

The long-awaited 2026 BNOC List

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Oxford Union under scrutiny as term's controversies reach national media

Oxford law academic cancels series on sex and gender following protests

ANISHA MOHAMMED

Dr Michael Foran, Associate Professor of Law and Fellow of Keble College, has cancelled the remaining lectures in a series on sex, gender identity, and the law, following protests at two of the events.

The lecture series, hosted by Keble College, examined themes from Foran's recent book *Sex, Gender Identity and the Law*. Topics included the legal treatment of sex, single-sex spaces, and gender-identity beliefs, and sexual consent.

Foran is an expert in equality and anti-discrimination law, whose work has been cited by the UK Supreme Court. His lecture series was delivered alongside the publication of his book, which traces the history of how sex has changed within UK law, and its implications for ongoing controversies over single-sex spaces, freedom of expression, and sexual intimacy. Protesters said his positions on sex and gender identity, and his associations with certain campaign groups, motivated their demonstrations. They told *Cherwell*: "We have a moral responsibility to challenge transphobic rhetoric, even when it's dressed up in academia."

The protesters also argued that Foran's associations with organisations such as Sex Matters and the Women's Rights Network, which they described as working to "erode the rights of trans people", made his platforming by the University a harmful rather than neutral act. They further argued, in a statement shared online, that his work "weaponises the language of feminism to pit women's rights against trans rights".

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BEATRIX ARNOLD and
MERCEDES HAAS

The Oxford Union has faced sustained national media attention over the past two weeks following a series of controversies involving its president, Arwa Elrayess, and the society's annual ball.

The society recently gained the attention of the national press on 28th May, when *The Telegraph* reported that the Union's Trinity Term ball, themed around Al Andalus, had partnered with the Palestinian Forum in Britain (PFB). This has been public knowledge since the term card was released in April. The group's logo appeared prominently on promotional material for the event, with the PFB providing dabke dance classes as part of the entertainment.

The PFB, *The Telegraph* reported, has links to Zaher Birawi, a pro-Palestine activist who helped to

organise the June 2025 Gaza Freedom Flotilla. In 2013, Birawi was labelled a ' Hamas operative ' by the Israeli government. Birawi has repeatedly denied the allegations and has successfully sued World-Check for falsely designating him as a terrorist. There is no evidence that Birawi has any links to Hamas.

The Telegraph coverage made much of the fact that Elrayess, the first Palestinian and first Arab woman to have been elected President of the Oxford Union, has been pictured shaking hands with Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian ambassador to the UK.

Days later, on 2nd June, *The Telegraph* published leaked WhatsApp messages in which Elrayess, writing in a private group of around 100 prospective PPE students in September last year, invoked the principle of proportionality in relation to Hamas. She further cited the historical pattern whereby resistance movements deemed terrorists during their time are later on often "lauded as

heroes". The national media coverage, which went beyond *The Telegraph* to include *The Times* and the BBC, has focused on these selected parts of her messages, suggesting that Elrayess had described Hamas directly as "heroes".

Elrayess, writing in an opinion piece for *Cherwell*, said: "The blatant misrepresentation of my words by those in the national press who are responsible for reporting truthfully shows a clear lack of journalistic integrity. Explanation and endorsement are not synonyms. Yet when Palestinians speak publicly, they are often treated as though they are."

"The result is a standard under which Palestinians are permitted to speak only if they preemptively defend themselves against interpretations they never intended. I have no interest in doing that."

The leaked messages prompted calls for her resignation from Oxford Students Against Discrimination, the

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Protest held outside Linacre College over allegations of racism towards ex-employee

STANLEY ARLIDGE and
HATTIE SIMPSON

A protest took place outside Linacre College on Monday evening in support of a former kitchen worker who has brought an employment tribunal claim against the college over allegations of racism, bullying, and unsafe working conditions.

Around 60 people gathered outside the college from 5.30pm, holding signs reading "Justice for Joe" and "I stand with Joe". Protesters also chanted "shame" towards the college.

The protest followed allegations concerning a former employee, known as "Joe" for the tribunal, who worked at the college for 26 years. Joe has alleged that a manager referred to him using racist language, mocked his Caribbean accent, and attempted to force him out of his job. He also claims that he was required to wear unsuitable footwear, and alleges that this contributed to him developing gangrene, which ultimately resulted in the amputation of his leg. Joe also claims that a senior member of staff visited him whilst in hospital, pulled the sheet back from his leg and said, "I want to see if it is true that your leg has been amputated". An employment tribunal is due to consider the case later this month.

Linacre College has strongly denied the allegations. In an email sent to college members ahead of the protest, and shared with *Cherwell*, Principal Dr Nick Leimu-Brown described the allegations as "extremely serious" but said that the College "rejects those allegations and disputes the claims that have been made". Leimu-Brown also wrote: "The demonstration has been organised under the slogan 'Justice for Joe'. Whatever views individuals may

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Hasan Piker and Cenk Uygur denied entry to UK days before Oxford Union and Oxford Speaks events

HATTIE SIMPSON

Cenk Uygur and Hasan Piker, both due to speak at the Oxford Union last week, have been barred from entering the UK after the Home Office revoked their Electronic Travel Authorisations (ETAs).

Uygur and Piker had been scheduled to appear for an event advertised as “Joint Event & Student Head-to-Head” at the Union on 6th June. Both were also due to take part in events at South by Southwest London (SXSW), a music, film, and technology festival. Uygur was additionally expected to speak this term at an event hosted by Oxford Speaks.

Uygur is the founder and host of *The Young Turks*, an online news and politics talk show. Piker, Uygur’s nephew, is one of the most followed political livestreamers worldwide, with millions of followers across Twitch, YouTube, and X. Both are prominent figures in online left-wing commentary, particularly through their criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza.

Uygur announced the decision on X, writing: “I’ve been banned from the UK. I tried to get on a flight to London to attend SXSW London and give a speech at Oxford. I’ve been banned for criticising Israel. Are we free anymore? This is oppression of Western citizens by our own governments on behalf of a different country!”

In a video published on *The Young Turks* channel, Uygur added that he currently holds a two-year visa, which he understands to have been revoked, and described the decision as “a bit of a gut punch”.

Responding to Uygur’s tweet, Piker said that his authorisation had also been revoked, writing: “The UK has revoked my visa as well. all at the behest of Israel.” He also claimed that the decision reflected a broader abandonment of “liberal values” by Western governments.

A Home Office spokesperson told *The Guardian* that the pair’s ETAs had been cancelled because their presence in the UK “may not be conducive to the public good”. The spokesperson added that such decisions are based on assessments of the risk an individual may pose to society.

According to *The Times*, concerns were raised by the Home Office about Uygur’s previous comments on Israel. The newspaper reported that the Home Office decision is understood to have been based on concerns that his presence could exacerbate antisemitism. *The Times* coverage also cited concerns regarding comments Uygur had made about grooming gang scandals in the UK.

Oxford Union President Arwa Elrayess told *Cherwell* that the Union was “deeply concerned” by the revocation of the speakers’ ETAs. She described the timing of the decision as “troubling” given that the event had been “publicly announced for months”. Elrayess added that the Union was founded on the principle that “ideas should be challenged through debate, not ignored or silenced”, and argued that invited speakers should be able to express their views and be challenged by members “irrespective of political viewpoint”.

Elrayess also told *Cherwell* that the Union would “not allow this event to be shut down”, and is exploring alternative options for the event, including hosting it online, and said the society remains “steadfast in its commitment to open debate”.

The decision follows criticism of both speakers from politicians and campaign groups. Last week, Labour MP David Taylor called for Piker to be prevented from speaking in the UK, and added in a tweet shared this morning: “Thank you Home Secretary for revoking Hasan Piker’s visa. There’s no reason to open our doors to those who seek to spread hate and division, especially to those who’ve supported a proscribed terror group.”

The Community Security Trust (CST), a charity which provides physical security, training, and advice to protect British Jews, also urged organisers of SXSW London not to provide Piker with a platform. CST accused him of “promoting rhetoric that includes antisemitic themes, denial of well-documented atrocities and apparent support for extremist groups”.

Piker has also faced criticism for a number of previous remarks. In 2019, he apologised after saying that “America deserved 9/11”, later describing the comments as inappropriate. He has also been criticised for comments about Hamas and Israel, including saying that he “would vote for Hamas over Israel every single time” on an episode of *Pod Save America*. Piker has repeatedly denied accusations of antisemitism, describing himself as anti-Israel rather than antisemitic.

The decision also comes amid ongoing controversy over speakers invited to the Oxford Union. Earlier this term, Carl Benjamin was disinvited from a Union debate following objections from student groups. Far-right figures such as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon and Laurence Fox are also due to speak at an event later in the term, which has incurred significant backlash from across the University and the Oxford community.

Image credit: Poisonwithahawkseye, CC BY 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



Oxford Union under scrutiny as term’s controversies reach national media

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Campaign Against Antisemitism, and others. Oxford University distanced itself from the controversy, noting that the Union is an independent society and that “views attributed to members of the union should not be taken as representative of the University or Oxford students more broadly”.

The coverage was accompanied by a *Telegraph* opinion piece by former *Jewish Chronicle* editor Jake Wallis Simons, and a news report citing a Higher Education Policy Institute survey which found that 28% of undergraduates considered the 7th October attacks “defensible”, compared with 5% of the general public in a separate YouGov poll. Wallis Simons linked the controversy to the Union’s invitation of the left-wing political activists Cenk Uygur and Hasan Piker, and claimed that this amounted to a culture of “dangerous radicalism”.

Last week, the *Daily Mail* claimed that the Oxford Union has become “a seething cauldron of anti-Semitism”. The article cites the presence of “Islamic prayer mats” as evidence that the Union is trying “to encourage public Muslim worship”. The Al Andalus-themed ball was referenced to show that “even downtime is politicised”.

On 6th June, *The Telegraph* published an article focusing on the alleged experience of Ben Ashworth, a second-year history student and Union member. Ashworth, who is not Jewish, claimed to *The Telegraph* that he had been “the victim of an anti-Semitic smear campaign”, which resulted in him being dropped from an electoral pact during his candidacy for Union secretary.

Last January, Ashworth, along with other students from the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, travelled to Israel on a “fact-finding trip” organised by the Pinsker Centre, a pro-Israel think tank with strong Zionist sympathies. When posts about his trip began to circulate on social media, Ashworth filed an unsuccessful complaint with the Union against two students for “harassment, bullying, or victimisation”. Ashworth told *The Telegraph*: “The Union needs to have a serious reckoning with the crisis of anti-Semitism that it has allowed to fester”, and characterised the debating society as “a breeding ground for anti-Jewish hatred and movements aimed at destroying the Jewish state.”

Following the controversy incurred by the leaked group chat messages, a motion of no confidence was moved against Elrayess by Ashworth on 4th June. The motion required 150 valid

signatures within 48 hours of being posted. After it received only 10 physical signatures and 106 digital signatures, the motion failed to pass.

On the same day, a motion was brought in the chamber by Alex Evans, the Union’s LGBTQIA+ Officer, that the President disinvite Stephen Yaxley-Lennon and Laurence Fox. The far-right figures are scheduled to speak at a debate on the motion ‘The House believes the West is right to be suspicious of Islam’, now set to take place in Week 8 on Wednesday, 17th June. The high-profile invitation has been the subject of extensive national attention since it was announced.

Speaking against the motion, Elrayess told members that the issue was “bigger than Tommy Robinson and Laurence Fox”. She said that the role of the Oxford Union as “a free speech society” was “not to platform views uncritically but to subject them to the most rigorous scrutiny.” The motion was brought to a vote by acclamation in the chamber, and failed to pass.

In a statement posted on the Oxford Union’s Instagram, Elrayess said: “I am delighted to see that our members continue to uphold the central principle of free speech that this Society was built upon.”

Image credit: Beatrix Arnold, for Cherwell.



Protest held outside Linacre College over allegations of racism towards ex-employee

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hold about the case, I hope we can all agree that genuine justice depends upon a fair and independent hearing of the evidence. I would encourage everyone involved to respect the legal process that is already underway. Justice is never served by heated argument on social media”. He added that the matter was subject to ongoing legal proceedings and that “the truth of the claims are for an Employment Tribunal to determine”.

Linacre has also previously emphasised the College’s commitment to diversity and maintaining an inclusive working environment for all staff, which doesn’t tolerate racism or discrimination.

Several speakers addressed the crowd during the protest. One of the speakers was Professor Gus John, a race equality campaigner who studied at Oxford. Addressing the crowd, John described Joe’s alleged treatment as “a form of lynching” and argued that “racism kills and it kills instantly and it kills slowly”. He told protesters that Joe’s experience represented “a slow and deliberate lynching”.

John also told *Cherwell* that it was “absolutely appalling that a university college could be treating an employee in this way” and argued that it was “absolutely essential that we understand how long we’ve been on this road in our struggle against racism”. He also called

for campaigners to remain “committed for the long haul”.

The organiser, Dan, told *Cherwell* that the protest served two purposes: to show that “the community is behind you”, and to send a message that “the community is watching” the College. He added that Linacre should “acknowledge, apologise, and atone for the harm they have done to Joe” and provide compensation if the allegations are upheld.

Geoff Taylor, a retired teacher at St Clare’s in Summertown and UCU member, said he had attended because of the “abominable treatment of Joe”, and repeated the trade union principle that “an injury to one is an injury to all”. Carole Scott from Oxford Stand Up to Racism told *Cherwell* that campaigners “have to stand in solidarity with those who have suffered racist abuse”.

Multiple speakers also criticised the lack of action from Joe’s union, UNISON, in providing legal support in the tribunal. In his speech, Professor John described a lack of support for Black workers from parts of the trade union movement, labelling UNISON as “a disgrace” and arguing that it was “ignoring the humanity of it all”. *Cherwell* has been unable to verify these claims of incorrect handling of the case within UNISON and discriminatory treatment by the union. UNISON refused to comment to *Cherwell*, “as this is still an active case with ongoing proceedings”.

Several attendees also said they planned to raise Joe’s case within their local branches. Peter Cann, a retired member of the National Union of Journalists and UNISON, told *Cherwell* that he would be calling on both his NUJ branch and local UNISON branches to condemn what he described as an “appalling act”, and said he would ask his UNISON branch to examine the role of union officials in Joe’s case.

The demonstration was also attended by multiple local councillors. Oxford City Councillor for Holywell (the ward that Linacre sits in), Dr Dianne Regisford, told *Cherwell* she was there to show “support and solidarity” and was calling for “a full investigation into the allegations”. Oxfordshire County Councillor for Linacre Emma Garnett also described the allegations as “absolutely horrific”.

Very few students were in attendance at the protest, but one told *Cherwell* that she was “standing in solidarity with Joe” and wanted to ensure that more students were aware of the issue and “how relevant it is to us as participants in the institution”. Otilia, a Linacre student attending the protest, told *Cherwell* that she hoped students within the college would consider what action they could take, adding that this case conflicted with Linacre’s public commitment to diversity.

Image credit: Hattie Simpson, for Cherwell.

Transgender rights protest in central Oxford following updated EHRC guidance

CHERWELL NEWS

A march took place this afternoon in central Oxford in support of transgender rights, after a new Code of Practice was introduced by the UK’s Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

The march, organised by Oxford for Trans Rights, began in Bonn Square around 3pm with a series of speeches, before heading around the city centre at 4pm and ending outside Oxford Magistrates Court at 5pm for closing addresses. Over 200 people took part, with representatives from the Oxford Green Party, the Oxford Liberal Democrats, and the Socialist Worker Party present, and members of the Unison and Unite trade unions also in attendance.

A protester from Oxford for Trans Rights told *Cherwell*: “We’re out here protesting the rollback of trans rights in the UK and the new EHRC guidance that’s been brought before Parliament that’s blatantly discriminatory.” They accused the EHRC of working “hand in hand with gender critical organisations who are pushing for our erasure” and urged people to contact their MPs, arguing that the draft guidance has received “a complete lack of reaction from the Labour government”.

The march came after the EHRC updated its guidance on the 21st May in light of last year’s Supreme Court ruling in *For Women Scotland vs The Scottish Ministers*, which ruled that the terms “sex”, “woman”, and “man” in the Equalities Act referred to “biological sex”. The new draft guidance now states that transgender men, including those with a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), are legally women, and trans women with a GRC are legally men.

Speaking at the rally in Bonn Square, speakers repeatedly criticised the guidance and the Supreme Court ruling. One speaker told protesters: “We have the science to back us up, we are real, we are valid, and we are not going anywhere”. Another speaker argued that the guidance could leave transgender people excluded from public life, warning, “We could be defined out of access”. Others urged demonstration to remain hopeful despite recent developments, telling the crowd, “We must be forward-thinking and remain hopeful”.

Chants at the demonstration and on the march included “Trans rights, women’s rights, one struggle, one fight”; “pack it up, pack it in, throw the guidance in the bin”; and “no LGB without the T”. They also called out former Health Secretary Wes Streeting, Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and Labour MP for Oxford East, Anneliese Dodds.

The updated Code has forced universities to review how facilities, including accommodation, toilets, and changing rooms can be used once the guidance is formally approved. In a previous statement, a University spokesperson told *Cherwell* that “the University is reviewing the updated Code carefully to ensure we conduct our activities within the parameters of the law, and in accordance with our values... Oxford remains committed to being an inclusive university where everyone belongs and is supported to succeed”. The Oxford Student Union also published a statement on Instagram affirming their commitment to “protecting the rights, safety, dignity and wellbeing” of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex students across the University.

Jessica Weavers-Medina, the University’s elected representative for trans staff, told *Cherwell* at the protest

that “an enormous amount of staff have reached out in the past week” following the guidance. She added that “the concern, the pain, the fear is significant, and we need to take action”, adding that staff were worried about their ability to “come into work and keep their dignity”.

Representatives from the Green Party and Liberal Democrats were also at the protest. Green City Councillor for Holywell, Alfie Davis, told *Cherwell* they attended “to resist the awful guidance that’s been imposed” and explained that the changes would affect council-run services, including public toilets and leisure centres. They added that Oxford Green Party councillors had agreed to support a Labour-led administration on the understanding that the guidance would be implemented “as trans inclusive as possible” and in a way that would “minimise harm” to affected. They also urged the University to take a robust approach when reviewing its policies, telling *Cherwell*: “We need to make sure the University doesn’t cave in”.

Lib Dem City Councillor for Headington, also addressed the University’s review of its procedures, telling *Cherwell* that, whilst Oxford was being “boxed in by the government to some extent”, it should “use that clout, use that power as much as you can to do the very, very best for your trans members”.

At around 3.45pm, violence broke out after a man started shouting and disrupting the demonstrators during a group photo. He returned to pick up a dropped mobile phone and punched multiple transgender rights demonstrators. Another individual shouted, “there’s no such thing as transgenderism”, and followed the march to its finish point.

Three police officers and a police van

were also present at the end of the protest outside the courthouse, which is opposite the police station.

The protest was followed by a post-march picnic in “solidarity with trans rowers” on the last day of Summer XLIIs, after changes last month to Oxford University Rowing Clubs’ (OURCs) Rules of Racing, which now mean only athletes assigned female at birth may row in a Women’s boat, at both inter-collegiate and university-level competitions, including this year’s Summer XLIIs. The change came after OURCs had to align their inclusion policy with British Rowing, which has advised since September 2023 that only people assigned female at birth will be eligible to compete in the Women’s category.

The changes to OURCs’ Rules of Racing provoked condemnation from college rowing clubs, with 49 college rowing club captains voting against the rule change at an informal vote in a Captain’s meeting, with only one voting in favour. In a statement on Instagram, Wadham College Boat Club described the changes as “disproportionate, discriminatory, and impossible to enforce”, whilst Somerville College Boat Club wrote that they were “deeply saddened by the recent rule change...which threatens our long-standing values of inclusivity and friendship”. The Oxford University LGBTQ+ Soc President previously told *Cherwell* they did not see the EHRC guidance changes and the updated Code of Practice for OURCs as “unrelated events”. Speakers at the protest also expressed support for rowers affected by the changes to the Rules of Racing, with one speaker telling the crowd, “Let trans athletes thrive, solidarity with the Oxford rowers”.

Additional reporting by Siyeon Lee, Ned Remington, and Hattie Simpson.

Mansfield College redevelopment plans approved by City Council

ANGELINA WU

Oxford City Council unanimously approved Mansfield College’s development plans on Tuesday, 26th May. The project, known as the Estate Transformation Project, will be delivered by architects Feilden Fowles. Mansfield told *Cherwell* that the development would “provide students and the College with up-to-date facilities they need for generations to come”.

The John Marsh Building has been approved for demolition, and will be replaced by a four-storey building containing 174 en-suite bedrooms. This will increase the number of student rooms on the college site by 70, from the current 104.

Development will be concentrated in a new South Range, which will include additional academic, social, and work spaces. A new entrance garden on Mansfield Road will replace the existing car park, while a new Porter’s Lodge gatehouse will be set back from the street. The college’s new Junior Common Room will also be located in the South Range, described as a “centre of daily life”.

The new buildings are intended to act as a “contemporary counterpart” to the existing Grade II*-listed North Range, which will in turn see redevelopments of its own – the project is expected to “not only provide high-performance new buildings, but also improve the existing listed building fabric”.

The proposals include new green spaces across the site, including a second quad, a new garden quad, a publicly accessible pocket park, and new site-wide landscape design. The College also plans to reduce carbon emissions through “low carbon design and energy-efficient systems”, as part of its target to reach net zero carbon by 2050. Mansfield told *Cherwell* that

“the project will cut Mansfield’s carbon emissions by over 40%”. Building stone from the existing John Marsh Building, and other buildings set for demolition, will be recycled in both the new South Range and landscaping elements.

Alongside the approved proposals, Mansfield College is also bringing forward plans for its historic Champneys buildings. Oxford City Council will be considering applications to build a three-story extension with a lift to the Chapney’s building, improving access to the library.

As part of the demolitions, the College’s WWII bomb shelter will be removed from the side of the Champney’s building. Oxford Preservation Trust stated that “the WW2 history of the college will be reflected in the proposed interpretation plaque”.

Mansfield College says it aims to minimise disruption during construction. Mansfield told *Cherwell*: “College life will continue as normally as possible, with the majority of student and academic activity concentrated in the main Champneys buildings and the Hands Building”. Student representatives have been involved through the planning and design process, providing feedback on the layout of facilities. The College has also said that meals will be subsidised during the construction period, and that it will work alongside the JCR and MCR to maintain college activities.

Construction is expected to begin later this summer, with the project scheduled for completion before the start of the 2029/30 academic year. Helen Mountfield KC, Principal of Mansfield College, described the plans as “the most significant transformation of the College estate since it moved to central Oxford from Birmingham”.

Image Credit: Medarduss, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



NEWS SHORTS

Spell bound

A bookshop devoted exclusively to ‘Romantasy’ has opened in Jericho. Bad Girl Books sells only fantasy-romance novels, a genre that has exploded in popularity online. Although unlikely to feature on any Finals reading list, the shop provides Oxford residents with a convenient source of magical kingdoms, ancient prophecies, and suspiciously attractive fae.

Winging it

An Oxford study has found that masturbation in birds is a natural behaviour, challenging the belief that it results from captivity or unnatural living conditions. Some owners have previously sought to discourage or punish the behaviour. The findings suggest, however, that birds are simply following their instincts – so owners may be best advised to let them wing it!

Not so secret service

Ed Davey, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, has claimed he was approached by MI6 while studying PPE at Jesus College, Oxford. Davey said he eventually turned the offer down because he “wouldn’t have made a good spy”. His near-recruitment marks yet another career path gone wrong for a PPE graduate with high hopes...

Lost cause

Oxfordshire Patriots, a far-right political group, caused confusion after sharing Facebook posts inviting residents to a protest in “Bonfire Square” – a location that doesn’t actually exist. The error was likely an autocorrection from Bonn Square, where protests have previously been held. The poster did note that “locations may change”, though few expected the venue to disappear entirely. Once again, the far right found itself with nowhere to rally.

CROSS CAMPUS

The wheel deal

The “first cycle street” in Cambridge has opened on Adam’s Road, giving cyclists and pedestrians priority over motor vehicles. The scheme has sparked controversy, with some residents questioning whether it can truly be described as the “first cycle street”, and others debating whether it is a waste of money or a fitting tribute to the city’s cycling heritage.

Block party

MIT hackers have revived their Green Building Tetris hack after a ten-year hiatus, transforming 153 windows into a giant playable screen for Campus Preview Weekend. Rebuilt over four months and costing around \$30,000, the display also featured additional animations. The project attracted widespread attention on campus and online, cementing its status as one of MIT’s most recognisable student engineering traditions.

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

MELISSA EDDON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sexual harassment more widespread at selective universities

BARNABY CARTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

delivered by student facilitators.

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

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

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

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

Image credit: Hattie Simpson for Cherwell.

Physics teaching to relocate amid asbestos concerns

OSKAR DOEPKE

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

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

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

'Asbestos' refers to several naturally

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

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

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

Image Credit: Hattie Simpson for Cherwell.



Facial recognition cameras deployed by police in Oxford

BARNABY CARTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





Nine colleges indirectly invest in Campsfield immigration centre

FAYE CHANG

At least nine Oxford colleges invest indirectly in Mitie Group Plc, an outsourcing company whose subsidiary runs Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) in Kidlington, Oxfordshire, a joint investigation between Oxford Student Action for Refugees (STAR) and *Cherwell* can reveal.

According to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, Balliol, Exeter, Hertford, Pembroke, Queen's, St Edmund Hall, St John's, and Wadham invest in funds which hold shares in Mitie. Although Christ Church did not provide specific information in response to the FOI request, *Cherwell* and STAR found the college also invests indirectly in Mitie, based on an email circulated to Christ Church students in 2025 and shared by the Oxford Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) Coalition.

These investments are spread across ten investment funds, identified as holding shares in Mitie through analysis of their 2024-2025 annual reports. The total value of these funds' investments in Mitie is £37.6 million, equivalent to over 1.5% of the company's overall market capitalisation.

Vanguard FTSE UK All Share Index Trust, which Pembroke uses, invests the largest amount in Mitie at £11.5 million. The BlackRock Smaller Companies fund, used by Christ Church, invests £10.2 million.

Notably, these figures refer to the overall amount that these funds invest in Mitie, not just the amount from Oxford colleges. Exact estimates of how much individual colleges invested indirectly in Mitie were difficult to obtain, as colleges did not disclose the total amount they held in these funds.

Other funds used by colleges which hold shares in Mitie are Vanguard's ESG Screened Developed World Fund, ESG Developed World All Cap Equity Index Fund, Total World Stock ETF, Global Small Cap Index Fund, and Charities UK Equities index; BlackRock's iShares FTSE 250 Fund; Henderson Smaller

Companies; and Legal & General UK Index Trust.

Mitie and Campsfield IRC

Mitie Care & Custody Limited (Mitie), a subsidiary of Mitie Group Plc, had previously run the Campsfield IRC from 2011 to its first closure in 2018. In 2025, the Home Office awarded Mitie a £140m contract to operate the centre again, with plans to more than double the facility's capacity submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. Mitie has also operated the merged Colnbrook and Harmondsworth IRCs since 2014 and the Dungeval IRC in Scotland since 2021.

Mitie has faced repeated scrutiny over the conditions in Campsfield. In 2011, a detainee committed suicide, and there were repeated mass hunger strikes in protest over living conditions. Another detainee attempted suicide in October 2013, leading to a major fire, after which it transpired that Mitie had not installed sprinklers in the facility at the time.

Inspectors to the Harmondsworth IRC, another site run by Mitie, reported in July 2024 that the facility contained "the worst conditions they [had] ever seen in immigration detention", although an independent progress review in July 2025 noted that "substantial improvements" had been made since.

The Coalition to Close Campsfield (CCC), a group made up of local organisations based in Oxfordshire, including STAR, has campaigned against the reopening of Campsfield and plans for its further expansion. Liz Peretz, an organiser of CCC, told *Cherwell* that she was "not at all surprised that colleges" are indirectly invested in Mitie.

"It's a sound investment for them", she added. "It's government money, it's taxpayers' money, it's not going to go away." However, she told *Cherwell* that such investments in Mitie were "investing in people's misery".

Lack of transparency

Of the 32 undergraduate colleges that responded to the FOI requests, *Cherwell* and STAR could not confirm for 20 colleges whether the investment funds they used included Mitie shares in their

portfolio.

For eleven colleges, at least one of the funds used did not publish information online about holdings, including funds Cambridge Associates, Rathbones Group, Cazenove Capital, Hollyport, and Adams Street Partners. The colleges in this category were Brasenose, Corpus Christi, Harris Manchester, Keble, Mansfield, New, Oriel, St Hugh's, St Peter's, Somerville, and Worcester.

Three colleges – St Anne's, Trinity, and University – did not provide information on the specific funds through which they invested, although Trinity and University's could be obtained through the college's annual reports.

Five colleges – Lincoln, Lady Margaret Hall, Jesus, Oriel, and St Catherine's – invoked legal protections which made them exempt from disclosing commercially sensitive information in cases where disclosure would constitute a breach of confidence or prejudice their commercial interests.

However, Lady Margaret Hall told *Cherwell* and STAR that four exchange-traded funds (ETFs) made up 22.9% of its investment portfolio. Since Mitie is part of the FTSE 250 Index, the college added that it could have indirect exposure, which it estimated to be no more than "0.09% of its overall investment portfolio, which equates to c.£58k in monetary terms". As Lady Margaret Hall did not share which funds they used, *Cherwell* and STAR could not confirm if the college had exposure to Mitie at present or just potential exposure.

Merton and St Hilda's confirmed that they do not have any indirect investments in Mitie at present, although Merton noted that it held £4,698.20 in Mitie shares through an investment fund in 2022. Jesus and Magdalen confirmed that they do not invest in any relevant fund, although Magdalen previously invested through Vanguard Total World Stocks ETF.

Of the nine colleges *Cherwell* and STAR could confirm indirect investment in Mitie, the level of exposure varied. Exeter, for example, told *Cherwell* and STAR that Mitie's exposure in the Vanguard ESG Developed World All Cap Equity Index Fund is 0.0036%, meaning the College's "exposure to Mitie through the tracker is minimal at c.£6".

Pembroke, which invests in the Vanguard FTSE UK All Share Index Trust, told *Cherwell* and STAR: "Any investment we have in Mitie is only through indirect legacy passive investment vehicles, and

based on the information we have we understand any exposure we do have in Mitie and its subsidiaries would be a negligible part of our overall investments." St John's, meanwhile, which invests in the Vanguard Total World Stock ETF as part of its investment portfolio, told *Cherwell* and STAR that "all investments are made and monitored annually" by the college's responsible investment policy".

“Mitie has faced repeated scrutiny over the conditions in Campsfield. In 2011, a detainee committed suicide, and there were repeated mass hunger strikes

Ethical investment

Income from investment makes up a significant portion of Oxford colleges' revenue. In 2024-2025, Oxford colleges received £448 million from their investments, constituting 60% of their overall incoming resources for that academic year.

Alongside investment managers, a large portion of the University's and colleges' holdings is managed by Oxford University Endowment Management (OUem), a subsidiary of the University which specialises in managing charitable endowments. According to its 2025 report, OUem has more than £7 billion in assets under management, with at least 20 colleges investing through OUem, according to FOI requests by *Cherwell* and STAR.

As of 2026, Oxford maintains ethical investment restrictions against companies manufacturing certain types of arms, tobacco companies, fossil fuel exploration and extraction companies, and any funds which invest in any of these types of companies. Following a report by the Ethical Investment Representations Review Subcommittee in July 2025, commissioned by Oxford University Council in May 2024, the University committed to expanding its restrictions

to cover more weapon types. However, no equivalent investment restrictions in companies involved in the border industry, such as Mitie, exist.

In recent years, the University's investments have been under scrutiny. Work from the Oxford BDS Coalition and Middle East Eye showed that, as of October 2025, the University indirectly invested in at least 49 companies flagged by human rights organisations for their ties to illegal Israeli settlements, with the total value of these holdings coming to £19 million. The coalition could not obtain any data on the value of holdings under OUem due to the company's lack of response to FOIs. A tribunal in April 2025 upheld OUem's refusal to disclose the value of its holdings in three companies on the BDS divestment shortlist.

While the University's Investment Committee endorsed the EIRRS's recommendation to work with OUem and the University to enhance investment disclosure, it is unclear what action has been taken by the University. A University spokesperson told *Cherwell* and STAR that the University's Investment Committee and OUem will be publishing further information on the University's investments, which "will be available shortly".

Further, the University added that, as OUem invests in funds and not individual companies, "there are contractual limits" on what OUem can disclose as company positions.

Closing Campsfield

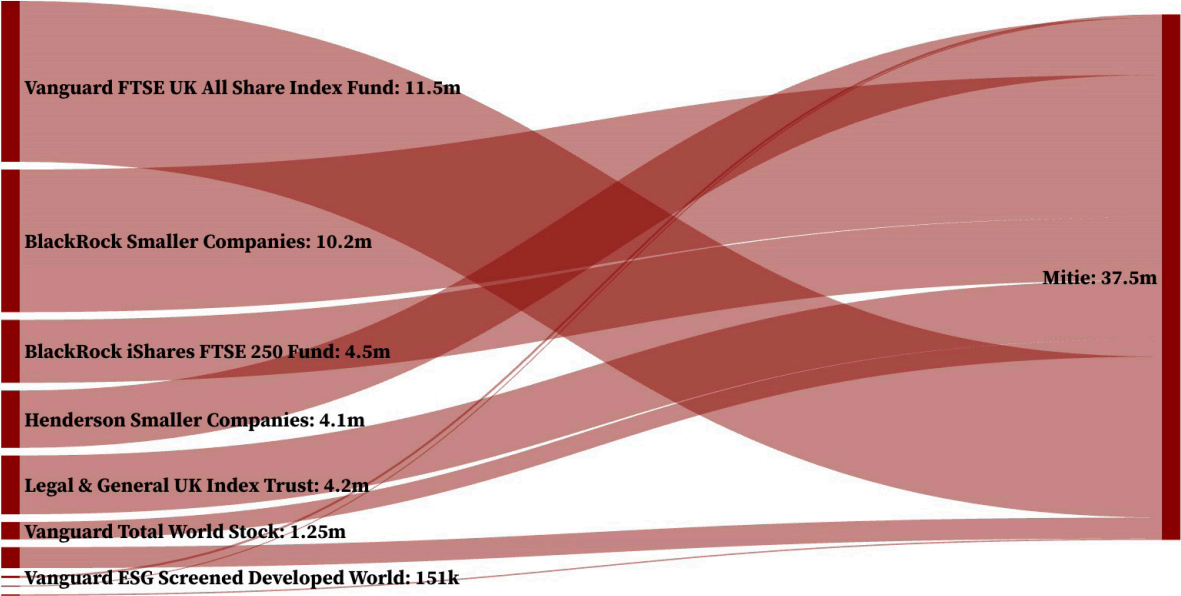
CCC has held demonstrations outside Campsfield IRC on the last Saturday of each month since December 2025, when the centre reopened. The most recent demonstration in May focused on Oxford colleges' investments in Mitie, as well as the low pay given to detainees in the IRC for cleaning and routine labour.

Still, members of the CCC campaign remain hopeful about the impact that the University and its colleges could have. Peretz told *Cherwell* and STAR: "The impact could be quite strong, especially if the colleges were prepared to say why they were divesting."

"[Mitie] likes to have good PR. They like to be seen as wonderful. And this is not a good look for them."

Balliol, Christ Church, Hertford, Queen's, St Edmund Hall, and Wadham were contacted for comment.

Image credit: Mercedes Haas for *Cherwell*.
Graph credit: Oskar Doepke.



By the numbers

£37.6m

indirectly invested in Mitie through funds by nine colleges

£140m

Home Office contract awarded to Mitie to reopen Campsfield IRC

20

colleges unable to confirm indirect investment in Mitie

£448m

in income colleges received from investments in 2024-25

Dear tourists, this is not the Black Country Living Museum

MORWENNA STINCHCOMBE

When you do prelims (or finals, mind), you begin to go a little insane. I certainly have; I can't stop muttering Old Norse to myself and saying the word "leaky". However, my most worthwhile burst of insanity came at the end of first year, as I waited for admittance to the Exam Schools tent. There was a woman standing on the steps of the neighbouring hotel, and I shouted, "Stop filming us!"; before a hench, bald man told me to "LEAVE HER ALONE!". Leave her alone? She needs to leave us alone! We are stressed, sweltering, and sodden with useless facts about Jeremy Bentham. We do not deserve to be treated like zoo animals.

I am fiendishly anti-tourism at the best of times. I was mildly disappointed, when, on the local election bumper edition of *Cherwell Spoken*, none of the candidates told me the obviously correct answer to questions about tourism in Oxford: they do not seem to know the walking speed necessary in a city, they intrude in our colleges, they think the University is a singular place, the city revolves around them and the students, and only one of us has actually had to put in hard graft to be here. Yet when it comes to exams, I have to take it up a notch. It is something about the masses waddling about in billowing (or stubby) gowns, looking like rosy-cheeked penguins, which attracts them. We are one better than Ms Crocombe or the Black Country Living Museum: we are history

brought to life, not for edutainment's sake, but because we are mired in the traditions of generations of students who came before us.

Yet the slack-jawed gawking of tourists, who see us as in the same category as an English Heritage actor, is actively disruptive to our work. Some of us have already endured all-nighters to try and cram the last whispers of revision in before our prelims or finals. Some of us are so anxious we are fit to burst into tears, faint, or worse, vomit (not unheard of).

Constantly being filmed and actively observed for another person's idle fancy is quite perturbing when you are facing an exam. Or, worse, the tourists may come up to you and bombard you with questions. This is, I admit, where I out-and-out lie. Why are we wearing black and white? "A dean died". Are the exams difficult? "Not if you do as much cocaine as I do". Why are you like this? "I'm not the one trying to interrogate someone before an exam".

It is true, this is hardly the most ethical approach to tourists in Oxford. Actively lying to them is some form of impoliteness, for sure. It treats tourism as a problem of individuals, rather than a problem of Oxford needing the tourists' money to stay afloat. Such hostility reeks of the Barcelona protesters who squirt tourists with water pistols; there are other cooks in the kitchen, other than the tourists, who want Oxford to stay as a tourism hub. Magdalen, although strict in where tourists can and cannot go, and therefore somewhat respecting students' privacy,

charges so much money for entry that tourism is very clearly a good racket for them. Some cities, such as Edinburgh, have started implementing a tourist tax: such a policy could be a boon for Oxford, which gets approximately £780 million / annum from tourism. This may also dissuade some people from coming to Oxford. Good riddance.

If we, as mere students, would be barking up the wrong tree to be actively hostile to tourists, perhaps instead the University and the City Council should carry some of the burden? Instead of the security at Exam Schools just being used to clear the way as hordes of relieved students flood out from their finals, the security could be just as well (if not better) used to tell tourists to finally stop blocking our routes, stop filming, and maintain a good distance from us. The City Council, too, could surely make it clear on social media what is expected of tourists to be respectful of the student population. This would, too, make a nice change from seemingly claiming that they simply can't do anything about the tourist tat / vape industry dominating Cornmarket.

Neither of these solutions is likely to come to fruition by the time that first years are doing their prelims. So we are left, unfortunately (or not: it is quite fun), to inconvenience tourists on our own account. You, fellow exam-sufferers, are not zoo animals. You are not actors at the Black Country Living Museum. You have exams to write, and deserve not to be filmed or irritated. And tourists ought to understand that.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

The importance of showing up

From its opening statements, I found Rebecca Bushee's article ("It takes a village, but no one wants to be a villager") to be consistently relatable. The rigmarole of plans cancelled last-minute, consistent rescheduling, and the rare occurrence of schedules actually aligning felt very familiar indeed. While I'm certainly not one to drop plans without good reason, my frustration at my own unavailability this term too, due to various commitments and finals exams, came to mind. It was the article's criticism of a "deep rooted individualism" that emerges from this, however, that was pertinent – while many of us are very busy, our generation, I agree, does appear to have a growing attitude of "protecting one's peace". This actually, bluntly put, can become a form of selfishness. The boundary between having to make sincere choices versus not feeling a sense of obligation or commitment towards others does appear to be blurred for many. Indeed, I agree that the important thing is effort; "we do owe it to others to try". The need for a sense of servitude and obligation towards others I believe stretches far beyond social efforts – it demonstrates an integrity and accountability that should be held throughout all aspects of life.

Elizabeth Millett, Music, *Hertford College*

A plea for all languages

Since moving away from Oxford city centre in my second year, I have come to really appreciate the linguistic diversity of Cowley Road. Within a few minutes' walk, it is refreshing to hear conversations in languages spoken thousands of miles apart, while the area's international shops and restaurants are enjoyed by people of all backgrounds and nationalities. Far from dividing communities, this diversity creates shared spaces. For this reason, I found Emma Heagney's article "The sound of belonging: Exclusion through language" particularly compelling.

As both a city and a nation, however, we continue to promote a double standard. Many people expect those arriving in Britain to speak fluent English, often treating language as a prerequisite for belonging. Yet where is that same expectation when we travel abroad?

As I prepare for my year abroad in Argentina, I am increasingly aware of my own linguistic limitations. The prospect has made me more sympathetic to those who arrive in Britain facing the same challenge. Learning a language takes time, and belonging should absolutely not be conditional upon perfect fluency. Quite the opposite: linguistic diversity is not a threat to community, it is what enriches it.

Leo Jones, English & Spanish, *The Queen's College*



Image credit: Archie Johnston for Cherwell.

Who gets to build the future: On tech bros

NANCY LOCKE

While scrolling through social media, a video appeared on my feed titled "Remember who you are, start-up boy", followed by a montage of clips of young Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. For many of us, when thinking about start-ups, the 'tech bros' image comes to mind. Perhaps images of drop-out Ivy League students in hoodies pouring over code, or clips from *The Social Network* flooding in.

Growing up in Silicon Valley, the birthplace of Apple and Google, I realised quickly that start-up culture was too often associated with the image of 'tech bros'. Exactly like the video on social media that I came across, not one of them represented 51% of the world's population: women.

Oxford is the beating heart of the UK's innovation ecosystem, constantly spinning out new technologies. The UK's start-up hub is only set to grow after Chancellor Rachael Reeves announced plans to bridge Oxford with Cambridge, investing in infrastructure and transport links to become "Europe's Silicon Valley". Conversations on venture capital, angel investors, and seed rounds are easily heard across the city, especially at inaugural events this year, such as OxBio'26 Summit and Ox Tech Week, which brought founders, investors, and researchers together. Yet in the midst of Oxford's entrepreneurial excitement, an important question remains: who gets to build the future? Will Oxford reproduce the same founder stereotypes that Silicon Valley is known for?

In 2026, especially in Oxford, the stereotypical 'tech bro' culture represents a dated and misrepresented view of the start-up space. The media's narrative

on 'tech Bros' is far from reality; however, it will surely discourage young girls from pursuing this industry. The tech bro label is simplistic and cliché, and whilst it has been used as slang to group many successful founders together, it can create division rather than inclusion. For example, such a culture can be reflected in recruitment processes: Klout app recruited programmers with a hiring message: "Want to bro down and crush some code? Klout is hiring". Such language ultimately only reinforces stereotypes about who really belongs in this field.

Research shows that for female founders, the gender gap is not merely about salary, but equity, and venture capital funding. A report by Parliament's Women and Equalities Select Committee found that only 2% of venture capital was going to female-led businesses, further highlighting exactly how significantly under-resourced female entrepreneurs truly are. Additionally, analysis by The Alan Turing Institute Women in Data Science and AI team has shown that, on average, female-founded AI start-ups secure six times less capital per deal than their male counterparts. The report showed that only 5% of VC firms that participated in funding deals had equal or majority representation of women making the decisions, highlighting gender inequality in venture capital funding. With the acceleration of AI tech companies, however, diversifying the start-up ecosystem is all the more essential to ensure services and products are created for everyone in society.

In 2019, The Rose Review estimated that if we worked to close the founder gender gap in the UK, and women found and scaled businesses at the same rate as men, this alone could add £250 billion

(equivalent to 310 billion today with inflation) to the economy. In response to these findings, in 2019, the UK government backed investing in the newly-launched Women Code (IWC) initiative, allowing finance providers to voluntarily collect and publish data on funding provided to women, leading to 290 signatories. In the Women and Equalities Committee's "Female Entrepreneurship" report (October 2025), the committee advocated that whilst IWC has helped with funding, due to its voluntary nature it had limitations in reach and scope. The Committee advocates a state-backed national programme of support to unlock the projected returns of female founders. It proposes that all investors supported by the British Business Bank sign the IWC and provide data on the proportion of finance provided to female-led businesses, and to set funding targets for women-led businesses, in order for UK equity finance to female entrepreneurs to increase from 2% to 10% by 2030.

Diversity is essential for driving innovation. For start-ups, where identifying new, unique ideas is required, a varied range of perspectives is advantageous. Diverse founding teams are essential to understand different consumer needs. With the recognition of women in Tech, the climate is changing. Take, for example, the Flybridge and XFactor Ventures "100 women in AI" campaign. However, whilst we can acknowledge that the founder gender gap is narrowing with the introduction of Government-backed initiatives, there is still a long road ahead. If the start-up space continues to be framed as male-led, we risk discouraging the very diversity that drives innovation and resilience. The narrative needs to change. More than ever, it is important to ask: who gets to build the future?

THE COMMENTS SECTION

See what our readers make of our social media posts

We love the puffers!! ('From sub fusc penguins to college puffer herds: The 'uniforms' of Oxford')

astrojacket via *Instagram*

Any chance they might knock it down? It is an absolute eyesore ('Physics teaching to relocate amid asbestos concerns')

Ian Hart via *Facebook*

Just wait until you have the absolute joy of graduation. All worth it. And no work will ever be this hard! In fact it might be a bit dull. You've been through the fire and survived. ('Oxford's exams need an update')

tarabolandcrewe via *Instagram*

Well, it's a stretch being asked to read a book like *Middlemarch* in a week plus read secondary literature before writing an essay to be presented to a world class scholar and clever students one has tutorials with and also study another period (Anglo-Saxon / Medieval) with another essay due: my memory of Oxford anyway. ('The Oxford students who can't read books')

Ian Fletcher via *Facebook*

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

Can students still afford to choose?

Living costs are increasingly influencing how university students choose colleges

VANISHA KARNA

There’s much about the experience of studying at Oxford that makes it truly unique compared to other universities. There’s the almost millennium-old tradition of wearing sub fusc and the regular formal dinners, but most the most glaring aspect of all perhaps lies in the day-to-day experience of the college system. While other students find a sense of community in their halls of residence or in student societies, at Oxford, the college serves as an amalgamation of the personal and the academic. It is where work is done, friends are made, and for most first-years, where they live and eat. This combination of purposes means that the college is central to the student experience at Oxford, and therefore inevitably forms a significant part of your identity at this University.

This can be a part of the allure of Oxford (or Cambridge) to the potential applicant. Pushing past the initial unfamiliarity that such a set-up may cause, the close sense of community that college fosters can add comfort to the disorienting experience of the intense eight-week terms and workload of studying here. While at other universities, there can be a sense of being thrown straight into the deep end, with little moderation between the intimacy of your student flat and the openness of the entire course and university as a whole, the Oxbridge college system acts as a middle-ground, allowing for inter-subject mixing and familiar faces. It also allows the applicant a unique degree of freedom in the environment in which they will be studying over the next three years. This freedom to be selective about elements may at first seem superficial, as prospective students compare the beauty of certain colleges’ gardens and dining halls. But, it can also involve having control over more meaningful traits. Factors such as the proportion of state-educated students at a college or of elements of its social life, for example, can act as deciders for where a student may choose to study. That such diversity between colleges can exist within the University is a great strength and enriches the quality of student life. Save those that end up being pooled or submit an open application, the majority of applicants often do research and get excited about the prospect of

which college they are going to choose to study at and spend most of their time in. This gives them an immense, almost unparalleled, amount of control over a huge aspect of their university experience.

However, consideration of living costs is growing to dominate conversations about higher education. Maintenance loans struggle to keep up with the growing costs of being a student, and the failures of successive governments to address the financial pressures that students face mean that for many the cost of university is growing unbearable. This negative effect is multiplied by studying in a city with living costs as high as Oxford.

“*There is a growing contradiction between the choice the college system is supposed to offer and the financial reality underlying being a student today*”

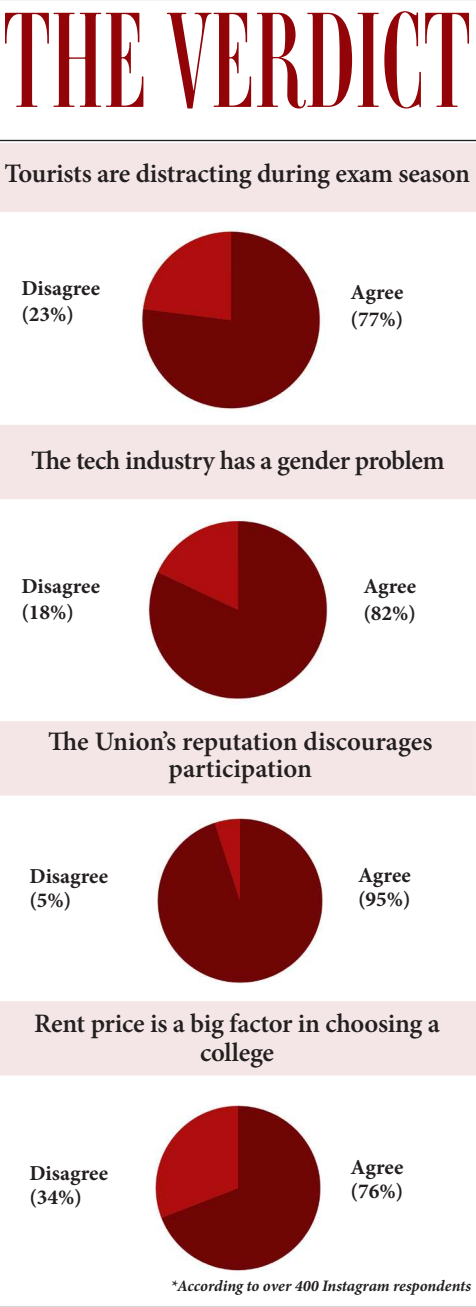
The purpose of going to university is not just to come out with a degree at the end, but to nurture interests independently for the first time and develop a sense of self at such a transitional age. This is something that the college system at Oxford can facilitate in a unique way. Facilities and interests between colleges vary, with the distinct rowing culture at Oriel, for example, contrasting with the reputation that St John’s holds for sports. While there is definitely scope for this beyond the college, the college system uniquely positions students to tailor their experience at university to what they want it to be. Taking full advantage of the opportunities presented by these years of study was previously facilitated by policies such as the maintenance grant, which gave students greater room to manoeuvre in their lifestyles and the ability to make choices which may have previously been inaccessible. The rising costs that going to university now entails, however, begin to limit this

potential for choice.

This is where a disconnect can emerge between colleges fostering an identity and the financial reality, which can be what shapes students’ decisions and experiences. My college, Wadham, has long prided itself on its progressive politics and liberal identity. However, rent for second year accommodation was recently proposed to rise by 10.63% up to £9470. Touting an inclusive image while charging rents which rank in the highest quartile across the University means that Wadham’s progressive ethos begins to ring hollow. Wadham’s character comes not only from a reputation nurtured by its students but also through its active efforts to encourage access and outreach. Its undergraduate centre doubles as a purpose-built building for widening access initiatives with schools to facilitate applications from a broader range of backgrounds.

While these efforts to develop a diverse and progressive community are commendable, they sit uncomfortably with the reality of rent and living cost rises, which become barriers to students applying. While a prospective applicant may love the College’s garden, chapel, and reputation of a liberal community, for an increasing number of applicants the primary consideration above all of these is cost. Wadham’s increasing unaffordability means it becomes eliminated as an option, no matter how progressive of a reputation it may boast.

Ultimately, the issue of higher living costs limiting choice is not unique to Oxford and its colleges, and its impact on the college system is perhaps a slightly low-stakes issue. However, rising financial pressures playing a greater role in college selection begins to undermine the point of the college system in the first place. Colleges have great diversity in their beauty, their academic specialisms, their facilities, and their ethos. This diversity is what can make the student experience here so unique. When financial considerations must take precedence in decision-making, these nuances become flattened. There is a growing contradiction between the choice the college system is supposed to offer and the financial reality underlying being a student today. The appeal of free choice is lessened when it can be exercised only by those who can afford it.



The Union was never about free speech

OLIVIA MAE BUTTERFIELD

A private members’ club audacious enough to promote itself as the “last bastion of free speech”, the Oxford Union is the embodiment of exclusivity and elitism. Founded by a group of young white men in 1823, the Union’s professed object is to encourage rigorous debate, often about some of the most controversial topics of the moment. It occupies a bizarre space between the University and the public, affiliated to neither and mediating between both.

Though times have changed since the founding of the Union, its atmosphere and attitude remain outdated. Yes, there have been recent statements of the Union’s commitment to inclusion – such as their 2022 Policy on Equality, Diversity, Accessibility and Inclusion, which outlines the aim “to be an open, diverse, accessible and inclusive society in which all who meet the criteria for membership feel welcome irrespective of their legally protected characteristics or socio-economic background”. But words can only do so much to eradicate a culture which has been compounding itself for 200 years, with its extensive list of alumni Prime Ministers, mostly men, mostly white. Whatever provisions may be in place, the fact is the reputation and culture that are recognised as part and parcel of the Union. The stereotypes do the work of keeping underprivileged and underrepresented students well away, and discounted lifetime membership is by no means a panacea to this issue.

The image persists of the card-carrying Union member as a rich, self-righteous white man, waving the flag of free speech with a hand adorned in signet rings. But, in fairness, as part of their accessibility plan, the Society’s discounted membership for those from underprivileged economic backgrounds does max out at £137 off the full-priced lifetime membership, which currently stands at a hefty £343. As an independent society that receives no University funding, it is understandable that membership fees play a necessary role in sustaining buildings, events, and speaker programme. However, despite these initiatives, the price of membership at all begs the question: how far can anyone be said to represent the virtue of free speech if this is locked behind a paywall? Especially given the funds the Union is able to raise through private room hire, social events, and termly balls. The numbers don’t matter, it’s the principle. This

attitude of self-aggrandisement is what many of us see behind the slogans, hacks, and prestige.

The concept of lifetime membership alone is enough to deter some from feeling that they have a place at the Union. Who is lifetime membership really for? Undergraduates who will return to the Union for the sheer love of debate? Or is it for those who go on to be the Boris Johnsons, Tony Blairs, or W. H. Audens of the future? People whom the Union can thrust forward as part of their longstanding historical tradition of prestige. Or, perhaps it is for residential members, a token gesture to people who live in Oxfordshire but aren’t University students. But don’t be fooled, this isn’t a heart-warming gesture of solidarity with the general public. In the Union’s words, “Any person resident in or near Oxford whose admission would, in the opinion of the Standing Committee, benefit the Society, shall be eligible for election as a Residential Member.” However, to put it more bluntly, these memberships have to be approved, candidates have to be interviewed, and the number of residential memberships is capped annually at 100. I found this information reading the Union’s 228 page rule document. One of my favourite rules is Standing Order E3 (e), which reads “No poster or notice which is not an official Union publication shall be affixed to any wall, window, door, or similar structure in the Society’s Buildings, except with express permission of the President”. Ah, free speech.

Whilst on this topic of free speech, it might be worth considering who this free speech was originally for. The Union was founded in 1823, nine years before the 1832 Reform Act, which extended the British franchise to middle-class, propertied men. 1935 marked the year in which women obtained “Third Class membership” to the Union, allowing them the generous privilege of coming to for tea . It wouldn’t be until 1963 that there was a woman who was a full member, namely Judith Okely, who went on to become an anthropologist. However, there were notable examples of Union women who served careers in public office, such as former Union president Benazir Bhutto, who became Pakistan’s first female Prime Minister, and the Union’s first female Asian president. Recent presidents and officers have come from a broad range of backgrounds, including the current president, Arwa Elrayess, who has made history herself by being the first Palestinian, first



Algerian, and first Arab woman to be president. While these are positive strides forward, it begs the question: why are such things still news in 2026? The Union was quite literally not built for most of us. And it seems that it is not for most of us still.

Whoever has been unfortunate enough to encounter hacks barricading St Michael’s Street before elections will have noted both the demographic and attitude of the members representing the Union to students. A friend of mine was passing down this street when one such member accosted her, questioning what she was even doing on St Michael’s if she wasn’t going to the Union. Still furthering this atmosphere of exclusivity and elitism is the sort of gated community the Oxford Union buildings themselves impress – with parties continuing well into the morning, blaring music, members making a raucous that can only be heard and not seen behind the tall barred gates. And so this idea persists, then, of the Union as loud, unabashed, and self-important, supposedly contained within its own four walls yet leaking out into Oxford society at large.

In quite stark contrast to this is the Oxford Students’ Union, an institution which is frequently misconceived as one and the same as The Oxford Union Society. One might be forgiven for this mistake, granted the national media coverage of the Oxford Union, or even the inclusion of ‘Union’ in its title. While the Oxford Union’s purpose is to provide a forum for debate and discussion rather than to act as a representative body for students, even official bodies like Wadham Student Union are quick to iron out the popular misconception between the two

institutions in the first sentence of their ‘short guide’ to the University-wide SU. Likewise, at the top of the Oxford University Student Union Wikipedia page, in italics it reads “Not to be confused with Oxford Union”, with a link to the debating society’s own page. This begs the question: are we, as Oxford University students, united by the Oxford Union? It seems quite obvious that one of these Unions is not quite as interested in the University students as the other.

This can be summed up by comparing the opening sentences of each institution’s ‘About Us’ section of their website. The Students’ Union proposes a clear aim of working for and in the interests of Oxford University students – “We exist to represent students’ academic interests, not just for better outcomes, but for a better, more equitable University experience.” The Oxford Union, on the other hand, introduces itself as “the world’s most prestigious debating society with a tradition of hosting internationally prominent individuals across politics, academia, and popular culture”. Perhaps it would be more fitting for the Oxford Union Society to drop the ‘Union’ from its title. I think ‘The Oxford Society’ gives an accurate enough depiction – although only if we are understanding ‘society’ in the Edwardian sense.

A pompous culture rooted in a history of exclusivity, whiteness, maleness, and richness keeps many at arm’s length from the Oxford Union. Locked behind a membership, distinct from both the University and from the public, it begs the question: who is the Union for? The answer, for now, can only be: for itself.

Image credit: Beatrix Arnold for Cherwell.

BIG 2026

NAMES

ON Cherwell

CAMPUS

As the academic year draws to a close, the most anticipated list in Oxford is finally here! This year's BNOC nomination form received 331 responses over the course of ten days, with the final response coming in just 14 seconds before the form closed (you've got to admire the procrastination of an Oxford student). The form allowed three nominations per submission, and nearly 350 people from across the University were nominated at least one time.

Unsurprisingly, the most nominated category in this list was the Oxford Union. There were 221 nominations in which an affiliation with the Union proved to be a person's strongest category. Not far behind was the category of 'Other'. While this list does tend to get a reputation for platforming the union hacks of the year (and in some ways this year's list is no different), it is interesting how many characters around Oxford defy a specific sort of categorisation. It should also be noted that a few people were nominated for different categories over time, speaking to both the fact that certain societies attract people with similar interests (political societies and the Oxford Union being a particularly strong pairing) and also the perhaps over-extended nature of the extremely motivated Oxford student. The category which received the fewest number of individual nominations was Sport, sitting at only 45. This might have to do with many sports taking place at a college level, while this list has a broader university-wide scope. Journalism was only slightly higher, though six members of *Cherwell's* own senior editorial team

(including one EiC in the top ten) were nominated, alongside a handful of former editors.

But being a BNOC is generally more than just an affiliation with a specific society – many people are in the Oxford Union, but only some become elevated to the status of 'union hack'. It takes a certain kind of personality or ambition to rise to the more recognisable of the close to 26,800 students affiliated with the University. At the very least, they probably needed to be following *Cherwell* on Instagram, or have an acquaintance at least tangentially involved who might have shared our survey link. Beyond the broad categories, survey respondents also had an open-ended question about why a person was, in fact, a BNOC.

But what turned a nominee into a BNOC on the list? For some, it was the simple act of responding to our email request for a description and photo; we have to have enough names to fill out the list, after all. Other components taken into account included the role of the nominee within Oxford's university society at large and, of course, the number of nominations received (though we attempted to look a bit critically at responses which seemed particularly like a spam or 'hacked' nomination). This year's list also reflects a tumultuous time for Oxford students in the limelight. While you may recognise some headshots on this list from previous years, or indeed from previous *Cherwell* articles, we've also tried to change things up a bit. Hopefully, this list provides both some familiar and new faces, no matter how involved you might be with some of the more public-facing Oxford societies.



George Abaraonye

Univ PPE, former Union President-Elect, perpetual Oxford figure with headphones. Returned from rustication to collect his BNOC crown, and signed off his acceptance email with "toodles".



Arwa Elrayess

Oxford Union's first Palestinian president, who arrived promising stability and delivered anything but that. *Cherwell* is happy to see a woman in male-dominated fields.



Overheard at Oxford

Self-proclaimed reformed ex-*Cherwell* hater. Proud to say that the "masses still flock to hear the propaganda". Oxford's most anonymous anonymous Instagram account.



Harry Aldridge

New College PPE, Media Soc president, 93% Club president, Union Secretary, and subject of a JCR no-confidence motion. Running Oxford's institutions one at a time, the last one pushed back.



Sanaa Pasha

Sanaa wants us to make it clear that although she describes herself as a 'dramatist', it's not in a pretentious way. Though, as OUDs President, co-founder of Riptide Studio, and a writer and director, it's safe to say she's earned a bit of self-importance.



Roxi Rusu

STANNER with a Google Calendar that would give a tutor palpitations. Rows, regattas, reggaeton nights, and international security. Doing it all for the joie de vivre, apparently.



Agastya Rao

Marked out by a distinctive yellow rubber duck in his pocket, Agastya has dedicated his two years at Oxford to such serious pursuits as the Keble Brick Challenge and the Oxford Sign Challenge (no, it's not a thing).



R. O. N.

Re-Open Nominations. Oxford's most principled and committed candidate, never wins, never quits, technically running for everything. We salute the consistency.



Jessica Maxine Wood

POV: You've been nominated for the world's most prestigious BNOC list. Instagram's favourite 'Lawfluencer', Jessica is known for heavily-vignetted dark academia edits of damp streets and overworked Rad Cam occupants.



Tresor Nsengiyumva

Queen's PPE fresher who "got weird for a week, got some spring weeks, and then started running for the Union for bants". First-year energy at its most unhinged and admirable.



Esme Somerside Gregory

Esme might be the only Physics student to (ever?) make the BNOC list. Writer/director of OUDs National Tour play, and Pres of Physics Gender Equity Network, you can't walk down the street with Esme without her stopping to chat to someone she knows.



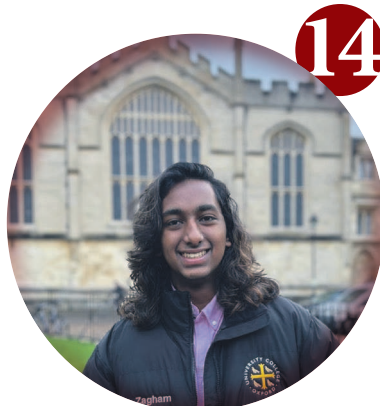
Gilon Fox

A familiar face in OUDs, and co-running Tiptoe Productions, Gilon is best known for his Oxford Playhouse Performances. You might also recognise him from Fight Night at the town hall, where he competed as 'Gilon "60 Seconds" Fox', and didn't last very long.



Hussain's

The Platonic ideal of the Oxford kebab van. The light at the end of the suffocating tunnel we call 'Bridge'. Delivering salvation to many a burnt-out, borderline black-out student in the form of cheesy chips.



Zagham Farhan

Zagham was nominated for heading "one of the most irrelevant political societies at Oxford". That didn't really narrow it down, but you can also spot him delivering one of his "near weekly speeches" in the Union, if you have entirely exhausted your will to live.



Benedict Masters

Statement attributable to an Oxford Union spokesperson: "The nominee the EiCs have a sweet spot for. Union Director of Press, who can be found anywhere but in Oxford. Has gracefully accepted the title 'Socially Acceptable Boris Johnson'."



Harriet Dolby

LMH historian, OUCA President, who somehow made Jeremy Hunt the least controversial person she invited this term. Spent Trinity filling rooms with people, the country has largely stopped listening to. Impressive logistically, whatever you think of the guests.



Ezana Betru

Director and co-founder of Riptide Studio. His lead role in a Playhouse production next term will be his 15th show in Oxford, which means he's either failing his degree, or a time-traveller. *Cherwell* has launched an investigation.



Jerome Pailing

Being tall isn't necessarily a personality trait, but it certainly does help make John's JCR President Jerome easy to spot across the bar. *Cherwell* commends his enviable ability to make a room full of men instantly insecure, as they mumble "height doesn't matter".



Anita Okunde

Former President of the Oxford Union, Anita describes herself as "literally just a girl trying to survive finals". Her startup Vox Populi Collective, meanwhile, promises to train up the next generation of hacks (read: material for Jevelyn).



Sam Gosmore

Another high-ranking thespian, Sam has been in 14 OUDs plays, and will be leading two Playhouse shows next term. His most common pose, in his own words, is to "stare meaningfully into the middle distance under stage lights". Profoundly affecting, we're sure.



Catherine Kola-Balogun

From SU President-Elect to editor at a 'paper' that shall not be named, Catherine's litany of extra-curriculars makes a certain no-conned JCR Pres look lazy. Catherine has "ended up involved in a bit of everything at Oxford".



David Quan

Wolfson MSc, podcaster, future SU president for postgrads. Insisted that BNOC stands for "Big Names, One Community". Many fellow nominees would beg to disagree.



Saara Lunawat

St John's law fresher, running for Union secretary uncontested. Either extremely talented or extremely intimidating. We suspect both. Also wrote for the 'Oxford Studebnt'.



Euan Willis

A fresher who can reliably be found drinking his way through Union events and Oxford's political societies, Euan is pretty much the archetypal OLC hack, and received one of his nominations for "being a lad". Right.



Macaulay Fergusson

One half of Wadham Entz, Macaulay has spent his first year trying to make up for the abysmal reputation of the college bar. Looks like he's having fun, but *Cherwell* would question whether spamming Instagram stories with AI slop is what Dorothy would have wanted.



ChatWSam

Sam's claim to BNOC fame is "loving formals and Oxford college life". Best known for reels rating Oxford formals, and for arranging 'An Evening with STP. Reviews', he is sure to pop up on your FYP when your essay is due in an hour.



NightSchool

Laughing in the face of Finals, Nahom Lemma and Ethan Penny, the DJs and founders of NightSchool, have gone from strength to strength, now a familiar part of the college ball landscape.



Christina Robinson

The woman who paints everyone's nails in Spoons, runs the freshers group chat, and has visited nearly every college. Tragically, has not made it to Queen's or Pembroke. Someone figure this out.



Cherwell EiCs

Oxford's oldest independent student newspaper (did we mention that we're IPSO-regulated?). Somehow still letting the editors nominate themselves. Standards are slipping.



The Isis EiCs

Oxford's other literary institution. Classier than us, allegedly. We're sure the BNOC list would be much better illustrated had it been organised by them.

The life and death of a library

The Bodleian system reached 2.2 million reader visits in the last academic year, serving as a hub for students. Yet local libraries which provide a wide range of services to the community face significant threats



ALICE SANDERS

I hereby undertake not to remove from the Library, or to mark, deface or injure in any way, any volume, document, or other object belonging to it or in its custody; not to bring into the Library or kindle therein any fire or flame, and not to smoke in the Library; and I promise to obey all rules of the Library.”

I feel slightly like a fraud when I confess that I never swore Bodley's above oath, displayed on the entrance desk to Duke Humfrey's Library. That isn't to say that I would ever act against it. In fact, I am fond of a Bodleian study session and very precious about every book I handle, whether the meticulously kept copies on my own shelves or the stacks of already graffitied loans scattered across my room. How, though, does the perception of an Oxford student align with how libraries are experienced more broadly? Certain images come to my mind: cool evenings watching the sun slip away through the windows of the Rad Cam, or reorganising the children's shelves in the silence of my local library, watched by an eerily smiling Humpty Dumpty mural, or (ever the history enthusiast) the halls of the Library of Alexandria in the depths of my reimagining. These images, lived and imagined, constitute my experience of libraries. Yet how we understand the relevance of these social and academic institutions inevitably varies across the spheres of time, age, class, and position.

Returning to Duke Humfrey's Library and the Bodleian Oath, it is the premise that counts. It is one of Oxford's irreverent traditions that sets the tourists in fits of excited whispers. Despite this apparent archaism, Bodley's oath, of which this is the most recent abbreviated form, does speak to Oxford's deep bibliothecal tradition. This history of libraries can be difficult to trace; the spaces used by students today are perhaps best understood as the result of a longer process of change: the gradual peeling of a chrysalis is perhaps a more apt description than an instantaneous founding.

It is in no small part on account of these traditions that Oxford University's libraries maintain their allure today. Merton College's library is thought to date back to 1276, though I doubt that students today would be too pleased if they found themselves waiting for the ceremonial opening of a large, locked crate to access the texts they need for their essay, as the college's earliest readers were obliged to. The architect of Magdalen College's Old Library was tasked with ensuring it had windows superior to those of All Souls', and links to grandeur don't stop there. The monarchy is entrenched in the history of the University's libraries – All Souls' Library was co-founded by Henry VI. Charles I was prevented from loaning a book from the Bodleian in 1645. If this says nothing else, it is surely that the rules of the Bodleian do not bend even for the monarchy, let alone you with your

takeaway coffee cup.

These traditions and trivia contribute significantly to the sustained value placed on these institutions today, with their claims to be the oldest library in continuous use globally, the second largest library in Britain, and the first library to ever stand their books vertically on their shelves. Yet alongside this pattern of growth and prosperity, they have also been vulnerable to fluctuations of funding and interest.

These occasional troughs in popularity have, however, enabled their ultimate flourishing. The Duke Humfrey's Library stood at a point of complete disrepair after 1550, when its books were all removed and taken to be burnt by the Dean of Christ Church in an effort to eradicate Catholicism from England, until Thomas Bodley intervened. Bodley's refurbished and restocked library opened in 1602. After this, its developments only continued, becoming a legal deposit library in 1610, and physically expanding until 1637 in a project which included the construction of the quad known today.

The All Souls College Library also floundered at points in its history, though due to a lack of space, rather than a lack of books. Its expansion was funded by Christopher Codrington, a sum notoriously associated with his pursuits in sugar plantations worked by slaves in Antigua and Barbados. In 2020, the library was renamed in an effort to address his legacy, but his statue (now notably with cracks projected on it) remains a central feature among the shelves.

These histories have each marked moments of imminent threat and near loss of the library; however, despite these difficulties, and the moral and political complexities of their redevelopments, Oxford's university libraries continue to thrive.

In fact, physical reader visits to the Bodleian Libraries have been returning to their pre-pandemic levels at a reasonable pace, cited as having reached 2.2 million in 2024/2025, surpassing the overall visits in 2018/2019. College libraries are even more frequented, used by 29.4% of students. Moreover, only 3% of the respondents asserted that they never use a physical library in the Bodleian's 2025 Reader Survey. Evidently, the University's libraries are immensely successful.

It is evident that this success has been a foundational factor in the success of the University and its creative and scholarly output, as a spokesperson for the Bodleian told *Cherwell* that the libraries' collections “have been instrumental in attracting scholars and major scholarly projects (such as the Oxford English Dictionary), shaping disciplines (such as Oriental studies) and the intellectual development of individuals (eg J.R.R. Tolkien). Without the Bodleian there would be no William Morris and the Kelmscott Press, the *Lord of the Rings*, or the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*”.

On a much more quotidian level, many users cite libraries as their most productive place of

work and, once I have finally found a seat, (the Rad Cam at 11am during exam season is not for the weak) I would agree. My room is too plagued with the promise of snacks and sleep, neither of which is especially conducive to efficiency. The academic motivation, provided by the library, has a variety of roots. Many find it a strong social effect. When your neighbour is sifting through pages of scrawled equations, watching the clouds shuffle past the window becomes a much less viable pastime. Together, ease of access to resources, the sense of obligation that comes from being surrounded by others doing the same, and the pervasive sense of academic tradition, craft a persuasive incentive.

These high reader numbers are proving remarkably persistent, even as the tendency to use online resources grows. For many students, then, access to a convenient and comfortable study space is the largest draw to visiting university libraries, even across the broader spectrum of subjects, with libraries accommodating varying needs in relation to accessing physical texts.

The shift from the chest of books at Merton College in the 13th century to the uses of our libraries in Oxford today has certainly been a metamorphosis; the libraries of the University are clearly continuing their life cycle, though in a different format. I, for one, am glad that my books are no longer chained to the desk, as they were in many of Oxford's earliest libraries. Yet I do persist with a certain sense of nostalgia, ever willing to journey far out of my way to obtain the physical copy of the book I need from the Humanities Library, despite the tantalising presence of the SOLO link. Perhaps it is a needless pursuit, but there is something comforting in the connection, in borrowing from the library and, if nothing else, it aids in lowering my screen time.

Yet as the libraries of the University continue to thrive, the broader national picture appears bleaker. The UK is losing public libraries at a rate of approximately 40 per year. While 97% of Oxford students and researchers can attest to the physical use of a library, across the general British population, only 30% of adults claim to have visited one in the past year.

This disparity may be easily dismissed as a reflection of differing needs, as most of the general population are not likely to spend the majority of their week preoccupied with their imminently due tutorial essay. While this might explain the smaller percentage of those users requiring the space for study (only 19%), this still leaves a notably small number of people using their local public libraries for other purposes. The main focuses of users centre around borrowing printed media, bringing children to do the same, or accessing wi-fi and printing facilities. These services offer essential access to literature and other forms of artistic and informative consumption, alongside the tools and space to enjoy them.

Given that approximately one in ten children in the UK do not own a book (rising to one in six for those living in relative socio-economic deprivation), it is evident that libraries are, for many readers, the crux in enabling reading to many that would not otherwise have access to it. The uses of public libraries, therefore, outside the relatively narrow confines of an Oxford student's perspective, have an essential breadth of impact, despite the proportionally smaller number of visitors.

While the University's libraries' social and welfare events are generally enjoyable, they attract the attention of only 32% of respondents, mostly (by a significant margin) on an occasional basis. However, for many across the country, libraries provide essential support beyond the confines of media. Many local libraries offer welfare initiatives, literacy programmes, and a warm place for those who lack access to one. A spokesperson for the Oxfordshire County Council referenced the public libraries of the city as “safe, trusted and warm spaces; community hubs where thousands of conversations and transactions occur daily”, making them more than just a resource, but also a social hub, which is comprised of these elements, but exists crucially as a focal point for community interaction. This breadth of uses has warranted a general augmentation in the percentage of

the population using their local libraries, with visits increasing by 71% between 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, particularly as financial and social crises deepen.

The role of public libraries is, therefore, an essential one, despite the fact that their uses differ so substantially. Yet, while the Bodleian Libraries' funding amounted to £57,337,771 in the academic year 2022/2023, public library funding is declining – by 24% between 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 alone, amounting to a funding cut of £232 million since 2010. Furthermore, public libraries in deprived areas, where they are in some respects most essential, are four times more likely to be closed due to insufficient resources. A spokesperson for the Bodleian told *Cherwell*: “The Bodleian has been fortunate as a major research library to have a broad range of funding sources, from the University funding, national research funding, philanthropy, commercial income, and its endowments. This has enabled it to survive the general and specific funding pressures facing libraries.” However, not every library has such opportunities, and public libraries, as the spokesperson notes, are therefore much more susceptible to the dangers of funding cuts. This can only beg the question: when did the persistence of knowledge and community become a question of survival?

“
While 97% of Oxford students and researchers can attest to the physical use of a library, across the general British population, only 30% of adults claim to have visited one in the past year

This disparity in resources, which separates Britain's local libraries from the well-funded and traditionally rooted libraries of the University, is reflected by the mixed experiences of students as to whether they study at their local library during the vac. Having visited my local library once to find that all the chairs had been removed, I must admit that I perpetuate this pattern. I study in university libraries daily, but never outside of the city. The university and college libraries of Oxford have an inherent convenience, boundless resources, a constant atmosphere of focus, and – usually – a seat for me. Not all students make this choice, however, although the general trend indicates greater use while away at university. It could be argued that this is in part due to the aesthetic and traditional values of Oxford's libraries, or their convenience (there is no better place than a college library to resolve an essay crisis at 4am), but this ultimately comes as a cumulative result of these factors.

Born from an accumulation of developments and sustained by another myriad of conveniences and attractions, there is no single formula to guarantee the endurance of a library. However, with some having been maintained for upwards of seven centuries, it is evident that the libraries of the University, and many of those across the country, possess the undeniable elements for survival.

History's most famous library, in Alexandria, is principally known for its demise – not, however, as the result of the one infamous burning. It did not undergo the pivotal revivals seen in the University's libraries, nor did it maintain the sustained resistance of those continuing to face challenges across the UK today. Instead, what remained sunk into disrepair, damaged by centuries of fires, sackings, and social changes that led ultimately to the loss of one of the greatest early academic institutions, and countless voices of the past. Whatever the ultimate cause of Alexandria's loss, we must learn, in Bodley's words, that we should never “kindle therein any fire or flame.” Nor can we sit by and permit any other library to burn.

Image credit: Jiayue Shi, with permission.

Cherwell

TT26

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

People's Princess and Gal Pal (aka Tyrant #1 and Tyrant #2)

SENIOR EDITORIAL TEAM

Promising Candidate, News Dep, Iron Man, Present in Theory, Diamond, Associate of BA, Ultimate WAG, The Juice worth the squeeze, Rather Be Rowing, Hallway Crush, and Social Warrior

NEWS

Promising Candidate and News Dep with War Correspondent, News Short, Big Brother, The Special Relationship, The Flash, Planning Inspector

INVESTIGATIONS

Iron Man with Therapist #2, Fluffy Unicorn, Ibiza Final Boss, and Wadham Spawn

OPINION

Present in Theory with Activist Spice, Musical Spice, Speedy Spice, Finalist Spice, and Fresher Spice

FEATURES

Diamond with Puffer Enthusiast, Cult of Busyness Sceptic, Editor Extraordinaire, Library Lover, Interviewer by Night, InDesign Pro, and an Oxford Student Who CAN Read Books

PROFILES

Associate of BA with Katseye, I barely know her!, Big Swing, I hardly know her!, and Guardian Angel

CULTURE

Ultimate WAG and the Juice worth the squeeze with 91st Minute Goal, Talented Brilliant Incredible Amazing, LinkedIn Warrior, Prince Placeholder, Let Her Cook, Thing 1, Cherwell's Strongest Soldier, [redacted], Film Bro, Unc, But She's a Cheerleader, Imported Sec Ed, Performative Male, Go Girl Give Us Nothing, and Thing 2

LIFESTYLE

Rather Be Rowing with Industry Traitor, Matcha Wokerati, Prison Mike, Tiktok Sociologist, and LinkedInwarrior Victim

SPORT

Hallway Crush with Can ya fasanya?, Two-Sport Tim, Speed on the Keys, and The Pitch Prophet

PUZZLES

Social Warrior with Dearly Departed, Usurper-in-Waiting, Sudoku Baron

CREATIVE

Illustrations: She-E-O, Hot for Hasan
Podcast: What Kant She Do? and Premier Poet
Archivist: People's Princess

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John Evelyn

Dear reader, do you condemn Evelyn? At least one person does – The Irrelevant Defender of Farce, whose recent grab for attention has hit hard – if you're a pensioner. If you're a student, you're probably none the wiser. Having poorly copied Geppetto's signature Torygraph concerned stare photo shoot, his attempt at a no-confidence vote in President Peace and Love similarly fell flat. Single-digit numbers of current student signatures should have spelled the end, but it was then anonymously claimed that it only failed because Peace and Love didn't push for her own removal... hard enough.

Turning to the shenanigans of another retiree, Andy Burnout. Having recently lost one position to the New JCR Cabal of Darkness and Conspiracy, said Cabal has also

orchestrated his removal from the Union, too, as it turns out that opting in for jobs means you have to do them – even if they were, in fact, optional to begin with. It's a shame that he's now sitting out this term – Iced Latte and Flat White need a secretary!

Indeed, elections this term are nothing if not incomplete – why Iced Latte and Flat White chose Tim Butdim for an officership when his PV is lower than one of Enthusiastic and Energetic's two secs boggles the mind. But hey, at least Enthusiastic and Energetic didn't flip.

The same cannot be said for Dachshund and Solarhow, whose double flipping would earn them gold at BUCS, or a binning in any dignified election. Their snaking of Joey Essex then backstabbing of Iced Latte would be impressive, if it were at any stage, sincere.



It has left Joey Essex the only candidate with four officers – as he is now formally joined by the Presidential Puppy, likely scared of the electoral bin he has seen too many of his friends fall into this past fortnight.

The count will bring us a new dawn, a new day, a new life – and yet you still haven't condemned Evelyn, you bigot.

Editorial



Mercedes Haas
Editor-in-Chief
Trinity



Beatrix Arnold
Editor-in-Chief
Trinity



Stanley Smith
Profiles Deputy Editor

I never thought I would spend this much of my Oxford education thinking about Tommy Robinson, or hyphenated words. And yet here we are. The question that consumed this term, in the paper, in the Union, in the University, was platforming. Who deserves one? What giving one says about you. Whether the refusal of one is integrity or cowardice, and whether the distinction matters as much as everyone seems to think it does. There is a particular kind of Oxonian confidence that allows a person to answer this question in the time it takes to finish reading this sentence. I remain unpersuaded that it is a substitute for actually thinking.

I should be honest about what this term has been. I was told that I had probably only gotten this job and the previous one because no one else had applied. I was called a tyrant, not to my face, which would at last have had the merit of directness, but in the way these things tend to travel in small institutions, which is sideways and ever so slightly garbled. My own personal privacy was breached for upwards of two months. There were daily, small, unremarkable acts of disrespect of the kind that are difficult to name without sounding aggrieved and impossible

I've always found it most difficult to write the beginning and the end. The middle part is easiest. Once you take the first step off the precipice you're carried along by your own momentum. The final sentence, ideally, is both poignant and definitive, a witty encapsulation delivered in a calculated cadence that acts as a mental adhesive for your message. The skill lies in veering between the vagaries of the universal and the insufferable egocentrism of the personal, all the while doing justice to what has come before. I'll do my best.

As we approach the end of term, I find my own experience already refracted through the angle of nostalgia. My time on *Cherwell* has, to succumb to the inevitable cliché, given me a crucial sense of purpose, concretising the elusive sprawl of university life in Google doc form. From my first article, fuelled by (admittedly partisan) indignation at male Guinness-drinkers, to sifting through the odious journalistic efforts of *The Telegraph* for this week's headline, the year I have spent on *Cherwell* has exposed me to the unexpected at every turn.

Leadership had never really formed part of my self-conception before I found myself faced with a stream of (variously reliable) anonymous tip-offs, cold calls from Union high-ups, and unsolicited advice from pretty much everyone. I have lost sleep,

My first interaction with *Cherwell* was a complete trainwreck. I had just finished prelims, gone straight to a festival, and for some reason decided to schedule my interview to be a section editor for the morning I got back. Needless to say, on very little sleep and with all manner of noxious substances still making their way out of my body, I was not an impressive candidate and was promptly rejected.

2 years, 5 editorial positions, and 21 bylines later and it's looking like my time on this paper is finally drawing to a close. I got over the crushing embarrassment of royally shafting my first interview and have somehow allowed this paper to become the defining feature of my university years; the throughline that threads the odd blur of memories together into something coherent. It has provided some striking moments: texting United Nations rapporteurs, photographing arrests, talking to students who are enduring a genocide.

to ignore without becoming so. I name them here not because I expect anything to come of it, but because a newspaper that prides itself on investigating the missteps of institutions and says nothing about its own seems to me to be missing the point.

Misogyny, I have found, does not announce itself. It is all too comfortable for people who would be genuinely offended to have it named. I noticed it this term more than I have noticed it anywhere else. What does not make it into this editorial will make it into the *Cherwell Files*, and it will be considerably less diplomatic than this. What redeemed it was working alongside someone of such fierce dedication and inexhaustible kindness that being called a tyrant alongside her felt, on balance, like a compliment. There is a version of this term that was entirely worth it, and she is most of it. If anyone at *The Guardian* happens to stumble across this editorial, please look into hiring her; you won't regret it.

hope, and my temper over this paper so often that calls to "bomb Choffice" have become common parlance among my friends. The petty dramas, malicious gossip, and casual misogyny I've witnessed have been enough to make the Union look like a wholesome alternative. Between us, Mercedes and I have gathered enough material to publish a comprehensive exposé of the inner workings of Oxford student journalism (the *Cherwell Files* are incoming, and names will be named).

I am a wholly different person from when I first applied for Lifestyle Section Editor. Exhausted, cynical, and perhaps a shade tyrannical, but also more self-assured, and (somewhat uselessly) an InDesign expert. I cannot express how grateful I am to have shared this experience with my co-EiC. Scarily competent, incredibly intelligent, and endlessly kind-hearted all at once, there's no one with whom I would rather have lost my mind this term. When it comes down to it, I can't find a way to close all this off with a punchy one-liner. So I'll leave the ending open for now.

But writing for this paper has also quietly transformed my life: it helped me swap self-pity for purpose, crystallised what career I want, and introduced me to my writing partner, editor, and girlfriend (yes, all one person).

It's difficult to know, then, just how to feel about saying goodbye. Pushing 23, it's not lost on me that I'm far too old to be so dedicated to a student paper. Nor has it all been entirely joyous; I have found myself, at times, both deeply disillusioned and utterly exhausted. But there remains, beneath the changeable tides that are my complicated feelings about student journalism in Oxford, an undercurrent of pride and gratitude. I'm glad I didn't let my first experience of this paper put me off.

PROFILES

Kumi Naidoo on fossil fuels, Amnesty International, and fighting Apartheid *‘Cecil Rhodes would probably turn in his grave’*



ANGELINA MIRRASLAVSKA

When former Rhodes scholar Kumi Naidoo reflects on his years fighting the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the first thing that comes to mind is not the peril he faced or the discrimination he suffered, but the friendships he made in the process.

“The relationships you build up in that moment of major repression and trauma... sustain you”, he tells me. “Those of us who struggled gave up so much. But I always say to people: what we gain in terms of friendship, solidarity, a life of purpose, a life of meaning, all of these things are invaluable.” It’s a remarkable thing to say about a period of his life when he was wanted by the government.

Born in Durban in 1965, Naidoo was 15 years old when he first became a threat to the South African state after he began organising boycotts against the Apartheid system. A national student uprising had swept through the townships, driven by something simple and infuriating: the inequality in education. “One of the first slogans I heard as a 15-year-old was: ‘You pay our teachers peanuts, no wonder they give us monkey education.’”

The South African government, controlled by the white supremacist National Party during the Apartheid era, allocated vastly more to the education of White children than Black children. Teachers in the townships were underpaid and under-resourced. When students at his school in Durban stood up to say so, the state’s response was immediate and predictable. “Those of us who led the protests were expelled from school. In some funny way, that turned out to be a good thing because we were mainly being fed rote learning, memorising things. When we got expelled, we had to teach ourselves. Some progressive teachers came and helped us stay

on top of our coursework.”

His mother had died by suicide that same year, as recounted in raw detail in his memoir *Letters to My Mother: The Making of a Troublemaker*. He had become politically aware before she died, he says, but her absence changed everything. Most of his friends who had been involved in the uprising were pulled back by their parents once things calmed down. He wasn’t. “In my case, I didn’t have the same family constraints. My mom was not there anymore to exercise caution. My relationship with my dad became strained after my mom passed. So I was able to do whatever I wanted to do. I didn’t have any restrictions on my time, on my movement, which, of course, all my friends had.”

He is quick to add that both parents had laid the groundwork for Naidoo’s activism, even if neither of them was explicitly political. His father was the informal auditor of half the community organisations in Durban, including Hindu associations, Muslim associations, and Christian churches. The headquarters for the local football and cricket associations was their home. Whenever young Kumi asked why Black children couldn’t use the same beaches or fairground rides as white children, the answer was always the same.

“Our parents would always say: ‘Oh no, no, you mustn’t ask questions like that. If you ask questions like that, you’ll end up in prison with Nelson Mandela.’” He laughs. “But I believe very strongly that my brother and I would not have contributed anything substantial to the liberation struggle were it not for the values our parents taught us.”

His mother, in particular, had given him something that transcended politics. “She said, the only religion you need is to see God in the eyes of every human being that you meet... Look for the weaknesses in yourself, and the strengths in others, because maybe you can do something about the

weakness in yourself, but you might not be able to do something about others.” He has carried that his entire life: “Now, as a holder of that wisdom, I take it and translate it to: ‘See God in every living thing, whether it be human beings or nature.’”

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A few weeks after his mother’s death, a family friend sat him down. “My boy, I don’t know how you ever recover from something like this. But one thing I do know: however bad you’re feeling, however traumatised you’re feeling, there are people in our country, in our continent, and around the world who are in a much worse situation than you are. I would urge you not to feel sorry for yourself. Think about all that you have, and try to live your life with purpose, and work for the dignity of everybody.” The advice was transformative: “That’s basically how I’ve tried to live my life”, Naidoo says simply.

From the age of 15 to 18, while keeping on top of his coursework, Naidoo was on the run. He co-founded Helping Hands Youth Association, his local residents’ association, and then he joined Nelson Mandela’s underground movement. He recalls how all-consuming this work became: “Your life became almost full-time activism. And then you did what little you could to just make sure you passed your exams and got into the next year.”

In December 1986, the army came to his home, looking for Naidoo. He happened to be away in Cape

Town at the time – being interviewed, of all things, for a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University. He called home after learning he had made the shortlist. What his family told him stopped him cold. “They said: ‘Don’t come back home. The army was here last night.’” Despite being a wanted man, Naidoo was determined to continue his education. He recalls that there were police on every entrance to campus, so he disguised himself as a businessman and was driven onto campus by a white professor at whose house he had been hiding. “And so, I wrote my four exams at a sort of quote-unquote secret venue on campus.”

The Rhodes scholarship was Naidoo’s ticket out of the peril he now found himself in. At the interview, he was the only Black candidate among twelve finalists. When the only Black woman on the panel asked why so few applied, he had a direct answer: the application process itself was built for privilege. You needed a car. You needed money for petrol. You needed to travel to individual meetings with each of the nine panel members. “If you came from a working-class background, that was not something you could take for granted.”

Naidoo questioned whether it was right to take money from the endowment of Cecil John Rhodes, one of the architects of the very system that had forced him to leave South Africa. “I discussed it with my friends and comrades, and we landed on the point that, if I were to get the scholarship, Cecil John Rhodes would probably turn in his grave. And we were not going to lose any sleep from creating him discomfort.” He encourages Black students from poor backgrounds to apply to this day. “We should feel no embarrassment to access a scholarship that was the result of the exploitation of the people of southern Africa, especially if you’re going to use those skills for advancing the interests of the people, rather than just for the advancement of your self-interest.”

Arriving at Oxford to undertake a PhD in Political

Sociology was a complete culture shock. The level of political consciousness was not what Naidoo had hoped it would be: “What I found difficult was the level of privilege at Oxford, and the kinds of assumptions that came with it.” But the hardest thing was the separation from his home. “My body was in Oxford. But my heart and soul were still in South Africa because my friends were being thrown in prison, being murdered. All the time while I was in Oxford.”

There is one story he tells that captures the dissonance perfectly. In South Africa, International Workers’ Day on 1st May is a significant, serious occasion: a day to remember the struggle of the working class. When he arrived at Oxford and heard students talking excitedly about May Day, he thought he had found his people. “I thought: ‘Oh, there’s hope, everybody’s concerned about the workers.’” A grin. “Only to discover that May Day was a unique Oxford festival. A pagan festival.”

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Naidoo left Oxford before finishing his PhD in 1990, when the African National Congress (ANC) was unbanned, and negotiations about the end of Apartheid began. “Coming back was very easy. I was desperate to be back home to help. Especially after Mandela was released and all the liberation movements were legalised. There was a big kind of excitement: ‘Hey, let’s go home and contribute.’”

In 1994, when the first universal suffrage elections were held, Naidoo found himself thrust into the role of Director of Training for the Independent Electoral Commission, responsible for preparing thousands of electoral staff nationwide. “I’d never run a massive national election before. Neither had I even voted in an election. And suddenly I end up as director for training.”

The challenges were immense. Ballot papers didn’t reach remote rural areas on time. Results were delayed. There was public contestation about the count. At points, Naidoo was the person on television explaining the delays. But it was also joyous: “It was special being part of a very important historic process. To see the long lines, the patience that people had to go and vote. After almost two decades of struggle, to see democracy finally be born in South Africa, that was quite a special experience.”

He returned to Oxford in 1995 to finish the DPhil he had started in 1987. He is cheerfully unashamed about the timeline: “My biggest academic achievement: I took the longest to ever complete a PhD at Oxford. I started in 1987 and graduated in 2000.” He pauses, laughing. “Most people, if it takes that long, they give up.”

After Apartheid came to an end with the victory of the ANC in the 1994 elections, Naidoo would eventually find himself engaged in a new struggle: climate justice. He had spent a decade leading CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organisations, when Greenpeace came calling. His first instinct was to redirect them. “I basically said to them: ‘Hey, I know some good environmentalists.’”

When they persisted and asked him to meet, he agreed reluctantly. Then his daughter found out. “She said: ‘Dad, I won’t talk to you if you don’t seriously consider this Greenpeace position. Because Greenpeace is fighting for my future, and you need to do much more on climate change.’” He smiles. “I always attribute my embracing of environmental justice to the encouragement I got from my daughter.”

He brought to Greenpeace a critique that has come to define the rest of his career: “One of the biggest mistakes we made was that Western environmentalism framed climate change as an environmental issue, whereas climate change is a result of our economic system, our energy system, our food system, our transport system. To treat any of these issues in three different silos is exactly wrong.”

“If you are a person of colour in the global North, most likely you’re living near a polluting facility. If you are white, you’re probably not facing the same challenges to air quality. Not only does linking these issues not dilute the environmental message, it actually makes climate justice much more real, pertinent, and brings it home to ordinary people. If you talk about climate only in degrees and parts per million, and you don’t connect it to air quality, to jobs, to local community, you will never move the large numbers of people you need to move.”

In June 2011, he spent four days in a Greenlandic prison after occupying a Gazprom oil platform in the Arctic. The drilling resumed soon after. He does not pretend otherwise. “Social change rarely happens in a straight line. Most actions do not achieve their

immediate objective overnight. The anti-Apartheid struggle certainly did not.” What matters, he says, is cumulative pressure. “Sometimes the impact of an action is not measured in days or weeks but in whether it helps move society closer to a tipping point for change.”

The road has been bumpy. In 2015, he resigned from Greenpeace, a year after it emerged that a staffer had lost £3 million in donor funds on the foreign exchange market. His tenure as Secretary-General of Amnesty International was short-lived: he resigned, citing ill-health in 2019, not long after allegations of a toxic workplace culture, highlighted by a researcher’s suicide, led staff to petition for his removal. He speaks about both with the same equanimity he brings to everything. “When I was headhunted for both the Amnesty International and Greenpeace leadership roles, one of the key reasons I was approached was the recognition that both institutions were structurally racist and did not reflect the realities of the world as it actually is. A key part of my mandate was therefore to help rebalance power within these organisations.”

Transformation, he notes, creates losers as well as winners. “When institutions begin to shift power from Global North to Global South, some people inevitably lose privileged positions, influence, and status.” He does not say this unkindly. “But it becomes deeply problematic when organisations like Greenpeace and Amnesty call on the world to act urgently and justly, while failing to look anything like the 88% of the world’s population that lives in the Global South.”

So, is there a difference between being a great activist and being a great organisational leader? “They are definitely not the same thing. Activism often rewards disruption, urgency, moral clarity, challenging institutions from the outside. Organisational leadership requires patience, coalition-building, administration, compromise, sustaining complex systems over time. Some people are exceptional activists but not effective institutional leaders. Others are strong managers but struggle to inspire movements. I tried throughout my life to bridge those worlds, sometimes successfully and sometimes imperfectly. Ultimately, others will judge how well I did.”

He has also engaged with the World Economic Forum in Davos while publicly criticising it, a contradiction some find hard to swallow. He doesn’t. “I believe we must be able to engage critically without becoming captured. My criticism of Davos has always been that too many powerful actors speak about justice and sustainability while continuing to benefit from systems that produce inequality and ecological destruction. But refusing to enter those spaces at all can also become a form of self-isolation. If we only speak to people who already agree with us, we limit our ability to influence outcomes.”

His current focus is the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, which he now leads as President of the initiative. The logic, he says, is simple: “Imagine one day you’re rushing off to school, and when you come back, you notice there’s water seeping out of the bathroom. You open the door and realise you left the tap on. What do you do first? Do you turn off the tap, or do you start mopping the floor?” He lets that sit. “For 30 years, we’ve been mopping the floor. 86% of what drives climate change is our dependency on oil, coal, and gas. Unless we address the root cause, which is fossil fuels, we’re not actually addressing the climate struggle at all.”

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He is not naive about the opposition. “The lobbying capability of the fossil fuel industry is not to be underestimated at all. They’ve got marketing and communications resources on a scale that you can only dream about.” But the public understanding has shifted, and that, he believes, is harder to reverse than a lobbying victory. “I don’t think it’s going to be as easy for them as they might be thinking because more and more people understand that the root cause of climate change is our dependence on oil and gas.”

Naidoo is 61 now. He remains very much a part of the city that provided him sanctuary from the repression of Apartheid. The boy who dressed as a businessman to sit his university exams while the police searched for him has lived, by any measure, several full lives. The professor who drove him through those campus gates is part of a long chain of people who took a risk for him, and for whom he has, in turn, taken risks. “It’s much better to try and fail”, he says, repeating one of his mother’s wisdoms, “than to fail to try”.

Image credit: Web Summit, CC-BY-2.0 via Flickr.

OXFORD SPOTLIGHT



Ananya Parakh speaks to Jessica James about Commerzbank, Christ Church, and the joy of shifting from STEM to finance

Supporting knee-length hair tied in a bun with a colourful scarf and married to a flame juggler, Jessica James isn’t a typical quant trader. A Christ Church PhD Physics alum and now Managing Director at Commerzbank, she speaks with levity and self-assuredness, a rare duality in the finance sector.

While many from my cohort are making the jump from physics to finance, it was more than unconventional for James in ’94: “It was absolutely weird of me to do so. I was trying to write up my thesis and thinking I was unemployable, and my supervisor, Patrick Sanders, came into the office.” He received this “funny letter”, anticipating James’ potential interest. It was from the First National Bank of Chicago, who were moving into the area of financial derivatives and looking for PhD Maths or Physics students. She was called onto the trading floor to explain her research to traders and salespeople, before being flown to Chicago for another interview. “Business class!”, she whispers in mock awe.

Physics and finance may share certain mathematical foundations, but there are clear differences between the two worlds. “Physics is about studying the foundations of the universe. Finance is about studying a man-made system that doesn’t always behave how you think it will. I’ve always enjoyed it. It’s fun. It’s fast-moving.”

Ambiguity of jargon is another key difference. When somebody in science uses the term force, its meaning is generally agreed upon. When someone talks about yield or convexity in finance, they could be defined in very different ways, depending on the context and the speaker. “The big change is the lack of precision of the vocabulary. It’s easy to think you understand something in finance, but when terms are ill-defined, you might not. Physics is mostly a zero-bullshit zone”, she says.

“Finance tends to focus on the future and the now, and data is, fundamentally, historical. Yet it’s a gold mine – especially today, when sophisticated analysis is increasingly used to uncover trends and behaviours – however, it’s often deleted, forgotten, or ignored.” It’s always a red flag when someone says “but this time it’s different”, be it an ex-partner or a teetotal friend, James explains that this is particularly true in finance. “It’s like the climate”, she tells me. “The climate can fluctuate in unexpected ways, and so can the market, right? Just because there hasn’t been an ice age recently doesn’t mean they won’t return in their time.”

At school, James was the only one doing Physics and Chemistry: “15 years in a convent school put me off God forever. But I understand why science and religion are often so conflated”, she says, explaining that she views both as trying to better understand the rules of the universe. As the sole woman in many rooms, including a weekend away as the Managing Director at Citibank, James has never minded being the odd one out: “I don’t care if they think I’m different. I was smarter than most of them.” I fully believe her. “It is tricky being a woman in finance. How many technical disciplines are there where you could say that women are equal? And, you shouldn’t have to be tough and immune to remarks that shouldn’t be made. But, it never really bothered me.”

While traditional routes into banking are competitive, James stresses the importance of getting into the right place and avoiding a mundane job. Her advice? Get in early via the internship-turned-graduate-scheme pathway. “Oxford and Physics give you the ability to think critically and believe in your own opinion and your own knowledge”, she says. “This helped me to thoughtfully reflect on challenges and gave me the courage to recognise that if something felt off, it probably was – and it didn’t mean I lacked ability.” This mindset has been the cornerstone of James’ career.

“But, the one thing that is the hardest, but the most important, is to understand where you fit into the organisation.” She tells me that when fixing code, processing data, or completing spreadsheets, we should be asking: why? Where is your organisation making money, and why does your job exist? It’s important to not be stuck in a bubble, James stresses, not just in finance but in any job. This understanding will push you to find originality in the way that you work, and perhaps do it better than other organisations: “Knowledge is power, and often the knowledge that is the most powerful in an organisation is who does what and why.” She believes in keeping a foot in more than one world, and, thereby, tapping into more opportunities.

“I had never seen five o’clock from the front before, only from behind.” The crazy hours in finance aren’t a recent development, although James prioritised her hours off work just as much as those she spent on the trading floor. Her secret was to not break stride and make no eye contact with anybody as she got off work. She quickly realised that “you’ve got to set boundaries, you’ve got to set limits”.

James has been a pioneer in finding probability-weighted foreign exchange market trading strategies. She has launched products based on trading signals, which she explained as buying the trading rules that came from looking at historical data. Amidst the global turmoil of the 2008 financial crisis, these instruments performed better than many others.

She also coined the term rollercoaster bonds: long-term bonds that become highly sensitive to changes in interest rates, similar to the way rollercoasters must consider forces other than velocity and acceleration. Here, rising interest rates can significantly impact the value of century (100-year) bonds, like some sold by Oxford University. While century bonds sound reliable and safe, she showed they would lose much of their value if interest rates rose out of the near-zero range of the pre-COVID world – and they did.

It’s clear that she enjoys devoting her time to finance and academia. However, reflecting on her time as an Oxford undergraduate, she reminisces on her fun side. She notes the same Brasenose dinner between exams and results as one of her favourite memories of Oxford, where “everything was possible. Nobody’s wave function had collapsed”. Her message to students? Love every minute of Oxford for how fantastic it is. But also: “Take pride in yourself. Take pride in your accomplishments. You got here, you stuck it [out]. Not many people can do that.”

Image credit: Jessica James, with permission.

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What student theatre can learn from garden plays

Mair Andrews talks to the co-founder of Crazy Child Productions about Oxford's favourite innovation

Student theatre strives to be as professional as possible, but the annual garden play offers something unique: permission to have fun. In Trinity Term, as students pivot between the library and Examination Schools, outdoor productions appear across the city, transforming lawns and gardens into temporary stages. For director and producer Magdalena Lacey-Hughes, these productions represent something increasingly rare in Oxford drama: the freedom to be creative without the pressure of being perfect.

Garden plays are as much a part of Oxford life as exams when the academic year draws to a close. After watching the Queen's College garden play's performance of *Guys & Dolls* on its closing night, I met with its director, Lacey-Hughes, expecting to discuss the challenges of outdoor theatre. Instead, our conversation turned to a bigger question: why does Oxford drama take itself so seriously?

After arriving at Oxford eager to throw herself into student theatre, Lacey-Hughes found the Oxford drama scene surprisingly difficult to navigate. "I never really got my foot in the door until Trinity of first year", where she choreographed *Fiddler on the Roof*, the Queen's garden play that year. "I think I just really didn't understand how student drama worked here. It was very confusing because it is super decentralised." It was through subsequent productions inspired by this one that Lacey-Hughes met George Robson, and the pair collaborated to launch Crazy Child Productions in Michaelmas.

Though her passion for the innumerable opportunities offered by Oxford's drama scene is tangible when she talks about her projects, she is candid about the anxiety which surrounds the field. Students are deeply invested in producing high-quality work, but that ambition can create its own culture: feedback from Oxbridge Onstage last term noted that "Oxford's drama is very serious and often quite dark".

For Lacey-Hughes, part of the issue lies in Oxford's fixation with professionalism. "I think it comes with the slight pretentious air that everything here has", she reflects. "There is this real emphasis on putting on plays that have huge legacies so that they can reinterpret themselves." Over the past year, she has noticed the same impulse when people discuss production companies. "People ask 'what do you do?' and you would respond 'we try to make student drama as professional as possible'. In reality, that is not achievable."

It's rather ironic here as Lacey-Hughes is hardly arguing from the sidelines: *Guys & Dolls* operated

on a budget comparable to some Oxford Playhouse productions, complete with a live orchestra and professional technical support. Yet what stood out most was not the scale of the production but its atmosphere, as audience members were pulled onstage, handed props, heckled, and encouraged to become part of the performance. The result was collective enjoyment shared by the cast and audience alike. What, then, prevents student theatre from embracing a sense of playfulness? For Lacey-Hughes, the problem is a culture: "I do think that there is a slight lack of understanding and appreciation for things that are just inherently creative." Looking at the prevalence of tragedies and dramatic reinterpretations of established classics, she argues that Oxford often mistakes seriousness for artistic value. "We think things are only impressive when people are able to cry onstage", she says, "rather than when they are able to make you laugh".

Part of this seriousness stems from the structure of Oxford drama itself. For newcomers, success is often less dependent on talent or funding than understanding an unusually decentralised system. Pressure mounts when there is, in fact, a 'right way' to produce student drama. "It's very confusing – you have to know it to be a part of it", Lacey-Hughes explains. Production companies sit at the centre of that system. Prior to each term, they bid for venues, apply for funding, and build reputations over time. The official OUDS advice makes one thing clear: without a Student Production Company, you cannot apply for funding. In theory, anyone can establish one, but the reality is that the necessary experience, contacts, and institutional knowledge often accumulate within established groups, making it easier for some productions to succeed over others.

It is partly this culture which inspired Crazy Child Productions, the company that Lacey-Hughes runs alongside George Robson. Reflecting on their company's purpose, she emphasises accessibility: Crazy Child Productions works with students who want to stage a single project without building an entire production company around it. *Stories From an Abandoned Warehouse*, for example, was organised by a postgraduate student who did not have the time to establish a whole brand. "We don't intend to take it out of Oxford", she says. "We want people to use it and the resources which we have built up."

The playful nature of garden plays offers escape from these pressures of Oxford theatre. "The pressure is off a bit more", Lacey-Hughes



believes. "You cannot be creative when you have all the opportunities available to you." Freed from some of the expectations attached to studio-based productions, gardens provide space for experimentation: earlier this term, Lady Margaret Hall hosted an unrehearsed performance of *Twelfth Night*, while St Edmund Hall staged *The Harrowing of Hell.26* in a crypt. The freedom of garden plays stems partly from their refusal to behave like conventional theatre. "You aren't going to feel as immersed when it is seven o'clock outside, the sun is setting, there's a bird over there, and you can hear the ambulance on the road." Rather than undermining the experience, she believes these interruptions create a different relationship between audience and performance. "It is a whole different type of world-building", she explains, "because the immersion is pretty much shattered".

But that freedom comes at a cost. Outdoor productions are technically demanding, and college regulations can limit staging decisions, particularly around audience movement and health-and-safety policies. Lacey-Hughes maintains, however, that these restrictions often produce better creative solutions. In *Guys & Dolls*, Queen's itself becomes part of the performance. "The window is a feature each year – it is the thing to look out for", she says.

This year, she reoriented the stage so that the window was on display the whole time; when actors were not using it as part of the set, residents were using it as, well, a window. "Initially, I was annoyed", she laughs. "Then I was like, 'fine'. We should have started charging them for a ticket."

The same elements which make garden plays less immersive also make them creatively exciting. "Even a black-box theatre is limited in certain ways", she argues. "That is what makes creativity really powerful, when you use it well and when you have limitations. You cannot be creative when you have all the opportunities available to you."

Perfectionism and professionalism are factoring pressures in student societies beyond theatre. In an urge to create portfolios and eagerness to enter industries immediately upon graduation, the rush to seem accomplished appears to overshadow the earnest and crucial learning experience of student societies. So, what do Crazy Child Productions want their production company to be known for? After a moment's consideration, Lacey-Hughes quotes a lyric from Billy Joel's 'Vienna', the song which inspired the company's name: "You can't be everything before your time" is a really cringe answer, but that is definitely part of it."

Image credit: Andrew Agerbak, with permission.

A fall from grace: 'The Harrowing of Hell.26' in review

ARUN LEWIS



Medieval mystery plays are something of a lost art today. Born of an era of limited literacy – and when 'literacy' meant a basic understanding of the scriptures, calculus, and how to write your own name – they were part of a broad arsenal of tools to instil belief in the laity. Such biblical stagings were part of the rich visual culture of medieval and early modern Christianity, a staple of religious holidays and festivals and a clear, succinct way to communicate the core meanings of faith to a population preoccupied with survival. Mystery plays have not had an easy ride – whilst they are still performed in parts, it is almost in homage, a respectful acknowledgement that, yes, in ye olden times, before the advent of such wonders as the Kindle and the megachurch, the best way to speak to the unordained masses was through the stage.

It is for that reason – the sheer scale of attempting to transmute an English mystery play into a modern black box theatre – that I respect the director, Meryl Vourch, for adapting this medieval theme, *The Harrowing of Hell.26*, for the stage. It ran at the Burton Taylor studio

from the 2nd until 6th of June, with curtains drawing at 9:30pm, and then in Week 7 at the crypt of St-Peters-In-the-East, from the 9th-11th of June, beginning at 8pm.

The atmosphere upon entry into the BT is heavy, the air is still. In an unfortunately sparsely-populated audience, several literally ashen-faced cast members sat amongst us, before the play burst to life. Its opening section, with Satan, played by Thomas Arensen, contorting and struggling before a harsh cry pierces the air, is the most gripping section of the entire play. Its wordless appeal, Arensen's impressive physicality, and the sudden shock of the shriek all meld perfectly to entrap the audience.

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The play cannot seem to decide whether it is a modern take on a mystery play, or a faithful recreation of one

The sound design and lighting were dynamic, lending themselves fittingly to a haunting depiction of hell, with the whispering of lost souls and the particularly striking sight of Christ's silhouette behind a thin pall. Simplicity was the motto of the costume department, as *The*

Harrowing of Hell.26 deliberately eschews ornate decoration to maintain focus on the performance.

The basics of the story, of Adam and Eve suffering in Hell at the hands of Satan and his devils before Christ rescues them from it, are performed well. The two devils, played by Elizabeth Henderson Miller and Sonny Fox are, again, incredibly well portrayed, with both giving everything to the role, including some manoeuvres that looked rather painful. Caleb Silverglied and Anastasija Vidjajeva both deliver strong performances as Adam and Eve, respectively, two wretches imprisoned in hell for so long that, despite their desire for salvation, they cannot bring themselves to take the steps towards it once proffered. Equally impressive is Patrizia Hinz, an authoritative narrator who holds the play aptly in her hands and maintains faithfulness to the nature of a mystery play. The bare space of the Burton Taylor, sparsely staged for the production, further lent to the unappealing afterlife depicted on the stage – save for an impressive demonstration from Arensen when he splits an apple in two.

However, despite the fine acting and good production quality, the play has a deep thematic flaw: it can never seem to decide on whether it is a modern take on a mystery play, or a faithful recreation of one. The former can be seen most clearly in its *Paradise Lost*-like Satan – who is not a total entity of evil but rather an individual with their own mores and desires – and keenly in its depiction of Christ. Whilst Jesus did cry out on the cross and doubted before his

arrest, by the time of his earthly passing in the scriptures, he appeared to accept his sacrifice as necessary for the salvation of man. Yet the play's Christ, played by Ian Machalek, lacks this acceptance. Instead, he wails and protests as if he has not already gone through his Passion. Once Machalek steps beyond the pall and confronts Satan, his Christ appears a curious blend of Son of God and Jared Leto's Joker. The play resolves with a clear indication that Satan has lost, but is equivocal in its conclusion on the emancipation of man from eternal damnation. This issue is particularly heightened because of those elements of the play, the torturous nature of hell, the pestering demons and the clear indication from the narrator that Satan's loss is a victory for good, which stick to the traditional mystery play framework.

It is not a bad play – it does not arouse any real upset or moral objection. As stated, *The Harrowing of Hell.26* has many strong points, and the work of its cast and crew can't be doubted. But after the enthralling first ten minutes, the play simply bored me. To bore an audience is worse than to offend or to shock – at least there lies engagement. Spending the remainder of the performance counting the minutes made it hard to enjoy.

Fundamentally, *The Harrowing of Hell.26* is a finely acted, well-produced play which was enjoyable enough to watch, but its conclusion is unsatisfying. The play ends with an abrupt jolt – so abrupt that it cuts itself off before it can actually decide what it is saying.

ART

Hag, Nag, Harpy, Hen: Olivia Plender’s ‘Little Fennel’s Complaint’

Amy Lawson on the representation of women’s health issues in Modern Art Oxford’s latest exhibition

I saw an Instagram reel recently in which the comedian Kyla Cobbler, standing at the top of a hill, holds up a rusted piece of coiled metal, pretending to be a doctor who is trying to sell the idea of the contraceptive coil to their patient. “Women’s health has just come such a long way, hasn’t it?”, Cobbler wryly remarks. One thing was clear from the comments: whilst it may be the 21st century, the science and discussions surrounding women’s health are often medieval in nature, to the point of absurdity.

This is something which Olivia Plender’s exhibition, *Little Fennel’s Complaint*, is painfully aware of, and is even evident in the title itself. The title is a composite, reflecting the irony behind the double meaning of the word ‘complaint’, which can refer both to a medical problem as well as to the (often incredibly gendered) act of complaining about something in general. ‘Little Fennel’ is taken from the name of the protagonist in the original version of the fairy tale *Rapunzel*, in which a pregnant woman exchanges her baby for the herb in the witch’s garden – fennel is thought to have been used to induce abortion, leading some to suspect that the exchange was a metaphor for abortion.

It is this combination of an examination of archaic methods and attitudes surrounding women’s bodies, and the idea of the ‘nagging’ woman, which runs right the way through Plender’s exhibition. Even upon entering the exhibition, I was confronted by a recorded chorus of muffled voices echoing from another room, repeating the words “witch, wife, wench” over and over, before switching to other alliterative patterns like “hag, nag, harpy, hen”. Struggling to focus on the first installation, *Our Bodies are Not the Problem*, which detailed, through the use of whiteboards displaying sketches of patients alongside text bubbles detailing their experiences navigating health problems, I eventually caved, following the voices to the second installation, *Mastering the Voice*. The cacophonous voices repeating these word patterns were actually a recording of a vocal exercise led by a voice coach, and complemented the adjacent paintings, which mimicked illustrations in early learning books, each one displaying a word or group of similar words alongside a picture. A rendering

of a woman using a typewriter was, for example, accompanied by the words “ball breaker, battle axe, bombshell”. As a student of both modern and ancient languages myself, this installation was one of my favourite elements of the exhibition, capturing as it did the narratives about women which are built up around certain words. One thing that particularly struck me was how much of this language relates to animals – “bird”, “chick”, “hen”, and “bitch” were among some of the repeated words in the sound work.

As I made my way through the exhibition, however, I couldn’t help thinking that none of it really surprised me (which is perhaps a sign that the ideal target audience was probably not me and the other sole woman in attendance). It is perhaps a characteristic of discussions around women’s health, and the taboos our society has constructed around certain topics, but I went into the exhibition thinking that I would find something shocking – a hospital horror story perhaps, or a representation of the visceral pain of childbirth. But instead what I found was the same story repeated again and again: in *Our Bodies are Not the Problem*, the subjects often discussed the performance required for a successful visit to the GP, with one remarking, “you have to learn how to be a professional patient”, in cataloguing symptoms, wording, even down to clothing. However, a remark made by another subject, depicted as tilting her head thoughtfully in a slightly hunched over position, struck a chord with me. “I managed the symptoms as best as I could. Your life shrinks, and you just accept it”, she remarked. As someone who has dealt with the volatile and often debilitating symptoms of PMDD (pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder) for most of my life, yet not having a name for the condition until fairly recently, the idea of your life shrinking is a familiar one. Perhaps that is the true horror story – a system which attempts to diminish your feelings and experiences until they are little more than words on a referral form.

Yet this was an exhibition which refused to shrink itself, spanning numerous media from acrylic paintings on canvas, to laser-printed wood, to embroidered textiles. The large embroidered wall hanging, titled *The Witches’ Sabbath*, was particularly striking with its vivid combination of



colours and textures, not to mention impressively hand-sewn – a gallery attendant told me that Plender was still adding final details to the textile right up to just before the exhibition was opened to the public. The hanging, inspired by Henrich Kramer’s 1486 treatise on witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, is an ode to male insecurity: the treatise expresses anxieties, for example, about witches stealing men’s penises and hiding them in trees, a grievance which Plender responds to with a gleeful depiction of a cat slinking away, a penis between its teeth, whilst a magpie looks on jealously.

It is precisely this attention to detail which *Little Fennel’s Complaint* had in spades. The space was used thoughtfully, from the privacy curtains which divided up *Our Bodies are Not the Problem* to the painted hospital lines on the floor,

whilst the neighbouring exhibition, Kira Preije’s *Unspeak the Chorus*, provided an apt tone-setting, with its disparate metal skeletons foregrounding the question of bodily autonomy which is so central to Plender’s work. Whilst it is true that the sound work in *Mastering the Voice* at times threatened to dominate the experience of viewing the other installations, I suspect that Plender deliberately wanted to create a disquieting atmosphere – even though we often attempt to cope with the day-to-day disparaging comments and gaslighting with humour (as the Instagram reel demonstrates), issues surrounding women’s health and female agency in general should be at the forefront of any discussion which takes place around medicine and the health system, even when it’s uncomfortable.

Image credit: Amy Lawson, for Cherwell.

Room on the pitch: Football fans and feminine fashion

FASHION

EMMA HEAGNEY

With the FIFA World Cup 2026 having just begun, I’m reminded of a question a friend once asked the group chat: “If I buy a Lionesses shirt, do you guys think I’ll be called a pick-me?” Her words, though coloured by her sense of humour, nevertheless speak to a real problem within football. From the hardcore Gooner to the casual Bellingham admirer, female fans of men’s football often fall victim to being categorised into one of two derogatory camps: the ‘pick-me’ or the WAG. A fashion choice as simple as donning a football shirt can push the unassuming wearer into either side.

Many women, including myself, had very similar experiences to boys growing up – we were surrounded by male family members who were diehard fans, we constantly had matches on TV, and we had dads playing in and coaching

Sunday league teams. Maybe we didn’t play the sport or collect Match Attax in primary school, but football culture has always been around us, and a sport which, in principle, is ‘the people’s sport’ is bound to be enjoyed by women as well.

But the sport hasn’t always received female fans warmly. Just last year, Sky Sports launched and quickly deleted its women-oriented TikTok page, Halo, following criticism of its patronising and misogynistic content. If encouraging female interest in football was the goal, then dumbing down the sport to pink, sparkles, and matcha was not the way to achieve it.

Is there a danger in knowing too much about football as a woman? On the surface, of course not. If anything will truly ‘unite the kingdom’, it will probably be football, especially if England brings it home at this year’s World Cup. But this camaraderie, bolstered by many a pint in a beer garden, offers no protection from accusations of

performativity. The assumption is that football is necessarily masculine, always perceived through a masculine filter, to the extent that women who show an interest in the sport seem to do so for the male gaze. With this mentality, held not only by men but also by many women with internalised misogyny, football remains an exclusive club, whose entrance is guarded by the question: “name five players”.

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The assumption is that football is necessarily masculine, always perceived through a masculine filter

But positive strides have been made in recent years with the increasing overlap of football and women’s fashion. Does anyone remember ‘blokecore’? Think vintage, or even designer, football shirts, Adidas Sambas, and baggy jeans. Adapted into a further microtrend, the short-lived ‘blokette’ introduced bows, frilly skirts, and hair ribbons to the ensemble. A microtrend, yes, but women were nevertheless included in a football-inspired trend, and treated as equals rather than ‘male-centred’ or ‘pick-me’. For every guy dressing like prime Beckham, there is now a girl wearing the same outfit, albeit with a feminine flair, perhaps.

But if knowing too much about football is the hallmark of a pick-me, then knowing too little is just as ridiculed. Herein lies a social history of the WAG, or the ‘Wives and Girlfriends’ of football players, often seen in an incredibly fashionable ensemble but perceived to know nothing about the sport. While America had Britney and Paris rocking Juicy Couture tracksuits and Dior saddle bags, the UK had Victoria Beckham and Cheryl

Cole doing the same with a British twist – often with a figure-hugging England tank top. WAGs, while at the time commonly seen as gaudy, are retrospectively viewed with the Y2K nostalgia that dominates the aesthetic of the 2020s. They’ve even had a resurgence in recent years, with modern English WAG style being adapted to the modern woman: it-girl Tolami Benson, fiancée of Arsenal’s Bukayo Saka, was often seen in the stands of the 2024 Euros donning a corset, crop top, or leather jacket adorned with the Three Lions badge.

But the term ‘WAG’ has been criticised heavily, especially by those the label has been placed upon – even the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) described the term as sexist in 2010. Let’s not forget that Victoria Beckham and Cheryl Cole were successful in their own right, being members of the Spice Girls and Girls Aloud respectively, and were just as brand-conscious as their modern counterparts, including Little Mix stars Perrie Edwards and Leigh-Anne Pinnoch. Technically, even Taylor Swift is a WAG, though her fashion sense may not live up to the connotations of the term. The trickled-down use of WAG to describe any girlfriend of a football-loving man is similarly derogatory, and reduces a woman to the interests of her boyfriend. Instead of enjoying the sport herself, by wearing his Liverpool shirt she merely participates in the man’s world.

In truth, this article began in my Google Doc as a fun list of World Cup pub looks – think flag-inspired nails, cultural hairstyles, and cute summer skirts – but I simply couldn’t ignore the inherent politics of being a female fan in a football kit. The worlds of football and fashion overlap in several ways, from ‘blokette’ to the immense influence football has had on men’s street style (I’m constantly thinking about 2010s Balotelli and, currently, Noni Madueke). Girls, let’s promise to wear our kits proudly this summer, and not let the judgemental old men at the pub get to us.

Image credit: Emma Heagney for Cherwell.



Why we should all be obsessed with ‘Obsession’

Willow Jopp reviews the smash hit 2026 film defying box office expectations

Something unprecedented is happening in the world of cinema this year. In less than a month, a horror film made by a relatively unknown director in his 20s, on a budget of less than \$1 million, has grossed over \$224 million at the time of writing. It achieved the rare feat of earning more in its second week and third weeks than its first – the first film to do so since *E.T.* in 1982. It’s the film on everybody’s lips: *Obsession*.

Without spoiling too much, *Obsession* follows a music store employee, played by Michael Johnston, who buys a mysterious ‘One-Wish Willow’, which he uses for a seemingly innocuous end: he wants his crush, played by the incredible Inde Navarrette, to love him “more than anyone in the f*cking world”. This wish, however, results in unexpected and horrifying consequences. What follows is an incredibly effective horror film, with plenty of uncomfortable moments and scares – it’s a film I strongly and wholeheartedly recommend everybody reading to see (but maybe not on a first date).

What makes *Obsession* so effective is that its supernatural premise is only a slight exaggeration of something that is recognisably human. The wish begins as a familiar romantic fantasy: to be wanted completely, unquestioningly, and above everyone else. *Obsession* twists this into something claustrophobic, and makes you question the ethics of what is being done. Johnston is especially good at making Bear both sympathetic and uncomfortable: he never plays him as a monster, which makes his choices more disturbing. Navarrette, the breakout star of the film, has the hard task of playing Nikki as charming, frightening, and pitiable all at once, which she does masterfully.

The film was directed by Curry Barker, a 26-year-old known for his sketch comedy on YouTube and TikTok. He made his feature-length directorial debut in *Milk and Serial* in 2024, an extremely underrated horror film, available to watch for free on YouTube. That it was made with a budget of only \$800 is remarkable. Considering Barker’s comedy background and relative lack of experience in the director’s chair, *Obsession* is a surprisingly well-made horror movie, with great acting, great pacing, great cinematography, and

great writing. Most mainstream horror films tend to be lacking in at least one of these departments, but *Obsession* succeeds at what it sets out to do – it made me uneasy, and it lingered in my head long after I watched it. So many details only made sense to me after the film had finished, and I found myself continually recognising just how clever this film was days after I had watched it. Soon, I found my Instagram Reels had been taken over by *Obsession* content – interviews, memes, clips, theories – and I completely fell down the rabbit hole.

I don’t seem to be the only one taken over by *Obsession* obsession. The film’s continual growth in popularity can be largely attributed, it seems, to word of mouth, since there was a very limited amount of promotion done for it. Everyone I’ve spoken to about it has either seen it and loved it, or heard about it and wanted to see it. It didn’t try to get a Super Bowl ad, or a brand tie-in, but instead relied on its quality to gain the interest of potential viewers. This was one of my favourite qualities about it: it is a film which inherently creates discussion, without being designed for virality. This is done through the ambiguity of some of its themes, which have left people on the internet divided. For those about to see it, I have some questions for you to consider: Is Bear a good

person? What really happened to the cat? What would you wish for?

Its success also speaks to a wider hunger for original filmmaking. *Obsession* does not have a pre-sold cinematic universe behind it, nor any big names. It has spread because people want to talk about it. Its premise is clean, but its moral questions are not, and its ending leaves enough unresolved to send viewers back through the film for clues. That is exactly the kind of engagement Hollywood often tries to manufacture through marketing. Here, it has happened organically.

What I hope Hollywood learns from this unexpected smash hit is to take more risks on young, passionate filmmakers. Audiences have been missing original stories and fresh voices, and *Obsession* provides both. We do not need another \$100-million-budget *Star Wars* or *Avengers* spin-off. We do not need another remake, sequel, or nostalgic cash-grab. We need creative risks, and the hope that it is possible for creative young people to break into this industry without needing to use a One-Wish Willow themselves.

Obsession is a taste of what the next generation of filmmakers looks like. Not only is it a great movie, but it is evidence that it is possible for Hollywood to change.

Image credit: *Obsession* via IMDB.



FILM AND TV

What’s Oxford watching?



The Thick of It

Vanisha at Wadham recommends *The Thick of It* (2005-2012):

“A political satire that came out of the now long-gone world of New Labour, its depiction of the often chaotic inner workings of a fictional government department might border on the farcical, but it speaks to the turbulent nature of British politics.”



St Trinian’s

Amy at St John’s recommends *St Trinian’s* (2007):

“This film raised me. I can’t think of a better combination of actors: Rupert Everett, Colin Firth, and Gemma Arterton all deliver arguably the best performances of their careers. True classic.”

Image credits: ‘The Thick of It’ and ‘St Trinian’s’ via imdb.com

Nonsense and sensibility: Adapting Austen for the screen

ABIGAIL CHRISTIE

It is a truth universally acknowledged that not all Jane Austen adaptations are created equal. But this fact hasn’t stopped a cycle of new adaptations from dominating our screens every few years and captivating our attention each and every time. Both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ versions share equal success in revitalising discussions on what constitutes accurate representations of women, relationships, historicity, and above all, the nuanced social commentary at the heart of all of Austen’s novels.

Butchered adaptations will not only find themselves sentenced to the depths of IMDb, but also condemned for the indignation it strikes in the heart of every ‘Janeite’ for its contribution towards a pervasive media culture that so often fails to present women and romance with multifaceted depth. A ‘good’ adaptation inspires quite the opposite reaction, with fans often planting it firmly on an immovable pedestal, second only to Austen’s writing itself.

Two new adaptations of Austen’s novels are due to be released this year alone – *Sense and Sensibility*

and *Pride and Prejudice* – and in doing so, both are inevitably placing themselves on the chopping block of opinion, where every minutia is scrutinised and compared, and any creative liberties taken are examined in microscopic detail. Netflix has declared that every generation deserves its own adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Regardless of whether you agree with this statement, what can be said with certainty is that, in filming a new version of an Austen novel, the final form shoulders the significant responsibility of shaping, at least in part, the contemporary perspective of such classic works.

So what does constitute a good Austen adaptation? Is it one that lingers dreamily in the collective memory, its tendrils shaping Pinterest boards and helping romanticise the Regency era? Or does a more successful adaptation try to shed its source material, using its skeleton to instead tailor the content to modern audiences? To answer in short, an Austen adaptation should aim to be as timeless and enduring as the novels themselves.

In the check-box for good Austen adaptations, a realistic and genuine portrayal of female characters must come top of the list. Each of Austen’s novels centres primarily around their female protagonists,

with some even being eponymous, such as Emma or Lady Susan. Although now a much beloved character, Austen famously wrote that Emma would be a heroine “whom no one but myself will much like”, anticipating the reception of Emma’s most explicit flaw: vanity. But it is this degree of verisimilitude that should be translated on screen, since these female characters are intentionally imperfect, designed to hold a mirror up to their audience. Romola Garai’s portrayal of Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* (2009) convincingly embraces the character’s penchant for snobbery, self-importance, and meddling, whilst also highlighting her intelligence and growing self-awareness.

Appropriate on-screen dialogue is integral to the success of any period piece, whether it’s the accent, delivery, colloquialisms, or the words themselves. Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet and Anna Chancellor as Caroline Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) both diligently balance the witticisms, humour, and carefully barbed jabs peppered throughout Austen’s novel. Ehle delivers the quick-witted back-and-forth between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy (Colin Firth) with playful yet biting precision, capturing the evocative tension in the dialogue that emanates from the page itself in the novel. Chancellor embodies the highly-strung, sharp-tongued Miss Bingley, with her arched eyebrows and tense posture constantly reminiscent of a predator stalking its prey.

On the opposite end of this spectrum, however, is *Persuasion* (2022), which failed to win the hearts of its audience. Listening to Dakota Johnson’s Anne Elliot describe, in a slightly jilting ‘English’ accent, how she and Wentworth are “worse than exes – we’re friends” in an awkward attempt to break the fourth wall, feels jarring, to say the least. The vocabulary of this Anne Elliot is littered with weird anachronisms, which are exacerbated by her oddly forced habits of drinking alone and stroking her random pet rabbit. In attempting to create a ‘wine-drunk-girlboss-cool aunt’ out of Anne, Cracknell obscures the intelligence and emotional depth Austen equipped her with. So it could only be through Anne Elliot that Austen could voice such social commentary: “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their

own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.”

Yet the blatant 21st-century vernacular in *Persuasion* (2022) begs the question – does modernising these historical storylines make the audience lose touch with the original material, and to what extent? There seems to be an implicit assumption that the modern audience would not be able to meaningfully comprehend or engage with the notions of 18th-century society, and certainly not its phraseology.

So, do these novels need to be adapted or abridged to remain relevant or accessible to a contemporary audience? Both *Clueless* (1995) and *Emma* (2020) are based on the original novel, yet interact with their source material in entirely opposite yet highly engaging ways. By retaining the core plot of a well-intentioned but ultimately misguided and meddling matchmaker, but adapting the setting, characters, dialogue, and costumes entirely to the era in which it is set, both films convincingly tap into the timeless themes of girlhood and personal growth.

However, the appeal of Austen in TV and film isn’t just restricted to the canonical sphere. Spin-offs of Austen’s works have been flooding our screens for decades. From *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016) to *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2013), and most recently *The Other Bennet Sister* (2026), the captivating and enduring ingenuity of *Pride and Prejudice* lends itself well to reinvention time and time again. Much like *Clueless* (1995) – and very unlike *Persuasion* (2022) – these Austen-adjacent adaptations demonstrate that modern creativity in a historical context can certainly thrive.

Although these aspects are not a guaranteed recipe for success, the realistic portrayals of female characters, appropriate dialogue, and believable historicity, are, in my opinion at least, the fundamentals for a ‘good’ Austen adaptation. The continuous remaking of Austen novels suggests our appetite to be enthralled or appalled by the many different renditions remains as insatiable as ever. After all, it has been over 80 years now since the first major adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1940, and we’re still waiting for the next.

Image credit: Frédéric Soulacroix, CC-BY-0.



MUSIC

What's Oxford listening to?



Amy at St John's recommends *Parallel Lines* (1978) by Blondie:

"The OG baddie, I come back to her time and time again. Still believe that 'Telephone' was Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's answer to Blondie's 'Hanging on the Telephone'."



William at Pembroke recommends *Sound of Silver* (2007) by LCD Soundsystem:

"The centrepiece of this album, 'All My Friends' (arguably the perfect song for Trinity term) is always in my rotation, but the rest of this album has so much to offer. It still stands as a nearly perfect hybrid of rock and dance music. An extraordinary album."

Image credits: 'Parallel Lines' via Spotify and 'Sound of Silver' via Wikimedia Commons.

Is the dancefloor really dead? Charli xcx goes rock

EMMA HEAGNEY

If you're as hyped as I am for Charli xcx's upcoming studio album, *Music, Fashion, Film*, then you might have also had the jittery, robotic melody of its lead single ("now we're making roooooooooock music") stuck in your head for weeks. In 'Rock Music', Charli firmly rejects the signature electronic soundscape that took her from being the darling of critics to a mainstream icon, and makes bold statements on the place of rock and electronic music in a post-Brat world – most significantly, announcing the dancefloor to be resolutely "dead".

Interestingly, Charli's nightlife scepticism goes hand in hand with an ostensible rejection of electronic music and an astute embrace of rock, as though the latter cannot overlap with clubbing – it's precisely because the dancefloor is dead that Charli says she's "making rock music" now. Guitar-focused rock music has been definitively out of the mainstream for well over a decade, perhaps even longer. Aside from the recent rise of bands like Geese and Turnstile, rock itself has died, or at least has remained dormant for a long while. A genre which once occupied over 60% of the Billboard Hot 100 has faced a steady decline since the turn of the millennium, being slowly replaced by pop and hip-hop. As someone who grew up obsessed with rock music, from grunge to shoegaze and more, my rock playlists are dominated by older tracks, their release dates spanning from the 60s to the 90s – part nostalgia, part genuine yearning for the days when rock was as creatively fruitful as possible.

For this reason, 'Rock Music' is all the more interesting. It is a fascinating blend of parody and utmost sincerity – on the one hand, we see Charli grapple with the legacy of her career-defining dance record, and on the other hand, she employs a catalogue of cheesy rock tropes, from lines like "I'm really banging my head" to the sugary, optimistic, "let's make a rock band!"-style spirit that you only find in film and TV. In a way, Charli tells the critics who doubted her authenticity on *Brat*, rock can be just as superficial. Maybe 'Rock Music' is best thought of as the 'Song 2'

of the 2020s: a satire of a genre which is often contrasted against her discography, rather than seen as complementing it. Charli also sticks to her roots in terms of the song's production, filtering her perspective on rock through the distinctive A.G. Cook and Finn Keane production that we have come to associate her with. She has one foot in the door of rock and one in the door of electropop, refusing to commit to either side, and it is much to her advantage.

Just as quickly as she soared to electropop stardom, Charli abandoned her '365 party girl' image to embrace a rock edge, bearing her influences proudly (namely, The Velvet Underground). She is inevitably reacting to her newfound fame and the anxieties that accompany it, but her reinvention also reflects the state of nightlife in the mid-2020s, which she declares to be "dead". In Oxford, however, there does seem to be a place for rock music on the dancefloor – Indie Fridays continues to be massively popular, along with Boogaloo and other regular fixtures. But Charli's statement may nevertheless ring true. Could Oxford nightlife do with better music? Most certainly. For me, the number one factor that puts me off clubbing in this city is how dire the music can be. My apologies, but I never want to hear ABBA or the same old Y2K playlist again. My ideal club night would either have a stacked lineup of student DJs, spinning anything from acid house to jungle, or it would simply be an all-night Future marathon – like a sleeper agent, I'm suddenly awake and alert when I hear the words "I'm on that good kush and alcohol..."

Nightlife discourse continues to circulate social media circles of the 2020s, thanks to shifting patterns and trends, partly fuelled by Charli herself. It would be a lie to claim that *Brat* did not bring electronic music into the mainstream, after a 2010s dominated by trap at one extreme, and Lana Del Rey-esque 'sad girl' pop at the other. Complete with a hyperpop flair, *Brat* and its various club anthems prompted renewed interest in partying and raving, as well as in the production of electronic music – think back to that viral episode of the *Tape Notes* podcast, in which Charli breaks down the Logic

session of 'Club Classics'. Even I now own the Pioneer DDJ FLX-4, the standard DJ decks for any performative cool kid.

Statistically, young people are going out less, and are also drinking less alcohol. But while this is often chalked up to 'the damn phones', or the pursuit of a clean-girl lifestyle, there are much larger structural factors at play. The dancefloor as a physical space might not be in rigor mortis just yet, but it is dying. In Oxford alone, at least eleven nightlife venues have closed in the last two decades. Only we true Oxford oldheads, in our third years and above, will remember the days when Park End was at Atik, or when Intrusion, Oxford's goth night, was held at Kiss Bar.

This pattern is repeated in almost every part of the country, and contributes significantly to the general feeling amongst Gen Z that nightlife is in fact on its last legs. Even on an individual level, can you afford to spend upwards of £8 on a single spirit and mixer at a club? From drinks and Ubers to club tickets and post-club Hussain's, the cost of a night out is becoming increasingly extortionate, and presents a material barrier to the formation of community, identity, and a great experience. Sure, you could go to an underground, illegal rave, but who's paying for the decks? The sound system? The legal fees when the fun is shut down?

Naturally, I write as a student and for students, who, by and large, do not have infinite funds to invest in a spectacular clubbing experience. I highly doubt that the economic burden of nightlife on the consumer is a significant problem for Charli, or any other celebrity of her stature, many of whom have responded negatively to the bold statements made in 'Rock Music' – her feelings seem to be fuelled in large part by her ruminations on what it means to be cool. Likewise, while I may be inclined to agree that the dancefloor is "dead", my perspective is certainly skewed as a third-year with an exam-ridden friend group, for whom the Radcam has become the default third space. Tongue-in-cheek as it may be, Charli xcx's 'Rock Music' speaks to the structural issues actively decimating nightlife across the world, issues she addresses candidly on its follow-up, 'SS26', even if her motivations may be more aesthetic than political.

Rap as poetry: 'The Odyssey' and breaking down the medium

NIAMH HOYLAND and VAL MICHAEL

When interviewed on his decision to cast Travis Scott as a bard figure in his upcoming adaptation of *The Odyssey*, set to release on 17th July in the UK, Christopher Nolan stated that "I cast him because I wanted to nod towards the idea that this story has been handed down as oral poetry, which is analogous to rap". This statement has provoked reactionary backlash on social media and within cultural conversation. The film is clearly not claiming to be a faithful representation of Ancient Greek warfare with negative commentary particularly revolving around Nolan's diversion from traditional adaptation. This aversion to Scott's casting, in spite of his previous work with Nolan on *Tenet* (2020), works alongside an anger at the film's casting of non-white actors as figures in the Homeric epic.

This is certainly not a novel perspective; ever since the 'Golden Age' of hip-hop, spanning from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the genre has rapidly innovated in both style and lyricism. Not only was it drawing upon the beats and riffs of other genres like jazz and soul, often sampling from these areas, but its technique shifted, increasing in complexity. Later, rap became far quicker in pace and flow, popularised by hip-hop visionary Rakim, who introduced a soft-spoken style of rapping and popularised the flow credited to this Golden Age. Lyricism drastically evolved also: variations on rhyme were popularised, with more internal rhyming, off-beat and multi-syllabic rhymes. These lyrics also became less focused on the "party rhymes" of the old-school era, but were highly conscious of sociopolitical issues, particularly racial politics, crime, religion, and the failures of government. Sounds were determined by the building of community spaces in specific areas, rather than being defined by marketing strategies.

Notably, this combination of developments within the genre also brought about the emergence of something even more overtly literary in its approach. It would be impossible to note down every prominent entry into this Golden Age and post-Golden Age canon, which utilises complex poetic techniques. And yet, MF

DOOM's 'My Favorite Ladies' is an extended metaphor where he appears to speak about relationships with various women, who are actually all personifications of drugs, considering his dependency on them. Lauryn Hill uses similes on 'How Many Mics' to show bravado, rapping that "me without a mic is like a beat without a snare", but also to display angst and betray vulnerability when she says "loving you is like a battle/and we both end up with scars" on 'Ex-Factor'. Jay-Z has always been known for his slick entendres, like on 'Brooklyn Go Hard': "I father, I Brooklyn-Dodger them/I jack, I rob, I sin/Aw, man, I'm Jackie Robinson/'Cept when I run base, I dodge the pen". The intricacies of rap lyricism should require no justification; take one look at the giants of hip-hop, and it's written all over their work.

As a result, since the 1990s, more scholarly work has been written on rap's relationship to poetry. Brent Wood highlights its proximity to 'folk-poetry', with its "relatively free borrowing of music and words between practitioners", it being "locally-oriented", not assumptive of literacy, and "a union rather than a separation of music, dance, and lyric".

“Contemporary poets feel no need to abide by formalist structures, why would we not extend music artists the same grace of medium?”

Folk-poetry, a more traceable evolution of the 'oral tradition' Nolan refers to, indicates a liberation of poetry from academic application, existing outside of a canonisation of what is considered literary art. The foundation of rap in the 1970s was on the back of political poetic heritage of the 1960s and various African-American traditions such as Signifying, playing

the Dozens, and Toasting, which all showcase verbal dexterity and prowess in exchanges of ritual insults. What emerged was rap, all about the 'power of the word', creating a new oral tradition reliant upon rhyme and rhythm, just as poetry is.

The other thing worth noting is that often, contemporary poetic works forgo meter and the stricter rhythmic techniques which categorised earlier iterations of the medium, instead latching on to a writing style that is far more abstract. 'Tipp-Ex-Sonate' by Koos Kombuis is a poem infamous for completely forgoing words altogether, a punctuation-based form that is praised as a commentary on censorship and segregation. Contemporary poets feel no need to abide by formalist structures, and if the boundaries of the medium can be disturbed for their creative license, why would we not extend music artists the same grace of medium? Musical backing could be seen as a literalisation of the rhythm implicit in metre and rhyme. Examples of poetic formations within rap appear potently and often. Wu-Tang Clan's 'Triumph'

utilises internal rhymes, sibilance, and fricative alliteration to execute with explosive power their erudite understanding of sound and speech: "I bomb atomically, Socrates' philosophies and hypotheses/Can't define how I be droppin' these mockeries/Lyrically perform armed robbery/Flee with the lottery, possibly they spotted me." Dr Marcyliena Morgan called rap the "poetry of generation", but it may be more than that. Rap has become so influential to the cultural consciousness – shaping fashion, slang usage, and seeping so far into the mainstream musical landscape – that it has dominated every aspect of it. Its prowess in pop culture is so much so that Nolan's decision could be read less as an artistic one but more as pandering to popular demand. It is difficult to diagnose how rap music will factor into *The Odyssey* until its release, but the statement alone, however genuine it will prove to be, honours an evolution in the legacy of oral storytelling.

Image credit: Eze100709, CC0 via Wikimedia Commons.



YA thrills: Escapism and disguise

Elizabeth Gammaidoni explores the different worlds of emerging YA authors

An issue that has been encountered by authors since the dawn of time, perhaps one that feels too obvious to even state, is that some readers will not enjoy their books. This can result from many issues: maybe some don't like an author's style of writing, or the genre they tend to write in. In these cases, readers tend to avoid those texts whilst easily acknowledging that others may enjoy them (with exceptions, of course). However, the point at which readers will not simply ignore the existence of a text they don't like seems to be when it displays a political or social opinion that they disagree with.

At Blackwell's, a group of four YA authors, Tesia Tsai, Dhonielle Clayton, Caitlin Breeze, and Kate Weston, came together in a panel to discuss their novels. They talked about their inspirations, writing processes, and character development. The aspects of their discussion that most gripped me were twofold. The first was the extent to which each felt they had placed themselves into their texts, and how emotionally baring this must feel. The second is the need they felt to provide some level of removal within their books in order to avoid criticism for any commentary their books may provide on society.

The former idea is one that each writer experienced on a very individual level, as would be expected. Yet, in a way, the explanations of each made it clear that the writing process involved an inevitable soul baring. Tesia's experience of the pandemic inspired her to write her novel *Deathly Fates*. When discussing her novel-writing process, she explained, "a lot of my frustrations end up being poured into my writing". Her experience during the pandemic greatly influenced her writing process for *Deathly Fates*, increasing her awareness about the fragility of human life and opening up a fear of her own father passing away. This theme is clear throughout *Deathly Fates*, in which the main character must undertake a journey in order to save her father.

Rather than a fear of a possible and ever-nearing future, Caitlin instead discussed how her experience of the past is what inspired her

to write her novel *The Fox Hunt*. She reflected on her time at university, noting especially the experience of women within age-old institutions like Oxford and Cambridge. Despite increasing attempts to move into the present, she discussed how entrenched in the past such ancient institutions tend to be, and the consequences for their students. As with Tesia's fears for the future, Caitlin's experiences of the past make themselves clearly present within her work.

“*Novel writing requires simultaneously a baring of the soul and an attempt to hide away, to pre-provide an excuse for themselves*

Kate also talked about the extent to which emotional vulnerability went into writing her novel. She discussed her struggles with mental health whilst writing process of her novel *Coterie of Liars*. Her struggles went into her characters, a process which is incredibly soul-baring. In a more comedic turn, she also admitted that many of her characters (those who meet less favourable ends) have been ex-boyfriends of hers. At its core, though, does this not share key elements with putting her experience with mental health into her novels? The writing process seems to be one for her which offers a kind of catharsis.

Dhonielle's writing process was unique among these authors since she collaborated with five other people in order to write this book. Each person had one character from their novel, *Breakout*, which they wrote. Dhonielle describes the extent to which this writing process required incredibly careful organisation among the six of them. This careful collaboration was balanced, however, with its own soul-baring moments.

Dhonielle explained how, in a strategy similar to Kate, she went through her old high school journals and picked out those she felt had most done her wrong during her childhood, and turned them into characters. As with Kate, at its surface, this appears comedic, but underneath it reveals the depth of personal experience each of these authors put into their writing.

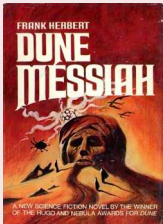
Ultimately, the main message I took from this panel was the extent to which authors place their personal experiences, and themselves, into their work. Yet, another element of their discussion is the simultaneous removal from reality that each inserted into their texts. Tesia and Caitlin began this discussion, given that they have a more obvious removal from reality in the supernatural elements of their books. They discussed the protection this provided them in offering social or political criticism within their texts.

The fact that the society they offer within their texts is not one that exists in real life means that any complaint they receive about the comments on the state of the world their novels provide can be easily countered. I enquired further, with Kate and Dhonielle, whether they felt they had any parallel situation in their novels despite the fact that their novels do not contain supernatural elements. I received an answer in the affirmative, that the placement of their characters physically away from society, either on an island or in an elite party away from regular society, provides a parallel experience. Each group becomes an exaggerated microcosm of society, which cannot necessarily be seen (if the authors wish to avoid criticism) as a true reflection of society because of their intensely exaggerated nature.

These authors, then, showed me the delicate balance required within novel writing: a simultaneous baring of the soul and an attempt to hide away, to pre-provide an excuse for themselves in the case that they may receive criticism. Although this process may seem emotionally exhausting, it was clear from the words of each author that novel writing provides an escape and a catharsis which they would struggle to find in any other activity.

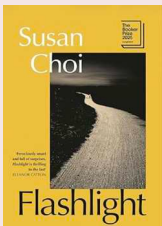
BOOKS

What's Oxford reading?



Eoin at Somerville recommends *Dune Messiah* (1969) by Frank Herbert:

"A re-read in preparation for Dune Part 3, this book still remains, to me, the platonic construction of the charismatic leader which, as with any great work, becomes increasingly relevant as time passes. I'm very excited to see what Dennis Villeneuve does with his adaptation in December!"



Toby at Christ Church recommends *Flashlight* (2025) by Susan Choi:

"A story of family heartbreak and grief, this novel is both amazingly well observed and packed full of crazy twists."

Image credits: 'Dune Messiah' via Wikimedia Commons and 'Flashlight' via Amazon.

WHAT'S ON

STAGE

On Some Far Shore
Pilch
9th-13th June

Scenes with Girls
BT Studio
9th-13th June

MUSIC

Aquinas Piano Trio
Holywell Music Room
14th June, 11.15am

FILM

Backrooms
Ultimate Picture Palace
Until 24th June

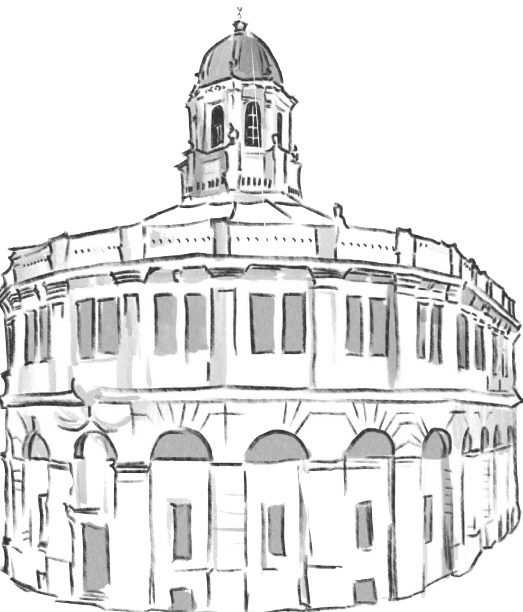
LITERATURE

Sally Bayley WORM IN THE BUD
with Victoria Tennant,
Blackwell's
13th June, 2pm

ART

Emerging Unrealities: A Queen's Art Showcase
The Queen's College
14th June 11am-7pm

Olivia Plender: Little Fennel's Complaint
Modern Art Oxford
Ends 16th August



The Source

Circadian Renaissance

Outside, the sky is almond.
A conciseness to the air
is brisk to touch the skin
and glaze the windowsill with morning condensation.
The honeyed sun insists,
makes the bedsheets lace
where last night's tea glimmers like pennies in stand-
ing-water pools,
like wishing fountains
this morning's balanced cups on white ruckled sheets.
On the desk capsized books like little roofs,
Paris on a tabletop,
and postcards pinned by the breeze to the wall.
Shirtsleeves on the chair,
sweetly billowed pirate sails,
fastened by a cool suspended poppy teardrop paperweight.

Read the full piece online at cherwell.org

CLARA LEONARD DAVIES

A day at the races: Corpus Christi 2026 Tortoise Fair

ABI CHRISTIE

Oxford is full of weird and wonderful traditions, and the Corpus Christi tortoise race certainly takes the cake. What likely began as an informal competition between Corpus students some 100-150 years ago, has now blossomed into a day-long affair of tortoise-related festivities and slow-speed racing, attracting hundreds of spectators from across the University and wider public. Tickets quickly sold out for what can only be described as the highlight of the Trinity social calendar, with numbers capped at 725. Having won the 2025 tortoise race, despite a few hiccups in previous years, Corpus' own tortoise Foxe was favoured to win this year.

I was lucky enough to be able to sit down and chat with Vivi, Corpus' JCR tortoise-keeper (*custos testudinum*), in the week leading up to the race. I began by asking what exactly the role entailed, and the position turned out to be more varied than I expected. Vivi told me: "You [get] a big book of standing orders, and most of it is about organising the tortoise fair. But you also have to say that you will sign your life away for Foxe's wellbeing ... [If] the building was on fire, and I could either save Foxe or myself, I do have to say that I will go and save Foxe."

Vivi described admin, and event-planning, as a large part of the role, with some aspects being fairly time-consuming: "I got into the position on the Saturday of week eight in Michaelmas and then started working immediately. It's a lot of ordering merch, and I've got volunteers in from the charity that we supported [RSPCA Oxfordshire]. You have to work out training for people, how many tickets you're selling, and where you're selling them. There were lots of emails in college about what's going on, and lots of health and safety meetings."

On the day, occasional spells of June sunshine accompanied the thoughtfully curated schedule of events. Entering

through Corpus' front quad, the RSPCA stall, and tables of tortoise merch greeted incoming visitors, with displays ranging from tote bags and t-shirts to tortoise plushies and face-paint. The wafting scent of the barbecue encouraged foot traffic to move through the college, before visitors arrived in the gardens, where live music, tortoise figurine painting, and dancing were all taking place. The joint efforts of Vivi, volunteers from Corpus and RSPCA Oxfordshire, and the wider college community certainly paid off – almost everywhere you looked, there seemed to be a beaming face sporting a tortoise t-shirt or holding a tortoise plush.

Aside from the actual tortoise race, the event of the day that attracted the most spectators was the human tortoise race. As a fresher, I remember learning there was a vacancy in my college's JCR for the position of Tortoise-Keeper. I was (understandably) very excited at the prospect of looking after a tortoise, only to be met with the mildly terrifying reality that my college did not, in fact, have a pet tortoise, and the Tortoise-Keeper was actually required to don a costume and attend all tortoise-related events as if they were one. Needless to say, I did not apply and, to the best of my knowledge, the position remains empty.

But there was a very different atmosphere on the day: at 2.45pm, the Tortoise-Keeper announced the human tortoise race, and encouraged any volunteers from the crowd to step up. The two individuals dressed as respective halves of a tortoise were the first to enter, followed by an enthusiastic group of people happily exercising their free will. The contestants were required to eat a head of lettuce as messily as possible, and then crawl to the finish line. A humorous array of crawls across the grass ensued, with Corpus bringing victory home.

Although 2026 marks the 52nd tortoise race, its documented history is not exactly linear, with it having only become a consistent annual event in the last few years. When speaking to Vivi about its



history, they referenced a document known as the Illustrious History of Tortoises, which has been passed on from predecessors. "I think there was a year in the 70s when Blue Peter entered a tortoise, and I think that same year they painted designs onto the top of the tortoises so you could see where they were from. It's been relatively recently that it's turned into a sort of fair event. It used to be just an inter-college thing and now it's more open to the public to raise more money for charity."

As the afternoon progressed, crowds started to gather around the hexagonal race track for the event everyone had been waiting for: the tortoise race. The growing anticipation drew spectators in surprisingly early, with people sitting down at the track for over an hour before the race began in order to secure an unobstructed view. Tortoise enthusiasts of all ages rallied together at the fenceposts, keen for the race to begin. There were five competitors for the 2026 race: Foxe (Corpus), Bernard (Corpus), Kale (Nuffield), Truffle (Regent's Park), and Wendy (Balliol). Excitement only intensified at the sight of the Tortoise-Keeper laying down a ring of lettuce for the tortoises to race towards. From where I was sitting, a firm fanbase had their hearts set on Wendy as the winner, despite her being the smallest and the youngest (at only three years old). Wendy had been socialising with her tortoise-

keeper throughout the day, winning the hearts of everyone she crawled by, with her pancake-shaped shell.

After a best-of-three race was declared, the tortoises each started their crawls towards victory. Truffle and Kale were unperturbed by the pressure of winning, and the cheering of the crowds, each taking the distance to the lettuce in their own stride. Wendy, being the smallest by far, still gave it her all and made a beeline for the lettuce as fast as her little legs would allow. Foxe seemed less concerned this year with winning glory, and more focused on trying to bite Wendy. Speaking to Vivi about Foxe's personality, I learnt that he seems to have a penchant for biting and a long history of grumpiness. Nevertheless, victory was still brought home to Corpus by Bernard, who reached the lettuce to a chorus of victorious celebration.

The painstaking thought and effort put into the organisation of the tortoise fair, and the dutiful care taken of Foxe by the Tortoise-Keeper and his caregivers in the lodge, embody how Oxford's communities are more than meets the eye. Animals, though a minority at the University, tend to shine light where it is needed the most. Discussing their importance, Vivi summarised it best: "Animals really help it feel like somewhere you live, rather than just somewhere you work".

Image credit: Vivi Alabaster, with permission.

Absence (and digicam photo dumps) makes the heart grow fonder

PRITY LALOUX

Last Michaelmas, as my friends and I were going through our photos from a weekend trip to Bristol, Bath, and Cardiff, my friend said: "When I look at these photos, I feel nostalgic for time that isn't over yet". This comment stuck with me, and I have found it to ring increasingly true the more time I spend in Oxford. As my camera roll fills up with photos from formals, balls, BOPs, and ordinary days just spent revising with friends, I can't help but feel a twinge of sadness every time I go through it. Given that I am only a second-year undergraduate, this melancholy feels premature and out of place. While it certainly still lingers during term time, I feel my nostalgia for Oxford truly reached its peak in the last long vacation, and has only grown as my year abroad draws scarily close. Ultimately, this nostalgia is due to a combination of distance and distorted memories, framed through the lens of social media and selected photos.

We all know the bittersweet end-of-term feeling, when the last essay has been submitted, your room is packed, and you are ready to go home. When you open Instagram, your feed is flooded with digicam 'photo-dumps' captioned "michael-mess", "hellary", or "trinifree". Swiping reveals a series of formals, parties, and general merriment taking place across a variety of friend groups. Your heart swells at the thought of all the fun times you had last term as you prepare your own 'photo-dump'. I myself am guilty of the overly sentimental, highly curated Instagram post (though they are often nine months late). Through such

colourful carousels, we are offered a highlight reel of the term – a glimpse of only the best moments. When I first post, though, my feelings do not necessarily reflect the version of term I present on my social media. Although I already miss the fun times with my friends, I am also exhausted from the previous term, and thoroughly ready for a break. When I look at my highlight reel in this context, all I can see is the absence of all-too-recent essay crises and deadlines passed.

On reflection, it seems that these types of posts have the greatest impact on me a few weeks into the long vacation. Once the dust has settled, and I have fallen back into my daily routine at home, I find myself spending more and more time staring longingly at my term-time photos. Originally taken in the context of Oxford chaos, they now stand independently, as images of a more exciting time with friends, and the nostalgia this evokes is only exacerbated by the warm, familiar glow of the digicam. These photos look older than the ones taken on my phone (I am a shameless digicam leech in my friend group), and thus, almost feel as if they come from a more distant time. Not only do our digicamposted memories recall the best, hand-picked moments, they do so in a way that covers our experiences in a romantic haze. It is no secret that Oxford lends itself extremely well to romanticisation, and the combination of distance, lack of context, and blurry analogue media only serves to heighten this longing. It seems that, as Oxford becomes more remote, my feelings towards my university experience become less accurate. The breakneck

speed of term is forgotten in favour of remembering the times spent ignoring work in favour of more lively pursuits. In short, as soon as August hits, my rose-tinted glasses are decidedly on.

I have spent some time contemplating this feeling as I prepare to leave Oxford for a year. This looming departure makes this the last term my college wife and I will spend as students together, and my last overlapping term with many of my closest friends. As I feel the same nostalgic emotions swelling up much earlier this time around, I really start to feel that the depiction of Oxford in the photos I post is misleading. I wonder whether, in my preservation of the best parts of Oxford, I have done my real experience an injustice. While I love and cherish the fun and beautiful parts of Oxford, it would be a lie to say that the stress and challenges were any less of a fundamental part of my experience here. When so much of my time is spent at a desk in a library, it almost seems unfair to my past self to forget those moments. The rose-tinted glasses seem to have selective blinders attached to them.

Yet I think the solution to my problem might come in the form of better documentation. While my camera roll provides ample material for yearning, my saved snaps with my sister offer a very different version of the term. There, I can observe a museum of library sessions, essay crises, and the generalised academic chaos that accompanies the term. Without concern for external perception, these photos are taken live, and offer far better contextualisation for the ups and downs of Oxford. Although I sometimes expect to be brought down by the resurfacing

of such memories, the resulting feeling is surprisingly much more optimistic. In forgetting the chaos of term, we tend to forget our achievements. The sudden shift in circumstance, environment, and even time zones can distract from the challenges that we each managed to overcome, and the projects we've completed within such a short period of time. Distance from these varied experiences, combined with a more accurate recollection of them, allowed me to appreciate what I've learned, and achieved, in my time here. I can cherish my weekend trip to Wales with my friends, recall the stressful week of catch-up that ensued, and appreciate the increase in writing speed I gained as a result. Thinking about the times I have scrambled to finish writing before going out for the evening has allowed me to value the balancing act of managing work and fun that Oxford demands, and makes me excited to continue this in my final year.

Of course, this isn't to say that compilations of happy memories stored on digicams or posted online are always harmful to us. As I mentioned, I love to dump digicam photos of myself at balls on my Instagram (what else is the app for?). However, I do think that recontextualising my nostalgia, and reflecting on the more challenging times of term, when I have more space and time, has been incredibly beneficial to my relationship with Oxford. As I look forward to the last two weeks of term before I set off on a year abroad, I want to preserve these slightly challenging and conflicting feelings. I think they are what allow us to cherish our true experience of Oxford.

HOROSCOPES



Aries

You will end the year with zero opps.



Taurus

The term is ending... take a chance!



Gemini

Start a podcast. The world needs to hear what you have to say.



Cancer

Maybe it's time to start revising ... just a thought!



Leo

The future is bright! Wear SPF (please).



Virgo

Studying in the Rad Cam will not make you more 'dark academia'. It's summer.

HOROSCOPES



Libra

No one understands you.



Scorpio

Revision is for the faint of heart (You are not faint of heart).



Sagittarius

Love is within your grasp!



Capricorn

You will get a first on ALL finals or prelims. Probably.



Aquarius

No one is praying on your downfall.



Pisces

Let go of that parasocial relationship.

Do ‘day in the life’ videos make us hate our own?

JESSIE JUKES

An alarm flashes on a phone screen: it’s 5am. A hand reaches out to turn it off, and then there is a freshly-brewed coffee, a session at the gym, a perfectly balanced lunch. Before midday, the creator has done a workout, attended two lectures, completed their to-do list, and managed to film it all. “Day in the life” videos are everywhere. Whether on Instagram reels, TikTok, or even YouTube shorts, every day I am met with a barrage of content showing the perfectly curated lives of their creators. I see things like: “a day in the life as a busy student”, “a productive day in my life”, or “clean girl morning routine”, where in the course of just a minute, we get a glimpse into a person’s life – or at least the version of it that they want to show us.

These videos can be entertaining, and there is something inherently captivating about watching others live their lives. But they also create the perfect breeding ground for comparison. We watch them while doomscrolling reels, eating junk food, or procrastinating essays, and it’s hard not to think: “I should get up earlier”, “I should go to the gym”, or “I’m not revising enough”.

But no one reaches for their camera when they’re exhausted, or eating takeaway in bed. Our mundane days pale in comparison with someone else’s curated highlights – their best moments pulled together under the guise of reality. It’s rare to see an unproductive ‘day in my life’, or videos where their creators seem unmotivated or sad.

The resulting unrealistic standards for productivity are only exacerbated for Oxford students, who, already in an environment characterised by high expectations and academic pressure, have their own version of these videos to compare themselves to: the “day in the life of an Oxford student”. Between lectures, tutorials, societies, and deadlines, it is already easy to feel like we should be doing more, and an endless stream of videos showcasing students at their most productive, busiest, and most motivated can be somewhat disheartening.

There is also a voyeuristic quality, and with it a genuine safety concern to these videos: there is something undeniably fascinating about watching how others live. With the ever-increasing prevalence of technology and surveillance in our lives, the lack of privacy that comes with it is starting to feel progressively more normal. In the past, a desire to see into the personal lives of others would remain just that, but now we can actually do it. And beyond the pressure, and comparison this encourages, it can also cause genuine dangers – sharing every intimate detail of a routine leaves creators vulnerable. What might

seem like a harmless clip of a morning walk can make it surprisingly easy for strangers to work out where someone lives, studies, or spends their time.

And then there is the “what I eat in a day” content. There are countless videos online of influencers presenting restrictive or disordered eating as wellness. A perfectly arranged smoothie bowl or low-calorie breakfast is not inherently harmful, but for younger, more impressionable viewers, creating standards of what is and isn’t acceptable to eat can lead to their normalising these unrealistic standards, and the construction of unhealthy obsessive mindsets when it comes to food.

And yet, despite all of this, we continue to watch these videos. They do have an appeal, and that’s why they continue to get so many views: I’ll admit that I myself enjoy this content. It can be as motivating as it is sometimes demoralising, and sometimes, when I’m scrolling TikTok instead of writing an essay, seeing someone else’s eight-hour revision day helps to encourage me.

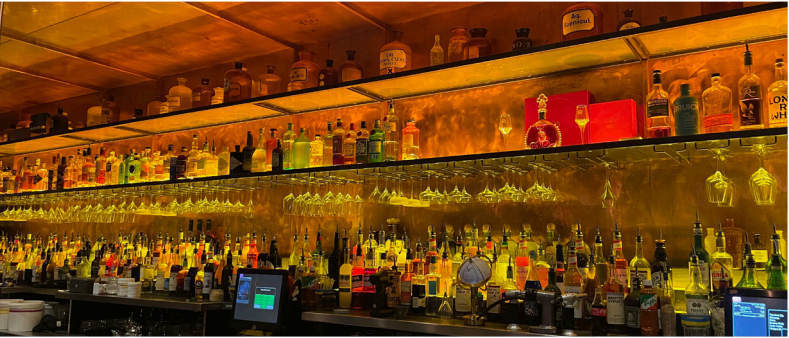
“No one reaches for their camera when they’re exhausted, or eating takeaway in bed. Our mundane days pale in comparison with someone else’s curated highlights

There is something undeniably fascinating about watching how others live, and the short length of these videos makes them even more addictive. I also wonder if part of their appeal lies in the fantasy that they show to us: we know that it isn’t realistic, that their creators have chosen which parts of their day to leave in, and which to leave out. We know that it isn’t possible to live like this all the time, and yet we continue to watch. We continue to compare our messy bedroom to the perfectly arranged one on our screen, our procrastination to their productivity, and our ordinary days to their highlights.

“Day in the life” content isn’t going to disappear, and nor should it (for the most part) – after all, it is genuinely entertaining. I think that is worth remembering, though, when we see these videos, that the reality they present is not actually as real as it seems, and that a life well-lived is not necessarily the one that makes it onto social media.

CHERWELL-FED

The cocktail that will take you into your overdraft: The Alchemist reviewed



NORA MILES

Venturing to the third floor of Westgate does feel like you’ve left the real world behind. But making eye contact with the card machine as you pay for your cocktail at The Alchemist will bring you right back down to earth. Is it a fun night out with friends? Or has the price of cocktails made this kind of evening untenable?

Part of the fun of The Alchemist is the presentation of the drinks. Whether you feel like the drinks are worth the money depends entirely on where you fall on the spectrum between whimsy and cynicism. Maybe I was caught on a bad night, but I found myself in the latter camp. The irony is, if I were more drunk, then I would have been more amenable to the spectacle of drink presentation, but at £13.50 a pop, I was too sober to forget how much each bedazzled sip was costing me.

Highlights of the menu include drinks served in hip flasks, test tubes, tea cups, lightbulbs, and tobacco pipes. There’s also a section for shareable drinks, including something called the ‘Infinity Vortex’, which resembles a Rob Roy or Manhattan, and which will set you back £22. There’s also ‘The Globe’, which dares you to “share a pour that orbits the moon. Romance in perfect balance”, and offers a twist on a Cosmopolitan. Is the twist simply that it comes in a globe? Mostly, yes.

The first cocktail was a French Kiss, which was presented in a traditional cocktail glass, and contained vodka, berry liqueur, raspberry, pineapple, cranberry, and citrus juices, as well as popping candy, and a meringue topping. The flavours were simultaneously fruity and fresh, yet violently sweet. But its pink colour and meringue dome did provide it with a touch of whimsy, and it made the perfect accompaniment to a girly night out.

Next, I tried the J2Woah. The picture on the menu appeared to depict a beer bottle with a shooting star inside, but I didn’t quite get the theatricality that the menu promised. The bartender called out for a J2Woah, and I was fairly disappointed that the alchemy in question involved pulling out a bottle of pre-made cocktail

from the fridge and plonking some cubes of dry ice into the top. It tasted good, but if the menu promises Ketel One citroen vodka, Cointreau, passionfruit, orange, wine, citrus, and golden shimmer, then I’d guess that you could approximate the experience by necking one third of a J2O and filling the bottle up with vodka.

Now it’s time to be cynical about their chips. There’s just something about the words ‘spice bag’ and the number 10.50 following a pound sign that doesn’t sit right with me. The spice bag originated in Dublin twenty years ago as a late-night favourite at a Chinese takeaway. At an upscale bar, paying approximately 50p per chip (spice sachet would be more accurate), it just feels a little bit like you’re cosplaying a night out, but for twice the price – *Hunger Games* Capitol style. Admittedly, we were complicit in this gentrification since we ordered the truffle fries with halloumi, and I’ll confess they were very good. But I think I’d prefer to pay fine-dining prices for finer things.

Menu

French Kiss Cocktail: £13
J2Woah Cocktail: £13.50
Truffle Spice Bag: £10.50

Westgate Roof Terrace

I’ve definitely had worse and less financially sensible nights out. £30 is about as much as I would pay in a restaurant, so if you’re looking for something slightly different to do with your friends or partner, then I wouldn’t necessarily rule it out. It’s a good place to suggest if you’re confident that you’re not going to be footing the bill. The menu reads like the horoscope section of a tween magazine, and makes for an enjoyable deliberation experience. The atmosphere was undeniable, and the view over Oxford in the summer sunset is breathtaking. I wouldn’t even rule out going back myself, since my friend regrets not trying the drink that comes in a bong, and I concede that I would quite like to take a shot out of a conch shell.

AGONY AUNT

Dear Agony Aunt,

I feel like everyone’s started revising well before me and now I have no chance to catch up. I’m worried about not getting the grades I know I could have done, but I find it impossible to balance work with uni life and I’m still adjusting to coming here. Help!

Sincerely,
Pree Lim

Dear Pree Lim,

The real secret of Oxford is that we’re all jealous of people who started revising before us: those around us in college who seem to effortlessly balance a degree, do well in tutorials, run about ten different societies, and have plenty of friends. In a world where we were each the envy of our previous schools, it can get pretty hard to strike the right balance.

Whilst exams are important, do keep your head up and understand that adjusting to the real world is one of the biggest parts of university, and it is no shame to say that you’re still doing that. I’m still doing that! Close that Whatsapp group chat, get off the *Cherwell* Instagram page, and get a bit of studying done. The sooner you start, the sooner it will all be over, and you’ll be less panicked. I promise you know more than you think you do. And a bad set of Prelims is not the death sentence people seem to think it is!

Yours finally,
Agony Aunt

A love letter to my year abroad

REBECCA BUSHEE

A year is a long time: enough to call a place home, enough to strip away the bright facade of newness. I've spent my year abroad at this university, unstuck in time. My friends at home have lived a thousand different lives in the interim, and I suppose so have I. But this place is different. It's somewhere that's nearly impossible to explain. My friends ask me about how it compares to Brown University, and I find myself at a loss. The differences are manifold; they're cosmically different, worlds apart. How can I express how I feel about Oxford? How can I capture this rapturous feeling? I cannot hope to explain my world here. And yet, I must try. I love this place, I hate this place, I can't bear to leave it behind. I don't think it will ever truly leave me.

I write to tell you all what this place means to me. To tell you what it has been to take a year abroad.

Michaelmas

Oxford still seemed romantic, a sort of richly brocaded city of dreaming; it was all twisting spires and ancient promises. The city was new, freshly minted in my mind. Things felt heavier: the air, the weight of age, the frantic, feverish rhythm of life. That was particularly significant, the speed at which everything seemed to go. Two months is not a long time. The rate of coursework, essays, and even social activities seemed breakneck. I found myself settling into my modules, grinding out two essays every single week. I would go to the Radcliffe Camera and bask under the elegant arches and soft incandescent light. Work felt special when it was beneath the watchful eye of some marble statue. I rowed in the mornings, and swam on Saturdays. Days were spent dutifully working, nights were consumed by revelry.

There was something on every single evening. Whether it was formals (such an alien concept, even to students in the UK, I'm sure), college BOPs, club nights, socials, or debate nights, I was meeting new people at a rate which rivalled my own first year of university. Formal dinners were particularly dazzling – dressing up for a three-course meal in a vaulted hall evoked some sort of Public school fantasy – and it's no surprise I went to as many as I could afford. I involved myself in societies which seemed novel and interesting. I made friends in student

politics, and watched with mild amusement as intrigues unfolded on a scale unlike any I'd seen before. It felt very...Oxford. It was somewhat alluring, the draw of the glitz and glamour of an entirely different social world.

But my disillusionment with student politics came early into the term. One night, sequestered in a college common room, beneath dim lights, I found myself at a hushed afters. The group was discussing one of my friends, saying terrible things. I knew then what I know now: I wanted no part of that world. I resolved to extricate myself.

Like any new thing, Michaelmas was bright, exciting, and romantic. Underneath the shine, I found that some truths were better left buried. The journey out of darkness was not easy or linear, but it was worth it.

Hilary

Hilary began as it ended, with a sort of incorrigible grey. There was a lightness to it, at some point in the middle, when things fell into place. When the rhythms of life here began to feel as normal as breathing. I wrote so much that term: articles for a student paper, modules on Mesopotamia and Ethnobotany, and pages and pages in my journal. I also took up ice skating. There was something freeing about gliding across that glittering rink. It smiled at me, kissed my cheeks with cool breath, and pushed my feet across frozen ground. I found peace in my solo skates, joy in skating with others. Collapsing into bed, face flushed from the cold, I could not have been happier.

By this point, the glamour of student politics had thoroughly worn off. It seemed more like a tired old thing, full of fatigued people. Yet still, friends found themselves deeper entrenched in the machinery of it. I pulled further and further away as they ran elections and relayed intrigues.

Working on the student paper was my saving grace, with the Schwarzman becoming an unlikely refuge. We spent long hours below that sun-soaked ceiling, passing the day in leisurely conversation. We discussed the paper, pitched articles, and wrote silly headlines that could never be published. Little work was done, even when dusk came and went. The watchful oculus considered us carefully, as we raced about on rolling chairs under the moonlight. We would stay into the early morning hours, dancing, singing, running around that hollowed-out



space. The darkness was warm.

Nights at the Schwarzman melted into afters at one room or another. Twilight spent in fervent conversation, marked by tea or cheese and crackers. I felt so full in these liminal moments. Pink parties, game cafes, and homemade DnD campaigns made my time at college all the brighter. Although the end of Hilary was marked by a particularly nasty bout of pneumonia, I felt satisfied with all I'd done in my grey little term.

Sometimes, in that mid-year lull, the only thing to do is to keep pressing forward. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. The articles and essays I wrote that term are still some of my favourites.

Trinity

May night was long and dark, a treacherous road twisting round the riverbend. We walked in cold twilight. Moonbeams glanced across my cheek – a quiet beacon in the near black. The neon glow of varsity faded into dawn, slowly. When the sun finally turned Magdalen Tower blushing red, the choir heralded the start of spring. May morning shone just a bit too brightly, full of clamorous noise and clatter. Dancing and merry bells followed me all the way into my belated slumber.

Oxford was beginning to shimmer beneath the brilliant sunshine. It made everything feel just a bit more hopeful. I was determined to spend the term trying an entirely new set of activities. I shed the politics which made Hilary drag endlessly, and leaned into my renewed

joy for writing. I joined two magazines and a different student paper. These turned out to be such sources of light: full of incredible, creative people, and even more incredible work. Writing articles, performing pieces, editing work, it was all so fulfilling. I looked forward every week to our lay-ins, or planning meetings for events.

Trinity was a time of great celebration. I attended countless birthdays, including my own. My friends made me such thoughtful cakes; I was laughing long into the night. It was so nice to be with the people who made Oxford special. I turned 21 under the multicoloured lights at the Brasenose Ball. It felt magical, to be able to mark the occasion in such a fairytale manner. I will always remember the purple glow and the soft music in the background as I checked my watch, and hugged my friend tight when the hour hand slid to midnight.

Ultimately, it was the small moments that made Trinity particularly special: whether it was simply studying with finalists, or watching Eurovision for the first time on my friend's bed (we ate too many of her snacks and took our bets entirely too seriously).

I must have done absolutely no revision the second the sun came out. Maybe it was the warmth of the afternoon light on my face at Port Meadow, or the cool depths of Hinksey Lake, but those days passed in such a calm haze. The picture of idyllic summertime.

Sometimes, letting go is just a chance.

Image Credit: Jps3, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

OXFORD

TINY LOVE STORIES

Love is the feeling of home, and one that I have often chased. I used to seek out love in fumbling first dates and intoxicated late-night encounters, clinging to shadows of romance in dark corners. But sitting in a sun-soaked kitchen, laughing endlessly with the people who truly have my heart, I realise what love really looks like. Slowly completing a crossword, bickering playfully over the answers. Talking for hours in pocket-sized corridors, without any real intention of retreating to bed. Hushed voices over hot tea, spilling secrets like milk not to cry over. If love is the feeling of home, then it turns out I had found it all along.

Anonymous

CHERPSE.

Oxford's blind dating

An evening at The Grapes: will the rain dampen an evening of whirlwind romance?



Miss Gap Year

First impressions?
My date had the most dope outfit.

Did it meet your expectations?
Yes, a very kind and interesting person.

What was the highlight?
Getting to try more expensive wine for cheaper because they had ran out

What was the most embarrassing moment?
Being unable to hear each other over loud music.

Describe the date in three words.
Raining, pouring, dreams.

Is there a second date on the cards?
[no answer]

Miss Martin Lewis

Money Saving Expert

First impressions?
Polished and had her act together, knows what she likes! Supperrr cool.

Did it meet your expectations?
Honestly, I had no idea what to expect, so ... yes? I had a fun conversation and met someone new, so to me it's a win, even if it wasn't a whirlwind romance.

What was the highlight?
She just had really interesting stories, like, she's lived a life. Her gap year? Insane. It was just fun hearing about it.

What was the most embarrassing moment?
The date ended with this middle-aged man offering to buy drinks, and the bartender who let us know kept on distracting me while I was trying to say goodbye .. if it wasn't a date, I would've said yes. Free drink is a free drink.

Describe the date in three words.
Loud, Conversational, Grapes.

Is there a second date on the cards?
I'd like to see her again, but I'd be happy if it was just platonic.

SPORT

Goodbye football: Welcoming political tension to the centre stage of the World Cup

Jessica Gregory dissects the politicisation of the 2026 FIFA World Cup



It's been four years since England men lost to France at the quarter finals in Qatar. Since then, the women have won the Euros twice – in 2021 and 2025 – bringing football home for our success-starved nation: it would be amazing if England could repeat this success in this tournament too.

However, when approaching the 2026 World Cup in North America, my thoughts don't drift towards football. I've barely considered the players in our squad or our chances at success. In fact, the game itself has taken a backseat. Instead, the politics, headlines, and contentious issues that we've already seen in the build-up have dominated the discussion. With all these different factors at play, concern trumps any excited anticipation in the build-up to the tournament.

There are plenty of places to start when considering the disarray of this World Cup, but I think a relatively simple place would be with the fans. Supporters are the very essence of football. Whilst there can certainly be issues, the majority of fans merely want their team to win. For this reason, the ticket prices for this tournament are completely unfair to these loyal fan bases. Back in December, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) announced that the cheapest tickets for the final would still cost over £3000. Naturally, this is completely unrealistic for many football fans, now left with no chance to watch their team play. This doesn't even consider their devotion in terms of flight, accommodation, and transportation costs. In fact, even the president himself said that he wouldn't pay to watch the US play Paraguay in the group stage.

The frustration in terms of profit runs even further. One of the new features in this year's tournament is 'Hydration Breaks'. In other tournaments, so that high temperatures don't have a negative effect on players, time is allocated for athletes to rehydrate. However, these breaks have been introduced as a compulsory requirement for every match in this tournament, regardless of whether they are playing indoors or outdoors, in a conditioned or

unconditioned stadium. This means that matches will only be played for 22 minutes before a break, which some have noticed aligns these games more closely with American football.

On the face of it, these breaks may seem beneficial to the players. However, the *Guardian* has found that this offers FIFA more than 200 guaranteed slots for advertising. Naturally, more advertising allows for only more revenue. This brings into question, then, whether FIFA is truly concerned about the safety of the players, or simply just its own profit boost. Whilst the decision could, of course, be informed by both, it does suggest that FIFA's goal in this tournament is to severely boost the revenue they receive, despite the rules of the sport and the loyalty of the fans. This is further endorsed when considering the high ticket prices.

“*This tournament no longer focuses on the game itself, removing the very passion from the sport*”

Additionally, many stadiums have had to change their names temporarily for the tournament. Some originally had brands as their stadium names, such as the Mercedes-Benz Stadium. However, in order not to hand out free advertising to companies which aren't sponsoring the tournament, the names have been changed to generic city names. Mercedes-Benz Stadium, for example, is to be known as the Atlanta Stadium for the duration of the World Cup this year. Though this may not have a direct impact on the game itself, it once again highlights that capital is premium in this tournament is decentralising and almost displacing the very essence of the game for wealth-snatching tactics.

Furthermore, the World Cup, for the first time,

is taking place across an entire continent. Whilst that may be an exciting part of football history, the sheer size of the continent also provides something of a logistical nightmare. The tournament will take place across four time zones, with some stadiums up to almost 3000 miles apart. Frustrating for fans, who want to see their teams once they've passed the group stage, the sheer cost of travel is something that won't be easily managed – especially alongside the already extortionate ticket prices. Secondly, it's a long way to go for the players, who will have to travel wide expanses to play their next match. Even if this may affect all players, it does add a degree of difficulty, considering that 104 games will be taking place across 39 days. The excitement of such international hosting is somewhat lessened when visualising the tricky logistics for both fans and teams.

Moreover, there remains an ongoing concern over ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids in the USA. Even back in January, the FSE (Football Supporters Europe) fan group expressed concern over such events. There have also been concerns, in light of these raids, over fans' personal safety when travelling to the US. Supporters have no reason for their fears to be alleviated, as Todd Lyons (director of ICE) expressed that the enforcement group's presence was a necessary part of the World Cup. With regular stories on the news and social media, it's no wonder that fans – forced to constantly consider their own safety – are sceptical about the role that ICE will play in the tournament.

Concerns have also been raised over new security checks for fans entering the country. Back in December, President Trump announced security checks that would involve checking tourists' social media accounts. This affects 42 countries, one of which is the UK, in the interest of the safety of Americans. However, according to the *Guardian*, the FSE described the new measure as “profoundly unacceptable”.

Read the full article at cherwell.org
Image credit: U.S. Department of State, CCO 1.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Cambridge Pythons steal back the limelight in victory over Oxford Lancers

Oxford Lancers went head-to-head with Cambridge Pythons on 23rd May for their annual Varsity Match, taking place away from home at Mumford Pitch, Grange Road, Cambridge. Oxford were set to defend their commanding victory over Cambridge last year, but double glory was not to be. The light blues finally beat Oxford with a decisive 26–12 victory, marking a thrilling season finale for the Pythons.

CRICKET SEASON

Oxford Women Comfortably Triumph Over Bristol Women's 1st XI

On 1st June, Oxford Women's Blues, captained by Hannah Davis, played a friendly T20 cricket match against Bristol University's Women's 1st XI. Oxford won the toss and elected to field, managing to restrict Bristol to 88 runs in 19 overs before the fall of the final wicket. Oxford successfully chased the target within 13 overs with a loss of 4 wickets: Maisie Wright's fiery knock of 35* (21) proved crucial.

NETBALL CUPPERS

Trinity triumph at Netball Cuppers Final

Trinity College's Women played an impressive set of matches last weekend to take ultimate victory in the Netball Cuppers Final at Magdalen College School. A closely contested game saw Trinity take a narrow but well-earned win over the reputedly feisty Brasenose team, leaving everything out there on the court to achieve a final score of 23–20.

RACE ACROSS OXFORDSHIRE

First Race Across Oxfordshire takes place for homelessness charity

Last month, the first ever Race Across Oxfordshire took place in order to raise money for Homeless Oxfordshire, a charity aiming to provide food, shelter, and support to those living on Oxford's streets. Raising over £24,000, 18 teams of two competed, travelling the length and breadth of the county with only a map, £30, and bus tokens. The winning team, Fiona Curnow and Phil Kouvaritakis from the law firm Gardner Leader, secured victory with a mere five minutes separating them from the race's runners-up.

UPCOMING

Cycling Blues

Sunday 12th June
Ellesmere Centre, Stetchworth
President: Becky Strain

Cricket Over Blues

Sunday 21st June
Arundel Castle
President: Andrew Moss

Lawn Tennis

Sunday 28th June
Cambridge
President: Scott Malcom

Going to watch a Varsity or Cuppers match?

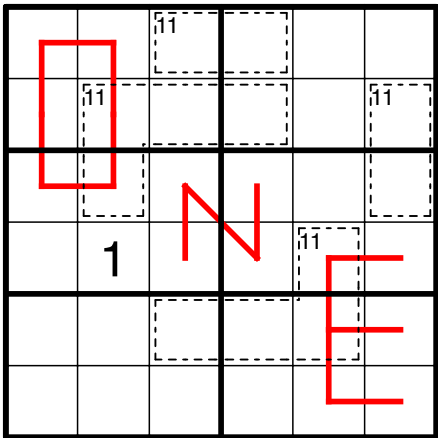
Email sportcherwell@gmail.com to write up a match report

Sudoku Finals by JADEN LEE and DOM JOYNER

Editor's note: I hope the Puzzles pages this term have given you practice in solving variant Sudokus. It's the end of Trinity now, so time for your finals!

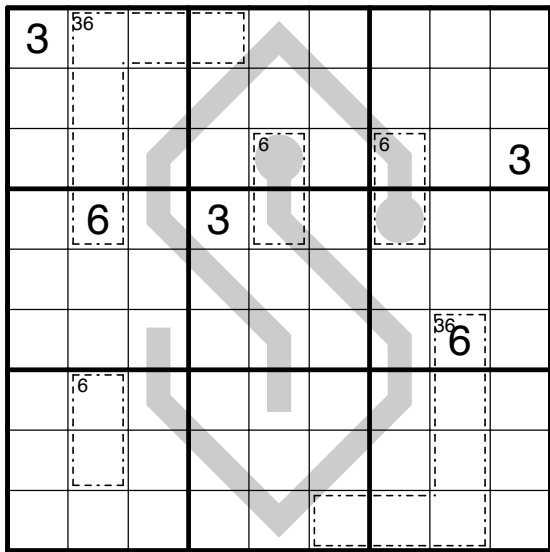
All three of these puzzles obey normal Sudoku rules and use **Killer Cages**. Within a cage, digits must sum to the value in the top left.

Ones by DOM JOYNER



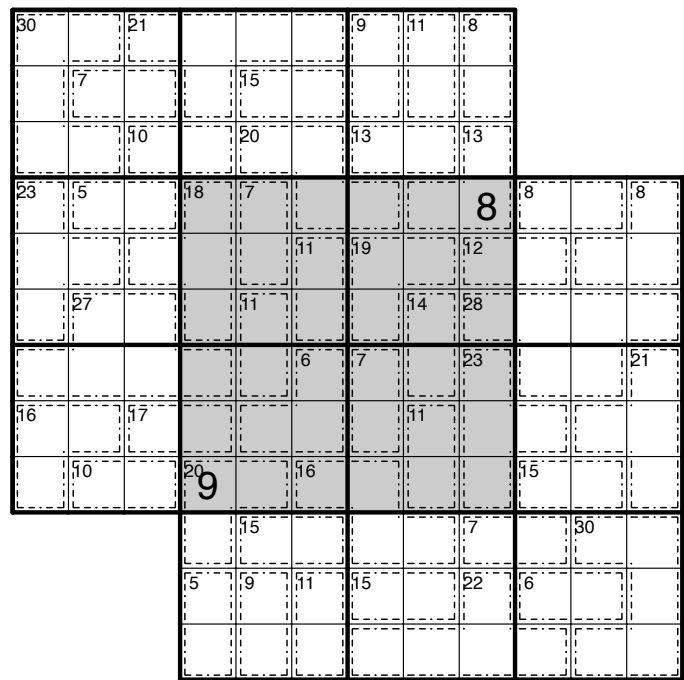
Red lines form **consecutive sets of unique digits**, in any order (e.g. 3, 2, 5, and 4)

Sixes and Threes by DOM JOYNER



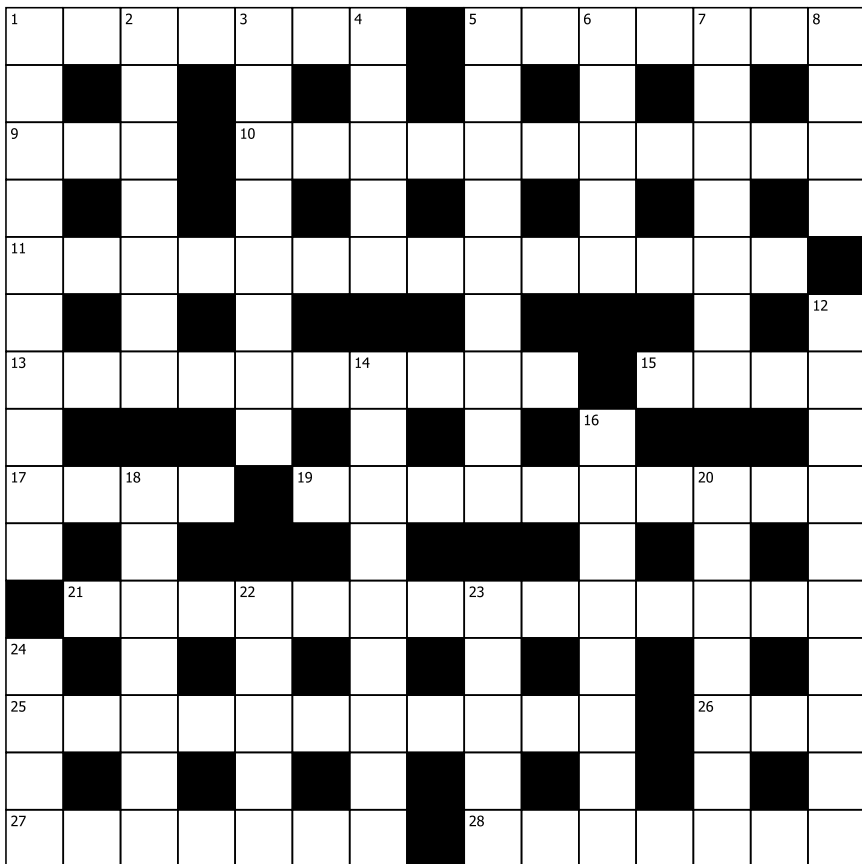
Starting from the bulb, digits along a thermometer **may not decrease** (but might stay the same).

Double Kill by JADEN LEE



The top left and bottom right 9x9 Sudokus overlap in the central four boxes. For the purposes of each Sudoku's rules, the rows and columns do not extend fully into the other one.

Cryptic Crossword: How To Spend Your Long Vac by ZOË MCGUIRE *Difficulty: 4/5*



ACROSS

- 1) Sold for lunch containing ketchup filling (7)
- 5) Brightens unhealthy lead-free fumes (7)
- 9) French King to get a profit on purchase (3)
- 10) Deceives and guides an alleycat (5, 6)
- 11) Hastily summarised holy passages abroad (6, 8)
- 13) Scale summit, reportedly, after her fan got lost (10)
- 15) Test mode of cycling (4)
- 17) Rolling in dough that's high in calories (4)
- 19) Not far, 1 picture contained in a British pound (10)
- 21) Amazonian trial that's easy at first: chat with bird beside Jolly Roger, perhaps (4, 10)
- 25) Photos about shrinking lake you might place first in global event (11)
- 26) Eggs over loud (3)
- 27) Part of sea witch is oddly uninspired (7)
- 28) Touching bronze fellow (7)

DOWN

- 1) Stand to let go of Ranger's concern (6, 4)
- 2) President takes on setter to suit attainment (7)
- 3) Heroin rolled with ecstasy, shot up and cried (8)
- 4) Life partner hated disturbance (5)
- 5) Derogatory in chant about finishing move (9)
- 6) Beamed relaxed noise (5)
- 7) Union terms to besmirch line up, losing husband (5, 2)
- 8) River heard in the middle of nowhere (4)
- 12) Juice fruit in Battersea, for one (5, 5)
- 14) "like, like, and like, it's whore, money, drugs" [dropped mic] (9)
- 16) As one matriculated child (2, 6)
- 18) Ring to say goodbye (7)
- 20) Fit to be vacuum - nearly (7)
- 22) Very evil asgardian carrying Loki's crown (5)
- 23) Order cited another order (5)
- 24) Genre for twice grand explosion (1-3)

Week 5 answers:

Cryptic: Across: SAVELOY; IMPLANT; UNION MEMBERSHIP; SCENTED CANDLES; LYRICS; IN EXCESS; FREUDIAN; ORNATE; WHY THE LONG FACE; ONCE IN A LIFETIME; SPLASHY; RESPECT. **Down:** SNUBS; VOICE; LUNATIC; YIELDS; PARADOX; ATHLETE; TIPS; BRAINY; ISLE; LIFT; IOU; CON; CAMERA; ETHICAL; DETAILS; REGRETS; COZIER; ABIDE; EJECT; LOTS
Codeword: Across: RAFT; PRIVILEGED; SPRAWL; BLIZZARD; ICON; CONSPIRACY; MICROBE; NIGHTLY; VOLUMETRIC; MUON; MISJUDGE; PODIUM; DISSONANCE; FLUX. **Down:** CAPPUCINO; STRAINER; APPLICABLE; DISBAND; KIWI; GEEZER; BEAR; PRINCIPLED; COLLOQUIUM; HUMIDIFY; FREEING; UNJUST; IRIS; DUNK.