughout their degree. Unlike many college-specific funds or externally affiliated awards, the Reuben Scholarship is centrally administered and framed explicitly as sustained financial support rather than short-term crisis intervention. It is also processed by department rather than requiring applicants to apply directly through Reuben College, a key distinction from many other funding options at Oxford, whether centralised or college-based.

This centralisation is significant because it mitigates the inequities created by the college-by-college funding model, under which levels of financial support vary widely depending on a college’s historical wealth and endowment. The Reuben Scholarship therefore represents a partial corrective to structural inequalities embedded within the collegiate system, although it does not eliminate the broader issue of unevenly distributed financial security across colleges.

While certainly levelling the playing field, still the familiar tensions remain. There is little publicity of the Reuben Scholarship, and like many access initiatives, eligibility is still tied to income-based thresholds that struggle to capture the full complexity of students’ lived realities. While its scale and centralisation mark a shift towards a more coherent university response slightly different to Crankstart and college funding, it nevertheless operates within the same structural constraints that shape Oxford’s broader approach to student support.

Taken together, Oxford’s many bursaries, scholarships, hardship funds, and charitable grants reveal a system rooted in good intentions but fragmented in execution. Financial assistance

is often generous, yet inconsistently publicised. This, alongside frequently slow or inflexible implementation, makes funding options impactful, but symbolically loaded in ways that can reproduce stigma rather than dismantle it.

As the national cost of living continues to rise and student hardship becomes ever more dynamic, the challenge for Oxford is not simply to provide support, but to ensure it is visible, adaptable, and tuned into the realities of student life not just at the point of entry, but throughout their time at the University.

“ Oxford’s many bursaries, scholarships, hardship funds, and charitable grants reveal a system rooted in good intentions but fragmented in execution

When approached for comment, the University told *Cherwell*: “Ensuring that financial background is not a barrier to an Oxford education is a long-standing and central commitment of the University. Each year, Oxford invests more than £10 million in undergraduate bursary support through our Approved Access and Participation Plan with the Office for Students. Our undergraduate bursary support is among the most generous in the UK and rises annually in line with inflation, providing sustained, non-repayable help with living costs throughout a student’s time here.”

“We have strengthened this support in recent years. From 2023 entry, we increased the eligibility threshold for the Crankstart Scholarship from £27,500 to £32,500 and raised the upper household-income threshold for Oxford bursaries from £42,875 to £50,000 to extend the support available to more students. In 2024–25, around one in four UK full-time undergraduates received a non-repayable bursary of up to £5,970. In 2025–26, this rose to £6,270. Home students are reassessed annually for bursaries to take account of any change of circumstances and ensure support remains appropriate.

“This core bursary provision is complemented by targeted additional support, including the Oxford Travel Supplement for bursary holders living more than 80 miles from Oxford, and dedicated financial assistance for students facing particular challenges, such as care-experienced and estranged students. Taken together, these measures reflect Oxford’s determination to remove financial barriers and support students during their time here.”

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Image credits: Chloe Pomfret, with permission.



Remembering Jaipal Singh Munda, an Adivasi pioneer

Hemant Soren, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, visited St John's College to pay tribute to his ancestor, Jaipal Singh Munda, a seminal figure in advocating for the rights of Adivasis after graduating from Oxford



SOFIA MOLLONA

Chief Minister Hemant Soren, on an official state visit, was welcomed at All Souls College on Friday 23rd January. The event was organised by Professor Alpa Shah, an anthropologist and fellow of the College, whose fieldwork in Jharkhand, during which she lived among Adivasi communities, spans over 20 years. After a formal welcome in Nagpuri, the Chief Minister paid tribute to Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the former President of India, who was a philosopher and fellow of All Souls. Following this, the delegation was received in the President's lodgings at St John's College, where an exhibition of archives relating to Jaipal Singh Munda, an Adivasi who matriculated at the College in 1922 to read Politics, Philosophy, and Economics, had been laid out.

Addressing the President of St John's College, Dame Sue Black, and a room full of scholars, the Chief Minister said he was impressed to see these records preserved, which give insight into the incredible life of Jaipal Singh Munda. The collection contains several photographs and documents relating to his student life at the College. He stated that it would be a pleasure to co-host a joint archive with the government of Jharkhand and St John's College to continue preserving the legacy of Adivasi scholarship.

The evening ended at the Blavatnik School of Government, with the Chief Minister in conversation with Professor Alpa Shah and Professor Maya Tudor, examining how Jharkhand, an indigenous-majority state, but also a mineral-rich one, was looking to the future. The Chief Minister's vision for 2050 revolves around shifting from an extraction-based economy, centred on removing and exporting natural resources from the land, to an inclusive one. He was asked tough questions about how he would ensure that mining was not colonised by outsiders and did not dispossess, exploit, and further impoverish Adivasis, as it had in the past. In his responses he recognised the importance of these questions, which went to the heart of the values that Jaipal Singh Munda fought for.

Jaipal Singh Munda was born in 1903 in the small village of Takra. He arrived in England in 1918 under the patronage of Canon William Cosgrove. Arriving at Oxford in 1922, he described himself as the "only Asiatic" there, as Asians were then referred to. Non-European students were both hyper-visible and socially marginalised within elite academic institutions. As an Adivasi, historically positioned outside India's caste hierarchy, Jaipal Singh was doubly marginalised even among other Indians.

Yet the archives reveal how Jaipal Singh's brilliance extended to many aspects of college life.

A photo from 1925 shows the St John's College Hockey Team, with Jaipal Singh smiling in the centre as their captain. That same year, he earned a Blue and became president of St John's College Debating Society in October. Through these societies, Jaipal Singh was able to connect with and establish himself among the intellectual elites of Britain. His prowess as a sportsman should not go unnoticed, as it took him to the Amsterdam Olympic Games in 1928, where he captained the Indian Hockey Team that won a gold medal. From early on, then, Jaipal Singh displayed his talents as a naturally skilled leader. In the collection at St John's, you can see an entry in the Debating Society's Minute Book, signed by him as president on the 16th November 1925. Under his leadership, the society debated issues such as 'This House deplores the existing public school system', 'This University stands in urgent need of reform', and 'That the spirit of nationalism is incompatible with world peace', questions still very much pertinent today.

The archives reveal how Jaipal Singh's brilliance extended to many aspects of his college life

The archives at St John's show the life of a talented man, who deserves more recognition than he has received, both internationally and nationally. However, his story goes beyond that of a man defying all financial and societal odds to thrive in one of the most traditional institutions in the world. Professor Shah, who has worked on the legacy of Jaipal Singh Munda, says his contribution as a statesman is equally exceptional; he spent his career striving for the rights and recognition of some of the most marginalised communities in the world.

After a few years in the British Colonial Service, during which he moved among British and Indian elites, Jaipal Singh became aware in 1938 of an Adivasi agitation in what is now the state of Jharkhand. Adivasis were resisting the seizure of their land and forests by powerful higher-caste outsiders, but their concerns were ignored not being listened to by the state. At this moment, Jaipal Singh Munda resolved to fight for his people's future. After returning home, he led the Adivasi Mahasabha party (the great Adivasi assembly),

and in 1946 was sent to the Constituent Assembly, an elected body tasked with drafting

India's Constitution. Meanwhile, he also set up a weekly bulletin, the Adivasi Sakam, which brought greater awareness to the ongoing oppression that Adivasis faced. When speaking for the first time at the Constituent Assembly, he declared that he was proud to be a 'jungli' – a pejorative term used in India to disparage Adivasis. In one of his most powerful speeches to the Assembly, he stated: "You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them. They are the most democratic people on earth."

His life was dedicated to recognising Adivasi rights and their claim to the land, Shah notes in an essay on Jaipal Singh Munda for the Indian magazine, *Outlook*. He championed better working conditions; Adivasis were often forced to travel long distances to work low-income jobs within large corporations. Often, these corporations would displace communities, seeking the valuable mineral resources which were contained within the land. He also defended Adivasi cultural practices and advocated for their egalitarian social organisation. Shah tells me her own research shows how in Adivasi communities, leaders can be randomly selected and rotated, so that no single family could consolidate enduring power or authority. She also noted that Adivasi marriages were brought about by the free choice of both partners, unlike other places in India. "Gender roles were grounded in mutual respect, reflecting a broader culture of dignity", she observed. Indeed, Jaipal Singh himself complained about the lack of women representatives within the Constituent Assembly.

In doing so, he challenged the prevailing 'jungli' conception of Adivasis as backwards and primitive. Drawing on the rhetorical skills he had honed at Oxford, Jaipal Singh's position at the Constituent Assembly was crucial in challenging prejudices and served as a representative voice for those most marginalised. He recognised that the problems of inequality for Adivasis came, not only from the legacy of British colonial rule, but from within India's class and caste hierarchies. He was the primary force behind the movement towards a separate Adivasi state which would secure both their rights and land ownership. However, the state of Jharkhand was only formed in 2000, 30 years after Jaipal Singh died, amidst continued patterns of dispossession and alienation of Adivasis.

Honouring Jaipal Singh Munda's legacy is more crucial now than ever, as the state determines its developmental priorities. Even though Adivasis live on some of the greatest mineral reserves in the world, they remain some of the poorest in India. Despite Jaipal Singh's work, Jharkhand's founding was delayed by Indian political leaders who continually resisted the idea of an Adivasi self-governing territory. Another problem was that India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s allowed wealthy mining companies to target the land upon which Adivasi livelihoods were built. Since 2006, Adivasi lands have become a warzone after the Indian state deployed thousands of troops to surround their forests. Beneath the land were rich minerals, which both the state and international corporations wanted to extract. Despite legal protections, the state army entered on the pretext that they were handling groups of banned left-wing armed guerrillas, Naxalites, who also lived in the forests. Shah, who researched the spread of the insurgency and counterinsurgency, shows in her book *Nightmarch* that the result was the widespread dispossession, arrest, and killing of innocent Adivasis. Jaipal Singh Munda's work in the Constituent Assembly

informs questions about Adivasi agency and autonomy today. In the 'Jharkhand Vision 2050' brochure, the Chief Minister states his aspiration to transform Jharkhand into a "high-value, upper-middle-income state" with an economy driven by "productivity and value creation". During this transition, the founding principle of Adivasi sovereignty must remain a crucial aspect of political discussions going forward.

Dr Regina Hansda, an Adivasi who is a Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, says that the current moment marks a turning point for the interests of Adivasi sovereignty. She stresses the importance of protecting the *jal* (waters and rivers), *jungle* (forests), and *zameen* (land) against state and corporate interests: "Jaipal Singh Munda should be seen as a classic example of how indigeneity, coloniality and modernity can be navigated in a way that our identity and sense of self is not compromised."

The story of Jaipal Singh Munda's life and career stands as a testament to the value of widening educational access for Adivasis. An initiative by the Chief Minister in 2021 saw the creation of the 'Marang Gomke' scholarship, intended to promote social equity. Each year, the scheme provides Master's scholarships at leading UK universities for students from marginalised communities in Jharkhand.

There are many more stories yet to be uncovered about those early pioneers who managed to break through and navigate Oxford's rigid institutional system

Dr. Hansda points out that in the West, mainstream conversations about India rarely include indigenous, tribal people. "Access to higher education is still a major issue for the Adivasi population and the Chief Minister's visit reopens the possibility of students, including Oxford students, to study alongside Adivasi students in future to co-learn, co-imagine and co-create a hopeful future together."

The very fact that Jaipal Singh Munda attended St John's College should encourage greater historical curiosity. There are many more stories yet to be uncovered about those early pioneers who managed to break through and navigate Oxford's rigid institutional system. While at the Blavatnik School, an Indian man in the audience related how his son had asked his Indian teacher where Jharkhand was, only to find that she was unable to answer. This instance reflects a broad lack of awareness even within India that makes curiosity about Adivasi lives all the more important to bring to the centre. These communities deserve attention, not only because ongoing injustices persist, but, as Jaipal Singh emphasised, there is so much to learn from their livelihoods – politically, socially, and culturally. Engaging with these different perspectives better equips us to understand the challenges faced by marginalised Indigenous communities all around the world.

Images credits: Alpa Shah (top left) and Sofia Mollona (bottom right), with permission.



Cherwell

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John Evelyn

The rules of our dear society seem to be so finicky that even President Prada is struggling to grasp them. Despite having firm examples of how to lawfare a debate so hard the speakers leave from the terms before, her own attempt ended up in flames, much like a vodka-stained copy of *Cherwell* last time her squad did it. Her attempt to force a SAM, to shunter HackGPT onto committee, felt more like a David, or a Jack. This is to say that the SAM was never declared, leaving HackGPT rambling in front of a cringing chamber – brilliant PR for the campaign, I hear.

HackGPT's recent binning of John Minor in favour of the Leiden Lafanga as her secretary candidate has drawn heads. It appears that HackGPT is banking on votes coming from teenagers in Delhi who have not once stepped foot in Oxford. Seemingly, zero is still a higher PV than what John Minor can pull. Zero is also higher than minus one – HackGPT's number of standing candidates since I last reported, as MBAffable has left to join Resignation Queen as a promising secretary.

Maybe this represents a sea change for Resignation Queen – her frequent mogging of Prince Hamlet in Thirst indicates as much. Still, Prince Hamlet has been trying his best to keep his Noah's



Ark of a slate on top of a hack-filled ocean. He appeared on an OxStooge broadcast totally not to promote his campaign, where he totally didn't try to dunk on President Prada. The broadcast was then pulled, totally not because he went a little too close to a disreputable tribe. The "very, very nice school" mentioned was clearly not nice enough to include media training.

Tribland has almost wrapped up for another term, and the Deputy Ambassador was seen this week strutting down Frewin Court punching the air in celebration, with six cases unanswered for, one presidency in the bag, and her opponents banned from running again.

Editorial



Stanley Smith
Editor-in-Chief
Hilary

If you have nothing positive to say, don't say anything at all." This was one of my parents' favourite mantras when I was growing up. As it pertains to managing three bickering boys, or later three mopey adolescents, it's pretty sound advice. But, as it applies to editing a student paper, it's slightly more complicated.

So far this Hilary term, *Cherwell* hasn't had much positive to say. Last edition, we revealed that the Oxford University's senior Catholic chaplain had to step down after a sexual abuse allegation was made against him. In this edition, we reported that the University made no effort to restrict the access to the campus of an academic investigated for rape.

It's times like these that I can't help feeling that to be an editor of *Cherwell* is to be a constant bringer of bad news, a harbinger of institutional malpractice. Occasionally, I want to take my parents' advice (albeit wildly out of its original context) and pull the wool over my eyes; swearing from here on out to only write fluffy stories that will make a stressed out student smile.

But this, of course, would be a dereliction of duty. As unpleasant as they are, indeed because of that very unpleasantness, these pieces need to be published. We work in

the hope that it is only through publishing the bad news – all the stink that lurks at this university underneath a Febreze of academic excellence – that we might later get to publish good news. That by bringing wrong-doing to light, we may hope to soon report on justice being done.

Nor is it all doom and gloom. These ramblings are clearly the product of a few weeks immersed in *Cherwell*'s investigative reporting. If you look elsewhere in this paper, however, you will find stories of the endless energy of Oxford students who are seeking to make a positive change.

But for now it seems our headlines will continue to be dominated by difficult, often depressing stories. I cling to the naive hope that by saying the negative, by splashing it across our front page and delivering it to every JCR (and occasionally a Catholic chaplaincy), we can play a small part in pushing for a university that cares more about its people than its prestige. Until that day comes, we'll have to keep muckraking.



Mercedes Haas
News Deputy Editor

The first sentence does far more work than we like to admit. Before we decide to trust a piece of writing, before we even know what it is trying to say, we are already

ARCHIVES

Something wicked
this way comes

1960

Double, double, toil, and (financial) trouble. A warm May in Oxford couldn't be further from stormy Dunsinane. But treachery, suspicion, and the theft of £60 visited the Oxford Stage Company all the same. This was front page news, which makes a little more sense knowing that £60 in 1960 would be worth £1200 today.

The heist was simple. After performances of *Macbeth* in Birmingham and Reading, the business manager deposited the takings in his Keble room. Showing as much originality as a teenager hiding a vibrator, he concealed the money under his clothes in a drawer. Hours later when he returned, it was gone.

Suspicion ran rampant. Nothing else had been stolen. According to the producer "only someone connected with the play could have known that it was there", which certainly aren't the words of a man constructing a red string board.

The cast and the technical team were interviewed by the police. Each cast member had contributed £25 to the production, worth £500 today. Had one regretted their investment? Everyone involved in the production was fingerprinted as part of the investigation. Washing their hands afterwards, were they resisting the temptation to burst into "out, damned spot"?

Unlike *Macbeth*, the ending here is thoroughly ambiguous. The police had no developments to report, and the producer held no hope of recovering the money. He still wanted to take the play on tour in Germany over the long vacation, but had cancelled plans to put it on in Oxford. Of course, that was for strictly "artistic, not financial reasons".

listening for something quieter and more decisive. We want to sense whether there is a human presence on the other side of the page, choosing its words intuitively. Don't judge a book by its cover, but by all means, judge it by its first sentence.

That instinct explains the endurance of certain opening lines. "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself", "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte", "April is the cruellest month". Studying literature, one might reasonably expect these to be my favourite beginnings. They are not. The opening line that has stayed with me the most belongs to Parmy Olson's *Supremacy*: "After picking up this book and reading the first few words, you might be wondering if a human wrote them. That's OK. I'm not offended." It lands with unnerving precision. Not just because it is clever, but because it articulates a suspicion that now shadows nearly everything we read.

VICE has estimated that roughly half of online news content is already produced by artificial intelligence. Whether the number is exact is beside the point. Writing no longer guarantees a writer. For a time, I lost faith in journalism. Reading widely, I struggled to recognise the labour behind what is published. Working at *Cherwell* made that cynicism harder to hold onto. These articles aren't produced, they're worked on. Drafted, cut back, re-read, proofed, passed between hands. Even when the news itself is bleak, this week's headline included, the commitment remains palpable. In an age of frictionless text, labour has become legible again. Sometimes the most persuasive thing a sentence can do is show how much care it has cost.

PROFILES

‘You need to write. Write and write and write. Do your trade’

Tom McTague on his career in journalism



HASSAN AKRAM and HATTIE SIMPSON

Tom McTague is among the few mainstream British journalists who see politics through the lens of history and world affairs rather than just the Westminster lobby. He is best known for his writing on Brexit, work that sits somewhere between reporting and historical explanation. As Editor-in-Chief of the *New Statesman* and author of *Between the Waves*, he appears less interested in sudden moments, more in the longer arguments and themes that run through them. This instinct carries into the interview itself. We are speaking in his office at the *New Statesman* the day after the staff Christmas party, and it looks out over a rather quiet newsroom – the usual noise replaced by just a couple of journalists working on articles. The conversation begins with a focus on contemporary political figures, specifically those with whom he sympathises. He begins by clarifying what we mean by that: political agreement, personal understanding, or something else entirely?

He starts with Bridget Phillipson. They share a North East background; his parents were Labour

activists there, and he recognises the culture of the party she comes from – its assumptions, its internal logic. There are parallels in their lives too: siblings of a similar age, children, the move South-East. “There are a lot of things there that I understand and sympathise with”, he says.

Andy Burnham is who he follows up with. McTague profiled him for the *New Statesman* back in September, but the mention appears more personal than professional. Burnham’s sense of himself as a “normal lad” from the North West, combined with a career spent in Westminster, feels familiar. McTague talks about the tension of moving south and ending up in a world that feels so distant from where you started. “He obviously has that ambition to go on. I often find with Andy that I know so many people like him – friends, my brother, some of my brother’s friends in particular – who are just like Andy Burnham. Everything about him, I immediately recognise and understand.” Burnham, he suggests, is “quite representative of a lot of provincial English people who then go to Oxford [Burnham studied at Cambridge] or move south”. He’s recognisable.

Keir Starmer is the next to be named, and he

fits the same pattern. McTague has known him for years and describes him as similarly pulled between his upbringing and the office he now holds. “I have sympathy for Keir Starmer”, he says. “I got to know him over the years, and I think I can understand who he is as well – he’s pulled in a very similar way to Andy Burnham, between the sense of who he was growing up, his parents, and what he actually is now that he’s Prime Minister.” What links these three, almost starkly different figures, is by no means ideology, but experience: the strain of navigating politics whilst remaining attached to a past that doesn’t entirely fit.

I have sympathy for Keir Starmer

This attention to background and detail also runs through *Between the Waves*, McTague’s book on Brexit and British euroscepticism. Asked why he wrote it, his answer begins – perhaps unsurprisingly – with journalism. He thought he had reached the high point of his career when he became political editor of *The Independent on Sunday*. Then the paper

folded. *Politico* came next, along with new exposure to American journalism, which he describes as “fantastic”, and to Brexit at its most technical and politically fraught. “I had to immerse myself in Brexit, in my niche”, he says.

Reporting on Brexit highlighted a recurring problem. In Brussels, attempting to understand Eurosceptic arguments could mark you out as a Brexiteer; in London, the same writing might be read as reflexively pro-European. The assumptions attached to the work changed depending on who was reading it. McTague is clear about his intention in navigating this terrain: “I’ve always tried to write pieces that are, in some senses, not polemical. They’re an attempt to take things seriously and be balanced and intellectually curious.” The contradiction – and the effort required to sustain that position – appears to have stuck with him.

The conceptual starting point for the book came from American history. Reading Rick Perlstein’s *Before the Storm*, McTague was struck by just how wrong contemporary judgments had been. Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential defeat was meant to demonstrate the electoral limits of ideological

conservatism. Instead, it marked the beginning of a political trajectory that would eventually reshape American politics. "That's the story of the conservative revolution – how the conventional wisdom was all wrong, and how the losers of history had kind of ended up winning." The parallel, he says, was immediately obvious: "I thought, wow – that is the story of the Eurosceptics." The supposed losers didn't disappear; they regrouped and won.

For decades, British euroscepticism lost arguments, votes, and internal party battles. Then, in rapid succession, it secured a referendum, won it, and reshaped the political landscape that followed. "They secured victory after victory, having spent decades losing", McTague says. "There are all these moments in history where you could say it looks impossible that this would happen." What fascinated him wasn't Brexit as a rupture moment, but its part in a longer story. "I was intrigued by how history moves in a different way, actually, than politics suggests it does." Political ideas persist despite repeated failure.

That sense of continuity matters to him. If *Between the Waves* had an argument, it's not that Brexit was inevitable, but that political ideas endure far longer than their apparent defeats. Losing arguments, elections, or referendums doesn't dissolve a worldview; it often consolidates it. This belief shapes not only his historical writing but his approach to contemporary politics: he's wary of treating any political moment as final, decisive, or closed.

Finding a starting point, therefore, was difficult. He considered beginning in 1990, with "Margaret Thatcher in Chequers with her husband, family, friends on New Year's Eve – this woman who had been bending history to her will suddenly finds that history is running past her and she's no longer in control". Thatcher, he notes, was trying and failing to stop the German reunification, to resist the European Exchange Rate Mechanism – to halt forces already in motion. "She couldn't stop anything. And then she was going to lose power." But that moment required her 1988 Bruges speech, which required the 1975 EEC referendum, which required Enoch Powell. Each start point demanded its own history.

"This woman who had been bending history to her will suddenly finds that history is running past her and she's no longer in control"

Eventually, McTague arrived in Algiers in 1943. Reading Jean Monnet's biography revealed an unlikely convergence: Monnet drawing up ideas for European integration; Charles de Gaulle thinking about France's future; Harold Macmillan representing British interests; Enoch Powell also in the city. For a while, McTague admits, he became distracted by an assassination that occurred at the book's opening. "I've got to calm myself down", he recalls telling himself. "This is a story about Brexit, not about Admirals being assassinated." The story reminds us both somewhat of our own history essays and the many, endlessly tempting rabbit holes we have to resist falling into.

Powell and de Gaulle emerge as the most revealing pairing. They share certain instincts - a very romantic patriotism, a scepticism towards American power, sympathy for an alliance with Russia regardless of its Communism, and an opposition to the kind of multinational citizenship which could create mass immigration to Europe, whether from the Commonwealth or French Algeria – but differ in their conclusions. De Gaulle saw Europe as a route to restore French influence; Powell wanted Britain disengaged entirely, uninterested in replacing the Empire with another form of power. McTague is

clear about the limits of Powell's worldview: "Powell is full of complete contradictions. He creates myths, and then builds what he thinks are perfect rational buildings on top of them – but the foundations are mythological."

Asked what he might write next, McTague is cautious. Still, there are stories he hasn't quite let go of. That assassination remains tempting, as does the Allied invasion of North Africa during the Second World War – a period he describes as "completely wild". As he lists off submarines, clandestine meetings, shifting loyalties, and improvised diplomacy, it's hard not to agree.

“

In Brussels, attempting to understand Eurosceptic arguments could mark you out as a Brexiteer; in London, the same writing might be read as reflexively pro-European

Asked what he's most proud of, his answer is immediate. "It's the book. I'm incredibly proud to be editor of the *New Statesman* as well. Those two things – they're good things to have." What he hopes for the book's future is less specific. He talks instead about "the sense of history not ending – not being predictable, being kind of chaotic", and the danger of assuming that politics is moving in any fixed direction. "We might think now that history is destined to move in a certain way", he says. "And it's evidently not."

He mentions other work he's particularly proud of: "A piece for *The Atlantic*, travelling around Britain to capture the sense of the British state declining, and Britain declining." There are others too – profiles of Starmer and Boris Johnson – though he still regrets one edit. "There was a line I wish I'd fought harder for", he says, speaking about the Johnson article. "The chaos is the point. The chaos is performative and it's real – he performs it on purpose."

That experience feeds through into his advice: "You should be particular and proud about how you write. You should be pedantic and thorough. But you shouldn't see editing as a battle." Good editors, he insists, make your work better: "You shouldn't be so proud that you think you know best – usually the editors will improve your work. It's never infallible".

He turns to his admiration for American journalism. McTague contrasts a British political press preoccupied with not missing "the line" with what he experienced in the United States, where papers place greater value on long-form reporting. The difference, he suggests, isn't one of talent but of structure: time, access, and the willingness to let reporting develop without a predetermined conclusion.

"When American journalism is at its best, the access they demand – the on-the-record quotes – is superb", he says. He references a now-hugely famous *Vanity Fair* feature on Trump's inner circle, which was built on almost a year's worth of interviews. "There isn't a British equivalent – no one is spending twelve months talking to Morgan McSweeney, on the record, for ten thousand words. That's something we should aspire to do."

Finally, when asked about advice more broadly, journalism and life blur together. "They've melded into one", he says. The answer itself is simple: "You need to write. Write and write and write. Do your trade." Journalism, for McTague, comes down to curiosity – finding out things other people don't know and writing them down clearly. It's a modest definition, but one that fits his work: an attention to what outlasts the news cycle.

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OXFORD SPOTLIGHT



Anneliese Dodds MP spoke to Isaac Gavaghan about higher education, local politics, and damehood

Dodds spoke to *Cherwell* a few days after appearing in the New Year's Honours list. Receiving her damehood, she said, left her feeling "really delighted and very surprised". What stood out to her most was not the damehood itself, but rather being recognised alongside "so many incredible people" from Oxford, something which she describes as "very humbling".

Appropriately for an MP representing Oxford, Dodds' career has bridged academia and politics. Before her election as an MP in 2017, she worked as a university lecturer, researching social policy and higher education. This background clearly shapes her view of universities – she sees them not simply as engines of economic growth, but as cultural institutions. As Minister for International Development, Dodds travelled widely, and she warmly recalls memories of repeatedly encountering people whose lives had intersected with British higher education: "Just about everywhere that I went I would find somebody with a link to a UK university."

Internationalism is central to Dodds' politics and international students feature prominently in her defence of the current UK higher education system. Dodds observes that there has been a shift away from the Commonwealth towards countries like China, but frames this as a positive development. She pays tribute to "international students [who] support the educational experience of domestic students". With many UK universities now "cross-subsidised" by overseas fees, she suggests this income helps keep "opportunities open to people" who might otherwise be excluded from higher education altogether.

Dodds' view of the University of Oxford itself is more complex. She's clear that she is "so proud" of the "world changing" discoveries that are made at the University. Yet she thinks that the benefits of these discoveries fail to reach the city that hosts them: "Local people aren't able to see that benefit as much as I would hope... One of the things I'm really passionate about is trying to make sure that there is more of a connection, and that the opportunities associated with research and science are more open to local people."

To me, this seems unfair to the University. As well as being economically central to Oxford, there are many examples of the outreach initiatives that the University undertakes in order to benefit young people in Oxford. In 2014 the Oxford Learning Centre opened in Blackbird Leys, a part of Dodds' Oxford East constituency. The Centre helps to educate

students from age 7 to 18 and in the last decade has supported 5,000 local children. Personally, I grew up in Oxford, and I remember my own interest in academic study being kindled at primary school by the free after-school science club run by volunteer PhD students. The utter joy of making ice cream using frozen nitrogen convinced me that science was something fun and interesting, although I eventually chose to study history.

From universities, our conversation moves to local politics. I begin by asking whether the government's high taxation of pubs would continue. Dodds said that the tax burden on pubs was "something that is being looked at". Later the same day, the government announced its latest U-turn, reducing tax rates on pubs.

On wider ideological questions, Dodds is resistant to claims that the Starmer government had moved too far to the right. Indeed, she pushes back at my description of her as a "soft-left politician". She says she has "never been a big fan of labels". Instead, Dodds cites the workers' rights legislation the Labour government has passed. She sticks closely to the Labour Party line that Starmer's government should be judged "not just on what they say but on what they do".

Trying to move her away from the party line, I move onto tackling climate change at a local level, an issue that has sharply divided Oxford over the past few years. Dodds is unequivocal in her criticism of recent measures, particularly the congestion charge. She argues that it had no mandate from the electorate, since it did not appear in the election leaflets of the Liberal Democrat councillors behind the scheme. For her, the most important thing is balancing the climate crisis with local needs, ensuring fairness throughout. She attacked the way in which the congestion charge was introduced, as well as how its profits are used to make the Park and Ride service free – benefiting those commuting from rural Oxfordshire at the expense of those in the city, who the congestion charge affects the most.

For Dodds, it all comes back to fairness. For her, it's the principle that must anchor any attempt to reconcile climate policy with everyday life, but is also how she frames her broader political aim to unite the people of Oxford East. On the need to tackle climate change, Dodds insists on consensus, "we are all on the same page".

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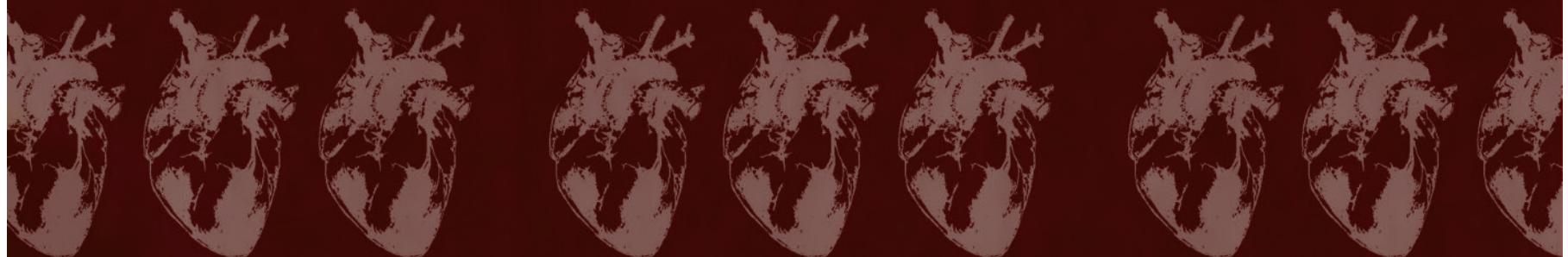
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CULTURE

A breakdown in technicolour: 'Company' in review

Fennec Fox Productions' energetic adaptation of the classic Broadway musical at the Oxford Playhouse

BEATRIX ARNOLD



With flashing lights and a shower of confetti, Fennec Fox Productions' *Company* bursts onto the Playhouse stage to deliver its exuberant portrayal of romantic pessimism, just in time for Valentine's Day.

George Furth's classic '70s 'concept' musical, centered around the life of middle-aged New Yorker Bobby (Aaron Gelkoff), takes the audience through a series of vignettes, grounded by the repeated scene of Bobby's 35th birthday. With the unifying themes of marriage, relationships, and commitment threaded throughout, the play explores a range of perspectives on romantic love, focalised through Bobby's married friends.

The play is very much character-driven, and the cast do not fail to do it justice. Gelkoff's performance achieves the impossible: making me actually feel sorry for a straight, middle-aged man living in New York. In spite of the character's fundamental unlikeability, and his penchant for blurting out the wrong thing at the wrong time (how does he have so

many friends in his 30s?), his compelling charisma and witty delivery establish an easy rapport with the audience, so that they find themselves invested in each revelation about his shallow life.

The show's specificity, capturing the zeitgeist of '70s New York, means that it's difficult to ensure its continued pertinence, particularly when transposed to 21st century Oxford. The production veers away from overt modernisation, and leans into the '70s aesthetic, from marujana-smoking hippies to tracksuit-wearing dieters. Yet far from alienating the modern audience, the play's themes of frustrated connection continue to resonate, even among students, so that the production's decision to situate it within its original context ultimately emphasises the perennial nature of its concerns.

The standout performance is Rosie Sutton's Amy, delivering the iconic number 'Getting Married Today' with a manic intensity that vacillates between hilarious and alarming. The hurtling momentum of the patter song gives the impression of spiralling panic, belying her masterful breath control. Such an emotionally fraught scene was pushed to comic extremes by the zany juxtaposition of her anxiety and the serene trilling of the priest.

The live music from the orchestra, if a little too loud at times, cleverly punctuates the



action, with jaunty riffs and well-timed bursts of melody. Sondheim's score is played with brilliant vivacity; its insistent intrusions aptly reflect the suffocating aspects of social life as Bobby is surrounded on all sides by a barrage of conflicting demands on his attention.

The high-level choreography is a highlight, accompanying the songs with endlessly energetic and impressively synchronised dance routines. The fast pace and high intensity of many of the numbers, such as 'Company' or 'You Could Drive a Person Crazy', means that the slower songs drag a little. This was the case with 'Sorry-Grateful' (the 'Mister Cellophane' of the musical), which, although the singing was of a high quality, was comparatively underwhelming.

Holly Rust's set, mimicking an indoor soft play area, is perhaps a little heavy-handed in its metaphorical import, but definitely makes the show visually arresting, and contributes greatly to its physical comedy as characters enter the main stage area via a brightly-coloured slide. The pair of swings, descending from the ceiling, are an ingenious conceit, transforming seamlessly from playground swings into overhead handrails on the subway,

before being used as the vehicle by which Bobby is literally pulled back and forth by his friends. The fire exit door through which Bobby departs at the finale amid a stream of white light was a little on-the-nose, reminiscent of *The Truman Show*.

The play as a whole is characterised by a certain superficial profundity, projecting the vacuous impression of emotional, and even philosophical, depth onto the actions of a largely unexceptional man. But this is, of course, a result of Furth's script, not any failing on the part of Fennec Fox Productions, and the energy invested into the performances more than makes up for this.

The awkward niceties of social life are pushed enjoyably ad absurdum, with the music, staging, and visuals lending the drama an exaggerated, sitcom-esque aspect. As the action redoubles, smoothing the boundaries between past events and counterfactuals, it indulges in a kind of oneiric surrealism, a breakdown in technicolour. The production was a well-executed marriage of humour – physical, visual, and sonic – and cynicism, a vastly entertaining staging of this musical theatre classic.

Image credits: Marcus Ashford with permission.



Musical theatre and classic literature: A marriage of two minds?

EVE WESTENBERGER

Sometimes, great works of art emerge from surprising sources. Consider the celebrated teen rom-com *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), loosely based on Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594). While Katherine's transformation into smart-mouthed American teenager Kat Stratford may read to literary purists as a 'dumbing-down' of the original source material, the film is memorable and packs a punch with its larger-than-life characters and unlikely love story, claiming a cultural legacy of the sort similarly enjoyed by Shakespeare's play itself.

From the initial inspiration to its creation, art's journey to conception is often just as unpredictable as the artwork itself. Nowhere is this clearer than in the exuberant and diverse world of musical theatre, which seems an art form uniquely able to set almost anything to song and dance. The writing of a musical, as with the creation of all art, calls

for the spark of inspiration, for which the kindling has often been found in classic literature. Take, for example, the recent sensation of *The Great Gatsby*, based upon F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous 1925 tragic novel of the same name, which has dazzled audiences both in London and New York. What, therefore, are the ingredients for a perfect literary-to-musical adaptation? In considering two of my favourite musicals, let's chart how speech becomes script, how characters become embodied, and how emotion becomes song.

“Art's journey to conception is often just as unpredictable as the artwork itself”

I'll never forget the feeling of seeing *Les Misérables* on the West End for the first time on my twelfth birthday; before this my exposure to musicals had

consisted solely of frequently re-watching the films *The Sound of Music*, *West Side Story*, and *Annie*. The first stirring notes of 'Prologue/Look Down' were captivating, and 'One Day More' was a personal moment of musical rapture at the end of Act I.

First performed in 1985, it's become one of the most well-known and beloved musicals globally. Based on Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, it follows French peasant Jean Valjean's efforts to reinvent his life after 19 years in prison, against the backdrop of the 1832 Paris Uprising. Hugo's novel is a long, complex, and interwoven book, yet I was struck by its vivid use of characterisation. This complexity of plot, language, and syntax is why it's such great source material to translate into song. The novel's strong emotions and characterisation, when set to music, are distilled into a spectacle that not only has something to say, but the power to be emotionally moving.

The tension at the heart of *Les Mis* is Inspector Javert's fanatical obsession with hunting down

Valjean. It's this very tension that allows *Les Mis* to work so well both on the page and in song. It provides an energy that pulls the narrative onwards while building momentum within it, creating scope for character development and emotional exploration, until we reach the climactic finale. Condensing a two-thousand-page long 19th-century French novel into a three-hour musical is an impressive feat, yet the richness of Hugo's original text would offer ample inspiration to any artist.

Perhaps it's ironic that *Spring Awakening*, which I've never actually seen, is among the musicals closest to my heart. While I've only experienced the show through a grainy early-2000s YouTube clips and the Spotify recording of the original Broadway cast, its diverse range of moving songs have stayed with me ever since. Its score was influenced by rock, folk, and electronic music, giving it a sound which was different to the majority of musicals at the time.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

FASHION

Will 2026 finally kill the clean girl?

Beatrix Arnold discusses the implications of, and threats to, the clean girl aesthetic

Last weekend, I was invited to a 2016-themed party. We put on exaggerated make-up, wore clashing outfits, and played a reprehensible amount of Shawn Mendes. Judging by my Instagram feed, we're not the only ones.

Throwback photos of tie-dye, flannel tops, and skinny jeans are the visual accompaniments to what seems to be a collective sense of nostalgia as we start the new year. Through the rose-gold spectacles, 2016 represents a time before everything was overproduced, over-optimised, and relentlessly monetised – a VSCO-filtered bygone era that thrived on experimentation. Embracing cringe looks like an act of self-liberation, an escape from the hyper-curation of the digital landscape in recent years. Could this nostalgia, bolstered by concomitant trends such as Zara Larsson's polychromatic makeup, represent a cultural shift away from a fashion scene hegemonised by the pursuit of perfection? Could it, in other words, spell the death of the clean girl?

The clean girl has become ubiquitous throughout celebrity culture, magazines, and social media in recent years. Her brand prescribes a lifestyle, the impetus behind which is the curation of a kind of idealised minimalism. It's no revelation that her practised effortlessness belies its unattainable requirements. The performance of the clean girl demands a level of privilege that ultimately celebrates wealth, thinness, whiteness, and able bodies; her lifestyle is only achievable if you're already insulated financially, socially, and genetically.

The predominance of the clean girl has, of course, been challenged before. 'Brat summer' was heralded as a new era, the reincarnation of the 'messy girl' characterised by two day old mascara, tangled hair, and cigarette ash – it seemed like the clean girl was on her deathbed. But this wasn't liberation. The

pendulum swung back and the clean girl lived on, repackaged as 'demure', the corrective to the period of licensed messiness. Brat summer had exhausted its course, and to cling onto it was cringe and immature. The clean girl, by contrast, was the grown-up standard, invested with a sense of moral superiority, to which social media dictated we return to after a wild summer of temporary license.

In fashion, subcultures and their accompanying aesthetics are usually the product of a community, a unified worldview: punk was anti-establishment, goth was rooted in non-conformity, even 2016 boho-chic was inspired by the shared values of the moment. The clean girl, in contrast, has never been a subculture to belong to, but an aspirational standard. Innovation is replaced by prescription, community is supplanted by consumption. The clean girl aesthetic favours conformity, not creativity – she is inspired not by ideas, but by a shopping list. There is no shared ideology beyond the Pinterest board. Her make-up is stripped of its artistic potential, its aim becomes invisibility. Her fashion, narrowed and purged of variety, offers almost no room for interpretation, let alone expression. For the clean girl, fashion is a medium of emulation.

“The clean girl favours conformity, not creativity – she is inspired not by ideas, but by a shopping list”

This is nothing new. The clean girl is a modernised iteration of a perennial aesthetic, upgraded with pilates and Erewhon. She is purity culture, quiet luxury, old-money minimalism made more palatable



for a new generation. She is perfection – and perfection will always sell. This all-pervasive aesthetic has, in various different permutations, always been the norm; opposing aesthetics serve to define by opposition, and ultimately affirm, that norm. Like Kim Kardashian's stripped-back house, 'clean' signifies distance from chaos, a glossy exterior that disguises its cost.

Despite what Sydney Sweeney might protest, fashion is and always will be political. It is the clean girl's self-distancing from subversion, her very apoliticism that makes her a cultural lightning rod. The aesthetic, largely harmless in isolation, bleeds into wider, more pernicious social trends, such as the Ozempic craze, or the 'tradwife'. The 'no make-up' look, neutral tones, and homely lifestyle amounts to rehearsed restraint, a whispered performance that politely declines to take up space. As self-expression is sacrificed for submission, and the male gaze is reasserted as the arbiter of ideal beauty, the clean girl implies a modest, non-

threatening, domestic form of femininity.

With her rigid sleep schedule, workout routine, and curated minimalism, the clean girl lifestyle is an exercise in self-discipline. When women, and the population at large, are convinced to police themselves, they are much less likely to imagine alternatives. It's easy to see how the clean girl culture of hyper-optimisation is a fundamentally capitalistic one. Consumption is marketed as self-improvement, beauty is transformed into duty, and self-expression mutates into self-exploitation.

In the visual economy of the digital age, appearance goes beyond individual expression, and becomes social, and even political, currency. Against the background of rising white nationalism, and the proliferation of AI generated media, appeals to authenticity feel futile. At any rate, if Pantone's colour of the year is anything to go by, it seems likely that the clean girl will keep dodging assassination attempts – she's always been here, and she's not going anywhere.

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

All in the details: An intervention for men's fashion

CAITLIN TIFFANY

In winter, comfort tends to take precedent over style. Fashionable tops are sacrificed for warm jumpers, and then engulfed by coats. Any shred of personality magically disappears from our outfits all because there is a chill in the air. Men are particularly vulnerable to this trap, but this does not have to be the case. Looking at last year's runways, the method for expression seems to be in the subtleties: a modification to a classic shirt or a colourful accessory. Nevertheless, experimentation in men's fashion seems to be on the rise again with more interesting takes on a basic suit or shirt. Through researching men's runway looks from the beginning of 2025 I have collected a series of key items that may allow both comfort and style in everyday outfits as we move through Hilary term.

Jeans will never go out of style, but cut and colour will. Skinny jeans have been out for a while and (thankfully) aren't threatening to return any time soon. The runways for Autumn/Winter 2025 showed baggy and straight jeans all around. In particular, Louis Vuitton and Prada showcased jeans in dark washes for the winter months. This is great news for the colder weather: the baggier the jeans, the easier it is to conceal an extra layer underneath – making them perfect for the particularly cold months of Hilary.

The runways of Louis Vuitton have been notable for their inclusion of leather. In the 19th century leather became a feature of rebellion in fashion with the emergence of the rocker and punk subcultures in the 60s. So, in a time of political instability in the

Western world, it is only natural that leather should find its way back onto the runways. Louis Vuitton showcased a pair of oversized brown, leather shorts whilst Prada exhibited some patchwork leather trousers in their Autumn/Winter 2025 shows, elevating a somewhat plain item through colour and cut to become a statement piece.

For a slightly more formal look, oversized suit trousers are routinely seen in every major designers' shows, from Dior to Hermes. They are appearing, largely, in muted tones like black, grey, and various shades of brown. This is a really versatile item to own as they can be dressed up with a shirt and a pair of Oxfords, or they can be dressed down with a comfy jumper and some trainers. Either way, they are a great way to escape the urge to abandon style in the winter.

The '70s called and dropped off their collars: collared shirts, collared jackets, collared jumpers, collared coats. Folding collars over jackets, or popping a jacket collar up has been seen in multiple Autumn/Winter 2025 shows: Dior, Simone Rocha, and Willy Chavarria. Some of the shirts feature checked patterns whilst others are more plain. Here, designers are playing not only with shapes but also motifs. The experimental aspects of the outfit are not what the clothes actually are (shirt, trouser, jacket) but instead the way they are cut and shaped. This again points to the concept that expression this winter belongs in the subtleties of an outfit. Again, shirts and jackets are wardrobe staples and are endlessly adaptable. Popping a collar up or folding it over a crewneck or jumper can add a bit of flair to an outfit before leaving for a lecture hall or library.

Turtle neck and round neck jumpers are in as

well. This, alone, is nothing revolutionary but, most importantly: they are plain and logoless. The trend of more muted, earthier tones is continued here, with the vast majority being in black and grey. Colour is not entirely absent, just more subdued: plum, burgundy, and forest green. These sorts of pieces can be easily layered with one another, and with the aforementioned collared shirts, to add an extra layer of heat. In the Dolce and Gabbana show, turtlenecks were seen underneath t-shirts and collared shirts beneath jumpers. So, again pieces of expression are crawling their way back onto the men's runway through colour and cut.

“Pieces of expression are crawling their way back onto the men's runway through colour and cut”

Outerwear may be the most vital part of a male outfit this winter. A good jacket or coat can hide a whole manner of layers and, you may have guessed, oversized is still in. For jackets, denim, suede and, in particular, leather are increasingly favoured. They remain classic in colour with, yet again, brown, black, blue, and navy. Some shows did indulge in a little more colour: the Autumn/Winter 2025 Feng Chen Wang show featured a yellow, sleeveless cargo jacket, but jackets like this were definitely in the minority. Experimentation with fashion seems, still, to be kept to the subtler aspects of an outfit. Ultimately, the pieces this year are rooted in traditional, timeless style

but they still branch out in more subtle ways. In their Autumn/Winter 2025 show Prada enhanced some of their coats with faux fur features, as did Dolce and Gabbana. Aside from that the coat styles seem to be very classic, tailored pieces. Still, the occasional colourful puffer jacket makes its way onto the runway, so don't throw away your college puffer just yet! Again, there is a mixture of simple and 'classy' pieces that are made more interesting through either pops of colour or accessories.

In terms of accessories, at the beginning of 2025 Louis Vuitton displayed a variation of beanies and baseball caps whilst Ami showcased knitted triangle scarves. The majority of these were kept plain but additions like this can be a really good way of introducing brighter colours and experimentation in an outfit. Additionally, belts and belt chains were ubiquitous in fashion week. Some designers layer multiple belts whilst others keep it simple with one. Either way, it's very difficult to go wrong with a belt – even one thrown on as an afterthought can make an outfit seem more polished.

Ultimately, the runways tell us that experimental and interesting fashion is possible in winter. It is not unfeasible to be warm and fashionable through layering different pieces and experimenting with cuts and accessories. Though men's style is often much quieter than women's, it is growing louder and more expressive.

Through subtleties, like collars and accessories, men's outfits will move from basic to cultivated. For now remember: keep the fundamental aspects of your outfits simple – expression comes through tailoring and accessorising.

'Heated Rivalry' vs 'Stranger Things'

Nora Miles reflects on the recent TV phenomena as case studies in creative control

The year is 2026. Two actors who were waiting tables six months ago just carried the Olympic torch into Milan. Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney is gifted a replica jacket from a low-budget TV adaptation of NHL fanfiction. *The Observer* is referring to the apparent Burnham-Starmer animosity as a 'Heated Rivalry'. What on earth is going on?

In January 2025, it was announced that small Canadian streamer Crave had picked up the adaptation of Rachel Reid's *Gamechangers* series of hockey-themed gay romance novels. The show takes its name from the series' second installment *Heated Rivalry*, which follows the developing relationship between closeted ice hockey players. Nine days before its release last November, HBO announced that they had picked up the show for its US distribution, closely followed by Sky in the UK. By every imaginable metric, the show has been a smash hit. Not only is it immensely popular, but the show's moving fifth episode 'I'll Believe in Anything' ranks among the highest-reviewed episodes of television of all time on IMDb. But why is it that this seemingly niche genre romance has turned out to have such widespread appeal?

While reflecting on this question, a contrast emerged in my mind. Netflix's *Stranger Things*, whose final season premiered concurrently with the release of *Heated Rivalry*, has similarly dominated the cultural zeitgeist at various points across its ten-year airing schedule. Of course, the comparison is an imperfect one; the shows are wildly different in many ways, and it goes without saying that the expectations for a final season are different to a debut. But it seems to me that they resemble each other in one key way – the concentration of creative control in the hands of a few key individuals.

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They resemble each other in one key way – the concentration of creative control in the hands of a few key individuals

Both Tierney and the Duffers influenced key structural and narrative decisions in their respective shows. The Duffers experimented with format to the point that their finale more closely resembled a feature film than an episode of television. They have also expressed their personal preference for introducing new characters every season, some of which have certainly played a key role in sustaining the show's popularity. In a similar exercise of autonomy, Tierney reported that we have him personally to thank for the show's steamy nature. *Heated Rivalry* fans might find a prudish version of the show difficult to imagine, but he insists he had to advocate to maintain that element of the source material. In his own words: "These books are porn. You think that the audience is here despite that?"

I will not attempt to establish any causality

between micro-managed creative control and assured popularity just yet, but it is undeniable that both shows have seen immense success. For better or for worse, both have launched veritable fandomania, skyrocketing their young casts into superstardom. *Stranger Things* is almost synonymous with the Netflix brand, and I would argue that it is to the credit of the Duffers that they managed to anticipate a clear gap in the market for a feel-good, nostalgic, small-town mystery, with an ensemble cast of fan favourites. While the appeal of *Heated Rivalry* seems more niche on paper, the viewing figures speak for themselves, and Tierney should certainly receive some of the praise for the surprisingly wide impact of a six-episode low-budget romance on the collective global cultural imagination.

But heavy is the head that wears the crown. The Duffer brothers' clear responsibility for creative decision-making has meant they have received the brunt of the criticism for the perceived flaws of the show's final season. Fans were so underwhelmed that they produced a viral conspiracy theory that the finale was actually a hoax, and that a secret ninth episode was coming. That can't be good for the ego. So what lessons can networks learn from the reception of the two shows, and to what extent can their successes and failures be attributed to their centralised executive production structure?

Hardcore *Stranger Things* fans will be able to pinpoint the amount of plot holes amassed over the course of the show. The valid defence for the Duffers would suggest that any of their team of writers could have anticipated and mitigated these issues, and that any show capable of inspiring such impassioned opinion on characterisation has at least succeeded in keeping its audience emotionally invested.

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

FILM AND TV

What's Oxford watching?



Donkey Skin (Peau d'âne)

Archie at Wadham recommends *Donkey Skin* (1970):

"From the director who brought you The Umbrellas of Cherbourg here's a psychedelic fairy tale about incest, beauty, and a horribly realistic skinned donkey. A great time."

You can watch *Donkey Skin* on Kanopy.



Sunset Boulevard

Beatrix at Wadham recommends *Sunset Boulevard* (1950):

"Billy Wilder's classic film depicts with Gothic exaggeration the murky landscape of Hollywood in its early days. With snappy dialogue and innovative shots, it continues to provide cinematic inspiration."

Image credits: 'Donkey Skin' and 'Sunset Boulevard' via imbd.com

A twisted tour-de-force:

TOBY BOWES LYON

The release of *Bugonia* marked yet another triumph for director Yorgos Lanthimos and his collaborators. With his distinctive blend of comedy, tragedy, and absurdity, Lanthimos has remade a 2003 South Korean film, *Save the Green Planet!*, and in doing so produced a cynical but ultimately rewarding reflection on the human condition. His film is centred around the kidnapping of a powerful CEO by two men convinced she is an alien plotting to destroy the Earth, in a story which strikes the right balance between farce and realism.

Lanthimos and screenwriter Will Tracy made a few important decisions when adapting *Save the Green Planet!*. Most importantly, they changed the genders of key characters, with the CEO (Emma Stone) now female, and the kidnappers (Jesse

Plemons and Aidan Delbis) both male. This turns gender into one of the film's core interests, with Lanthimos exploring the misogyny powerful women can face, and the link between violence and 'ince' culture in America.

But, as ever with Lanthimos, none of the characters are treated with a sense of moral superiority. They are all flawed and ambiguous, with the audience's emotions split between horror at what the CEO is subjected to, and pity at the mental illness of the kidnappers, one of whom is cognitively impaired and is effectively controlled by the other. This fits into Lanthimos's broader interest in manipulation and the power dynamics of relationships, as well as themes of loneliness and emotional fragility.

Teddy, the lead kidnapper, is clearly deeply troubled. Over the course of the film, Lanthimos treats his story with the seriousness it deserves, chronicling a history of sexual abuse, bereavement,

'Bugonia' in review

Fendrix's remarkable score.

The film meditates on some of the darkest aspects of modern America: its lack of concern for the environment, its interest in profit over human relationships, its lack of care for the most vulnerable. Even its title is existentialist. 'Bugonia' refers to the ancient Greek belief in bees spontaneously generating from the carcasses of sacrificed cows, perhaps hinting at the idea that new life will always emerge, even if humanity is doomed to extinction. The planet might even be better, the film hints, if it were free of humans.

The film's use of the absurd has its own important function. It links to the idea of challenging conventions, as well as echoing the chaotic and seemingly meaningless nature of human life. Lanthimos wants his audience to reconsider every aspect of how they have been told to live, to stop copying others, and to start thinking for themselves. His film debates conformity versus rebellion, and the collective versus the individual.

Bugonia is not a perfect film, but it does not need to be. Some aspects of its depiction of gender, mental illness, and manipulation may strike some viewers as exploitative, and its ending may prove frustrating for those who favour realism over allegory. But its genius lies in its tackling of the human experience in a way which is not only darkly funny, but also philosophically resonant, and at times deeply moving. Lanthimos has announced he will take some time off to creatively recharge after *Bugonia*; it is a break he very much deserves after producing such a dark, twisted but ultimately hugely clever tour-de-force.

Image credit: 'Bugonia' via imbd.com



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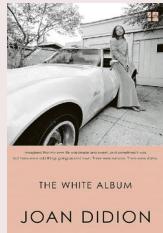
BOOKS

What's Oxford reading?



Abigail at Corpus recommends *Hurricane Season* (2017) by Fernanda Melchor:

"This is a squeamish whirlwind that follows a fictional impoverished community in Mexico."



Alyssa at Corpus recommends *The White Album* (1979) by Joan Didion:

"A collection of essays about 1960s California and all its social, political, and cultural changes. Interesting read but a lot of references to people that I have to search on Wikipedia to understand the story."

Image credits: "Hurricane Season" and "The White Album" via amazon.com.

Oxford's mysterious literary posters

CHARLOTTE STUART

It was the third time I'd walked past the Rad Cam noticeboard before I finally stopped. I had assumed it was just another poster, lost in the usual blur of student plays, society termcards, and talks promising free pizza. But this one was oddly specific. It advertised a Hamlet performance staged in 2011 at a venue called 'The Echo Chamber'. The font was formal, the layout carefully designed – it all felt familiar enough to pass at a glance. Yet at the bottom were the elaborate crests of 'Creech College' and the 'University of Kingswell'. Neither rang a bell.

A few days later I spotted another at the Old Bod, wedged between notices about library rules and history databases. This time it advertised a conference on 'The Air Battle of Pearl Harbor at 70: New Archival Discoveries', held in 2011 at 'Casaubon College' – part of the University of Kingswell. A quick Google search confirmed that none of these places existed.

The same week, I found myself staring at one of the large plywood boards along Catte Street, trying to make sense of it. It announced – in serifed capitals with a Latin feel – "A classical ritual in the Greco-Roman tradition celebrating the late Sir Francis Bowell, holder of the Mould Chair of Greek at the College of Casaubon" in 2011. A coda specified: "The ceremony will include a sacrifice and libations."

Intrigued, I began asking around – had anyone else seen the Kingswell posters? At first, no one had. Yet once my friends noticed one, they seemed to appear everywhere. All of the posters had something else in common: a QR code printed at

the bottom, leading to a sparse Linktree page. It contained neither names nor explanations, simply a downloadable PDF titled 'Dust on Marble'. It turned out to contain the opening chapters of an anonymous satirical novel set in 2011 in an Oxford-like university town. It was full of exaggerated traditions and obscure societies.

“*The posters began to feel like part of the story itself, as though the city had been folded into the fiction*

The narrator had a sharp eye for class divides and academic absurdities. The writing was surprisingly polished – more deliberate than one would expect from a casual student prank – which only added to the peculiarity.

The website offered the option to subscribe to a newsletter. Expecting little more than a confirmation email, I signed up. Over the following weeks, I received short messages with cryptic updates about the project, such as "Oscar Wilde has acquired the cockerel. Wigs are encouraged in the evening". They were signed by the "Sovereign Sesquipedalian Fissiparous Order of Saint Gwinnodock of Bethlehem, of Sparta, and of Atlantis".

At first I assumed it must be a group of students, perhaps an art project or an elaborate in-joke, but the longer it went on, the less certain I became. There were no society references, no Instagram accounts, and no familiar names circulating. It all felt less like a prank and more like a carefully constructed world that had quietly appeared in the middle of Oxford.

The more I read, the more the posters began to feel like part of the story itself – the fictional colleges and libation ritual featured in the novel, as though the city had been folded into the fiction.

One morning, I woke up to a subscription email mentioning that a "reading" of the latest chapter was taking place all day at Vaclav Havel's bench in Uni Parks. It wasn't framed as an event – there was no specific time and no invitation to meet anyone. Yet the location was real. It was an art installation devoted to the memory of the Czech human rights advocate, easily found on Google Maps.

When I decided that curiosity was more important than deadlines and went to investigate, I wasn't sure what to expect. Online images suggested a small, round table built around a tree, flanked by a couple of elaborate chairs. It felt strangely natural to find about a dozen carefully designed booklets lying in a neat pile. Their shiny covers resembled marble, and the title was printed as if formed from dark, scattered dust. On the second page, a sentence read: "This edition is limited to 250 numbered copies."

I sat down and skimmed through the new chapters, enjoying the rare sunshine. It turned out I was not the only one intrigued. During the hour or so that I spent there, three students showed up who were following the same trail. Two had also seen the posters, and one had received a printed copy in an anonymous envelope left in their pigeonhole, with no further message. We briefly talked about our puzzlement, each of us quietly wondering whether any of the others might be the author. No newsletter updates followed until a digital version of the new chapters was sent on Christmas Eve.

Read the full article at cherwell.org

'Suturing Wounds': How not to decolonise a museum

ART

EMMA HEAGNEY

Today, the colonial history of the Pitt Rivers Museum is common knowledge. Whether you know of the details or just the dodgy vibes, the Pitt Rivers once represented an era of brutal European colonisation, with valuable objects stolen from communities and held in Oxford for their 'exotic' and 'curious' qualities. Despite efforts to supposedly decolonise the museum and honour the descendants of those exploited by colonialism, the museum has a long way to go. The lingering colonial rhetoric and problematic methods of display are no more evident than in the museum's latest photographic exhibition, *Suturing Wounds*.

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It is a shame that Sallam's work, fascinating in itself, is displayed so carelessly

In the photos, Egyptian artist Sara Sallam sheds light on the exploitative and colonial 19th-century practice of violently excavating Byzantine-era Egyptian cemeteries to steal textiles from the deceased. She poses in front of Blythe House in London, a huge storage facility containing millions of artefacts from British museums, and wears a tunic made of facsimiles of late antique Egyptian textiles, sewn together by the artist herself. Once worn to express social status and Christian devotion, western colonists admired them for their aesthetic value alone. They ignored the dignity of the dead and instead proceeded to inflict more violence against Christians in the Middle East, which continues today in the

persecution of Palestinian Christians, the direct descendants of such rich but exploited traditions. As a Byzantinist myself, I was extremely pleased to see this under-researched aspect of history explored in a tender, personal way. Sallam stitched together reproductions of textiles from the Akhmim cemetery to represent the literal suturing of the wounds created by colonisation. The additional medium of photography situates the tunic in a colonial setting and thereby renders its use an act of protest, a confrontation of colonised and coloniser through material objects.

When I visited the exhibition, I initially could not find it. Tucked behind tall cases on the very top gallery, the view from the ground floor consisted simply of bright pink words describing the photos. Eventually, when I found it, I had one thought only: was this it? The photos were used as a sort of wallpaper to be placed on some doors, probably storing more stolen artefacts. An effect of this was that I could not actually see much of the subject of the photos. This was exacerbated by the fact that the wood beams of the doors cut through much of the image of the tunic itself. Likewise, with the image taking up an entire wall, Sallam only reached my height, a mere five feet and two inches – anyone taller than me would probably struggle to see for this reason, and there was hardly enough space between the doors and the cases opposite to stand back and take in a larger view. I found that I actually had a better time viewing these photos online rather than in person.

Perhaps the most egregious issues, however, were that the images were of low quality (I could see the pixels) and that one of the wood beams cut through the sign which showed the background to be Blythe House. The entire point of the

photographic medium was rendered null and void, as the viewer was given virtually no information. Would the average viewer have known the context? No. In fact, the two friends I attended the exhibition with were clueless, understanding the vaguely anti-colonial messaging but unaware of the specific culture represented and why. There were no captions to explain the significance of the textiles, leaving the viewer in the dark. In fact, I worry that this results in the content of the artwork being misunderstood by most, reduced instead to an aesthetic object once again. It's such a shame that Sallam's work, fascinating in itself, was displayed so carelessly, despite the artist herself being a co-curator. These practices seem to align with the enduring colonial spirit that permeates the museum as a whole.

My own family was torn apart by British colonisation in Ireland, inheriting the generational problems of addiction, poverty, and identity loss. To this day, I have never met any of my estranged Irish family, and I feel a sense of emptiness

knowing that I will never have a connection to an entire half of myself. This context shaped my experience at the Pitt Rivers. I can only imagine how it must feel to have been affected by the horrors of slavery and genocide, and seeing sacred objects from my culture displayed so recklessly in the museum.

The museum's approach to decolonisation can be characterised with one word: passive. Performative activism checked off the list, the museum simply places a plaster over the wounds caused by colonisation. Signs designed to separate the museum from problematic practices are completely separate from their cabinets – the viewer is not challenged at all. Sallam's project is a bold look into the effects of colonisation on Egyptian communities today, but ultimately falters in its display in the Pitt Rivers Museum, which can't separate itself from its colonial history.

Image credit: Arnaud Malon, CC-BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Read the full article at cherwell.org



Dropping hints before dropping albums

Evelyn Lambert explores how artists generate hype for upcoming releases

One midnight this January, I received this ominous message in my house group chat: "Everyone should be scared because I'm going to become a completely different person. I'm genuinely trembling." After a concerned back and forth, my friend revealed – Harry Styles was releasing an album after four years of silence.

There had not yet been an official announcement, his single was not out, no release date confirmed. Instead, there was a trail of breadcrumbs for fans to follow: hints in a YouTube video released last year, cryptic billboards in cities worldwide, a website redesign, voice notes sent to fans. For Harry's diehard fans, this was enough. Evidence was compiled, TikToks made, fanpages erupted. The album didn't exist yet, but the anticipation did.

Harry Styles is far from the only musician to master this art. Billboards seem to be a particularly popular method of drumming up hype, with artists from Chappell Roan to Slipknot all using them in recent years. In April 2024, Slipknot teased a "one night only" event with a cryptic billboard put up in California, including a link to a retro website full of hints and references to previous releases. Just a cursory look at the band's Subreddit reveals how effective this was at capturing audience attention, with members sharing theories, and other evidence they had collected. When people think of current artists who leave Easter eggs for upcoming releases, Taylor Swift is usually the first name that comes to mind, and her fans are famously avid connectors-of-dots. But it is not only artists of the scale of Taylor Swift who coordinate creative promotional campaigns. In 2017, Southampton rock band Creeper teased their debut full-length album *Eternity, in Your Arms* with an imaginative

campaign. They wiped their social media accounts, as if they had been kidnapped, and released a missing poster with a phone number, which, if called, would lead you down a rabbit hole with clues relating to their new album. This sort of creative promotion however requires a pre-established fanbase to work. Newer artists certainly also use social media to tease their work, but the formula is generally more straightforward. I'm sure you've seen it before – musicians about to release their first single, posting TikTok after TikTok over the same clip of a song, in hopes of it becoming a trend.

In the age of social media, where small clues can be projected across the world, and interrogated by thousands, less really is more. All it takes is wearing a suspiciously coherent colour palette, and a change in Instagram profile picture, and big artists can get the world talking. In a time when we have access to all the information we could ever want, all of the time, this waiting game is especially tantalising. It heightens the emotion, and gets fans invested, before they even know what the album sounds like. There is also a parasocial side to it. Fans feel like they are being let in on a secret, and spotting a clue becomes a source of pride, a proof of devotion. This creates a sense of collective buzz among those in the know, bringing fanbases closer together.

From a marketing perspective, this slow-burn is perfect for promotion. Before making any outright announcement, fans advertise new releases to each other and theorise widely online. Algorithms reward engagement, speculation, and discussion, these prolonged teases feed into, encouraging us to comment, share, and check pages for updates. So while a clear announcement might trend for a short time, a long build-up can stretch excitement over weeks or months. Building hype early is a way

to ensure an album is well-received. Long periods of anticipation mean that listeners' verdicts are half-formed before the first note even plays. Someone with this more cynical view might bemoan fans spending more time waiting for the album to be released than actually listening to it.

While the tools may be new, teasing music releases is anything but. Artists have long done publicity stunts to attract attention for upcoming releases. In June 1995, Michael Jackson erected ten 32 feet statues of himself across the world to promote his album *HISStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*. Garth Brooks took a completely different approach in 1999. The successful country star wanted to try out rock music, so created a persona, Chris Gaines, to promote his album, *Life Of Chris Gaines*, whilst also allowing him the space to explore a new musical genre. The biggest difference between now and then seems to be scale. Whilst in the past, big stunts which got the attention of traditional media seemed to be the move, recently, social media has allowed artists to leave a more subtle trail for devotees to follow. This can also be a lot more interactive, and create a greater sense of personal satisfaction for fans who have 'figured it out.'

Ultimately, promotion seems to be a part of the performance for many artists, setting the stage for the project they are going to release, and priming their audience for what is to come. What some dismiss as a marketing ploy, taking advantage of fanbases for free promotion, I choose to see more positively. Teasing albums gives fans, often young women and girls, something that connects them – a reason to meet new friends, to discuss and speculate together, and to have something exciting to look forward to. Can that really be a bad thing? After all, getting there is half the fun.

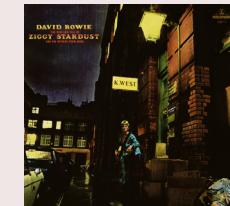
MUSIC

What's Oxford listening to?



Charlie at Keble recommends *With Heaven on Top* (2026) by Zach Bryan

"This album provides another example of why country music has become so popular. Using his classic banjo soundtrack, Bryan delivers a repertoire that is as full of talent as it is deeply emotional."



Mair at Keble recommends *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) by David Bowie:

"38 minutes of storytelling: an album that is meant to be listened to in its entirety as it tells a story through explosive and catchy choruses."

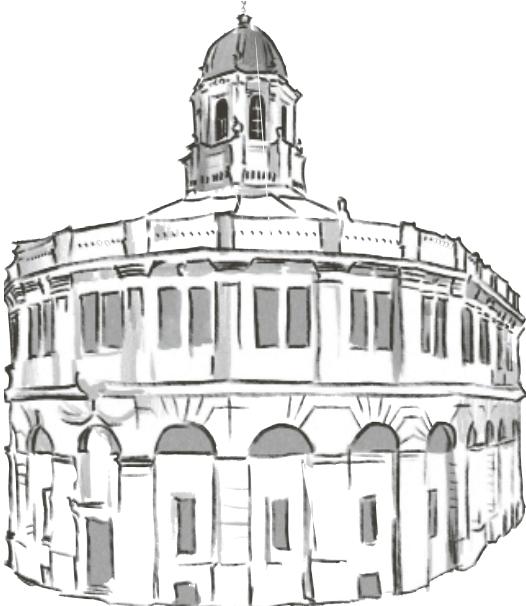
Image credits: 'With Heaven on Top' and 'Ziggy Stardust' via Spotify.

WHAT'S ON

STAGE

La Voix Humane
Burton Taylor Studio
10th-14th February

Tick, Tick... Boom!
Michael Pilch Studio
11th-14th February



MUSIC

Lunchtime Recital
Recital Hall, Schwarzman Centre
13th February, 1:15pm

FILM
H is for Hawk
Phoenix Picturehouse
9th February, 4pm

Misery: An anti-Valentine's screening
Ultimate Picture Palace
14th February

LITERATURE
Philosophy in the Bookshop, with Manon Garcia
Blackwell's
14th February, 3pm

ART
We're Going to Need a Bigger Brush
Modern Art Oxford
23rd January-22nd March

Beyond the Appliances of Art: Lewis Carroll and his Illustrators
Christ Church
9th February

The Source

Stewing

Under the undead sky full of
bright birds
a dove lands softly trembling the
raindrop leaves on skeleton trees.
Feathers fall light like spices on
clove-scented earth, warm, joint
snap and sizzle in gutless steam.
Shed bones into stock pots and
suck marrow through your greedy teeth.

MAYA MUKHERJEE

LIFESTYLE

Kilts, ceilidhs and calling: Inside the world of Oxford Reeling

Pick up your fiddle and don your kilt: it's time to take a dive into the world of ceilidh dancing and its restorative power

NANCY ROBSON

It's Thursday night in New College's Long Room, and several dozen students are desperately trying to master The Plough Speed. This, for the uninitiated, is a mindboggling routine of side-steps, spins, and shuffles. With its roughly hewn stone walls and exposed beams, the Long Room has a certain Braveheart charm to it, which feels entirely appropriate for the evening. It resounds with confused chattering and laughter until, as the opening notes of the melody crackle from a speaker, the dancers together gather into their lines, and take each other by the hand.

If this sounds a far cry from your Thursday evenings, then you've probably never come across Oxford University's Caledonian Society. They are responsible for Oxford's termly Highland Ball, the main event of which – as you might have guessed – is Reeling. Popularised in the 18th century by Scottish Lairds, Reeling is somewhere between English country and French line dancing, except set to Highland music (think fiddles, pipes and accordions). With a core repertoire of around eleven different dances, it is a more formal, rehearsed cousin of the Ceilidh.

Not that any of this is on my mind as I'm whirled around the Long Room. With all the counting beats and desperately trying to recall the next steps, Reeling doesn't leave a lot of time for contemplation. This, my partner for the evening tells me, is partly why he comes. He's five hundred words into an essay and hopes that the endorphins from all this dancing will power him through to the end of it. He then steps on my toes, but I'll forgive him for that.

By the end of the rehearsal, I'm

absolutely knackered and, judging by the red-cheeked, sweat-sheened faces around me, I'm not alone in this. Yet even the absolute beginners – those who had never stepped foot near a ceilidh before tonight – seem exhilarated, some of them staying behind to finesse the steps, while the more veteran dancers practice flinging each other in the air. As I look around, essay deadlines, tutorials, and the Damoclean sword of marked collections feel like they're a world away.

“Unlike so much at Oxford, this is a place where mediocrity can flourish

If this is starting to sound a little cultish, I can promise you it isn't. Addictive might be the better word. When I ask how they started Ceilidh dancing, a few of the students I chat with mention the Burns Nights held by their colleges – chaotic practices in the JCR, the bizarre sight of a college chaplain blessing the haggis, and some very tipsy Reeling. This makes a lot of sense to me, because there's something a little Bridgerton in the magic of whirling around a grand, old Hall, with dance cards and flouncy dresses to boot.

Yet this glamour is a long way from my first encounters with Scottish country dancing, which took place in an unbelievably stuffy basement in South London. By the end of the night, the room would reach almost tropical levels of humidity, so that, for my nine-year-old self, Ceilidh meant descending into a

hellish, slightly pagan underworld.

But regardless of whether it takes place in a stained-glass hall or a cellar, in black tie or trainers, the magic of this dancing remains the same to me. To clarify, I have a non-existent sense of rhythm, two left feet, and a mortal fear of dancing in public (unless, that is, copious amounts of alcohol have been consumed). But at a Reel, none of this matters. For one, because no one is looking at you, or at least at you as an individual; the beauty of the dances comes from the unison, the synchronicity, the efforts of the collective.

Unlike so much at this university, this is a place where mediocrity can flourish. If the steps are right and the enthusiasm is there, then your actual competence is somewhat secondary (or at least, that's what I've been telling myself). If you are willing to spin, or be spun, then you're welcomed in, taught how to perform a figure of eight, and thrown straight into



Why you shouldn't finish your reading list

ANISHA MOHAMMED

On being accepted into Oxford, everyone warned me about the reading lists. "You'll be reading eight hours a day", they said, half-serious, half-proud. At the time, it sounded almost romantic. I imagined long afternoons tucked away in ancient libraries, light slanting through leaded windows, books piled high beneath the dreaming spires; the kind of intellectual exhaustion that comes with purpose, the price of becoming someone serious and scholarly. Then the term started, and I realised that "reading list" was really just code for "we dare you to sleep".

Sixth form hadn't prepared me for this. I was used to summarised textbook chapters and neat exam-board extracts, not three entire novels and a stack of theory articles before Thursday's tutorial. So when I read *The Atlantic*'s piece, 'The elite college students who can't read books', I immediately recognised myself in their experience. However, the article seemed to frame the issue as one of attention span: we simply can't sit still long enough to read anymore. This is a growing narrative for our generation, and maybe relevant to universities with slightly fewer contact hours. But for me, it's not just about distraction. It's about design.

There's a difference between being lazy and being lost. Reading lists at universities, especially in the humanities, can often feel endless; not just in volume, but in purpose. You're

handed 20 or 30 titles for one essay, often with little explanation of why they're there or how they relate to one another. Some texts are foundational, some are marginal, some are there to challenge you, and others seem included simply because they can be. But no one tells you which is which.

In an environment like Oxford, where tutorials can feel quietly competitive and intellectual confidence is often performed as much as developed, that ambiguity carries weight. You're not just trying to learn: you're trying to prove that you belong. Reading becomes less about understanding and more about keeping up appearances, about staying afloat in a system that rewards the impression of mastery.

When you don't know why you're reading something, it's hard to care about it. The sheer volume makes it easy to feel like you're working in a vacuum, turning pages simply to meet a deadline. In a degree built on curiosity and interpretation, that lack of direction slowly drains motivation. A degree you once loved can start to feel like an endless series of tasks to complete rather than ideas to explore. Instead of excitement, there's anxiety; instead of engagement, there's exhaustion. Reading stops being a process of discovery and becomes just another obligation you're already behind on.

Everyone knows the unspoken truth: no one actually finishes everything on their reading list. And, in many cases, you're probably not meant to. Different degrees (and even different tutors) operate with very different expectations

about depth versus breadth. But this lack of clarity matters. The guilt that comes with unfinished reading, and the sense that you're constantly falling short, can make students feel like failures before they've even begun. We all end up reading strategically: jumping between chapters, skimming introductions and conclusions, trying to extract just enough insight to write something coherent. There's something faintly absurd about attempting to assemble a passable argument in front of a tutor who has likely internalised each article on the list. Yet this coping strategy is often treated as evidence of poor focus, rather than as a rational response to an impossible workload.

“You're not just trying to learn: you're trying to prove that you belong

As Rose Horowitz writes in *The Atlantic* piece, "to read a book in college, it helps to have read a book in high school". And yes, maybe I wasn't fully prepared for this kind of academic reading. Sixth form didn't train me to juggle multiple books a week, and there's little I can do now to retroactively fix the education system. Oxford, for all its brilliance, has a tendency to throw students straight into the deep end with little acknowledgement of how uneven that preparation can be.

HOROSCOPES



Aries

Try pulling an all-nighter in your bed instead of the library.



Taurus

A figure from the past will try and re-enter your life. Don't let them in.



Gemini

You're smashing it, keep up the good work!



Cancer

You've really let yourself go.



Leo

Don't let your sub-fusc gather dust – treat yourself to a formal.



Virgo

Valentines is just round the corner, and so is fifth week blues.

HOROSCOPES



Libra

Chloe, if you're reading this – run.



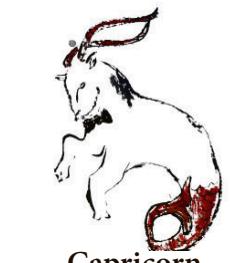
Scorpio

Try eating more green, less beige.



Sagittarius

A mortifying typo is on the horizon. Triple-check your messages.



Capricorn

Where the hell is your husband? What is taking him so long to find you?



Prioritise your mental health this week.



Your tutor isn't angry, just disappointed.

The case for doing nothing (on holiday)

TREVOR LEE

The greatest part of gallivanting around Europe? Not the ancient churches steeped in culture, nor the towering spires you have to pay £20 to gain the privilege of climbing up hundreds of steps, and certainly not the historic castles, which you suspect have seen more starry-eyed tourists than actual battles.

No, my best memories were of parks. They were found in the tranquility of self-reflection as I enjoyed the serenity of nature, clutching my too-expensive coffee and watching the ducks swim about in the river, as the cold winter wind whipped the fallen leaves off the ground beside me. And so it was that I soon discovered a strange new hobby: I made it a point, in each major city I went, to try visiting a park.

My parents were dumbfounded by this. They could scarcely believe that I, having flown 13 hours from sunny Singapore to live and study in a foreign land, would squander a magical European holiday just sitting around. Surely, they argued, I ought to have taken it upon myself to visit the 'must see' tourist attractions of these wonderful places.

Perhaps they had a point. But, in my defence, it wasn't for lack of trying. Having obsessed over trying to do precisely that in the earlier part of the winter break, I soon found myself wondering what the point of it all was. What does it even mean for a tourist attraction to be a 'must see'? Is it truly the culture and history that lies behind them? The sheer volume of tourists that are drawn to them in droves? That they were featured on websites and travelling blogs (read: other people said it should be visited)? Or, is it, as I came to suspect, simply the expectation that one must see it, just to tick it off the list?

"We feel obliged to optimise everything, to make the most of our leisure time, even when we are meant to be relaxed"

At any rate, I was quickly fed up. I didn't enjoy waking up early to have a head start. I didn't enjoy going to see yet another cathedral for what must have been the third day straight. I didn't enjoy posting aesthetic pictures on Instagram, so that everyone who probably scrolled past my story in less than half a second would know I had a good time. So why did I feel a need to do so?

AGONY AUNT

I'm looking for some genuine advice but also a bit of reassurance to open my 20s. I feel like everyone around me has their future figured out, meanwhile I have no idea what I want to do, where to even start, or what will make me happy. Help!

Sincerely,
Oxstressed historian

There is a strange irony in that even on holiday – the ultimate exercise of our free will – there is a particular ideal or prescribed way to spend it. We feel obliged to optimise everything, to feel productive, and to make the most of our leisure time – even when we are meant to be in our most relaxed state.

This pressure to do things that we are told we ought to do, rather than what we actually want to do, is not unique to travelling. In fact, it manifests in most aspects of our daily lives. It is what drives us to go partying or clubbing for the fear of missing out, rather than because we want to, or to enter a relationship because we feel we really ought to have done so by now, or to default to choosing the most prestigious career options available, because our educational pedigree behoves us to do so.

"Once you've seen one European church, you've seen them all"

Being cognisant of this, it is worth taking a moment to pause and reflect. Is this something I really want to do or something that I feel like I should be doing? Granted, in some cases perhaps we really ought to do certain things – those tutorial sheets and essays are not going to complete themselves, nor will your body thank you if you pull constant all-nighters and eat meal deals every day. But, I suspect, in more situations than we might realise, we are unwittingly swept along by these dominant social narratives and cultural pressures. And, in letting ourselves be carried by these currents, we run the very real risk of losing sight of what makes us, well, us.

Perhaps I cannot convince you, dear reader, to relook at every aspect of your life. Perhaps some of these pressures are too deep-set to simply be cast away by sheer force of will. Perhaps, having just entered the cusp of adulthood, we haven't a sufficiently strong sense of self to distinguish our own desires from those which others and society impose upon us.

But, we can, and should, start to try. Change is possible, and at the very least, it should start with how we go about having fun. Go crazy. Visit parks instead of tourist traps. Put down the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and start kicking your feet whilst reading a trashy romance novel (no one will judge you, I swear). Sit by the marina and watch the warm rust-red hue of the evening light fade away into an unfamiliar metropolitan skyline.

Have fun doing what you genuinely enjoy. After all, once you've seen one ancient European church, you've basically already seen them all.

CHERWELL-FED

All buttered up: Broche, and the art of the perfect croissant



— LUIS PRENNINGER —

During these cold winter months, in which – to that pinnacle of British construction, breathable walls – I wake up in a freezing room, I find great solace in hiding beneath my blanket. Very much aware of my spatially limited happiness. Beyond the edge of my bed, however, I have found another place of naive joy, one that offers a time-out from some nuisances of everyday life: a tiny hole-in-the-wall coffee shop in Jericho called Broche.

The moments of concentrated happiness sold at Broche take the form of unbelievably good pastries. Here is my ranking of those I have tried, from great to most incredible: Danish three cheese croissant, pain au pastrami, bostock, cinnamon bun, chocolate and cherry croissant, pain au chocolat. But it is the vanilla and raspberry croissant, which stands out as my favourite. The crisp outside, the illegal quantities of butter folded into its dough, the luscious vanilla custard, the sweet-acidic raspberry jam with seeds: any Frenchman would be happy to claim Broche's *pâtissier* as one of their own.

Knowing that they must have worked relentlessly to learn the craft – and then to make these pastries daily before sunrise – the brazen price might very well be justified. But I don't think we're paying £5.40 for the croissant; rather, we are paying for the luxury of engaging in that luxury. This may be a little cynical, but it puts the vanilla and raspberry croissant into a different perspective, and perhaps a more honest appreciation. At least, I hope so.

The pastries at Broche are not only damn good; they are also highly aestheticized objects of status through which customers define themselves.

Menu

Croissant: £3.50
Pain au pastrami: £5.60
Bostock: £4.40
Cinnamon bun: £3.80
Pain au chocolat: £4.00
Vanilla & raspberry croissant: £5.40

165 Kingston Road, OX2 6EG

None of this is to say that you shouldn't go. You should. If it happens to be sunny, cross the street and lean against the neighbour's garden wall, as I usually do – Broche, unfortunately, sits in its own shade. Be cheap; get a plain croissant. Have a matcha latte. Enjoy a brief, luxurious moment of immunity from all things troubling.

Image credit: Amy Lawson for Cherwell.

Dear Oxstressed historian,

To be perfectly honest, no one has life completely figured out, even if they project the illusion that they do. I know I certainly don't. It's completely natural that you're feeling this way. Yet, dear reader, give in not to despair. Oxford is an amazing place to be in your 20s! There are so many opportunities to be had and cool new people to meet and be inspired by. It's never too late to start. All there is for you to do is to put yourself out there – join a club or society that sounds fun to you, find out what drives the passionate people around you, go for talks and lectures that pique your interest. Life is an adventure, and there's no better time and place to start exploring. It's okay to try new things and it's okay to fail – that's how you grow and learn a little something about yourself each time. Don't be too hard on yourself; you're not late to anything. In fact, you're just beginning. And, in this Agony Aunt's humble opinion, that's plenty of reason to be excited rather than stressed out.

Lots of love,
Agony Aunt

It's 2016's world, and we're just living in it (or are we?)

Jiayue Shi reflects on 2016's return to the cultural consciousness, and what this reveals about how we recall the past

Barely a month has passed since we made our flustered entry into 2026. But it seems like the verdict is already in: your honour, we've had enough. Bring back 2016. Tastes were bad, but times were better. You can see this nostalgia in the vines and 2016 outfit inspo reels on your Instagram feed. It's in the colourful return of Zara Larsson's 'Lush Life'. Many influencers I follow, from pop culture satirists to the guy who sings ballads about the Louvre heist, are posting pictures of themselves from ten years ago. My generation on Anglophone social media have decided to fall back in love with fidget spinners, Snapchat filters, and sappy Tumblr quotes.

2016 is childhood. It's an aesthetic. It's kitsch. It's embarrassing, therefore, sincere. It's collective. It's everyone's "last normal year", because, so it goes, the first Trump presidency ruptured the timeline and the American timeline is universal. And above all, best of all, 2016 is gone forever. The past is the absolute elsewhere. If it were not so, we couldn't have shaped it in the exact likeness of our longings. If we could actually have 2016 back, we would no longer make it our cathartic refuge.

“*There's something reassuring about the nostalgia that tells us that our best years are behind us*

This begs the question: was 2016 so great? You'd have to be sufficiently affluent and unperturbed to enjoy that year as a paradise lost. The 2016 divide would be nonsensical to those for whom the world has always been on fire. As for myself, I was in my early teens in 2016. I'm fond, but I don't miss it; there's truth in the tacit wisdom that the experience of girlhood is enough to keep one illusionless about it. I was semi-familiar with the pop culture references that the trend reminisces today, but not raised in it. China's 2015 military parade lodged itself more intimately in my political memory

than Brexit and Trump did in 2016. What it's making me see is that the trend exists only in a depersonalised and depoliticised memory. There you have an aesthetic, a utopian field of signs.

“*We've always been nostalgic, and utopias have always been consumable*

But this is nothing new. We've always been nostalgic, and its utopias have always been consumable. No matter how jaded we are with Disney remakes, they just keep coming, in the hyper-real image of our childhood. Studio Ghibli aesthetics are nostalgic: already, generative AI has pushed out numerous stylistic replicas. 90s Britpop is nostalgic, and it still sells – ask anyone who got an overpriced Oasis ticket in 2024. Cottagecore is nostalgic: a quick Pinterest search shows us the quaint white curtains and garden paths of a pre-internet pastoral, with its tactful amnesia of the real labours of country life. Post-socialism is nostalgic: I've seen the inert left-wing melancholia that is best pictured in vintage Sputnik pins and revolutionary internationalist posters. It goes with the embarrassed awareness that we're wistful not for the past our grandparents lived, but for its unrealised ideals, now safely buried in a dead future. In nostalgia, there is a present futility that we dance around by being self-conscious, ironic, and entertained.

Last term my college hosted a 1920s-themed black tie dinner. The cheerful email reminded us that we, too, are in the hedonistic 20s, living through economic recession and authoritarian ascent. Happily for us, there would be live jazz in the bar afterwards. It was a great night, I committed to the bit. There I was, dancing Lindy Hop with my friend. I wore qipao in homage to the fashionable Shanghai ladies of exactly a century ago. We took pictures on a thrifted 2000s Fujifilm camera.

Yet inevitably, this was accompanied by the wry knowledge that the 1920s, too, were nostalgic. Europe's traditional Right lamented the passing of religion and order. The Nazis were nostalgic for a mythical Germany of the pure-blooded Volk.



Revivalist right-wing nostalgia today is sellable and iconographic, from MAGA hats to algorithms that push St. George's flags and trad wife content to the right audiences. We're buffeted on all sides by nostalgia of every kind. Absent-mindedly, industriously, we produce a great desire for pasts, and create desirable pasts to match. Then we buy them up.

The thing we really don't know what to do about is the future. Late-night conversations with friends my age reveal the uneasy suspicion that we're incapable of creating a future – individual or collective. We speak anxiously about graduating Oxford, about the job market, about wasted potential, about the daily injustice that descends on others in our phone screens and not ourselves. It's easy relief, especially now, to miss the 2010s. Through the cringy filters, it emerges as an innocent time where many futures felt possible.

Now that we've arrived, we're convinced that

we're living – and responsible for – the worst possible one. Is the 2016 nostalgia trend not just pop culture brought back from the dustbins, but endlessly recycled facsimiles of lost hope? Is the power to multiply and consume our one truly democratic cultural power?

There's something reassuring about the nostalgia that tells us our best years are behind us. Agency lost in the present regains dignity in an uncomplicated collective past. If now is the time of monsters, they're happy we're distracted. But it's also the now that demands action and imagination from us. I'd like to think that the present, narrowing between desirable pasts and inconceivable futures, is still ground enough to stand on. Nostalgia gives us much-needed relief and fun, as long as it's not paralysing. If the future struggles to be born, we need to start preparing for a livable one.

Image credit: Athena Sandrini, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Pexels.

OXFORD — TINY LOVE STORIES

Saying goodbye is never easy. And we stumble through it without a trace of elegance. Neither of us have ever been keen on hugs, so we sit in comfortable silence, basking in the warmth of our passing memories. That schoolgirlish laughter we shared every lunchtime, the inside jokes that never died, the friendship necklaces we'd replace every year, your address which I knew like the back of my hand, and my dog who loved you like you were her own. But one day, we'll have grown apart enough to grow back together. So I'll pick up the phone and you'll say hello.

Abigail Christie, Christ Church College

CHERPSE. Oxford's blind dating

An evening at the Jericho Tavern. Can old acquaintances turn into something more?



Mr Uncultured

First impressions?

We knew each other through friends, so it was quite funny as we've met a few times.

Did it meet your expectations?

At first I thought it might be awkward, but it ended up being nice to get to know her more. I've never been on a blind date before, so I was pleasantly surprised. It being someone I knew already took the stress off a bit.

What was the highlight?

We went to G&Ds afterwards, which was also nice. I also learnt about some cool art, and have since realised I am super uncultured.

What was the most embarrassing moment?

When we both realised we knew each other.

Describe the date in three words:

Cadavers, Van Gogh (in a good way).

Is there a second date on the cards?

I don't know. Probably not, but not because she wasn't nice.

Miss Art Connoisseur

First impressions?

Once the silhouette in the distance came into focus, I realised that we'd crossed paths before.

Did it meet your expectations?

It did, even though it wasn't anyone new. Conversations were easy because we're both captains for rowing clubs, so we could bond over the shared struggle of the rain and river conditions this term.

What was the highlight?

When we went to G&Ds, where he shared some stories from interrailing and camping on a boat over chocolate ice cream which I still think is a questionable flavour.

What was the most embarrassing moment?

He walked me back to my college, said goodbye, and then when I tried to open the gate, my Bod card didn't work, and I dropped my phone. Classy.

Describe the date in three words:

Light-hearted, easy, relaxed.

Is there a second date on the cards?

I don't think so, but it was nice to get to know the best friend of some of my friends.

SPORT

Town and Gown share the spoils in boxing showdown

Natalie Tan reports from a night of bruising entertainment at Iffley Road

NATALIE TAN

There's something very satisfying about watching people try to beat the living daylights out of each other. If that sentence seems contentious, you may want to come down and see it with your own eyes. You haven't really lived until you've seen – or been – attendees milling around in suits and evening dresses, holding champagne flutes and devouring hot dogs, as two boxers beat each other bloody in the ring five feet away.

The latest edition of OUABC's Town v Gown featured bouts of three rounds of two minutes each. With the sports hall of Iffley Road transformed into a spotlight-strewn ring and crackling with good-natured anticipation, fighters walked out to blaring anthems like Shakira's 'Hips Don't Lie' and Charli XCX's 'I Don't Care', which rapidly dispelled any pretensions of seriousness about the event.

The first match against external opposition came when Diego Dolgetta-Garcia (Oxford) stepped into the ring to face Pho Van An (UCL) to raucous cheers and an incredibly enthusiastic rendition of 'Bella Ciao' from the home supporters. Though Pho and Dolgetta-Garcia seemed evenly matched in the first round, with each fighter dishing out as much as they took, Dolgetta-Garcia had Pho on the ropes by round two, after a vicious flurry of blows that Pho only dodged the worst of by clinching him. The fight came to an abrupt end when the referee deemed Pho too injured to continue; Dolgetta-Garcia raised his arms in elation as the hall once again exploded into chants of "ciao, ciao, ciao".

A series of local derbies followed, with Lukasz Gawrys (Oxford) winning decisively over Joseph Lucas (Oxford Brookes) in the 69kg bout after a ref-stops-contest decision late in the second round. Even before the next fighter, Jonelle "JJ" Domingo (Oxford), took to the ring to face his opponent Vladislav Davis (Oxford Brookes), supporters



brandished a massive Philippines flag and made their support well and truly heard. The fight would prove to be one of the better ones of the night: when Domingo nailed Davis with a precise, powerful hook inside the first few seconds to a delighted roar from the crowd, it seemed over before it really began. Davis, however, had well and truly turned the tide by the third round, picking opportune moments to step inside Domingo's reach and land blows that were sparse but costly.

Beyond the brutality, what makes a fight great is showmanship

To the joy of the Brookes contingent, the bell rang on a victory for Davis as the court turned dark red with pulsing bass and a reluctant round of applause. In an unexpected departure from the programme, the final match featured last-minute replacement

Aiden Faulkner (Yeovil ABC), who had agreed the night before to the match, stepping up against Tom Wise, OUABC Men's Vice-Captain, who had just triumphed at BUCS Boxing Championships the week before. It's an age-old adage to save the best for last, but it paid off for OUABC. From the second that Faulkner and Wise began to circle each other, it was apparent to even a complete amateur like me that they were a level above everyone who had gone before. They darted in and out of reach at double-time speed; somehow, still, there was a frighteningly clean weight behind every swing, even the missed ones. By the end of the second round Wise was sending Faulkner into the ropes more often than not: before the bell rang on the end of the third the audience was leaping to their feet with the satisfied roar.

But it was ironically the first fight of the night that encapsulated it all: beyond the brutality, what makes a fight great is showmanship. The lightweight matchup between Pratul Ramesh (Oxford) and Kai Smith (Oxford) resembled that between a bird and a bear more than anything else.

Light on his feet, Ramesh bobbed and weaved around Smith, eventually dodging his wild blows with such ease that he barely looked like he was trying. Ramesh ducked a massive hook, and as Smith staggered forward, carried by his momentum, Ramesh did a little pelvic shimmy, a come-hither, a really-now that drew a rising murmur of appreciation from the audience, that inside six amateur minutes you could still find time for showboating. Again Smith swung; again Ramesh dodged; again he danced. Arrogance is timeless. I found myself leaning forward in my seat. That's what Town v Gown promised, and that's what it delivered: a damn good show.

Image credits: Nicole Naomi Tan with permission.

Read the full article at cherwell.org



UPCOMING

Rugby

Men's Blues vs Rams RFC
Friday 13th February
Iffley
Captain: Jack Hamilton

Fight Night

Wilder Fight Night
Saturday 7th February
Oxford Town Hall

Dance

Dance Varsity 2026
Saturday 21st February
Leys School, Cambridge
President: Ruby Suss-Francksen

MATCH OF THE WEEK

OURFC Blues obliterate the Tabs ahead of Varsity in a much-anticipated clash

With a record of 5-0 compared to the other side's meager 3-0, the Blues' trip to Cambridge last Wednesday was a heavyweight clash potentially for the league, in a great preview to the upcoming varsity fixture. Ultimately, it was no contest. The mighty dark blues went marching on, bowling over their counterparts 20-6 in a match that is surely promising for varsity. Now with as many points as the next two teams in the league combined, promotion is all but guaranteed for this dogged side.

BELOW THE SURFACE

OUCC dig deep in the Peak District

At the end of Week 2, OUCC (Oxford University Caving Club) took to the Peak District to explore nearby caving systems: the cavers ventured to a cottage – owned by Orpheus Caving Club – that was not only some 20 miles away from the Castleton caving area, but also within reach of the Monyash, Lathkill Dale, and Manifold Valley caving systems. The next outing – at the end of Week 4 – will see OUCC venture to South Wales – a regular location for the university society – to explore the OFD cave system near Penwyllt.

OUTSIDE OXFORD

Alcaraz completes record-breaking Career Slam

22-year-old world number one Carlos Alcaraz recovered from a set down in his maiden Melbourne final to become the youngest man to complete a career grand slam and deny Novak Djokovic from becoming the oldest grand slam champion in the open era. The victory answers doubts that followed Alcaraz's recent split with longtime coach Juan Carlos Ferrero, as the Spaniard joins an elite group of eight men who won all four major titles in history.

BUCS SUCCESS

Oxford University Cross Country Club secure historic win at the BUCS Championships

Oxford University Cross Country showed out on the national stage this weekend at BUCS Cross Country Championships. A team gold for the Men's A race saw the first men's win since 1970. In the Women's A race, Oxford took bronze as the third highest scoring university overall. OUCCC displayed a dominant performance over the rest of the UK, ranking in the top three universities overall after persistently tough competitors Loughborough and Birmingham. Special mentions go to Jared Ward in 1st place, and Rebecca Flaherty (5th) and Christopher Parker (6th).

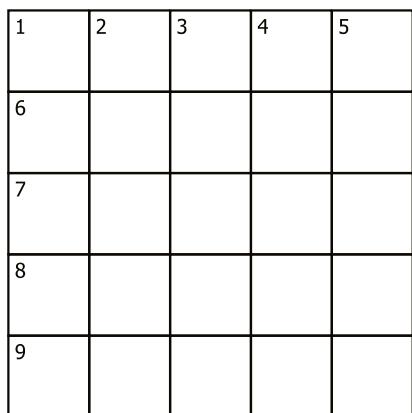
Going to watch a Varsity or Cuppers match?

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

Puzzles

A Little Off The Top by ZOË MCGUIRE

The answer to this puzzle is a seven letter English word.



ACROSS:

1) Rural, backwoodsy (+1)
 6) Where you might find Nitrogen, Oxygen, or Argon (+1)
 7) Well-known and liked (+2)
 8) Smelled, as wine
 9) Spook

1) Cosmic belt (+1)
 2) A smidgen, in Spain (+1)
 3) American patriotic chant (+1)
 4) One decorating a bathroom, perhaps
 5) Angry rant (+1)

DOWN:

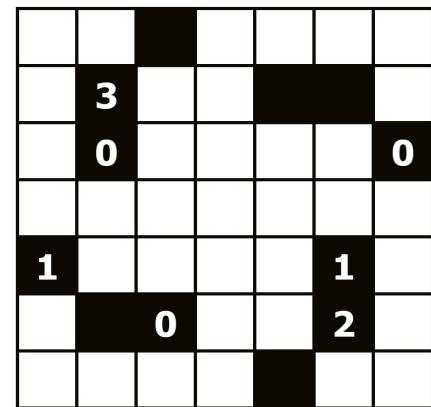
Connections by NAT ELDER

Can you identify what links the entries in each case?

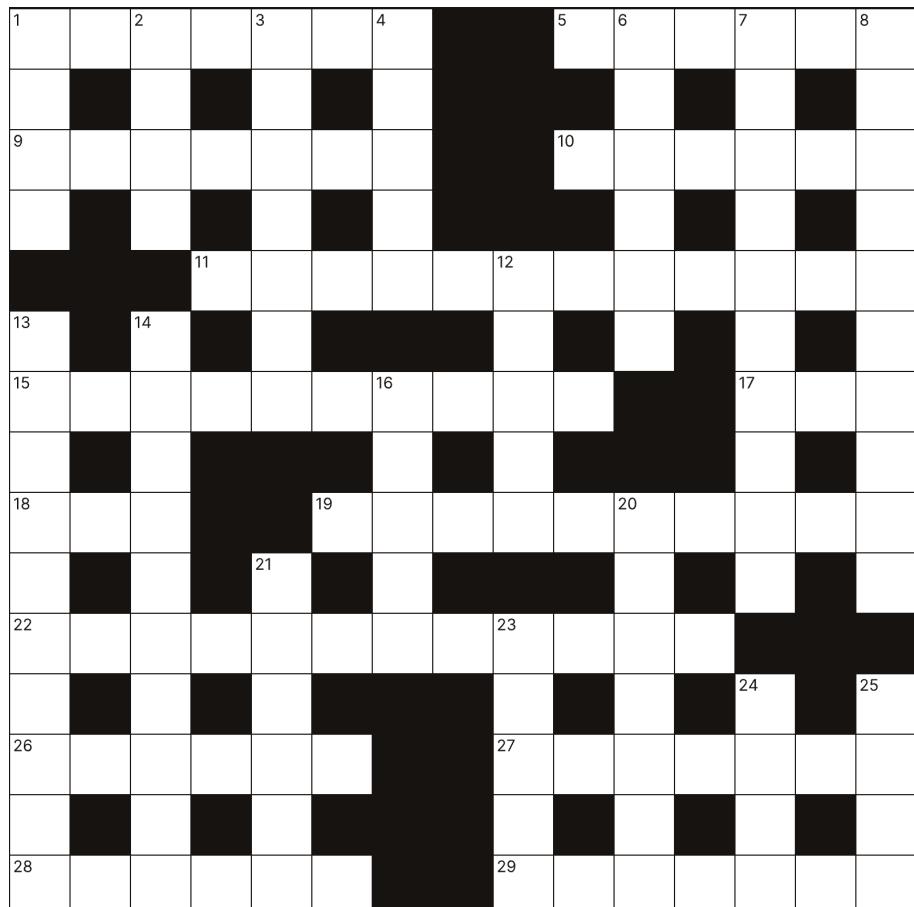
- 1) Yes (0); The Cure (1); The Beatles (2); Arctic Monkeys (3)
- 2) Butterflies; Corkscrews; Little Ribbons; Shells
- 3) Winkel Tripel; Cassini; Orthographic; Dymaxion
- 4) Scar; Cain; Romulus; Claudius
- 5) Citra; Mosaic; Fuggle; Cascade
- 6) Dove (1993); Collins (2001); Trethewey (2012); Limón (2022)
- 7) eta; iff; supset; simeq
- 8) Oxygen (948); Beeswax (901); Talc (533b); Lecithin (322)
- 9) Pin; FTSE; Tolkein setting; Tolkein novel; Pac-Man ghost
- 10) Azote; Wolfram; Alabamine; Niton

Akari by ZOË MCGUIRE

Place light bulbs to fully illuminate the grid. Numbers in black squares show how many light bulbs are orthogonally adjacent to them. Light bulbs illuminate their row and column unless blocked by a black square, and no bulb may illuminate another.



Cryptic Crossword by NAT ELDER



Difficulty: 3/5

ACROSS

1) Partially dissent official and get shown the red card (4, 3)
 5) Material that's fabulous and endlessly opulent (5)
 9) Note after regular harmonies central to occasional memory loss (7)
 10) Outside of term time, you two basically manage nothing! (6)
 11) Friend embraces Conservative monarch, or beginning disruption of social hierarchy (7, 5)
 15) Hopeful to ship undergraduate into schooling (10)
 17) No head of hair results in ghosting (3)
 18) Fault produced by Sinner in semi? (3)
 19) Alpine rally cut short, chaos at the same time (2, 8)
 22) Frenzied captain, coked up (6-6)
 26) Editor begins disapproval with thousand small texts on tablet (1-5)
 27) Adrian begins suggesting radical alternative to degrees (7)
 28) Refuse gentleman smuggling drug, leads to more probing (6)

29) Misery for Svitolina, disheartened by relay backfiring and Sabalenka's lead (7)

DOWN

1) Second place to serve (4)
 2) Condemnation in editor's extract about limit of sudokus? (4)
 3) Seafood and soy mixture with side of fritters (7)
 4) I gather money in Swiss Open? (5)
 6) No end of shock about 26 creator (6)
 7) Series opener of Traitors able to get Claudia going in circles (5, 5)
 8) Went to artist before turn to phone gallery (6, 4)
 12) Hidden assassin in Japan (5)
 13) Perhaps "crab" is a curse Nat muffled after beginning Cryptic (10)
 14) Outrageous transaction is timeless Oxford tradition (10)
 16) Control over period of preparation (3, 2)
 20) The last word and date editor fixed (7)
 21) Male chocolate dog? (6)
 23) Regularly acquire large and small rings (5)
 24) Late edit to story (4)
 25) Oxford magazine provides tidy commission - uncommon! (4)

Week 1 Answers:

Skippy Synonyms: SPRIGHTLY (SPRY); PROPORTIONATE (PRORATE); RAUNCHY (RACY); ISOLATED (SOLE); NOURISHED (NURSED); GIGANTIC (GIANT); TRIBUNAL (TRIAL); IMPOSTER (POSER); MANOUVRE (MOVE); ENTWINED (TIED); SPRING TIME

Cryptic: Across: SANGRIA, SOILING, AMONG, HIGH TABLE, OFFICER, SKILLS, PAIN IN THE NECK, AMBLED, LEAFLET, ROYAL BLUE, MACHO, DYNASTY, GLIMPSE. Down: UNDO, TRAGIC, GATHERING, MISTAKEN, DIABOLICAL, SHADOW, SAGA, GREASY, FLAMBOYANT, CHALLENGE, NEEDLESS, SACRED, STOOGE, ARMPIT, PLOY, CAPE.