



BALLIOL
COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

FLOREAT DOMUS

NEWS AND FEATURES FROM THE BALLIOL COMMUNITY | JUNE 2026



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Front cover: Graduation 2025

Back cover: Statue of Dervorguilla of Galloway, installed in the courtyard of Master's Field in September 2025 thanks to the generosity of Jim Rogers (1964).

From the Master

Dame Helen Ghosh DCB

As I come towards the end of my Mastership, I am naturally feeling retrospective. While the forthcoming *Annual Record* is the place for a more serious look at my time here, *Floreat* is where I feel I can take a rather more sideways view. I have tested what follows at one or two alumni events in recent months, at opposite ends of the age spectrum. There wasn't heckling, or even audible murmuring, so I feel it safe to share here ten things I have learned about Balliol since I arrived here eight years ago.

First, I discovered in my first few months that the Fellows of Balliol are very wary of the place looking too smart. I commented, in a 'First Impressions' piece, that I felt that the place looked rather 'tatty' – the signs, the paintwork, the staircases. This is 'plain living and high thinking' I was told. One colleague commented huffily, 'We don't want to start looking like a country house hotel'. Well, I think we've avoided that risk, despite quite a lot of 'de-tattification' during my time.

Number two: it is striking that we have the reputation – and regard ourselves – as being at the radical, left-wing end of the political spectrum. (There is nearly always a reference at this point to the Trotskyists fighting the Stalinists in the JCR in Christopher Hitchens' day). But, as someone recently pointed out to me, if we are so left-wing, why were three of our four Prime Ministers from the Conservative Party, and the fourth, H.H. Asquith (1870), a not-very-radical Liberal?

Although Denis Healey (1936, Honorary Fellow 1979 – 2015) and Roy Jenkins (1938, Honorary Fellow 1969–2003) are good counter-examples (they really should have been Prime Minister), not to mention R.H. Tawney (1899) and William Beveridge (1897), the fact is that we should never take anything for granted about the views of alumni, so varied and independent as they will undoubtedly be. But – number three – the important point for



Dame Helen Ghosh, Master of Balliol College

me is that we have a tradition of being out there taking part – in public service and political life – not necessarily in historical causes that we would now espouse, but certainly not sitting at home, waiting for others to act.

That brings me to number four. I took on this role well aware – not least from being married to an Oxford Fellow for forty years – that it is not for the Head of House to question established College processes without according them due respect. I have often enquired, 'Why do we do it this way?' 'Because we always have', is the invariable answer. You would have thought I was seeking gold-plated elephants when, early in my tenure, I suggested that we should have a plasma TV screen in the Lodge, rather than a tatty (yes) chalkboard, to

welcome visitors and update students. We now have one in place. Hurrah! It's only taken seven years.

But the flip side is that – number five – we are, as the French would say, 'happy in our skins'. If we may sometimes be a bit stuck in the mud, contrariwise that does mean we are not constantly unhappy with ourselves. We generally rub along with each other – the JCR and MCR, staff and students, even the Fellows with the Master – most of the time. We tenaciously defend the right of members of our community to express views, within legal bounds, with which others might disagree. The democratic structures introduced by Christopher Hill (1931, Master 1965–1978) in the 1970s – student representatives on College Committees,

the JCR running their own bar – remains a healthy one. And we are still good at the things we have traditionally done well, including the seven Firsts in PPE our students achieved last summer.

And number six, when I stand up at Freshers' Dinners, how grateful I have always been that I'm not the Head of one of Oxford's richer but less colourful colleges. What on earth do they say, on these occasions, about the history of their colleges – beyond the accumulation of wealth over many decades, punctuated by the occasional Archbishop and (other than Christ Church) only a couple of Prime Ministers between them? I'm delighted that I have a 'story to tell', starting with a criminal conspiracy on the part of John de Balliol against his nemesis, the Bishop of Durham. Although things do go a bit quiet over the next 600 years,

they certainly perk up around 1798, when a string of reformist Masters set out to improve our academic standing through shockingly revolutionary appointments of Fellows on merit and students through competition, and later, in the 19th and 20th centuries, to open the University and educational opportunity to working-class students. A great story to tell.

And I will devote numbers seven, eight, and nine to what I have learned about Balliol's wonderful alumni. Old Members were warm and welcoming towards me from my very start – I have found friendships here which will long outlast my time as Master. They are clever, curious, and talkative. A silence never falls at an alumni event, whether a small dinner party or a large drinks reception. And they are extraordinarily loyal and generous to the College,

making it possible to fund initiatives that we would never have been able to support ourselves, and which have transformed our students' experience and our academic life.

But number ten is probably the most important. I have learned that being Master of Balliol is an enormous privilege. Thanks to the standing and achievements of my predecessors over the past two hundred years, the title itself still commands enormous respect in the galaxy of Oxford Heads of House. I hope that I have lived up, in some part, to the responsibility it brings. I am confident that, in Seamus Perry (Massey Fellow and Tutor in English), I am handing that responsibility to someone who will fulfil it wonderfully.

Floreat Domus!

Awards

New Year Honours 2026



Professor Andrew Pithouse (1977): Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), for services to social care education and policy. Emeritus Professor of Social Research at Cardiff University and lately Special Policy Adviser to the Welsh Government, Professor Pithouse continues to write on comparative social policy with colleagues in Scandinavia.



Giles Shilson (1992): Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), for services to outreach and inclusion and to charity. He writes: 'I am delighted to receive this honour, which reflects in particular the tremendous impact of the City Bridge Foundation's work, both as trusted owner of the City's five bridges and as London's largest independent funder.'



Lady Pinsent (Dametra Pinsent, 1997): Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), for services to business and to the beauty industry. Chief Executive Officer of Charlotte Tilbury, Lady Pinsent credits the recognition to the collective achievement of her team: 'Building a new business requires a village of determined and resilient problem solvers and the success of Charlotte Tilbury is a testament to that.'

Senior Members

Vincent Cheval (Associate Professor and Tutorial Fellow in Computer Science) has been awarded a Synergy Grant by the European Research Council (ERC) to investigate the security of probabilistic systems.

Professor Jason Lotay (Professor of Pure Mathematics and Fellow and Tutor in Mathematics) has been appointed to the inaugural cohort of Fellows of the Academy for the Mathematical Sciences.

Rachel Quarrell (Lecturer in Chemistry) has received a Teaching Award by the Mathematical, Physical, and Life Sciences (MPLS) Division in recognition of her significant contributions to student learning and educational innovation.

Professor Lyndal Roper (Honorary Fellow) has won the 2025 Cundill History Prize for her book *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War*.

Autumn Rowan (Tutor in Medicine and Director of First Year Medicine) has been awarded Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) in recognition of her outstanding contribution to teaching and learning in higher education.



Professor Ronald Roy (George Eastman Visiting Professor 2006–2007) has been elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering.

Jennifer Sliwka (Garlick Professorial Fellow 2023–2025) has been appointed Director of the Picture Gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Professor Jin-Chong Tan (Professor of Engineering Science, Lubbock Fellow and Tutor in Engineering Science) has been awarded a Proof of Concept Grant from the European Research Council (ERC). The grant will enable Professor Tan's research group to engineer a revolutionary sensor device exploiting a novel photoluminescent nanomaterial they have discovered.



Old Members

The Hon Bob Rae (1969) has been appointed the eighth Visitor of Massey College.

Michael Sandel (1975) has been named the 2025 laureate of the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture.

Professor Philip Torr (1990) has been awarded an AI2050 Senior Fellowship by Schmidt Sciences, an organisation that supports researchers working on projects that enable AI to deliver profound benefits for humanity by 2050.



Professor Timothy Snyder (1991) has received an honorary degree from the University of Oxford.

Dominic Sandbrook (1993) has received an honorary degree from the University of Oxford.

Professor Greg Challis (1994) has received the Kitasato Microbial Chemistry Medal by the Kitasato Institute and Kitasato University in Japan. The medal recognises outstanding research in the field of microbial chemistry.



Shashi Jayakumar (1997) was appointed the next Non-Resident Ambassador to the Republic of Cuba by the government of Singapore.

Katie Wilson (2000) has been elected as the next Mayor of Seattle.

Professor Dermot Green (2004) has been awarded the 2025 Promising Scientist Prize of Centre Mécanique Ondulatoire Appliquée (CMOA) in recognition for his contributions to theoretical atomic and molecular physics.

Daniel Susskind (2006, Career Development Fellow in Economics 2016–2021) has been appointed the Mercers' School Memorial Professor of Business at Gresham College.

Professor James Maynard (2009) has been appointed to the inaugural cohort of Fellows of the Academy for the Mathematical Sciences.

From aspiration to achievement: the Gregson Scholarship in action

Future Academies Watford, located in Garston, is a mixed, non-selective secondary school and sixth form for students aged 11 to 18. Situated in a diverse urban community, the school places a strong emphasis on providing academic education to improve social mobility.

In a recent Ofsted report, which saw the school move from 'Requires Improvement' to 'Good and Outstanding', inspectors rightly identified enrichment opportunities as a significant factor in the transformation of students' pride in themselves, their school, and their academic outcomes.

For the last three years, this transformation has been supported by the Gregson Scholarship Fund, established by a gift from the late Sir Peter Gregson (1955). The fund enabled the school to appoint a Lead Teacher to coordinate activities for high-attaining students and to develop an ambitious enrichment programme. Will Matthews was appointed as the Gregson Scholar to galvanise staff and students into action.



Will Matthews, Gregson Scholar



Students participating in Balliol's Year 10 Discovery Programme

Will has worked closely with departments, encouraging each to develop an enrichment offer that complements classroom learning and raises aspirations. Maths students now take part in weekly maths circles, tackling challenging problems they would not ordinarily encounter in the classroom. As a result, pupils regularly compete in the UK Maths Trust national challenges. In Computer Science, coding clubs – partly inspired by a trip to the National Museum of Computing at Bletchley Park – are promoting intellectual curiosity.

The funding has also strengthened the school's new Character Curriculum, broadening students' cultural capital and world view. Drama students now work towards LAMDA qualifications in performance and public speaking. Trips to the First World War battlefields in Belgium and to Auschwitz in Poland have provided powerful educational experiences. Holocaust education has become a particular priority, with trained ambassadors encouraging

respect and tolerance across the wider school community. Clubs such as creative writing and debating have encouraged students to develop literacy, oracy, and critical thinking skills.

Assistant Headteacher Marc Faccini believes these experiences have had a profound effect: 'Through exposure to new experiences and opportunities, we have broadened their horizons and helped them appreciate the richness of learning beyond the classroom. At the same time, we have nurtured intellectual curiosity and a commitment to excellence.'

Alongside enrichment, the Gregson Scholarship has enabled a more structured approach to identifying and supporting high-attaining students from the moment they arrive. Will meets regularly with the 'Future Scholars' cohort, ensuring that each student has a tailored plan designed to foster ambition and academic progress.

Year 10 students take part in Balliol's Discovery Programme, an online GCSE enrichment course designed to prepare

them for post-16 learning. To broaden students' exposure to different academic settings, the school has organised visits to local and Russell Group universities, alongside virtual work experience opportunities. Through collaborating with The Brilliant Club, students have also worked with PhD candidates, culminating in a visit to Oxford.

The impact has been striking – pupils who once felt intimidated by university environments now see them as attainable. As Marc explains: 'raising aspirations and confidence translates into academic gains.'

The results speak for themselves. The school has achieved record-breaking GCSE and A-level results for two consecutive years, and the sixth form uptake has doubled. More students are choosing traditional academic

subjects, and teachers report increased confidence in supporting Oxbridge applicants as a result of working with Balliol through the College's sustained contact programmes, taster days, and online talks. In recent years, several students have received offers – successes that are now shared across departments to strengthen guidance for future applicants.

The Gregson Scholarship has not only transformed opportunities for students; it has reshaped the school's culture. Academic ambition is no longer simply encouraged – it is expected. The impact has been so significant that the school has now committed to funding the Gregson Scholar post permanently. The wider Future Academies trust has also pledged to replicate this model across its schools, embedding a structured approach to raising

aspirations and achievement among high-attaining students.

Reflecting on the past three years, Marc says: 'The progress we have made is deeply aligned with the vision of the Gregson Scholarship. We have fostered a culture where students see themselves thriving in the most competitive environments – and contributing meaningfully to society.'

Will and Marc are united in their gratitude: 'A heartfelt thank you to Balliol College for making the Gregson Scholarship possible. The opportunities it has created for our students have been life changing. We are truly grateful for your support and for believing in the potential of young people from our community.' Balliol is also grateful to the family of Peter Gregson for their support in making the scholarship possible.

Launch of Trefethen's Index Cards

Balliol College Library has launched a new collection, Trefethen's Index Cards, now fully catalogued and publicly available on Epexio, the Library's online platform for archival material. This fascinating and unusual collection is the work of Lloyd Nicholas Trefethen FRS, (Professor of Numerical Analysis and Professorial Fellow 1997–2023, Emeritus Fellow), currently Professor of Applied Mathematics in Residence at Harvard University.

The collection consists of roughly 1,200 index cards, each bearing a short piece of writing by Professor Trefethen. He began producing these cards in February 1970, at the age of 14, in an effort to capture and retain recurring thoughts and ideas. The collection currently includes all cards up to the end of 2025.

The index cards contain Trefethen's thoughts, observations and questions spanning a wide range of topics, from language and religion to word play.

The tone varies considerably, with some entries light-hearted and others more serious and thought-provoking.

In some ways, the collection resembles a diary, offering an intimate picture of Trefethen's developing thoughts and ideas from adolescence through a distinguished academic career. It provides remarkable insight into his intellectual development and evolution as a scholar. More broadly, the collection offers a unique window onto the intellectual, cultural, and technological developments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries as perceived by Trefethen.

The collection has been fully digitised, with high-resolution images of each card available alongside full text transcriptions. The digitisation allows users to explore the collection in a variety of ways, including by date range or subject.

Professor Trefethen continues to produce new cards to this day, which will in due course be added to the

collection. Taken as a whole, the index cards offer a rare and sustained record of a scholar's intellectual journey across more than five decades.



A box of Trefethen's index cards arranged by year



FEEDING THE FUTURE

How will we feed a growing global population in a world shaped by climate change, geopolitical uncertainty, and shifting patterns of consumption? This feature brings together contributions from Balliol members working across these different contexts, offering perspectives on food security as both a systemic and a lived challenge. Together, they point to the importance of resilience, adaptability, and cooperation in navigating an uncertain future.

Feeding the world in a changing climate:

Q&A with Sir Charles Godfray

What will it take to ensure reliable food in an increasingly uncertain world? Sir Charles Godfray, Director of the Oxford Martin School and Professorial Fellow, discusses his work on food systems, why he remains a ‘cautious optimist’ about feeding ten billion people, and which scientific, policy and collective choices will matter most in the decades ahead.

Can you give us a sense of your academic background and early research interests?

I’ve worked on food systems since 2009, but my academic background is in population biology and ecology. I spent 25 years at Imperial College London studying ecological interactions between populations, as well as how natural selection acting on populations shapes behaviours and life histories. I’ve always taken a two-pronged approach to population biology, combining mathematical modelling with experimentation in both the lab and the field.

Much of my research sought to answer fundamental questions, but my experimental work typically involved a group of insects that I am particularly fond of: parasitoid wasps. These are very common insects (there may be a million species worldwide) that lay their eggs in or on the body of other insects, eventually consuming them (think the alien in the *Alien* movies!). Their biology makes them ideal for testing hypotheses in ecology and evolution, but they are also of significant applied importance as natural enemies of agricultural pests; indeed, you can buy vials of tiny parasitoid wasps at garden centres to control whitefly in greenhouses.

When I was in my mid-20s, I was seconded to the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organisation to work

‘I’m interested in understanding how the food system might evolve under different future scenarios and policy choices.’

on a practical project searching for parasitoids in Fiji for release in the Philippines to control a coconut pest. Later, I developed mathematical models to identify the most effective wasps to control invasive mealy bugs in Africa. I really enjoyed projects where you could take insights from fundamental science and apply them to real problems that farmers face on the ground.

What made you start working on food systems?

In 2009 I was asked by John Beddington, then Government Chief Scientific Advisor, to lead a Foresight project on the Future of Food and Farming. Foresight projects, run through the Government Office of Science, seek to bring together evidence on long-term challenges facing the UK. Our brief was to look at all aspects of the food system – from production to consumption, and from economics to

health and sustainability – to take what was then beginning to be called a food systems approach. I had the privilege of chairing a wonderfully interdisciplinary group of people, working closely with civil servants across government. We reported in 2011 just as global food prices were experiencing their greatest volatility in over 50 years. This and our then novel food systems approach assured a good audience.

The project really sparked my interest in interdisciplinary approaches to food systems, and when the Oxford Martin School asked me to develop a programme on the Future of Food, I jumped at the opportunity. Over the following years, we brought together a wonderful group of young researchers and secured a major Wellcome Trust programme focused on meat and dairy systems.

What would you say characterises your approach?

I’m interested in understanding how the food system might evolve under different future scenarios and policy choices. We do this by studying its past responses to perturbations, and by modelling possible futures. Our models have an economic core but can be influenced by climate and weather – for example through effects on crop yields – allowing us to understand not only food availability and prices, but



Sir Charles Godfray

also environmental impacts and health outcomes. Of course, this approach has limitations but the old adage that ‘all models are wrong, but some are useful’ holds. This type of modelling is particularly valuable at identifying future pinch points and avoiding unforeseen negative consequences of policy decisions.

To give a more concrete example, modelling led by Marco Springmann and Pete Scarborough identified which food types had the greatest effects on different environmental outcomes and provided the quantitative framework behind a ‘Planetary Diet’, adjusted to different geographies that both promotes health and minimises environmental harm. The models are only as good as the underlying data, and epidemiological and experimental dietary studies by my colleagues Tim Key and Susan Jebb, alongside Joseph Poore’s achievement in building the largest food-environment footprint database, play a crucial role in keeping them grounded in the real world.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about feeding a global population of ten billion healthily and sustainably by mid-century?

I would describe myself as a cautious optimist! One definite cause for optimism is that global population growth is decelerating, meaning we are likely to avoid the Malthusian crisis that has been regularly predicted since the 1780s. One reason that population growth is declining is that more people are moving out of poverty, clearly a good thing. But wealthier populations demand better

‘Feeding ten billion people is eminently doable – but only if we have the political bravery to make some hard choices.’

diets that take more resources to produce. Nevertheless, when you do the sums, feeding ten billion people is eminently doable – but only if we have the political bravery to make some hard choices, for example about consuming less of the food with the greatest environmental footprint.

Does this mean we all have to be vegetarian?

No, but it does mean we need to eat less meat, treating it as something special rather than a part of every meal – a flexitarian approach. This is easier if meat-free food tastes good – and, to be parochial for a moment, the chefs at Balliol do a fabulous job of creating delicious vegetarian dishes.

Could this optimism be derailed by climate change?

It could, which is why it is so important to reduce the roughly 30% of global anthropogenic emissions that come directly or indirectly from the food system. We also need to adapt our agriculture, including developing more heat-resistant crops and new types of animal husbandry.

Agriculture in some regions that produce food today may no longer be possible in the future, while other regions will become suitable for cultivation. A warmer world means more energy in the atmosphere and more extreme weather events, posing an increasing challenge for farmers.

What role will new technology play in addressing these challenges?

A very important one – let me pick three examples. First, a combination of robotics and data science, increasingly powered by AI, now allows inputs such as water, fertiliser, and insecticides to be applied exactly where they are needed rather than being applied uniformly across a field. This ‘precision agriculture’ saves money and reduces environmental harms. Second, agriculture in low-income countries is being transformed by cheap mobile phone technologies, giving farmers access to agricultural advice (including on the weather) as well as on market opportunities. This use of appropriate technology will accelerate yield growth in poorer countries. Finally, more food will be produced indoors, through bulk fermentation and, in the future, cellular agriculture. It’s still too early to

understand the full impact of landless agriculture, but there is a fascinating ferment of ideas out there.

You've held senior advisory roles to the UK government on food systems and environment. Is there a moment or policy outcome from that work which you're particularly proud of?

Angela McLean, before she took up her current role as Government Chief Scientific Advisor, and I developed a form of evidence review that we called 'Restatements' – the name deliberately chosen to emphasise we were summarising evidence rather than creating new knowledge. Restatements consist of a concise list of what we know and don't know about a contentious topic (with an extended appendix for people wanting to delve

deeper), written for politicians or senior civil servants. Each Restatement is developed by a group of specialists who assess the confidence we have in different parts of the evidence base.

The third Restatement we produced focussed on a class of insecticides called neonicotinoids (neonics), which had been implicated in the decline of pollinators. The topic was so contentious there was a debate in the Commons, and, to our delight, both the Minister and Shadow Minister quoted and accepted the evidence summary in the Restatement. As a result, the debate focussed on the economic, social and environmental trade-offs of restricting neonic use, rather than descending into disputes about the science itself – issues for which Parliament is not well suited. Policy formation typically involves

many inputs so it is seldom possible to assess one's impact; this was a rare case where that influence was clear.

Finally, when you look ahead 20 or 30 years, what do you most hope we will have got right about feeding the world – and what would most worry you if we haven't?

We have made significant strides in reducing global hunger and malnutrition over the last 50 years. I'd love to see this progress continue but with an ever-greater emphasis on healthy foods and foods with a smaller environmental footprint. This is eminently doable but what worries me most is whether we have the collective will and energy to make the changes to the world's food systems that are so clearly needed.

Feeding the future: why access matters

Global food production has never been higher – yet hunger persists. Drawing on decades of experience in international development and humanitarian work, Simon Dradri (1989) examines why access to food – not availability – is now the central challenge in feeding the world.

Food is the most fundamental human need, required daily, yet it is also one of the most politically, economically, and socially complex. During my work with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in more than two dozen countries, I have seen that hunger today is rarely the result of absolute scarcity. Instead, it reflects a failure of 'access' – the inability to ensure that the vast global food supply reaches those in need – a paradox of 'hunger amidst plenty' that defines the global food system in the 21st century.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends the consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and whole grains. An average adult requires 2,000-2,500 calories (2 kilograms)

per day for a healthy life. When food is unavailable, hunger follows, leading to starvation and death in conditions of extreme scarcity or famine.

In the 20th century, famine affected countries including China, the Soviet Union, India, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and North Korea. These famines were caused by combinations of political and economic mismanagement and natural disasters, resulting in tens of millions of deaths. While famines are rare today, restricted access to populations affected by active wars – as in Sudan, Gaza and Yemen – is pushing conditions once again towards famine.

Following the establishment of the United Nations, several initiatives

were launched to mitigate hunger and food insecurity. These included the 'Freedom from Hunger Campaign' in 1960, aimed at raising global awareness and mobilising action; the 'Right to Food', enshrined in the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) adopted in 1966; and the establishment of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 1974 as an inter-governmental forum for food security policies. The frameworks, systems, and institutions they created contributed to relative global stability in food security and helped avert large-scale famines.

Yet the struggle to secure food remains one of humanity's greatest challenges. Today, more food is



produced globally than is required to feed the world's population. Recent data reveals that around 9.9 billion tonnes of food were produced, with nearly one billion tonnes in storage. In theory, this volume can feed over 15 billion people – far exceeding the current global population of around 8.2 billion. And yet, UN sources show that around 300 million people face acute food insecurity, while 2.83 billion people (roughly 35% of the world's population) cannot afford a healthy diet. This is the paradox of hunger amidst plenty.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines food security as a condition in which 'all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and preferences for an active, healthy life'. This definition is both aspirational and instructive. The challenge lies particularly in the question of 'physical and economic access'.

'UN sources show that around 300 million people face acute food insecurity, while 2.83 billion people (roughly 35% of the world's population) cannot afford a healthy diet. This is the paradox of hunger amidst plenty.'

Global food production has grown consistently over the past eight decades, supported by relative peace after the Second World War and unprecedented international cooperation. Research undertaken by the International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs) contributed to major productivity gains in staple crops such as wheat, maize,

and rice. Sustaining this progress will require continued collaboration, new investments, and global action to mitigate conflict and climate-related disasters, which increasingly disrupt production, markets, infrastructure, and displace populations.

Further challenges arise from demographic change. The global population is projected to reach ten billion by 2060, with most growth occurring in developing countries. Population ageing and changing consumption patterns will create new health, nutrition, and food security challenges. Advances in science and technology can support continued growth in food production, which has outpaced population growth since 1960. However, abundance alone will not resolve food insecurity.

To ensure food security, the greatest challenge that must be addressed is 'access to food' at the individual level. There are three pathways of access to food: own production, market purchase, and transfers (including food

Left: Simon Dradri (right) during a field visit to a livelihood project in Ethiopia's Somali Region, supporting refugees and host communities towards greater independence from WFP food assistance

aid and gifts). Improving outcomes across these pathways is the central challenge.

Own production remains the main source of food access in agrarian societies, but its share is declining. Economic transformation, urbanisation, and migration away from agriculture mean that fewer people rely solely on what they grow. Estimates suggest that one-third of the world's population still depends on own production.

Market purchase has, on the other hand, become the most dominant means of food access. This reflects shifts in livelihoods towards services, rapid urbanisation, and the expansion of supermarkets. Even households that produce food often sell part of their harvest to meet other needs and later buy food during lean seasons. Today, aid agencies distribute cash and vouchers, enabling people to buy food according to their preferences, further reinforcing the role of markets.

Food transfers, including food aid and informal support, have also increased as acute food insecurity has risen. Many households face seasonal food shortages due to income loss, inflation, or other seasonal factors. The use of coping strategies has increased and include selling assets, borrowing, reducing meal size and number of meals, prioritising vulnerable

‘To ensure food security, the greatest challenge that must be addressed is ‘access to food’ at the individual level.’

household members, or migrating in search of assistance. However, migration – primarily driven by conflicts, disasters, and economic stress – is no longer a reliable solution for many.

Systems to assist vulnerable populations exist in most societies but are under strain. Food banks in urban areas are the latest iteration since the 2008 banking crisis. According to the Trussell Trust, the number of food banks it manages in the United Kingdom rose from 35 in 2010 to 1,700 in 2024/25. In the United States, there were 200 food banks and 60,000 pantries serving 40 million people in late 2010; by 2023, this figure had risen to 47.3 million. These trends highlight the growing reliance on food transfers and the persistence of food insecurity even in high-income countries.

As the number of people depending on market purchase and food transfers is expected to grow, pressures on

humanitarian systems are intensifying. Food aid agencies are facing funding shortfalls and are increasingly forced to reduce assistance to the most vulnerable. In fact, global humanitarian funding has stagnated over the past decade, with appeals consistently underfunded. The UN Global Humanitarian Overview for 2025 sought USD 45 billion to support 181 million people, yet received only 23% of the required amount.

Funding fatigue is increasing among major donors, many of whom have reduced aid budgets in response to domestic cost-of-living pressures and migration. Some have closed their aid institutions, and official development assistance (ODA) has fallen well below the agreed 0.7% target. At the same time, defence spending has risen sharply, from an average of 2% to 5% of GDP. The ‘peace dividend’ of the post-Cold War era has clearly ended, and there has been a resurgence of conflict. As the cases of Ukraine, Iran, and Lebanon show, these can have devastating impacts on human, economic, and food security on a global scale.

Taken together, these trends point towards a more fragmented and constrained global environment. In this context, prospects for significantly reducing hunger and food insecurity will remain poor. If availability is no longer the binding constraint, then ensuring access – through markets, protection systems, and effective transfers – must become the central focus of efforts to feed the future.



Left: WFP food distribution at Qoloji Camp for internally displaced persons near Jigjiga City, Somali Region, Ethiopia, in June 2019

Above: Simon Dradri

Why resilient crops aren't enough

Drawing on fieldwork across West, Central, and Southern Africa, Mira Gratier (1997), an independent consultant in humanitarian assistance, disaster preparedness and social impact, offers a community-level perspective on how climate uncertainty, conflict, and social systems shape food security, and why resilience must be rooted in lived realities.



Mira Gratier

‘What became clear is that climate change doesn’t operate in isolation – it undermines livelihoods and food security while aggravating long-standing non-climate problems.’

In Nigeria’s Delta region, farmers have learned to expect disruption. Every year since 2012, they have faced floods – what they don’t know is which kind, or when they will come. This year, will it just be flash floods from rain falling locally? Or devastating riverine floods driven by rainfall upstream along the Niger and Benue Rivers and the sudden release of waters from dams in Nigeria and neighbouring Cameroon? Or catastrophic floods affecting millions, as the floodplain turns into one large expanse of water, and roads become waterways, navigable by boat?

The farmers I met last November in Rivers and Bayelsa States explained what this uncertainty means for their livelihoods. Take cassava and plantain, staple crops that require one to two years to reach maturity, but whose roots will rot if there’s too much water. Because farmers could wait for the crops to mature and harvest gradually as they needed cash, the crops were a reliable store of food and value growing in their plots. Now, when flooding threatens, they harvest prematurely, selling at lower prices to get the cash needed to evacuate their families to higher ground. Several farmers told me they’d stopped growing plantain altogether; others uproot and store the plants under their roofs in the hope of replanting them after the danger has passed.

Farmers in Kadrokpa village in Western Côte d’Ivoire also face uncertain rains, which they described to me as ‘a lottery’: ‘the climate has

changed, we no longer know when to plant. Before, after two, three, or four downpours, we would go ahead. Now we have to sow several times [because the] interruptions in rainfall destroy or rot the crops.’ Meanwhile, their cocoa plantations have started to dry up in the heat, and fish catches are down as migratory fish change their habits in response to multiple environmental stressors – warming oceans, pollution, acidification, fluctuating salinity – making their movements harder for local fishermen to anticipate.

In conversations I had last year in coastal communities across Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon and Nigeria, I was struck by the complex ways in which climate disruptions and environmental degradation intersect with other economic and social changes, amplify the risk of disaster, and threaten to unravel agricultural and economic systems that communities have built over generations. Prospects for young people are difficult, as traditional occupations are less viable, access to land and to finance is constrained, and the jobs that match their educational achievements and aspirations aren’t there.

These conversations formed part of a study on climate and security risks in coastal West and Central Africa looking toward 2050. What became clear is that climate change doesn’t operate in isolation – it undermines livelihoods and food security while aggravating long-standing non-climate problems.

‘People I met are hungry for policies that make sense and work for them.’

In regions affected by conflict, this creates a particularly vicious dynamic: violence heightens vulnerability to climate change and makes it harder to address climate risks, while climate impacts can contribute to further instability. Yet despite being most exposed to climate disasters, countries experiencing conflict or political instability are considered less safe for investment, and struggle to access finance for climate adaptation. In this way, climate impacts, social fragmentation, global inequalities and security risks become mutually reinforcing.

The issue with adapting to a changing climate is that it isn't just an agricultural problem – it's an economic and social one. And uncertainty makes it difficult to plan or adapt with confidence. So the answer isn't simply finding more climate-resilient crops – plant something tougher, and the problem is solved.

In Zimbabwe, where I worked during the severe 2016–2017 drought, more resilient crops already exist. Indigenous grains like millet and sorghum can handle drought conditions far better than maize or wheat. Smallholder farmers I met knew this. So why weren't they growing more of these traditional crops?

Because resilience isn't just about what survives in the field – it's about what works in kitchens, markets, supply chains and communities. The older grains had been displaced by higher yielding crops over decades, just as sliced white bread had achieved dominance at the breakfast table. Urban elites have started to bring these grains back, but middle-class Zimbabweans will need to revive old recipes and eating habits whose intergenerational transmission has been damaged or severed. It requires understanding the entire value chain, from production through milling to

consumption and social experience. And it means confronting an uncomfortable truth: the traditional methods of growing and processing these grains, and preparing food, place a heavier burden on women, demanding more of their time and labour.

This is where my training as a historian has proven unexpectedly useful: it taught me to think about how change moves slowly and then very fast; about structural drivers, proximate causes and how so many factors are interconnected; and about unexpected events and tipping points. This historical lens has shaped how I approach working in different contexts – looking for the connections, asking whose interests are served by current arrangements, recognising that communities are already adapting in ways outsiders might miss.

The uncertainties facing farmers in Nigeria's Delta or in Côte d'Ivoire don't look the same as the challenges in Zimbabwe's drought-prone regions. Climate adaptation is a process of change that has implications in terms of gender dynamics, and to get it right you need to draw on social marketing approaches, an understanding of power dynamics, social norms and political economy, and pay attention to the granular details of everyday life.

Who bears the burden of 'resilient' solutions? Who profits from the current food system and who would lose out if indigenous grains took

precedence? Why isn't the market able to respond by itself, considering that the grain mill adapters needed for millet and sorghum aren't complex pieces of engineering – they're just different fittings that can handle smaller, finer grains?

People I met are hungry for policies that make sense and work for them, and that recognise their voice and agency as citizens and as economic actors. They understand that with improvements in technology, governments can and should give them actionable and intelligible warnings, so that they are at least better prepared to face the worst disasters. Where communities had recently experienced floods, I could hear a tonal shift in the voice of some of the local authorities I met – towards anticipating and facing these risks with better tools next time around.

This matters for how we think about 'feeding the future'. International development favours best practices and scalable solutions – technical approaches that worked in one context and can be replicated elsewhere. And it is structured around technical expertise that doesn't always go hand in hand with the ability to listen, build bridges across disciplines, and challenge mental frames. We desperately need policy that is locally relevant but globally coherent, emphasising cooperation and collaboration. We can't keep procrastinating and extemporising, waiting for the perfect fix.

Feeding the future isn't a technical problem to be solved by experts – it's a collective challenge that requires us to listen, cooperate, and adapt together. Yet in the face of a rapidly evolving geopolitical horizon, with heightened global policy divergence, volatile diplomatic and economic relations, and powerful countries nakedly asserting their interests, can we maintain that focus on our collective future?

‘Resilience isn't just about what survives in the field – it's about what works in kitchens, markets, supply chains and communities.’

Food security and the role of alternative protein

Neil Goldsmith (1981) examines how alternative protein could contribute to feeding a growing global population amid environmental and economic constraints.

Protein's importance

Protein availability is a key element of food security. Proteins are essential for life and unlike fats or carbohydrates, their supply is ultimately gated by the need to fix nitrogen from the air – an energy-demanding process, whether natural (soil bacteria, lightning) or artificial (the Haber-Bosch process used to provide fertilisers). Nine of the 20 amino acids that comprise proteins can only be obtained from eating foods that contain them.

Humanity consumes 300 million tonnes of protein each year: two-thirds from plants and one-third from animals (including fish and dairy). But those animals themselves have eaten a further 280 million tonnes. So together with our livestock, we get through 500 million tonnes of protein a year.

As countries get wealthier, per-capita protein consumption rises, with a greater proportion coming from animal sources. Whilst a typical African diet may include around 65 grams of protein per day, 75% of it plant-derived, an average American consumes almost twice as much (around 115 grams per day), with 65% coming from animals.

Protein shortages and constraints

Global protein consumption increases by five million tonnes each year, driven by population growth and increased affluence in low- to middle-income countries. This outweighs any move towards vegetarianism in already affluent regions.

Producing this ever-increasing amount using traditional techniques is challenging. Further conversion of rainforest to farms is undesirable, marine fishing has reached its limits, and climate change is making



‘Cultured meat is unlikely to play a major role in food security in the near term.’

agricultural yields less predictable.

Traditional approaches can still be improved – through genetic engineering of plants and their root microbiota to increase nitrogen fixation, precision farming, expanding aquaculture, and encouraging plant-based diets – but these measures may not be enough on their own. This is where alternative protein comes in.

Alternative protein: the hype

Alternative protein – making protein without farming or fishing and with less ecological impact – has attracted much hype. As the argument is sometimes put: ‘Let’s get rid of those inefficient cows and make protein from the air or by growing meat in a vat.’

Some ventures explicitly brand themselves as making protein from

air. And in theory, you can. The main elements in protein (carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen) are all present in the air. In practice, however, they exist in energetically unfavourable forms or at low concentrations, sometimes both, so you need significant energy to convert them into protein – energy that agriculture gets freely from sunlight.

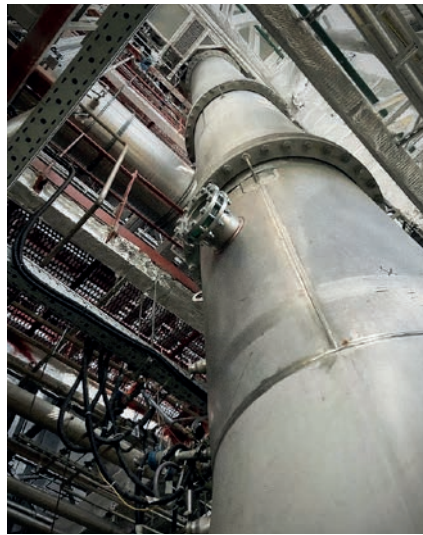
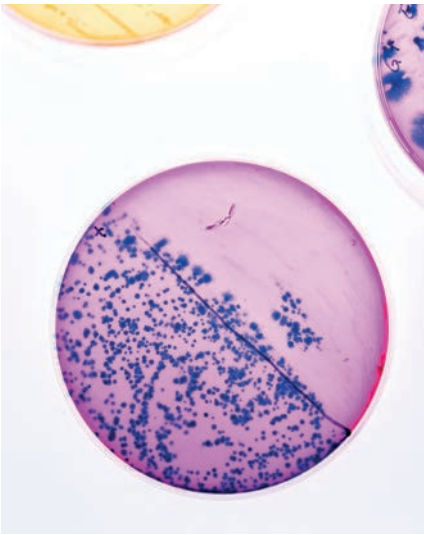
Most alternative protein approaches rely on fermenting or culturing cells in large vats, using microbial, fungal, algal or animal cells. A variant is insect rearing (insects not being traditionally farmed). If electricity prices decline in the long term – driven by solar, wind, and fusion energy – rather than increase due to the expansion of AI server farms, then growing electrotrophs (microbes that ‘eat’ electricity) could also become viable.

A sub-theme of alternative protein is the use of plants and microbes to make animal- or dairy-like proteins, such as the use of plant haemoglobin (but made in recombinant yeast) in the Impossible Burger to mimic the taste and bleeding characteristics of meat.

The reality

Bulk protein prices are low: around \$1.10 per kilo for animal feed and \$1.60 per kilo for human food. Large-scale protein purchasers all use sophisticated algorithms to blend different proteins for maximum performance at minimum cost. Whilst high-performance proteins can fetch premium prices (\$2.00 per kilo), anything above this will confine you to niches markets.

Viable alternative protein ventures must therefore have low production costs (your protein must also be palatable – both humans and prawns can be picky). Four factors are critical:



Far left: Methanotrophic bacteria on a plate

Left: A vertical reactor loop

Above: Final alternative protein product

Scale: low cost requires scale, and scale in turn requires low cost – something of a Catch-22. Persuading investors to commit \$50 million–\$200 million before a facility is built, and without firm customers, is a rite of passage for almost everyone in the sector.

Cheap feedstocks: the cells you are growing must feed on inputs that cost much less than food-grade protein prices – so either ‘waste’ agricultural matter (for example, insects are typically reared on slurry from animal sheds) or inorganic inputs such as carbon dioxide, hydrogen, methane, ammonia, and oxygen.

Low energy costs: for many of the cheapest feedstocks, energy is needed to concentrate, move, and convert them into protein. Your savings on feedstock are often offset by the energy bill.

High productivity: Protein must be produced rapidly and densely, favouring robust, fast-growing organisms (bacteria good, mammals bad).

These constraints mean that cultured meat is not, in itself, a solution to food security. The slow growth rates and complex needs of muscle cells (that is, meat) make low-cost production difficult. As a result, cultured meat is unlikely to play a major role in food security in the near term, remaining largely restricted to high-end niches (cultured ‘scallops’, upscale restaurants).

Sustainability

The sustainability case for alternative

protein rests mainly on what it avoids. Traditional protein production, particularly livestock, is land- and water-intensive and a major driver of habitat loss. Expanding agriculture removes forests, wetlands, and biodiversity.

Biomass fermentation offers a different model. Protein is produced in compact, enclosed systems that require only a fraction of the land and water used by agriculture. Production is predictable, year-round, and largely decoupled from environmental volatility.

This reduced land footprint is particularly important. Fermentation-based systems can relieve pressure on land, freeing it for carbon storage, biodiversity restoration, and other uses, while water use is minimised through recycling. The compact design also means production can be close to end markets, reducing transportation. In this way, alternative protein frees space for nature.

Alternative protein will not replace conventional protein sources entirely, and its own inputs must be sustainably managed.

Nevertheless, biomass fermentation can shift some production away from land-intensive methods, with the near-term benefits strongest for countries that are too arid, cold, or urban to grow enough food.

Unibio

Unibio International plc, where I am Chair, is a UK-Danish alternative protein producer with two distinctive approaches to solving the cost conundrum.

First, it industrialises a natural phenomenon: bacteria that consume methane. Pond bottoms are often anoxic, and when biomass rots under such conditions, methane is produced (rice paddies are a major source of methane emissions). Because methane is both nutritious and energy-rich, certain pond-dwelling bacteria have evolved to metabolise it. By using these bacteria industrially, we can access not only two key protein elements, but also a cheap source of energy (methane provides more calories per dollar than electricity).

Second, Unibio has developed continuous flow, vertical-loop fermenters that deliver productivity ten-fold higher than conventional fermenters. The continuous operation maximises facility ‘up time’, whilst its vertical design improves gas uptake rates, a key productivity-limiting factor in conventional fermentation processes.

Unibio is partnered with the Saudi Industrial Investment Group, Gulf Biotech of Qatar, and Mitsubishi Corporation of Japan.

Looking ahead

Alternative protein has much to offer in supporting future food security, particularly in countries where arable land is in short supply. It also faces real challenges, primarily competing with the low costs of traditional farming and fishing. It should therefore be seen as one element in a matrix of changes that we need to make to ensure equitable global access to high-quality food at an acceptable economic and ecological cost.



Reflections on the food system and Brexit

Dame Clare Moriarty (1982, Permanent Secretary of Defra 2015–2019) reflects on how the Brexit referendum brought previously hidden aspects of the UK’s food system into view, reshaping thinking about trade, risk, and resilience.

It’s fair to say that before the Brexit referendum, the trade side of the food system didn’t attract a great deal of attention. When I became Permanent Secretary of Defra in August 2015, there were plenty of food issues on the day one list, from milk prices to bovine TB, avian flu to neonicotinoids. But Sanitary and Phytosanitary regulation, SPS for short, which later came to dominate our lives, was largely invisible.

That wasn’t because the rules didn’t exist or weren’t considered important. There was a whole web of regulation relating to the import and export of products of animal origin, plants, pets, and fish, and a corresponding set of IT systems used to track their application and issue the necessary paperwork. However, it very largely happened below the eyeline of ministers and senior officials.

The key reason for that was the canvas on which SPS protection operated. Since 1993, plants and

‘Supermarkets were hardwired to operate on a just-in-time basis, which depended in turn on that smooth flow of products through key ports.’

products of animal origin had been allowed to move freely around the EU, with import and export checks applied at the boundaries of the EU. The vast majority of our trade was with other EU countries, and flowed seamlessly through seaports, particularly Dover. Volumes of trade subject to checks were low, and most businesses in the food sector had no cause to worry about cross-border SPS requirements. Within these parameters, the system worked smoothly, with teams of competent

vets, plant inspectors, and other officials just getting on with their jobs. And in government, what doesn’t need fixing doesn’t attract much attention.

All that changed with the referendum in June 2016. Trade shot up the agenda as we began to contemplate a future in which checks would apply at the UK’s borders, and it became important to understand what current arrangements looked like, and how they might change. It soon became evident that some of our operations were positively Heath Robinson-esque. Export health certificates – required only for products of animal origin destined for non-EU countries – were issued by a team in Carlisle who had to stand up, attract the attention of team-mates, and enforce a pause before saving data in order to avoid crashing the system. This was clearly not going to be robust for the much higher volumes that would be required in future.

As we dug deeper into the food

system, we learned how much of what was taken for granted as standard retail practice was in fact a product of the regime that had been in operation since 1993. Supermarkets were hardwired to operate on a just-in-time basis, which depended in turn on that smooth flow of products through key ports. Witnessing the smooth efficiency of lorries moving through the port of Dover or the Eurotunnel, it was evident how small an increase in processing time would be needed to cause significant – and unpredictable – delays, with knock-on effects for the supply of food to supermarkets and processing facilities in the UK.

We also learned the extent to which supply chains were optimised for the EU of 28 nations. With no border controls to worry about, just-in-time systems could span multiple countries with specialised manufacturing facilities for different elements of their products. For example, Mars had a single factory producing pouches that were distributed to food processing facilities manufacturing a range of products from M&Ms to Pedigree Chum dog food.

The summer of 2018 delivered a sharp lesson in the resilience of supply chains when a number of the EU's carbon dioxide manufacturing plants went into planned maintenance at the same time. Initial jokey headlines about shortages of fizzy lemonade for Pimms at Wimbledon gave way to serious concern as the consequences began to emerge. Carbon dioxide is crucial for a range of food processing operations, including fresh meat production, so there was a short chain of events leading to a build-up of animals on farms and associated animal welfare concerns. The realisation of these second- and third-round impacts was something of a wake-up call and prompted a focus on other products where interruption in supply could have much wider implications.

Labour was another major issue, as agriculture was highly dependent on EU workers. On one Open Farm Sunday, I visited a soft fruit farm on the south coast whose workforce was necessarily seasonal and almost entirely composed of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens. There were also particular issues in Northern Ireland, where the long land border presented a whole additional set of challenges. Supply



Dame Clare Moriarty

'Supply chain mapping showed that basic ingredients typically crossed the border multiple times.'

chain mapping showed that basic ingredients typically crossed the border multiple times as they were incorporated into finished products and subsequently put on sale.

Addressing this array of challenges spanned operational readiness, negotiations, communications, and engagement, all undertaken in conditions of huge uncertainty. In the early days following the referendum, there was expectation – or at least hope – that negotiations would minimise the amount of change needed. In Defra, however, we grasped the nettle early, recognising that relying on a negotiated settlement to eliminate the need for independent trade arrangements would leave food supply dangerously exposed in the event that it could not be achieved. We therefore got on with the mammoth task of spinning up six separate IT systems covering imports and exports of products of animal origin, plants, fish, and chemicals. Later, we prioritised being as prepared as we could be for the most challenging 'no-deal' scenarios. That approach put us out of step with some parts of Whitehall, but was certainly the right decision from the perspective of food security.

Greater than the technical challenge

of developing new systems was the human one of building business readiness among a hugely diverse landscape of food-related businesses not used to engaging with SPS controls. Just working out how to reach people was a major task, and we collaborated with colleagues across government, as well as with farmers, processors, retailers, and transport companies, to design procedures, test systems, and develop clear and accessible communications.

Even the most successful operation of SPS controls, however, could not fully mitigate the impact of ending the freedom of movement for goods through the UK's key ports. On the import side, the UK government could waive controls, but without an equivalent move from the EU, the risk of congestion at ports – particularly Calais – remained huge. This took us back into the territory of negotiation, and in the end, controls were introduced on a phased basis between 2022 and 2024.

My direct association with this work ended when, having moved to the Department for Exiting the EU, I closed the department on 31 January 2020. So I watched from a distance as the Covid-19 pandemic turned what had previously been theoretical questions about food-sector resilience into immediate practical challenges. Lockdown, infection, and shielding placed even greater strain on distribution systems than a no-deal exit would have done, underlining once again the need to think about food security not just from a technical perspective, but a behavioural one too. Lessons learned about just-in-time distribution, global supply chains, and labour markets are important, but human responses will ultimately repay further study: panic buyers stripping shelves, restaurants reinventing themselves in delivery mode, and – in the village where I live – an empty boarding school kitchen becoming a community shop and hot meal supplier.

Looking back, the post-referendum years exposed how much food security depended on systems that had become invisible through long familiarity. The experience did not just change how we thought about trade or regulation, but how we understood resilience itself – as something that must be designed for uncertainty, not assumed in its absence.

Tackling food security during COVID: lessons from a system under strain

As supermarket shelves emptied and panic spread, Dame Tamara Finkelstein (1986, Permanent Secretary of Defra 2019–2025) recalls how the Covid-19 pandemic exposed both the fragility and resilience of the UK's food system.

'It always starts with toilet paper' – these were the words of a food industry leader discussing the risks of panic buying during the Brexit preparations. As the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic in early March 2020, I recalled these words as images of supermarket trollies loaded with toilet paper appeared on the rolling news. Shortly after that, the food shelves emptied.

It was a crisis in our food security, and as civil service leader of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I needed to work with colleagues in my department, across government and, most importantly, across the food system to get a grip on it.

The shelves emptied because supermarkets could not restock quickly enough from their distribution centres. This fuelled panic that there was a shortage of food, which in turn worsened the problem. The instinctive reaction of politicians at such a moment is to say 'I'll just go on TV and tell the public not to panic, there is plenty of food and stock piling is anti-social.' Well, there is one thing we know very well from the evidence: this approach does not work and can, in fact, have the opposite effect. The best response is to have a calm, technocratic voice from the supermarkets explaining the facts, and to allow the shops to put limits on purchases if needed.

The pandemic was always going to



“There was never any risk of too few calories available to feed the nation.”

place significant pressures on our food system, and those pressures evolved over time. Brexit preparations meant we knew a great deal more about food supply than we had before, but the truth is that supply chains are incredibly long and complex, and no one can fully map or understand them.

Several clear lessons emerged from this period.

- There was never any risk of too few calories available to feed the nation. However, there was a reduction in the range of products available as factories simplified the number of lines they ran, which fuelled public concern.
- Food is part of a wider economic and health system, so seemingly unrelated rule changes could affect food supply – for example, when key experts needed to repair factory machine lines were not able to re-enter the country after travel rules changed.
- Even if there is enough food overall, it must be distributed fairly. This meant ensuring food reached vulnerable people, including free boxes of essential goods, reserving supermarket delivery slots for those in need, and setting aside shopping hours for NHS workers or those shopping for the elderly.

Getting through Covid depended on the food system working together. A critical mechanism was the daily call that Defra held with representatives from across the whole industry – from farming leaders and factory operators to logistics companies and

supermarkets. Each day, issues were raised, and the guiding principle was to find solutions quickly. Defra coordinated across the government to fix issues – from relaxing time limits on unloading lorries at supermarkets to securing commitment from the police to support supermarket workers when challenged by panic shoppers.

Covid and Brexit brought into sharp focus the issue of food security and made clear that there are risks that must be actively managed. But the risks that keep me awake at night are

the underlying threats from climate change and biodiversity loss. While the logistical challenges we faced during the pandemic were concerning, we

‘Food is part of a wider economic and health system, so seemingly unrelated rule changes could affect food supply.’

know that environmental change is already driving water shortages and damaging agriculture and fisheries across the world.

We have national and international targets in place to address these risks. The challenge now is to ensure that we act on them – working across government, industry, and communities – so that the food system is resilient not only to sudden shocks, but to the slower, deeper pressures that will shape how we feed ourselves in the decades ahead.

An organic odyssey

Alan Heeks (1966) reflects on his journey from global business to organic farming and community food initiatives, exploring what local, organic approaches can offer as societies confront climate change and fragile food systems.

I was leaning on a gate with my farm manager, Peter, looking at the chaos of arable fields in the process of conversion to organic standards. He said, ‘Alan, you have to realise that in organic farming, you can’t control anything: it’s like driving a tractor without a steering wheel.’

When I left Balliol in 1969, I chose the high-pressure world of big business: training in marketing with Procter & Gamble, a Harvard MBA, then senior roles in building materials, where at least we were making tangible things of practical value.

By 1990, I found myself in a dangerous position of having satisfied my ambitions, made some capital, and wanting a new adventure. Seemingly from nowhere came the idea of creating an organic farm and an educational charity where young people could find direction as they approached adult life. I formed a charity and we bought a rundown 130-acre farm in Dorset.

Mark Twain observed that ‘the best way to learn fast is to make a lot of mistakes in a short space of time’. Both I and all our initial team had little of the experience we needed, but

the vision was sound, and amazingly, Magdalen Environmental Trust is still thriving today, doing what we set out to do.

One of the ironies of this story is that I was the one most in need of education. Slowly, I learned that organic farming requires deep observation, patience, and creativity to steer natural systems towards productive outputs. I also realised that these principles translate to human work and wellbeing brilliantly.

By 1998, I was running change management programmes at Magdalen Farm for businesses and charities, using the farm itself as my teaching model. Since then, the approach has been used with groups ranging from burnt-out hospital doctors to homeless teenagers, and is described in my 2024 book, *Natural Happiness: use organic gardening skills to cultivate yourself*.

My baptism by mud into organic farming has been life-changing in many ways. It awoke me to the issues



‘My baptism by mud into organic farming has been life-changing in many ways.’

Alan Heeks with the dairy herd at Magdalen Farm

in conventional farming that have become clearer to many since the 1990s: pollution of soil and rivers, and impacts on human health. In 2000, I became Chair of Abel & Cole, one of the pioneers in home-delivery boxes for organic produce. It was hugely satisfying to see a business grow rapidly by delivering ethical products, and to see my daughter Ella move from PPE at New College to joining as a marketing trainee and eventually becoming Managing Director.

Sustainability and climate change have shaped my work since the 1990s, but as the crisis has intensified, my focus has increasingly turned to food. Alongside Greta Thunberg, another influential voice to emerge in 2018 was Professor Jem Bendell, whose paper on *Deep Adaption* argued that climate change could not simply be 'solved',

and that systemic adaptation was essential.

Jem believes that the first major impact of climate change in the UK and other countries will be food shortages and price inflation – a view shared by a number of experts, notably Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University. In 2025, Tim produced a major report for the National Preparedness Commission analysing Britain's exceptionally fragile food security and proposing solutions from household to national level.

Spurred on by Jem Bendell's paper, I launched Bridport Food Matters in 2019, a project in my then hometown. Our aim was to raise local awareness of the food security risks, promote local food growing, and encourage and train people to cook fresh, local, seasonal produce instead of air-freighted

imports and ultra-processed foods.

What I learned from Bridport Food Matters was sobering: most people struggle to face and prepare for looming threats. Sadly, history confirms that populations usually only respond to a crisis when it happens.

Fresh pastures in Wales

Whilst the Bridport project has made progress over six years, I decided in 2023 to relocate to Wales, drawn by innovative food initiatives and a moderately progressive government. The two largest parties in the Senedd, Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru, have a co-operation agreement to speed up responses to climate change – something hard to imagine at Westminster.

One of the projects I am assisting is the Our Food Trust, a non-



An organic wellbeing group at Hazel Hill, the woodland retreat centre Alan founded

‘What I learned from Bridport Food Matters was sobering: most people struggle to face and prepare for looming threats.’

profit aiming to increase local food production. We are working closely with Tim Lang: the Welsh Government have taken his report seriously, and this is evident in their recent agricultural policies and financial support for horticultural startups.

An exciting example is Sarn Farm in Powys. Our Food Trust approached Powys County Council, which owns about 100 farms, to propose a pilot scheme to convert farms into horticultural smallholdings. Within a week, the council offered a long lease on the 38-acre Sarn Farm and rewrote its planning policy to enable residential dwellings to be created for lower income growers.

Within a year, young growers were living onsite and running three successful smallholdings, supported by Welsh Government grants and organisations such as Bwyd Powys, the local food partnership body. The council has since offered a second farm for lease, and Our Food Trust are seeking ethical investment to buy private land to scale up production.

Another project that drew me to Wales is Black Mountains College. Whilst my Oxford education has been invaluable, the alarming pace of change – climate, AI, and more – suggests urgent reform in higher education. Black Mountains is a startup college focused on life skills and vocational training to regenerate ecosystems and human societies. I have an occasional advisory and teaching role there. It’s worth visiting their website to see how this vision is being put into practice. Several of the College’s courses address the food security crisis, including a diploma in Regenerative Farming and Agroecology. Two of the growers at Sarn Farm are Black Mountains graduates, and their role in training many more growers is vital to Our Food Trust’s plans.

Another pioneering project I have helped with is Cegin y Bobl, which is Welsh for ‘The People’s Kitchen’. Its prime mover is a young Welsh



Young growers at Sarn Farm

food author, Carwyn Graves, who has recruited local celebrity chefs and farmers to create meals for primary schools (which in Wales are funded by the Government) with fresh, local, healthy ingredients, for the official budget of £2.31. I’ve tried one, and it was delicious.

‘With only 3 million people, Wales is under the radar for London. Everyone knows each other, and if we don’t look out for each other here, no one else will.’

Carwyn’s vision is to use these school meals as a catalyst to teach whole communities how to cook healthy food, and to help them realise how seriously unhealthy the mainstream food system is. When I asked Carwyn why there’s so much innovation in Wales, he explained, ‘With only 3 million people, Wales is under the radar for London. Everyone knows each other, and if we don’t look out for each other here, no one else will.’

When Tim Lang launched his major report in early 2025, I asked when he thought it would be taken seriously. Sadly, he replied, ‘Only when the crisis actually happens.’ These pioneering projects in Wales may be small in scale, but they offer proof of concept, and approaches which could be scaled up relatively quickly if a dynamic UK government stepped up to the situation, or if local communities take a lead.

From farm to fork: a local experiment in practice

Balliol was the first college to trial what would later become OxFarmtoFork – an initiative designed to connect local producers directly with chefs. After a chance encounter led to a conversation with Good Food Oxfordshire about linking farmers and chefs more directly, Executive Head Chef Bertrand Faucheux offered to help test the idea, and Balliol became the first ‘guinea pig.’

Initially, the scheme was little more than a shared spreadsheet listing what local producers had available. Balliol’s first purchase was wild venison from Bruern Farms near Shipton-under-Wychwood. Overtime, vegetable growers were added, and the initiative evolved into a dedicated online platform through which growers list available goods and chefs place orders a week in advance. Orders are then collected and delivered by electric

‘The strengthening of relationships has been one of the most tangible outcomes.’

bikes operated by Velocity.

The scheme was never intended to replace Balliol’s existing suppliers entirely. ‘We can’t source 100% locally as availability isn’t always predictable,’ Bertrand notes. During the lean winter months, local supply is limited largely to root vegetables, and the kitchen relies more heavily on established suppliers. From spring onwards, however, the range broadens and the scheme becomes a more significant part of procurement.

Seasonality has therefore become more visible in menu planning. ‘You have to see what’s available and work with it,’ Bertrand explains. That flexibility requires longer term planning and closer communication with producers. Unlike large distributors, small growers must decide what to sow without guaranteed orders. Establishing a workable balance between supply and demand has taken time. ‘Initially it was difficult,’ Bertrand reflects, ‘but last summer it worked very well.’

The strengthening of relationships has been one of the most tangible outcomes. After Balliol’s chefs noted that muddy root vegetables were time-consuming to process, one producer invested in a root-vegetable washer – a small but telling example of farmers and chefs learning to adapt together rather than through intermediaries.

The environmental case for local sourcing is clear, but Bertrand is careful not to overstate it. ‘Reducing food miles matters,’ he says, ‘but the biggest impact comes from reducing meat consumption, particular farmed ruminants.’ In his view, the shift toward more flexible, plant-based diets among students has a far greater carbon impact than local sourcing alone. ‘Flexitarian seems to be the new norm,’ he observes.

For Balliol, however, the most noticeable outcome has been local economic impact. Many small producers operate on tight margins. ‘Small farms are just hanging on,’ Bertrand says. ‘By buying from them, we’re helping them employ people and invest with confidence.’

OxFarmToFork remains an evolving experiment rather than a finished model. It requires more communication and adaptability than conventional wholesale supply chains, but its evolution – from idea to trial to adoption by 20 colleges – suggests that institutions can use their purchasing power not only to buy food, but to strengthen the resilience of the local communities that produce it.



Bertrand Faucheux receiving a new delivery of local produce



Michael Sandel delivering a lecture in Seoul, Korea, to a crowd of 14,000

Philosophy for the people

Isabella Vacaflores (2025, MPhil Politics (Political Theory))
interviews ‘rock star’ of philosophy, Michael Sandel (1975)

In a packed Harvard auditorium, students are asked whether it is ever right to sacrifice one life to save five. Tentative hands rise, some for yes, others for no, as murmured debate spreads across the room. Michael Sandel, the professor at the lectern, withholds an answer. Instead, he pushes the students further, asking them to interrogate their moral intuitions: *what is the right thing to do?*

The question travels thousands of miles, crossing geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Guided by a belief in higher education as a public good, Sandel has long made his *Justice* course freely available online. For tens of millions of people worldwide – me included – it has offered a first encounter with philosophy and the possibility of living a more examined life.

Few philosophers have achieved such reach beyond the academy, earning Sandel a reputation as one of the field’s most influential public voices. Aside from teaching, he is the author of several bestselling books, translated into more than 30 languages, and a regular presence in public discourse through lectures, broadcast media, and podcasts. Last year, his contributions were recognised with the Berggruen Prize, often described as philosophy’s closest equivalent to a Nobel.

Yet his story begins not with philosophy but with politics. A self-described ‘political junkie’ from an early age, Sandel was born in 1953 and raised in Minnesota, later moving to Los Angeles as a teenager. A high school president and competitive debater, he studied politics as an undergraduate before beginning a

career as a political journalist.

Still, the fit was uneasy. Sandel tells me he was ‘torn’ between politics, academia, and law. Winning the Rhodes Scholarship – a welcome surprise – brought him to Balliol in 1975 and gave him, at a pivotal moment, some much needed breathing room to reflect on what he really wanted to do.

He arrived at Oxford at a time when the philosophy faculty skewed analytic and utilitarian. Balliol, however, stood apart. Central to academic life at the college was Alan Montefiore’s (1948) ‘much beloved’ tutorial on Kant, which Sandel took in his first year. This opened the way, for Sandel and his peers, to traditions of thought beyond the Oxford orthodoxy of the time, including continental philosophy, virtue ethics, and hermeneutics.

Even so, ‘it was not love at first

sight'. As an undergraduate, Sandel had struggled to see the connection between philosophy and the issues he cared most about. The discipline, he readily admits, felt 'daunting' and frustratingly 'remote'. During his time at Oxford, he intended to take only a handful of such classes to 'broaden [his] intellectual horizons'. Within a couple of terms, however, philosophy proved 'irresistible', prompting him to switch from a second undergraduate degree in PPE to a DPhil in Politics.

Part of the attraction lay outside the tutorial room. Sandel recounts how, behind the gates of Holywell Manor, students and tutors met monthly to debate philosophy, drawing a formidable roster of guests including Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Bernard Williams. Known as the T. H. Green Society – after a Balliol philosopher who, a century earlier, had founded British idealism – the group offered both a refuge from academic orthodoxy and a forum where intellectual risk taking was not only welcome but encouraged.

'It was an exciting time at Balliol to study political philosophy', Sandel recalls, encouraging current students to seek out similar opportunities to build 'intellectual camaraderie' within the college.

The imprint of Oxford is still visible in his work. In the *Justice* course – which he began teaching as an assistant professor at Harvard in 1981 – Sandel adopts a Socratic, discussion driven method that echoes the tutorial system he encountered at Balliol. 'I wanted to teach political philosophy in a way that would have engaged me as an undergraduate', he says.

Sandel bristles at the suggestion that his approach amounts to applied ethics. 'I don't like the term', he explains. 'It suggests a way of doing philosophy where principles are taken as fixed, and the only question is how to apply them.' His method works in the opposite direction: he begins with real world moral and political dilemmas, draws out students' intuitive judgments, and then traces them back to their philosophical roots.

The result is an approach that resists easy categorisation as either analytic or continental, bringing philosophy down from the ivory tower it is so often accused of inhabiting.

Recently, Sandel has turned this method on the idea of merit, arguing



Stephanie Mitchell

'I wanted to teach political philosophy in a way that would have engaged me as an undergraduate.'

that many of today's political and social pathologies flow from a mistaken belief that our success is our own doing, and that we therefore deserve the rewards our talents bring. In *The Tyranny of Merit* (FSG, 2022) he contends that simply making the system 'fairer' misses the deeper wrong: any society that valorises merit will inevitably corrode the common good, breeding hubris among winners and humiliation among those left behind.

I ask what this means for us, as students at one of the most prestigious colleges within one of the world's most prestigious universities. What responsibilities, if any, do we owe to those who have not been so fortunate? Sandel is unequivocal. Those who benefit from elite institutions, he

'Those who benefit from elite institutions, he argues, have an obligation to use the opportunities that flow from them in service of the common good.'

argues, have an obligation to use the opportunities that flow from them in service of the common good.

The argument resonates with recent talk about the so called 'Bermuda Triangle of talent', which describes how pay and prestige lure the 'best and brightest' graduates into consulting, finance, and corporate law, often at the expense of public service. Sandel's work allows us to frame this pattern as part of a more existential problem. In *What Money Can't Buy* (FSG, 2012) he argues that when market values come to dominate moral ones, income and status are easily mistaken for measures of a life well lived. If that is right, then resisting the pull of the 'Triangle' requires more than individual virtue – it requires a public conversation about what we owe one another, and what we should value.

Over a lengthy career, Sandel has wrestled with the defining moral and political questions of our time. But one throughline remains constant. Long sceptical of the idea that societies can ever be neutral on questions of the good life, he has consistently argued for a form of public discourse that makes room for moral disagreement while cultivating better democratic habits. 'Listening is a civic virtue in very short supply', he says, 'but democracy depends not only on the ability to argue, but also on the ability to listen.'

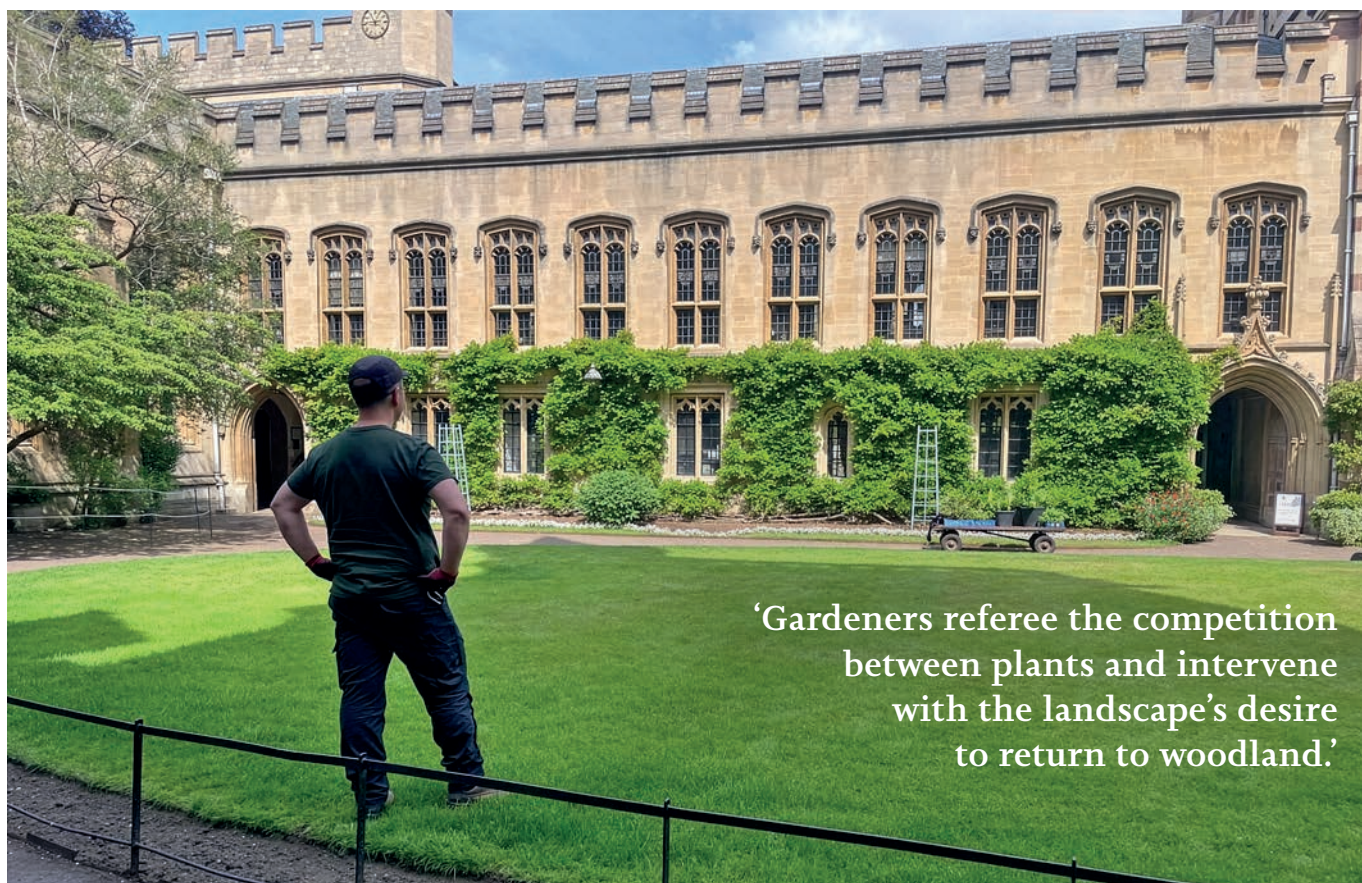
These concerns animate his most recent work, a new edition of *Democracy's Discontent*, which traces how American democracy arrived at its current moment of fragility. For democracy to meet the challenges it now faces, Sandel argues, it must once again grapple openly with first principles: what a just society looks like, what role money and markets should play, and what citizens owe one another.

When I ask what comes next, Sandel turns quickly to the ethics of artificial intelligence. He has begun teaching courses on the subject and is considering writing about it. The question, he suggests, is not simply what new technologies can do, but what they may change about us: whether chatbots and artificial intelligence might alter what it means to be human.

For a philosopher long concerned with the moral foundations of public life, it is a natural next question – and one that brings us back to the perennial one: what is the right thing to do?

CULTIVATING SPACES





‘Gardeners referee the competition between plants and intervene with the landscape’s desire to return to woodland.’

Refuge and Prospect

Douglas Brown (Head Gardener) looks after the gardens at the Broad Street site, the Master’s Field, and Holywell Manor. Here, he reflects on stewardship, succession, and cultivating a landscape that nurtures both biodiversity and human well-being.

As Head Gardener, my main concern is to cultivate the gardens for the well-being of their residents and for the diversity of life here. A garden that is poised in a particular moment of the landscape’s natural succession will have the most diversity. Imagine a forest with a clearing where a tree has fallen – in that open space, you’d see a meadow filled with flowering plants taking advantage of the sun and water. Left to natural forces, meadows give way to shrubs and scramblers, which in turn give way to trees until the forest canopy closes again. I see gardening as managing the natural succession of plants. What you see is not natural

but naturalistic – gardeners referee the competition between plants and intervene with the landscape’s desire to return to woodland. I feel this landscape creates a sense of well-being for people looking out from a sheltered space towards an open space.

Balliol’s veteran trees are a key feature in this landscape and an important part of the College’s heritage.

‘I would like the garden to always have something in bloom.’

We monitor their health regularly, and when we prune them, we do so to reduce stress in the canopy, with the aim of extending both their safe lifespan and their value to wildlife. For me, the beauty and value of ancient trees don’t lie in a delicate silhouette but in the wounds of time. Hollows and cavities provide shelter to animals such as birds and bats, as well as habitat for invertebrates, fungi, and lichens – easily overlooked but essential to a food web that sustains diverse life. Looking at the gnarled, truncated framework of ancient trees gives me a powerful sense of time that stretches beyond my allotted span.

In my (comparatively brief) time

Left: Douglas Brown surveying his work in the Front Quad

here, I must anticipate a succession of trees – planting now to replace trees we’ve sadly lost and will eventually lose. You will see some new additions at Broad Street already – maples, June berries and witch hazel now forming an understory in the spring bulb lawn, and a crab apple near the College Office suited to the surprisingly alkaline pH of the soil there. In the coming years, at Holywell Manor, we will continue to develop the ‘spinney’ by adding understory trees and shrubs as well as spring bulbs to take advantage of the light under deciduous trees in early spring. This year, I’m looking forward to the changes Dame Helen Ghosh is instigating in the Master’s Garden, including a water feature. Backed by the Chapel and filled with the sound of trickling water, I hope this secluded space will invite residents and wildlife to dwell together for a spell.

I would like the garden to always have something in bloom. There’s yet to be a month, even January, when I haven’t spotted bumble bees flying in search of flowers to visit. I’m always looking for little pops of colour, such as snowdrops or the swept-back yellow petals of the daffodils under the Magnolia. I prefer to pick plants with single flowers which benefits pollinators; native and naturalised plants are also given more weight in my selections, but that doesn’t stop me from picking something that just catches my eye or fills a particular niche. Soon, we will begin sowing the seeds of this year’s flowers in anticipation of warmer weather, and I will be thinking of one of A. E. Housman’s poems from *A Shropshire Lad*:

‘Some seed the birds devour,
And some the season mars,
But here and there will flower
The solitary stars,
And fields will yearly bear them,
As light-leaved spring comes on,
And luckless lads will wear them,
When I am dead and gone.’

A day in the gardens in early spring



7:45am

Arrive at College and walk through the gardens to the shed, checking if anything needs attention – weather damage, fallen branches, or litter. Check the rain gauge.

8:15am

Start the first job. At this time of year, much of the work is at the greenhouse. We gather tools, PPE, and supplies, and head up in the Balliol van.

10:00–10:30am

Tea break. At the greenhouse, it’s from a flask, with a biscuit or two.

12:15–1:15pm

Lunch in Hall.

3:30–3:45pm

If working off-site, return to Broad Street in time to clean the van and tools, store equipment properly, and update journals and task lists.

8:00am

Coffee brewed, birds fed, safety boots on. We check the forecast – much of our work depends on the weather. If mowing is needed, it’s best done early, before students settle onto the lawns when it’s sunny. We discuss and plan the work for the day and week ahead, posting checklists on the board. Douglas also checks in with Shane at Holywell Manor during the week.

8:30am

At the greenhouse: watering stock plants, potting up plugs, sowing seeds, and checking for signs of disease or damage. We prioritise good hygiene and biological controls – nematodes, beer traps, and simple sprays of soap or bicarbonate – and perhaps the occasional enchantment.

10:30am–12:00pm

Continue work on site.

1:15pm

Afternoons are often more varied. Douglas tends to keep this time for office work to preserve the more productive morning hours. Seasonal tasks might include pruning and training climbers such as roses and wisteria, cutting hazel and dogwood for plant supports, brushing moss from hard surfaces, and lifting and dividing perennials.

4:30pm

Home – leaving the garden to its evening life.

Learning the garden

Hannah Hutchinson (Apprentice Gardener) considers changing careers and discovering the rhythms of Balliol's gardens, one season and one Latin name at a time.



Hannah Hutchinson mowing the lawn of Front Quad

Before coming to Balliol, I worked in London in the performing arts industry. It was fast-paced and demanding; whilst I loved the creativity, I eventually realised I needed something calmer and steadier – and perhaps somewhere beyond London. Like many people in recent years, I began to find solace in nature and wondered if the outdoors could be a better working environment for me.

So, I started exploring. I got a converted camper van and spent a year travelling the UK and Ireland taking in its rich landscapes. I spent some time volunteering on various homesteads in Wales, working on people's land and learning traditional skills – scything fields, growing vegetable gardens, making biochar, and getting to know a family who cultivate oats for an oat milk business.

I also worked on my uncle's land, hedge-laying and digging a pond to create new habitats. Those projects brought me enormous satisfaction and led me to consider a career change. I applied for various apprenticeships – competition is fierce, as many people now see apprenticeships as an affordable and exciting way to retrain – and decided to relocate to Oxford. When I applied for the Gardener Apprenticeship at Balliol College, I cannot express how delighted I was (and still am, a year in) to be offered the role.

The gardens of Balliol pulled me in straight away. There is such diversity here: tulip trees, foxglove trees, strawberry trees, liquidambar, mulberries – just to name a few. It's a beautiful sight in the summer to see them in their full glory, an array of colours, heights and shapes. The gardens also have an intimacy about them, with each lawn framed by carefully considered flower beds,

“The gardens of Balliol pulled me in straight away.”



‘There are always new plants to understand, names to learn, and techniques to practise.’

Above: Working in the greenhouse

Right: Hannah and Richard Bramwell tending to a young tree

shrubs, and trees. Balliol feels peaceful, with friendly staff and students alike. Even the birds seem chatty!

One of the greatest surprises of my apprenticeship has been the sheer potential contained in a tiny seed. In the greenhouse, we grow many plants from seed before bringing them to the beds at Broad Street. Last summer, the Tithonia was a particular joy – a real star at nearly three metres tall, with brilliant orange flower heads. It grew so tall that we needed long-handled snips to prune it. I loved hearing people walk by and stop in awe to marvel at it. That Front Quad bed really seemed to cheer people up. It’s been lovely to see the seeds we nurtured bring so much joy.

Autumn brought another surprise: the sheer quantity of leaves. I hadn’t quite anticipated the scale of leaf collection required. But even that has its rewards – we are now making a beautiful mulch from them, returning the material back into the garden.

Working alongside Douglas Brown, the Head Gardener, has reinforced the idea that you never stop learning. There are always new plants to understand, names to learn, and techniques to practise. Douglas is generous with his knowledge and never gives up on a tricky problem. Richard



Bramwell, who has been at Balliol for over two decades, is a living archive – we often find ourselves asking him, ‘When was that planted?’ or ‘Are there bulbs in that bed?’ His friendly, open nature makes it easy for me to learn from him. He often tests me on my botanical plant names, and we always have a giggle whilst doing it. He reminds me to laugh and enjoy the time spent in the gardens. At Holywell Manor, Shane Corkery brings impressive attention to detail and colour. He tackles even the less glamorous tasks – such as clearing fallen ginkgo fruits (they’re less than sweet-smelling!) – with good humour.

I now notice plants everywhere. As part of my apprenticeship at Abingdon and Witney College, I learn new plant names each week, including their Latin binomials. When I walk through parks and streets, I often look at plants and recite their names in my head. I enjoy unpacking those names to understand them better. *Symphytotrichum novi-*

belgii, for example – the Michaelmas daisy – carries layers of meaning: *Symphytotrichum* means ‘growing together’, *Novi-belgii* means ‘from New York’, and *Michaelmas* refers to the end of harvest and, as we know so well in Oxford, the autumn term. When I

‘I feel most connected to the gardens early in the morning.’

learned this plant, we happened to be in Michaelmas term itself! So, I like to remember it as the purple winter daisy from New York, to help me remember.

I feel most connected to the gardens early in the morning. We arrive at the shed around 7.45am; it’s quiet except for birdsong and the kettle boiling. At that hour, the garden has a stillness

that allows me to notice small changes – a bulb that’s popped up, a rose opening, or a Blackbird waiting for its morning scattering of seed.

There are parts of the garden that I’m particularly fond of. The long walled bed in the Fellows’ Garden is an ongoing project. At present, we are painstakingly removing bindweed, carefully teasing out its spaghetti-like roots before preparing the soil for new planting. It is slow work but will be hugely satisfying once complete.

And then there is the mulberry tree in the Garden Quad, more than 400 years old. King James I is said to have planted the wrong variety in an attempt to establish a silk industry. It may not have yielded silk, but it still produces delicious berries. At some point in its long life, lightning struck and knocked it over the wall from the Fellows’ Garden to the Garden Quad – yet it re-rooted itself and survived. I find something magical in its persistence. Oh, how I wish trees could talk.



Above: A collection of stock plants and plugs at the greenhouse

Left: Shane Corkery tending to a garden bed at Holywell Manor

Cultivating sustainability at Balliol

Through initiatives in waste, food, and biodiversity, JCR Environment and Ethics (E+E) representatives describe how small, collective actions are helping to build a more sustainable College environment.

At Balliol, we understand that the land, gardens, and buildings around us are not infinite. What we do, or don't do, with them requires thoughtful engagement with the world within and beyond our walls. How can we best support the college environment for future Balliol members? Can we be doing more to support the wildlife? Is it possible to reframe sustainability as not only a continual aspiration but also as an everyday way of life? In the past year, the JCR has tackled these questions and sought to make sure our activities are sustainable for the long term through a number of initiatives intended to improve our impact on the world around us.

One of our key achievements this year has been in waste reduction. The Lindsay Bar has installed a carbonated drinks tap, to reduce plastic waste and cut the costs of buying bulk drinks, and is continuing to consider how we can reduce the consumption of single-use plastics in Balliol's biggest social hub. We have also been focusing on reducing waste at the end of term when students move out. In Trinity Term, we collected donations of clothes and household objects for the British Heart Foundation, as well as kickstarting a student-led initiative for members of the student body to trade pre-loved items through a group chat, capitalising on the already strong sense of community within Balliol to minimise



waste. Within the JCR body, we have encouraged students to be conscientious in our treatment of shared spaces, ensuring communal areas are maintained for the usage of others, and disposing of items in the correct way.

Food has also been a key area of improvement, as students have worked with Balliol's Executive Head Chef, Bertrand Faucheux, and his team to expand the range of vegetarian and plant-based options available. With Bertrand already expressing a strong commitment to minimising food waste and sourcing local produce, the JCR has been able to collaborate constructively to improve menus in a way which both supports those who already follow a wholly or partially plant-based diet, but also encourages other diners to opt for more environmentally conscious meals.

The gardeners have created a wild corner in the main quad, helping new plants to grow and encouraging various creatures to set up homes in Balliol for

biodiversity. Instead of just prioritising manicured lawns, this area of rewilding provides an opportunity for rich ecosystems of native plants and insects to flourish amid the surrounding urban landscape, and gives those strolling the grounds a chance to connect with the local nature — a picturesque reminder of the natural world living right on our doorstep.

Engagement with the wider Balliol community has also been important to us. Hosting activities during the annual Green Action Week, we were able to raise awareness of environmental issues in the surrounding area, and share research on subjects in the field of sustainability with students and members of the public. As the Environment and Ethics reps, we have also collaborated with the Welfare team to put on regular events to emphasise that this is something all of our community can be passionately and actively engaged with.

'One of our key achievements this year has been in waste reduction.'



Bodleian Map Room

Stewarding the Parks

As Chair of the Curators of the University Parks, Dame Helen Ghosh (Master of Balliol) reflects on the history, governance, and future stewardship of one of Oxford's most cherished green spaces.

The most enjoyable University role I have taken on in my time as Master has been as Chair of the Curators of the University Parks, a position traditionally filled by one of the Heads of House. The day-to-day management of what students nowadays call 'Uni Parks' is in the very safe hands of the Parks Superintendent, Dr Carolyn Jenkins, and her team of gardeners and arborists from the University Estates Division. But it is the Curators – half a dozen representatives from across the University – who have responsibility for deciding on overall strategy, major developments, and permission for the use of the space for events.

The Parks have a fascinating history. Archaeological investigation reveals a Bronze Age settlement at the western end of the site, with evidence of use for ritual and funerary purposes including a henge underneath the junction between Parks Road and Keble Road. Merton College owned the land towards the river from the 13th century. Before the development of North Oxford, its use was agricultural. But it had a recreational use even then: there are delightful illustrations of 18th-century ladies and gentlemen out for an evening stroll, enjoying an uninterrupted view of New College and the Radcliffe Camera across the fields.

The University bought the land from Merton in the 1850s, mainly in order to build the University Museum (completed in 1860). But the University rapidly realised its potential for sport and recreation (the Cricket Pavilion and field being an early project) and for science teaching *en plein air*. Over the decades, the development of the Science Area ate into the size of the Parks, but the original concept and layout is still recognisable. The Parks remain a place where people find refreshment and inspiration. Visitors may be walking with family or friends, students or staff out for a run, playing organised sports, or taking part in one of the many community events hosted there. The glory of the Parks is that, whatever people are doing, the power of nature and green spaces to uplift and restore has endured over the centuries.

But we must also look to the future.

'The word 'conservation' doesn't mean, as is often thought, keeping things exactly the same.'

Left: Illustration from a map of 1751, depicting recreational strollers and academics walking past a farmer harvesting

Below: Planned transformation of the corridor from the Parks to Old Marston, restoring meadow habitats and creating a continuous public footpath

Bottom: Snake's head fritillaries blooming in Hinksey Meadow



The word 'conservation' doesn't mean, as is often thought, keeping things exactly the same. The very best conservation comes from successful and imaginative management of change. As John Sales, Chief Gardens Adviser to the National Trust for 25 years, once put it, 'Gardens are in fact highly contrived eco-systems which have to be sustained by constant adjustment towards a known ideal'. And the ideal itself will change too.

To that end, in 2025 the Superintendent produced a Landscape Succession Strategy for the Parks. It vividly reminds us of the current and future challenges to which the Parks will have to respond – from climate change and the catastrophic national decline in biodiversity, to meeting the varied expectations of increasing numbers of visitors within an overstretched budget. Plans for new gardens, including the resurrection of the historic Genetic Garden, the establishment of a national collection of hawthorns, seeking recognition of the site as an arboretum, and new facilities for propagation, are all part of an ambitious vision for the future of the Parks.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Cherwell, plans are afoot for the transformation of a corridor of land stretching from the Parks to and beyond the Victoria Arms in Old Marston. A partnership of the relevant landowners, the University, Wolfson and Brasenose Colleges, and the Oxford Preservation Trust, is working together to return the meadows northwards along the river into a vibrant habitat for plants and wildlife. They also want to improve access for

the public, creating a continuous (and safe) footpath up to Marston.

Sir James Lawton, in his influential 2010 review of the dire state of nature in the UK, famously said that we need 'more, better, more joined up' habitats if ecosystems are to recover. That is what, on a small scale, this group of local landowners is trying to achieve here. They are very fortunate in having at their side local expert Catriona Bass, who has worked with local communities and landowners on similar meadow restoration projects in Oxfordshire, including Christ Church, which has successfully re-created a meadow within its own Meadow!

The Oxford Preservation Trust, of which I am a Trustee, will be applying the lessons learned in the Cherwell Valley to its other green sites in and around Oxford. The Trust owns 1,000 acres of land across the city and its surrounding areas. Much of it, notably the fields on the slopes of Boars Hill or on Harcourt Hill, was originally bought to protect the views of Oxford's 'Dreaming Spires' for future generations to enjoy. But more and more, the Trust is considering how those sites can contribute to restoring nature and creating the joined-up habitats we now need.

Hinksey Meadow is a great example of the Trust's activity. This traditional floodplain meadow regularly floods in both winter and summer. It was probably a hay meadow for much of the last thousand years and is now managed traditionally, with a hay cut each July followed by cattle grazing. The meadow is species-rich, especially in flowers such as the snake's head fritillary. With its chequered bell-like flowers, the snake's head fritillary, is Oxfordshire's county flower and is characteristic of traditionally managed flood meadows. It is nationally scarce, and only a few sites in the UK are known to hold wild populations. Though part of the Meadow will be lost in the creation of the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme to the west of the city, it will remain a precious resource.

All the Trust sites (with one or two exceptions for livestock management) are open to the public. Like the University Parks, they offer Oxford and all its communities the opportunity to enjoy the beauties of the natural world and the health and happiness that can flow from it.

Looking in, looking out

From Balliol's quadrangles to European housing blocks and rural Spain, Hubert Murray (1965) reflects on how buildings turn inward or outward – and what those choices reveal about community, care, and place.

In the beginning, at conception, amongst the many questions an architect must ask, is what a building wants to be: an introvert or an extrovert. Let me explain.

The Porters' Lodge at the Broad Street entrance to the Balliol Front Quad is a portal into an interior world. Away from the crowds of people, cars and bicycles, one enters a realm of manicured tranquility, flanked by Library, Chapel and Master's Lodgings. The Front Quad leads through a low passage to the Garden Quad, the social heart of the College. Student rooms, tutorial rooms, the Dining Hall and Buttery, and the Junior and Senior Common Rooms are all held in community by the lawn, the beech and mulberry trees, and other mature species carefully curated by College gardeners, exclusive of the outer world.

Balliol is but one example of medieval courtyard colleges derived, typologically at least, from religious communities of prayer and contemplation. These buildings are designed and built for communal, religious or scholarly introspection, shutting out the external world. The buildings that frame the quadrangle protect the select few against the iniquities and distractions of the many. At the same time the interior space thus created becomes an exclusive micro-utopia in itself.

The courtyard as mediator

This inward orientation appears repeatedly at different scales. In a more secular world, the courtyard model was the basis for Cerdà's 1860 plan for *L'Eixample* ('expansion') in Barcelona. The city's blocks were designed so that shops on the ground floor look 'out', while residential life looks 'in' toward shared, traffic-free courtyards. These internal spaces were intended as green communal amenities, supported

by libraries, clinics, laundries, and kindergartens.

Something similar can be seen in Vienna's *Gemeindebauten* built in the 1920s. Many of these housing blocks were centered on large courtyards, landscaped communal spaces that could accommodate social amenities including extensive sports facilities. Both in Vienna and Barcelona, residential buildings deliberately turned their backs on the street, privileging the interior communal space.

London squares offer a partial contrast. While Russell Square or Bedford Square create green interiors, the penetration of surrounding streets into the interior space punctures their exclusivity. In all cases, the urban square is an intermediary between individual

privacy and urban community.

On a smaller scale, the classical Persian and Islamic courtyard house offers another powerful model of introversion. Here, inward-facing architecture provides protection not only from public gaze, but also from climate: harsh sun and dust-laden winds. The space within is a landscape representing heaven on earth, employing a palette of shaded arcades, fruit-bearing trees and above all, the precious curation of water running through fountains, runnels and pools. The epitome of this tradition is reflected in the Alhambra's *Generalife*: 'a self-contained world of geometry, water, inscription, and light'.

So much for the introverted building. What then is its opposite?

The extroverted alternative

Nothing so much illustrates the concept of the extroverted building as the notion of the 'campus', prevalent in most North American universities. Harvard was founded in the new colony of Massachusetts on educational principles of democratic inclusion. Thus, its early buildings were domestic in scale, set in a 'field' rather than composed as enclosed courtyards. The campus developed organically as an extension of the town itself, with buildings that are extroverted, outward-looking, set in the open, and accessible to all. The gated perimeter wall encircling today's Harvard campus was installed in the late 1880s and 1990s, thus negating the original democratic intent.

This extroverted logic also shaped American domestic architecture. The ubiquitous 'setbacks' of US zoning laws ensured that individual houses sat centrally within their plots, framed by green lawns and ornamental bushes. Until recently, the absence of fences ensured visual openness between street, dwelling, and neighbour.



Hubert Murray

'The Porters' Lodge at the Broad Street entrance to the Balliol Front Quad is a portal into an interior world.'

On an urban scale, this pattern of individuated dwelling often sacrifices community in pursuit of individuality. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept adopted a similar spatial openness while attempting to restore community through incorporating social and communal amenities within easy walking distance. Yet even here, the balance between individual dwelling and communal life remains delicate.

There is a paradox in this characterisation of the 'open' and 'closed', the extroverted and introverted development. Open, accessible developments often fragment community, while closed, residential communities risk exclusivity.

From theory to practice

As an architectural student, I was attracted to the idea of courtyard housing, principally for the reasons reviewed above. The courtyard in social housing is a mediator between the privacy of the home and the community of neighbours set within a wider urban context. The closest I ever got to realising this type of spatial mediation was in the restoration of one side of Ford Square in Whitechapel – an early Georgian square serving all four edges, with a playground and benches for people watching, and handsome, fully mature London plane trees providing shade and oxygen in a densely populated area. Unlike the urban models of Vienna and Barcelona however, the power of the public space is diluted by diverse private ownerships and by Cavell Street, which cuts through the space, breaking the direct pedestrian connection between home and public space.

Most of my professional career has been spent in the United States, where social housing, and courtyard housing in particular, tend to be regarded as foreign with a sulphurous whiff of socialism. While much of my practice was focused on infrastructure planning and architecture, I also worked on planning universities, mainly overseas. University projects in Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Sarajevo offered opportunities to establish the institutional 'introverted' courtyard form for all the solid reasons of communal and climatic sustainability. In contrast, American schools and colleges continued to favour individuated buildings within a campus



Top: Family house in the sierra of central Extremadura in Spain

Above: Interior of family house with a primary view of distant mountains to the east

setting – an extroverted form of building within the landscape.

Building a family house in the sierra of central Extremadura in Spain required creating a building necessarily extroverted, situated in a landscape dominated by the cardinal points of the compass. The site demanded engagement with its surroundings while at the same time forming a spacious internal living space – an enclosed 'courtyard' – offering shade and shelter through the seasons.

The primary view of distant mountains is to the east, towards the sunrise. The secondary view is to the west, towards the Moorish castle, the

sunset, and the prevailing wind. The sun is at its highest to the south and to the north is a rocky, wooded rise facing south. The elevation is sufficient for achieving satisfactory water pressure, and the southern slope provides an ideal inclination for solar panels.

To the west, as a windbreak, is a bosque of existing oaks and newly planted *pinus nigra*; to the east, sheltered in the lee of the building, are fig, almond, and pomegranate trees. Thus, the building incorporates a generous internal space that opens itself to context, taking its cues from the landscape. An extroverted introvert, one might say.

Art and space

Lincoln Seligman (1969) explains how his work explores the relationship between art and space, drawing on decades of creating large-scale murals and sculptures for public buildings around the world.

‘Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here’ might have been helpful advice to a jurisprudence undergraduate who went on to work as an artist and sculptor for 45 years. I was fairly dirigible when choosing a degree course, and the law seemed to invite approval from most sensible people. After my degree, which I enjoyed, I continued to keep my head below the parapet by qualifying as a barrister at the Inner Temple, and then worked in the City as a shipping lawyer until the age of thirty. My work for shipowners mainly revolved around our business in Hong Kong, for which I was notionally responsible – there being no obvious connection between my presence there and the fortunes of the business. I still harboured a hope that I could one day use my visual skills to earn a living in a way that didn’t seem too much like work. Hong Kong became my jumping off point – moving from the claustrophobia of high-rise office life to exploring the vast atrium spaces of cities around the world. Through a series of improbable connections, I won a commission to paint a 6,000-square-foot mural next to the legendary Mandarin Hotel in Central Hong Kong. For some reason, perhaps a lack of common sense, I was undaunted by the scale of the project – its size, its public prominence, and the vast atrium space it was to occupy. I even felt, rather presumptuously, that the mural made the whole space mine. Fortunately, not speaking Chinese, I could only guess at the high-octane gesticulations and comments of the public milling around fifty feet beneath my scaffolding.

When I returned to England, the telephone didn’t ring for a long time, but eventually I picked up further corporate commissions in London and New York. My first New York commission was in the then new Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue (my



‘There was great pleasure to be had in tinkering with the sensation of space and movement.’

client was not the current president, but the jewellers Asprey). Painting abstract murals for buildings, atria, and airports was an enjoyable two-dimensional exploration of large public spaces. I also used my trompe-l’œil skills, much beloved by artists decorating Renaissance churches, to trick the eye into perceiving depth where none existed. In this way, a whole new visual platform could be created – another landscape for one’s imagination to populate. The entrance hall mural of Swiss Bank, with its surreal exploration of art and money, was a case in point, with added pleasure in allowing the pictorial narrative to poke fun at banking itself.

My scope was suddenly extended when Stuart Lipton, the developer of Broadgate, invited me to submit designs for the main atrium of a new City building. I suggested a mural of huge, random brushstrokes on the walls.

He was unimpressed and said that all bets were off unless I came up with something more exciting. After a few days of frenzied rethinking, I turned to the work of Alexander Calder, whose death in 1976 had left something of a vacuum. I remodeled my initial idea in the form of a 60-foot-high mobile that revolved with convection currents and randomly coalesced with the vast coloured splashes on the walls. The concept of a child’s cot mobile was enlarged to fill a 100-foot void. Before we mastered the simple science of heat rising, we relied on an obliging member of the cleaning staff to use her mop to get the 20-foot pieces moving each morning. There was great pleasure to be had in tinkering with the sensation of space and movement. The art must have intrinsic visual merit, but its greater point is the extent to which its occupation of, and movement within, the atrium are mutually complementary and intriguing. In this case, the painted sculptures both engaged with and fled from the atrium walls, creating enjoyable spatial ambiguities.

Having felt hitherto that large public walls were my surfaces to play with, I began to enjoy filling the huge glass voids created by contemporary atrium architecture. Typically, the architect created the space and lauded its empty calm; the building’s owner then invariably saw a need to fill it with something large, anything, often to the chagrin of the architect. I happily encouraged this – even when the work was described as ‘jewellery for buildings’. But the gentle, random movement of giant mobiles seemed to humanise the daunting scale of the buildings themselves.

This idea underpinned my mobiles for Cathay Pacific’s headquarters. Although a business hub, the three atria became home to sculptures based on the deconstructed curves and bars

of the classic DNA 'ladder' model – individuality in its purest form, set within an otherwise anodyne office building where workers might feel like dehumanised cyphers. The void was no longer inert, but an artistic showcase for random movements, reflecting, to my mind, the hopes and aspirations of the human spirit.

I later created the largest suspended glass sculpture in the world for Swires in Hong Kong, extending the idea of a living piece with fish swimming through reeds. The white, asymmetrical atrium was a perfect display cabinet for the shimmering piscatorial tangle, its rhomboid shape deliberately rejecting rectilinear verticality in favour of a form closer to nature. The challenge was to occupy this beautifully 'wonky' cube without compromising its individuality or tranquility.

I returned to the motif of fish in the main entrance to the Kowloon MTR station. The work hovers above the escalators – 11 pieces in heat shrink fabric on steel frames, each 16 feet long. The idea is movement captured as a still frame of fish leaping. I hoped that the upward flow of commuters would reinforce the feeling of dynamics working in conversation with each other. At the same time, the viewer is still encouraged to enjoy the majesty of the high-ceilinged steel cave of the concourse, dwarfing the sculptures much as a cathedral dwarfs its altar.

When initially approaching these projects, there are infinite variables. Not least the unknown of what the client can be persuaded to accept. Asking someone to approve, on paper, a rough design that will eventually fill a cathedral-sized space is a challenge in itself, requiring a sympathy for volume and space that may be far removed from their everyday experience. Sometimes, the relationship between artwork and space must yield to symbolism.

One series of very large, suspended sculptures in Taipei ended up reflecting purely numerical sequences. As is often the case in East Asia, the spiritual and feng shui significance of numbers proved a major preoccupation of the building's owner – something I was fortunate to learn before submitting my proposals. Similarly, in Beijing, my sculptures for the government's real estate arm were based on the wings of a phoenix rising from the ashes. Here the pieces were designed to lift



Top left: Suspended glass sculpture at Swires Hong Kong

Top right: Mobile at Cathy Pacific HQ

Left: Fish sculptures in Kowloon MTR station

Below left: Swiss Bank mural

the gaze upwards and away from the soaring glass walls. I had to accept that the relationship between the artwork pieces and the building itself was to be of secondary importance to 'sending an important message'.

Subjectively, I think the most successful works are those in which art and space live in harmony. This is not to say that visual tension is to be avoided. It's not an exact science. Often, inexplicably, surprises and happy accidents emerge that render the whole much greater than the sum of the parts. While space inevitably dictates scale,

the artwork ultimately determines how viewers enjoy the end result – often in places where they spend much of their working lives. For me, the sinuous moving lines of the natural world tend to soften harsh rectilinear spaces, suggesting an element of humanity, in a spirit of optimism, encouragement, and individuality. Perhaps they nod quietly to the creative presence of the human hand, working its discreet magic on the canvas offered by today's grandiose but glacial temples of glass and steel.

www.lincolnseligman.com

‘Roper constructs a portrait of how individual emotions created collective mentalities that fuelled radical action.’



Professor Lyndal Roper

Past and present: a historian's optimistic reflections

Sarah Blaney (2024, *History*) speaks to Professor Lyndal Roper (Emeritus Regius Professor of History and Honorary Fellow) about the past's hold on the present and the future of historical scholarship.

To the tourist groups clogging up the Broad Street bike lane, being regaled with stories of famous alumni and collegiate rivalries, Oxford's architecture is a magnet for international fascination. Medieval city walls run like a vein through New College as the commerce of Cornmarket Street is supervised by the 11th-century watch tower. However, when Lyndal Roper arrived in 1983, she confessed to not liking it much at all. Coming from Australia, she truly felt an outsider: a foreign landscape coupled with obscure traditions. Invited to stay the night in college accommodation

and attend the hall dinner following an interview for a Junior Research Fellowship at Merton, she initially responded, 'Oh, no thanks, I'll just go back to London,' before realising that 'the dinner was not optional'.

Reflecting on her time at Balliol, where she took on a Lectureship and Fellowship in 2002, Roper laughs that the architecture was appealing to the inner antipodean precisely because it was not old. She loved the 19th-century faux medievalism and 1960s staircases because they 'were not monastic' but reflected the pleasures of intellectual

life familiar to her from Australian universities built at the same time, such as the University of Melbourne, where she completed her undergraduate degree in History and Philosophy.

Despite decades at the forefront of historical research on early modern Germany and being appointed Regius Professor of History at Oxford in 2011, Roper confessed to feeling like she wasn't a proper historian 'because I wasn't very good at abstract forces like the economy, social structure and all that'. Rather, she was driven by her curiosity in people as historical

subjects. As we search for causal explanations, Roper believes these processes are fundamentally about people writ large, because ‘in the end’ even factors such as ‘demography is basically about sex...it’s about connections between people at the deepest level and what happens once that’s magnified to a whole society.’

Roper’s most recent book, *Summer of Fire and Blood*, the 2025 winner of the Cundill Prize, forays beyond her oeuvre on gender, witch trials and the life of Martin Luther into more traditional military history but maintains this distinctive Roper methodology. Her history of the peasant warbands that erupted and marched across Germany in the summer of 1525, four years after Luther’s alleged theses provided the starting gun for the Reformation, goes beyond the political and economic analysis of peasant servitude; her work places the peasants’ emotions and experience at the forefront to investigate why peasants take the risk of engaging in revolt. Why did they persevere in the face of violent repression and multiple setbacks? Human behaviour is not always rational and thus cannot entirely be explained by abstract, anonymous forces. Roper constructs a portrait of how individual emotions – the humiliation of being owned by a lord, the desire for the freedom to marry whom one wanted, and the process of walking together – created collective mentalities that fuelled radical action.

When prompted on the relevance of early modern history in the 21st century, amidst the rapid technological change and rise of political extremism, Roper smiled gleefully. Like a cat with a caught mouse at the cynical challenge to the grounds of historical scholarship, she discussed her recent work developing a workshop for historians about AI. Roper believes it to be a powerful tool for new directions of research, as ‘at the moment, the historiography is dominated by microhistory and narrative, which is great’ but ‘I’m quite excited about what it may mean for the future of history’, perhaps even going back to the culture of ‘argument, debate and discussion’ of 30 years ago.

Historians can now harness AI to create GIS maps, plotting the destruction of monasteries as peasant war bands blaze across Germany, or decode handwriting and translate texts,

enabling greater accessibility. Roper believes that, in neglecting to teach people these new skills or interact with technological change, not only does an institution limit its potential to generate new research, but ‘we are not equipping people for the workforce’. The historian’s skills of evaluating arguments through critically unpicking sources and evidence are increasingly relevant, with AI obscuring sources and generating synthesised answers as ‘fact’. For Roper, questioning the validity and attainability of ‘truth’ is at the heart of the historian’s critical thinking toolbox.

Meandering back to the initial tension between the past and current politics, Roper reflects on her time in Germany, particularly during the 2025 commemorations of the German Peasants’ War. The 111 events took her all over Germany, where she felt a palpable cultural divide between the

‘Historians can now harness AI to create GIS maps, decode handwriting and translate texts, enabling greater accessibility.’

former East and West, outlining the importance of memory in the creation of local and national communities and thus shaping the political atmosphere. The far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party achieved a record result of 20.8% of votes in the February 2025 elections, with its support base more in the east. Roper notes how the AfD support is high in many areas that ‘I know were involved in the peasants’ war’, such as Thuringia.

In the East, the peasants were used as a ‘founding myth’ of the communist region, ‘distinguishing itself from Soviet Communism’ by offering a native radical past. Even now, after reunification, while the political regime may not perpetuate that narrative, Roper describes a continuation in tropes of the Eastern political discourse; ‘you don’t expect the state to do anything for you’ and ‘we have lived through multiple dictatorships,’ drawing a line between lordly

oppression, Nazism and communism. The ideas of injustice, an oppressive regime in the celebration of ideologues such as Thomas Müntzer, embed the Peasants’ War in its genealogy that fosters an anti-state attitude. Whereas in the West, ‘the Holocaust is really the defining moment in German history’ where the pervading feeling that the East ‘hasn’t had its reckoning with Nazism has led to suspicion, even the idea that people in the former East need to be taught democracy.’ This continues to be reflected in the commemorative events, where the Peasants’ War in the East is ‘celebrated as a national event’ whereas ‘in the former West, it is very much local’.

Just as the peasants marched across Germany, leaving a legacy that continues to be negotiated in public discourse, Roper’s own pilgrimage to Oxford has evidently been a disruptive force in the traditional culture fostered within the sandstone turrets and cobblestone streets. In that interview for a Junior Research Fellowship, Roper recalls facing a room full of ‘what felt like 50 men’ who inquired into her research on the ‘family’ – a vague, reductionist word, flattening her research on the impact of the Reformation on the theology of gender relations regulating the civic community of Augsburg in the Holy Roman Empire.

‘I think what they were trying to do was help me. Oh, somebody working on women? That’s gonna be trouble, let’s say she’s working on the family’. She’s aware, too, that without that first job, and without Oxford taking a risk on her, she wouldn’t have had a career as a historian.

Since stepping into the role of Regius Professor of History, Roper has enjoyed being a part of the future of her subject in British academia and making permanent changes to the direction of research. For a time, Roper was the only woman professor in the faculty, and now, as the first female Regius Professor, she was able to help establish the Hillary Rodham Clinton Chair in Women’s History, followed by the Chair in the History of Sexualities. Oxford now ‘offers an extraordinary combination of expertise within the faculty’ and being a part of this ‘total transformation’, along with the move to global history, was probably the highlight of her Regius role.

MCR Presidents across the decades

Dorte Rich Jørgensen (1989)

Inaugural MCR President 1989–1990

In September 1989, I arrived at Holywell Manor from Denmark as an Engineering student. At the time, graduates belonged to a 'Graduate Society' within the JCR. I put myself forward for President in my first term; I wanted to make a difference and lead by example as a woman in that role.

My arrival coincided with a world going through monumental change; the Berlin Wall fell that November, and I remember graduates traveling to Berlin to witness history first-hand. Change was in the air, and it was happening at home, too.

The path to an independent MCR was controversial. The night before our final vote, the JCR circulated a paper under every door on the consequences of independence. This move catalysed our committee; we responded with our own paper, highlighting the benefits of independence: direct representation on College committees and access to the Master, with a clearer voice and place in the College for graduates.

On 13 January 1990, we secured the vote. The real work then began, when I personally wrote the Balliol MCR Constitution and Standing Orders, drawing inspiration from the Graduate Society, the JCR's legacy, and other successful MCRs. As someone still finding my feet in a second language, getting these foundational documents through the scrutiny of both graduates and the College was a significant personal achievement.

I remember feeling intimidated before meeting the Master, Dr Baruch Blumberg – a Nobel Laureate with 24 honorary degrees – for the first time. I called my brother for advice. He asked me, 'What do you have in common with him?' before answering his own



Dorte (then known as 'Rich') on the left, with fellow engineer Kate Vinot (née Jones, 1998) from Australia, having breakfast on May Morning in the Manor garden

question: 'You are both human.' That simple truth stayed with me. When we met, Dr Blumberg was incredibly encouraging, leaving me completely at ease. He laughed and told me he knew students were 'practicing on him' before eventually going to the Houses of Parliament. These were prophetic words; I did indeed end up attending meetings there later in my career.

My engineering background gives me a passion for our physical spaces. The Holywell Manor bar was in poor condition, and I was determined to see it refurbished. The Master enlisted Christopher Cross, former Head of the School of Architecture at what is now Oxford Brookes University, to draw up plans; I even had the privilege of discussing the architectural details directly with him. It brings me joy to know that the layout remains unchanged today and a small piece of history is preserved.

Beyond the politics, the Manor was a life-changing community. Negotiating with native English speakers who were

PPE students was a steep learning curve that taught me to believe in my own voice. Many heart-warming conversations shaped me into the champion for EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) that I am today.

I have fond memories of the 'Meet a Fresher' initiative we launched to welcome new joiners. On a lighter note, my fellow graduates gifted me a Viking helmet during my term. It became a prized possession, especially when Denmark famously beat Germany in the 1992 European Championship!

Looking back, being the inaugural President taught me that we are all equal in our humanity, regardless of rank – a principle I have upheld ever since. I also learned to ask for support, like when the Dean helped me find a week of quiet in College to focus on my DPhil proposal. While I later chose a more gradual path to leadership, I am immensely glad I stepped up for Balliol MCR. It was a privilege to help lay the foundation for a community that continues to thrive.

Lina Nerlander (1999)

MCR President 2003–2004

Most people who spent time at Holywell Manor would, I am sure, agree that it is the best place in Oxford at which to be a graduate. The mix of interesting people was, of course, the main reason, but the physical setting in Holywell gave us so many easy ways to interact. As you walked past the Lodge, the Porter would say hello, and on entering the lobby you'd often find people standing around chatting – perhaps on their way to the pigeonholes. Straight ahead was the Megaron bar, where you were even more likely to find someone to talk to later in the day or evening. If you headed left into the main MCR, you could sit and read a paper, and perhaps someone else was already doing just that.

For me, the best part of the day was dinnertime, when people would head downstairs to the canteen. There, I often had great conversations across subject areas. That was indeed another great thing about the MCR – the mix of not only nationalities but disciplines. I have since been in other educational settings, but they were segregated by subject and never matched the richness of Holywell.

The dining hall was under threat in the early 2000s due to the need to cut overall costs. Several MCR members at that time, including myself, worked hard to preserve it. I looked at a range of possible ways to save money,

'I have since been in other educational settings, but they were segregated by subject and never matched the richness of Holywell.'

including changes to services in rooms. We all greatly valued the friendly Head Scout at Holywell, and it felt terrible even considering such options. The dining hall eventually closed, which I think was a loss for the community, although I am sure people have found alternative social pathways. I am told that graduates now interact more with the Broad Street site, which is wonderful.

The Garden Party was the highlight of the social calendar. The year I was President, it was threatened when the veteran organisers proposed replacing the customary open bar with individual drinks tickets in an effort to make things fairer for those who did not drink much. The suggestion caused uproar and mutiny, and the party was almost cancelled. I don't remember the final outcome regarding the drinks, but

I do remember we had a great party!

In terms of the outside world, 9/11 and its aftermath were among the defining events of that time, especially as several MCR members were from the US, including New York City. I learned much about US politics and remember the patient efforts of my American friends trying to explain the Electoral College to me.

The photo I selected here is the humorous version of the annual MCR photo. A few days prior, I emailed a friend, writing that 'I plan to wear my vintage Swedish national costume, although it does make me look a little like a milkmaid'. My friend never received the email because it got blocked by the Oxford Herald email filter for 'inappropriate language'!

Even since leaving Holywell, I have more or less consciously tried to recreate some of its elements with a mix of talented, interesting people and a low barrier to socialisation, both of which become harder as we progress through different stages of life. I look forward to old age, when I might live in a senior citizens community with my own room but shared meals and social events. Perhaps we could establish a 'Holywell Manor: Senior Edition', where we can meet again and continue the great conversations – this time without the pressure of looming exams.



Lina Nerlander
in the front row,
6th from the left

‘I was struck by how many of the same topics we debated in my time had been argued countless times throughout the College’s long history.’

Rami Amin (2011)

MCR President 2013–2014

Pulling myself out of the murky river and back into our brand new College punt after falling overboard on a cold, windy morning is not how I imagined my time as MCR President would be. But arranging the purchase and delivery of a punt for the Balliol MCR is just one of the unexpected tasks I found myself undertaking when our seller downstream on the Isis offered to drop the delivery fee if I could get it back upstream myself. To avoid upsetting our budget-minded Treasurer, Elwyn Davies (2009), with a request for more funds for this frivolous expenditure, I volunteered to punt it back – not anticipating the depth or swells of the river that day. After convincing my trusty VP, Amit Kumar (2012), to join me (until now the only witness of my tourist-in-Oxford moment), we managed to bring it home to Holywell Manor – albeit with more paddling than punting!

Being elected MCR President for the 2013/2014 academic year proved memorable for many other reasons. My term coincided with the College’s 750th anniversary, marked by a series of events. At Celebration Weekend in September 2013, I watched Boris Johnson, then Mayor of London, deliver an after-dinner speech so full of sarcastic wit, references to antiquity, and self-deprecating humour that even his biggest critics couldn’t help but crack a smile amid the roaring laughter.

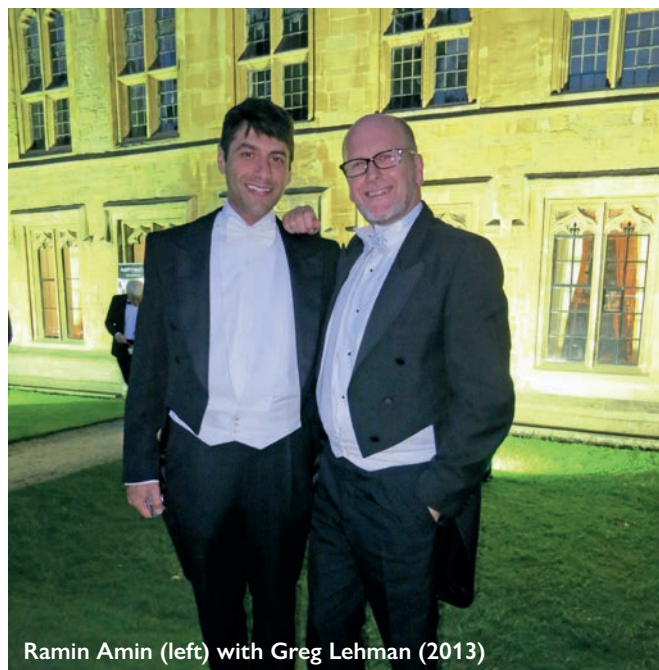
Attending Old Member events like

this was a perk of the job in that 750th year, and my favourite part was speaking with alumni across generations. I was fascinated to hear stories about food rations during the post-war years, awkward co-mingling on shared staircases among Balliol’s first co-educational cohorts, and a time when even the suggestion of paying tuition fees for education seemed preposterous. I was struck by how many of the same topics we debated in my time had been argued countless times throughout the College’s long history: from advocating divestment of endowed funds from one problematic source or another, to taking positions on Israel/Palestine, to adding more diversity officers to the Committee, to living-wage campaigns, to banning elitist balls, to bringing back those elitist balls, to pushing for meat-free Mondays in Hall (the latter of which proved the most polarising of these debates!)

My presidency culminated with Balliol’s 750th Anniversary Commemoration Ball in June 2014, attended by over a thousand students and alumni donning white ties and ball gowns, drinking champagne from ice sculptures shaped like lions and revelling amongst carnival games as fireworks illuminated the sky. My hazy memory can’t recall any dinner speeches, but if there were any, they would have been drowned out by Mark Ronson’s live DJ set on the back quad. For some humbling perspective, I now

live in Washington, DC, where this year we are set to celebrate the 250th anniversary of a country that did not yet exist when Balliol was already 500 years old!

As with the undergraduate community, the graduate experience at Holywell Manor was a delightful bubble of academic life – similarly walled off and insulated from the real world – yet real world events dominated discussion in the kitchens and common room. My predecessor, Davis McCarthy (2011), warned me that the Presidency would involve navigating discussions amongst some of the smartest, most opinionated scholar-activists in the world (he gifted me a bottle of whisky in preparation), and he was right. But for the most part, the role involved fairly unglamorous meetings, meetings, and more meetings. There’s a committee for everything, from academics to accommodation to ‘Art and Chattels,’ and I think only the College Presidents and the Master – Sir Drummond Bone (1968, Honorary Fellow) that year – are obliged to sit in all of them. In retrospect, witnessing all these behind-the-scenes deliberations amongst the Fellows – in parallel with the spirited debates of the JCR and MCR – not only showed me why Balliol has endured, but also gave me unbounded confidence that Balliol will continue to shine for another 750 years.



Ramin Amin (left) with Greg Lehman (2013)

Alina Nicheperovich (2022)

MCR President 2025–2026

Like many prospective students, I was first drawn to Balliol through a promotional video on the College website, in which Committee members spoke about the strong sense of community that defines postgraduate life at Balliol. Although the Cockpit looked rather shabby at the time (thankfully no longer so!), I was immediately convinced and decided to apply to Balliol for my master's degree.

From my very first week at Holywell Manor, I was swept off my feet – in the best possible way – by the abundance of Freshers' Week events and by the warmth and approachability of those around me. Keen to contribute to the social life of the MCR, I ran for Social Secretary in my first term at Oxford. Evidently, overseeing Bops did not deter me from committee life, and when I discovered that I would be staying at Balliol for my DPhil, I took on the role of Bar Manager, helping to rescue the Megaron from a rather precarious financial situation. I also served as co-president of the MCR Garden Party for two consecutive years.

Balliol MCR has been a place where I have truly flourished: academically, socially, and creatively. Wanting to give back to this remarkable community, I stood for election as MCR President with the aim of ensuring that everyone feels welcome and at home, regardless of background. Since assuming the role in summer 2025, I have made a concerted effort to encourage members to bring their ideas forward. This ethos underpins a new initiative I am developing with the support of our Praefectus, Professor Elena Lombardi, which will allow MCR members to host workshops and share skills: from knitting and gardening to creative writing and DJing. One of the great strengths of Balliol MCR is its diversity,



Alina (front left), visiting Oxford for the first time in 2009

‘From my very first week at Holywell Manor, I was swept off my feet – in the best possible way – by the abundance of Freshers’ Week events and by the warmth and approachability of those around me.’

and I firmly believe that we have much to learn from one another. I am also very much looking forward to celebrating the community's creative

talent at our upcoming Charity Concert, organised to raise funds in response to the ongoing conflict in Sudan.

Happily, my experience as MCR President has so far been a smooth one. Many of my meetings with the Master are spent hearing updates on developments within the JCR, and when it is my turn to report, the response has reassuringly tended to be that ‘all is fine and calm’. I am deeply grateful to the Committee officers for the often unseen and thankless work they do to keep the MCR running. For Old Members reading this, I am pleased to report that Bops at Holywell Manor remain as popular as ever: this year's Freshers' Bop reached capacity within an hour of opening its doors.

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to serve in this role, which has been a profound learning experience. As a STEM DPhil student, much of my time is spent grappling with scientific problems, often in solitude. Being MCR President has taught me how to listen carefully to a wide range of perspectives, to ensure that all voices are heard, and to work collaboratively toward shared solutions. Acting as a bridge between students and the College has strengthened my skills as a communicator and, occasionally, as a diplomat with a critical eye.

The little Belarusian girl in the photograph taken outside Balliol's Broad Street entrance could never have imagined that she would one day become President of the postgraduate community of the very college beside which she stands, at one of the world's leading universities. Although I still have a year and a half remaining in my DPhil, I already know that my time at Balliol will stand among the most meaningful and formative chapters of my life.

Oswyn Murray (Emeritus Fellow)

Praefectus of Holywell Manor 2000–2004

Author of *Holywell Manor: An Anecdotal History* (2007)

The Manor is Balliol's best kept secret. A fantasy of Kenneth Bell (Fellow and Tutor in Modern History 1919–1941), it is built around an ancient farmhouse with a 'medieval' courtyard and a 'Queen Anne' garden front designed by the unsuccessful artist George Kennedy (1901). Whatever its architectural eccentricities – an impossible internal layout, floors running across the middle of misplaced windows, a stone facade laid against the grain – it remains a lost Arts and Crafts gem, set in a garden of great beauty amid the remains of an Anglican nunnery. By the time I arrived in 2000 it had been transformed, by successive Praefectuses, into the best graduate centre in Oxford – a true holy well of learning.

I had thought myself privileged to be teaching for 32 years the most intelligent undergraduates in Britain; but the Manor was occupied by graduates who were equally brilliant and internationally diverse – young, dynamic, and committed to changing the world. I introduced annual interviews, asking each to explain their research: it was a revelation. They were idealistic people committed to academic careers and needed space to govern themselves. So, I left internal government largely to them and tried to act as a benevolent protector of their interests: successive Assistant Praefectuses and elected MCR Presidents did the real work.

We lived as a family. The lively Praefectus's seminars continued, with good food and drink, and policemen and poets as speakers. We had raucous Burns Nights and tried once to hold a Christmas dinner for those pagans and atheists still in residence, only to discover they had all gone to Paris. The Manor Bops were famous and regularly drew complaints from the neighbours; garden plays and summer balls were joyous occasions. We celebrated the Manor's 70th anniversary in 2002 with a pageant written by a graduates, attended by the family of the most



'The Manor is Balliol's best kept secret.'

famous Praefectus, Russell Meiggs (Honorary Fellow 1970–1989), together with Peter Snow (1958), his son Dan Snow (1998), Jack Good (1952), the hermit impresario who discovered the Beatles, and many St Hugh's alumnae evacuated there during the war. Our gardener, Eve, created a perfect paradise for summer events.

Within the wider University, graduate studies were in disarray; outside the science departments, supervision was shoehorned to tutors' responsibilities. Administrative

responsibility shifted towards the Divisions, which were increasingly developing one-year taught master's courses. I sought to maintain a balanced mix of programmes between Science and Humanities, and between taught and research programmes. With devious lobbying, I demonstrated that the Colleges had invested £100 million in graduate welfare compared with £1.6 million by the University, and became Chair of a Graduate Studies Committee answerable only to the Conference of Colleges.

The science faculties were well organised for research; but in the Arts and Social Sciences, supervision could be uneven. Many faculties were congenitally averse to interdisciplinary topics – few were eager to supervise projects on the influence of Walter Scott on Gujarati novels, English feminist writers during the French Revolution, or the influence of religious liturgy on Shakespearean theatre. Using my experience at the multidisciplinary Warburg Institute, I strove to place such inspired topics in sympathetic quarters.

I had earlier overseen the construction of James Fairfax Yard as a first step in the attempt to renew Balliol's housing stock. But I had my failures. Food was always a challenge: our culturally diverse students often had specific dietary requirements, from vegetarianism to restrictions on particular meats. Following the lead of Bill Newton-Smith, who had furnished the dining room with craftsman-designed tables and chairs, I rebuilt the kitchen and serving area and tried to rejuvenate the Cockpit – named after the 18th-century cockpit painted by John Malchair in 1787. I dreamt of making it the lunchtime venue of choice for the entire Science Area, but competing priorities and practical constraints limited what could be achieved. Shortly after my departure it was turned into a multi-gym – a sign of the times.



‘It was obvious from the very beginning that the community of graduate students was varied and extremely interesting.’

Diego Zancani (Emeritus Fellow)

Praefectus of Holywell Manor 2004–2010

In 2004, after nine years as a Fellow of Balliol College and two as Dean, I was elected Praefectus of Holywell Manor to succeed Oswyn Murray (Emeritus Fellow). Before applying, I consulted Professor Denis Noble (Emeritus Fellow), who himself had been in charge of Holywell Manor for a considerable number of years, and he suggested that it was certainly worth applying. There was a lot to learn, but it was obvious from the very beginning that the community of graduate students was varied and extremely interesting. It was made up of highly able young people with a wide range of interests and specialisations.

My aim was to meet each one of them: scientists, mathematicians, lawyers, and humanists. Some were already qualified as medical practitioners in their native countries but were not allowed to practice in Britain. Many went on to become prominent members of their professions, whatever their fields.

My activities included reviewing admissions documents, dealing with everyday occurrences, attending to student welfare and responding to unexpected situations. Another prominent responsibility was deciding on the allocation of funds for specific research projects. Applications were

submitted and followed by interviews. Listening to cutting-edge research was always illuminating and rewarding. MCR Presidents were elected by the students themselves and contributed in various ways to the life of the Manor, while the Assistant Praefectus, chosen by me and the Chaplain in charge at the time, helped me in carrying out a variety of duties.

Among the numerous activities organised each year, I would like to mention the annual opening of the garden in spring under the National Garden Scheme, when homemade cakes and tea were served to visitors. Numerous Praefectus seminars were also organised. These consisted of a welcome drink, a talk given by an illustrious guest – often suggested by the students – and a nice dinner following the question-and-answer session. One evening we invited an extraordinary person, Dame Stephanie Shirley (Foundation Fellow 2001–2025), one of Balliol’s most generous benefactors. On that occasion, I mentioned that the medieval church next door was up for sale, and it would be ideal to turn it into a depository for rare books and a research centre. Following my suggestion, Dame Stephanie commissioned an architect to undertake a feasibility study. Later, she donated

a substantial sum to help acquire the church, which now houses a significant part of Balliol’s Historic Collections.

Throughout the year, frequent events were organised around music, food, and drink. These provided valuable opportunities to welcome new students, help them feel at home, and get to know them in informal settings.

To celebrate 75 years of Holywell Manor, a big do was organised in late spring 2007, and many alumni attended the event which was a great success. A book entitled *Holywell Manor: an Anecdotal History*, compiled by Oswyn Murray, was published to mark the occasion.

During my tenure, two beautiful sculptures, *Icarus* and *Molusco*, were donated to the garden of Holywell Manor, by the Luxemburgish artist and former Balliol student Raymond Petit (1975), and by Martin Foley (1951, Foundation Fellow 2007–2025) on behalf of the Mexican sculptor Feliciano Béjar. A striking oil painting and a series of etchings were also donated by the well-known Russian artist Maxim Kantor.

On a personal note, I am very pleased that a former Assistant Praefectus, Tim Soutphommasane (2004), has now become a prominent member of the University of Oxford, as Chief Diversity Officer and Professor of Human Rights and Political Theory, as well as a Senior Research Fellow at Balliol College. It is always a pleasure to talk to Tim and reminisce about the good old days at Holywell Manor.

Professor Elena Lombardi

(Professor of Italian Literature, Paget Tonybee Fellow and Tutor in Italian)

Current Praefectus of Holywell Manor

Holywell Manor today — and I mean today, 19 March 2026, a day I picked at random to start writing — is a beautiful stone house that changes colour with the hours of the day and the vagaries of the weather. The magnolia in the Praefectus' garden is shedding its petals, but there are so many still on the tree that it feels it will go on forever in a time-warp of caducity and permanence, of frailty and constancy, like only nature and a Renaissance sonnet could depict.

The cherry tree (known as Russell Meiggs's tree) is in full bloom, and so are the countless flowering plants that our gardeners scatter throughout the outside spaces.

Holywell Manor today is a chat with Nick, our Lodge Manager, about a key (not lost — no, I just don't know where I put it), or a banter with Mark or Steve, our unique night porters. It is ... 'Hello Pauline, how are the scouts this morning?'; and Catherine, the Praefectus' PA, heading off with Shane, the gardener, on a mission to make our gardens ever more in bloom. It is a visit from Dan or Lewis from Maintenance (ouch, that means a clogged pipe); O*** running late for his meetings and, what's more, dropping his books as he stumbles out of the lodge (I won't tell who you are, at least until you win the Noble Prize); or A*** striding with confidence to her classes (she is dependable, as well as a rising star).

The Manor is now surrounded by the Master's Fields, large accommodation blocks that are very popular with our students (we now even have a statue of Dervorguilla at the centre); the Cockpit now hosts a gym for early risers and a social area for late sleepers; rules, roles, policies, and procedures have become more convoluted, as per the admin-rich disposition of current times; and when it rains we still get leaks in North Wing. We have now robust systems and wonderful teams in place in four important areas of graduate life: admission and administration, housing, welfare, and finances. Thanks to the generosity of Old Members and friends,



A tea party under the magnolia tree at Holywell Manor

and to the ethos of the Masters and Fellows, we are, within our means, one of the most generous colleges toward graduate students. This allows us not only to give the best provision we can to our students, but also to be ambitious and even visionary in our global outreach — supporting young scholars from disadvantaged areas in the UK and around the world, and welcoming students from conflict zones and from areas of displacement and poverty.

The great challenge of the moment is graduate funding. Not only in the humanities, where the situation is dire already, but also in the sciences, where we increasingly see master's and DPhil offers without funding attached, while institutions, bafflingly, privilege investment in buildings rather than people. I trust that Balliol

will distinguish itself, as it always does, in this matter.

Holywell Manor today — any day — is humming with life, academic and otherwise; it is bursting with intelligence, commitment, activism, activity, and, importantly, with friendship (*philia*: the word that begins the name of many disciplines, like philology, or philosophy) and discourse (*logos*: which ends the names of many of the things that we study here, from criminology to theology). It is the spirit of past lives and the premunition of future ones: they are here, suspended in this rich present, like the magnolia petals or the cherry blossoms dancing in the garden.

The Manor today — any day — is the irrepressible delight of being its current Praefectus.

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Carte sur les Mémoires & les



Map of Straits of Magellan by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin

OTHER FEATURES

Ports, forts, courts, and empire

Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages* and the idea of European overseas expansion

Drawing on Balliol's recent acquisition of L'Abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages*, Professor Timothy Weiskel (1969), retired professor of African History and Social Anthropology at Yale and Harvard, considers the significance of this collection in shaping Europe's understanding of the wider world.

Examining the past of both the Earth itself and of humankind requires attention to both 'micro-history' and 'macro-history'. These two perspectives correspond roughly to what the French historian Fernand Braudel described as 'event-based' history ('*l'histoire événementielle*') and 'long-term' history ('*l'histoire de la longue durée*').

With the recent acquisition of the 25-volume *Histoire générale des voyages* by L'Abbé Antoine François Prévost d'Exiles, the Balliol College Library now holds a rare and extraordinarily rich compendium that significantly enhances both approaches to understanding the past.

As a summary of what was known about world history in the mid-18th century, these volumes are arguably unrivalled as a source for the study of micro-history. But perhaps even more

importantly, the texts and illustrations bound within them provide the essential material for understanding the macro-history of the germination and gestation of European overseas expansion.

L'Abbé Prévost and micro-history

Prévost's work was quite extraordinary even by the standards of the 18th century. It was well-known and highly regarded in influential circles, owing in part to his own travels and literary output.

Antoine François Prévost was born on 1 April 1697 in Hesdin, in northern France. Orphaned at a young age, he entered a Jesuit school in Hesdin at 14 and became a novice of the Jesuit order in Paris in 1713, while pursuing his studies at a college in La Flèche.

Over the following decades, Prévost

left the Jesuits and France and moved to England. There he learned English and translated numerous significant publications into French, developing an admiration for English society and its comparative lack of rigidity between social classes. Prévost later returned to France, travelling extensively to Brussels, Frankfurt, and Holland. Reflecting this itinerant life, he adopted the descriptor 'd'Exiles' in 1731.

By the 1740s, Prévost recognised an additional means to link his own work with travel. Drawing his inspiration from a wide range of sources in England, he is thought to have conceived of the idea of the *Histoire générale des voyages* from Thomas Asley's *Voyages and Travels (1745-1747)*. First published in Paris in 1746, the work presented itself as a vast compendium of translated first-hand accounts by explorers and adventurers,



Far left: Leather-bound volumes of *Histoire générale des Voyages* (volumes 9–15)

Left: An antique illustration of a Surinam toad (*Pipa pipa*)

including Albuquerque, Bering, Cabot, Las Casas, Columbus, Dampier, Drake, da Gama, Hudson, and Magellan.

During his life, Prévost was also known for his translations of foreign works and the publication of *Manon Lescaut* (1731), which was later adapted into operas by Auber, Massenet, and Puccini.

Yet it was the *Histoire générale* that became his most influential scholarly achievement. It was widely consulted by Enlightenment thinkers, including Rousseau, Voltaire, Buffon, Raynal, Diderot, and Sade. As one biographer observed, ‘every philosophe of the second half of the eighteenth century had it to hand’ (Jean Sgard, *Vie de Prévost*).

L’Abbé Prévost and macro-history

Prevost’s extraordinary life and his achievement in compiling many of the important micro-historical travel texts known in the mid-18th century should not, however, eclipse his arguably more important contribution to macro-history – that is, ‘l’histoire de la longue durée’. It is in this realm that *Histoire générale* is truly outstanding and remains to this day of great significance.

Consider, for example, the macro-historical question: what drove European powers to expand their control over much of the globe from the early modern period to the end of the 19th century?

A sobering answer to this large-scale, long-term question was provided by a famous novelist at the end of the frenzied ‘Scramble for Africa’ during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his novel *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), Joseph Conrad summed up the history of European overseas imperial expansion:

‘The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from

those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...’

It would be a mistake to portray Prévost as an 18th century publicist for imperialism, but the texts and images in *Histoire générale* made overseas expansion imaginable and tangible for generations of European readers. Noblemen, merchants, sailors, and tradesmen alike were invited to envision colonial ventures as feasible, profitable, and desirable, both for themselves and for their nations.

In short, the *Histoire générale* provided its readers with the spark and kindling for igniting the European imagination and desire for empire, triggering a phase of European competitive colonialism for centuries after its first publication. Their pages provided what Conrad came to call ‘... the idea at the back of it – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...’

Images, maps, and the colonial imagination

The illustrations within the *Histoire générale* were central to its impact. Readers encountered portraits of rulers and courts from China, Tonkin, (Vietnam), Java, Ceylon, India, Africa, and the Americas. Particular attention was devoted to portraying the dress and ornamentation of royal courts, subtly suggesting what kinds of goods might be expected to function as profitable exports from Europe.

Equally influential were depictions of flora and fauna unfamiliar to

European audiences: elephants, camels, monkeys, gorillas, tropical fruits, spices, and agricultural products such as coffee, rice, and cocoa. These images shaped European perceptions of colonial environments and economic potential.

Perhaps most immediately useful to the European viewers were the detailed maps drawn by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin, *Ingénieur de la Marine* of the *Dépot des cartes et plans de la Marine*. To meet the demand for an ever-expanding readership, successive editions of the *Histoire générale* were published in smaller, more affordable octavo formats, with folded maps and diagrams retained.

Slavery, colonialism, and lasting significance

Despite the highly fragmentary evidence available to him, Prévost’s achievement was truly impressive. He never visited the regions he described, relying entirely upon published sources. Yet the *Histoire générale* provided Europeans with the textual, visual, and geographical framework that underpinned an economic system responsible for the forced migration of millions of people over several centuries: the transatlantic slave trade.

Historians examining the impact of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, China, India, the Indian Ocean, and the Americas will find invaluable documentation in Balliol’s collection of the *Histoire générale*.

In years to come in the current age of digital scholarship and collaborative online research, this collection will continue to nourish comparative colonial research through initiatives such as the [Balliol and Empire Project](#) and the [Oxford and Empire Network](#), as well as collaborations with scholars throughout the world.

A letter from 1733

Stewart Tiley (Librarian) explores the story behind a newly acquired letter that illuminates Balliol's place in the development of post-Newtonian science

1733 had been a warm year. In March, English became the language of the law courts. In May, John Kay patented the flying shuttle. In the summer, Handel visited Oxford and debuted his oratorio, *Athalia*, in the Sheldonian Theatre. On 2 December, as winter drew in, one Balliol alumnus put pen to paper to write to another who was teaching at Watts Academy in Covent Garden. After apologising for missing a meeting in London, called back to Oxford by 'an unexpected accident', James Bradley (1692–1762), once vicar of Bridstow in Monmouthshire, now Savilian Professor of Astronomy, launched into discussion of various scientific measurements.

First the recent 'Jamaica Experiment' to help ascertain the size and shape (or 'figure') of the Earth. Whilst Queen Nanny (c. 1686–c. 1760) was leading enslaved people fighting for freedom in the first Maroon War, in the port of Black River, a plantation owner, Colin Campbell (d. 1752), was observing the oscillations of the pendulum of a specially designed clock made by George Graham (c. 1673–1751). Bradley had previously reported on this experiment in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, noting variations between the measurements in Jamaica and in London. 'Not that I had much more to tell you', he wrote before describing precautions to mitigate the effects of temperature on the apparatus, to suggest that variations in the Earth's gravity due to latitude were the cause, to caution that the effect of geographical features might need accounting for, and to call for similar experiments across the globe.

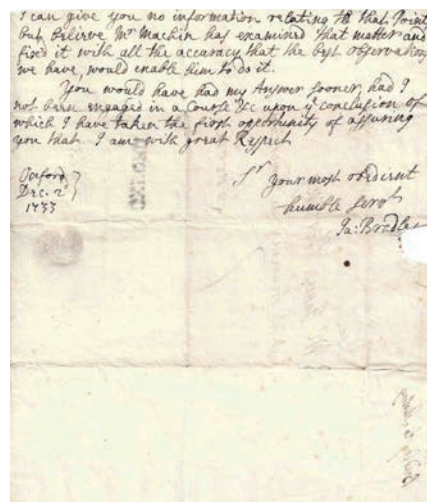
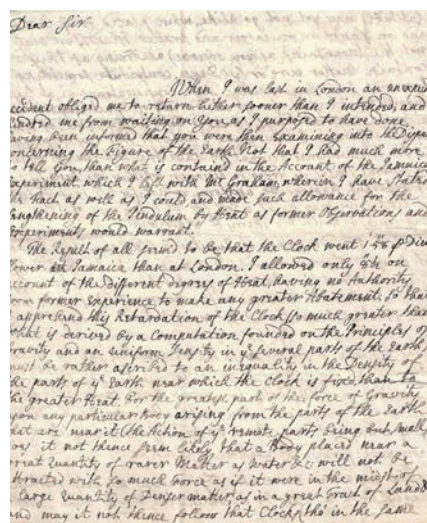
Next the diameter of Jupiter, on which he offers the results of 'observations which I made with the R. Society's Glass of 123 feet focus'. This was followed by the mean distance of the Moon from Earth, of which he confessed, 'Having never made

any observations myself ... I can give you no information,' but referred his correspondent to the work of John Machin (c. 1686–1751). He signed off noting that 'You would have had my answer sooner had I not been engaged in a course', possibly the lectures he'd instituted at the Ashmolean Museum.

Having already discovered the aberration of light, Bradley would go on to discover the nutation of the Earth's axis and become Astronomer Royal. By contrast his correspondent, James Stirling (1692–1770), followed a career more constrained by circumstance. His Warner Scholarship at Balliol was removed owing to his family's Jacobitism. He travelled to Venice but a professorship fell through, and rumours circulated that he'd had to flee for his life after spying on the glass manufactures there. In 1730 his major work, *Methodus linealis*, appeared discussing Newton's mathematics and outlining what would later be termed 'Stirling numbers'. His 1735 paper, 'Of the Figure of the Earth and the Variation of Gravity on the Surface', was an important contribution which this letter anticipates, but by then he was already managing mines at Leadhill in Lanarkshire, work which took up his time, removing him from mathematics, even if accomplished with the welfare of miners in mind.

Nearly three hundred years later, this fascinating letter has been purchased for the College by the generosity of Dr Keith Hannbuss (1963). Not only does it serve as a testament to scholarly communication between two celebrated scientists, but also stands as a key document demonstrating the flourishing of post-Newtonian work at Balliol in the 18th century, also including David Gregory (1659–1708), one of the first to teach Newtonianism publicly, and John Keill (1671–1721) who defended Newton in

his dispute with Leibniz over calculus. It will also form a lynchpin of our forthcoming exhibition on science at Balliol, due in summer 2026.



Top: Opening page of James Bradley's letter to James Stirling

Above: Closing page with Bradley's signature

Apocalypse Now?

Nigel Buckley (Deputy Librarian) revisits some of the scenarios explored in the ‘Apocalypse Now?’ exhibition held at the Historic Collections Centre in Michaelmas Term 2025

Disaster is always a draw – doom makes good headlines. Although people have survived countless crises, from pandemics and wars to natural disasters and economic collapse, the drama of disruption has usually won out against more mundane narratives of humanity’s ability to recover, innovate, and endure. Where’s the profit in peace? We want apocalypse now! Until it seems to get a little too close for comfort.

Revelation

The foundational text of the apocalypse in the Christian tradition is *Revelation*. The final book of the Christian Bible, it features divine judgment, cosmic battles, the fall of corrupt empires, plagues, fire, famine, and the eventual triumph of good through Christ’s return. Its symbols – four horsemen, seven seals, beasts, and dragons – have endured as metaphors for political chaos, ecological crisis, and existential dread. Despite its terrifying imagery, *Revelation* functions less as literal prophecy and more as a moral and political allegory. It was written under Roman imperial oppression and reflects early Christian hopes that

corrupt powers would be overthrown – something that feels cyclical: every generation projects its own crises into *Revelation*’s frame. The Bible featured here has a 19th-century blue velvet binding with a brass plaque bearing Balliol’s arms, but the pages inside date to the 16th century. It is a deluxe printing with hand-coloured illustrations (at their best in *Revelation*) and gilding to make it look like a manuscript. It may have been produced for the sponsor of the edition, Johann Friedrich I, Elector of Saxony, a supporter of Luther.

Nuclear Madness

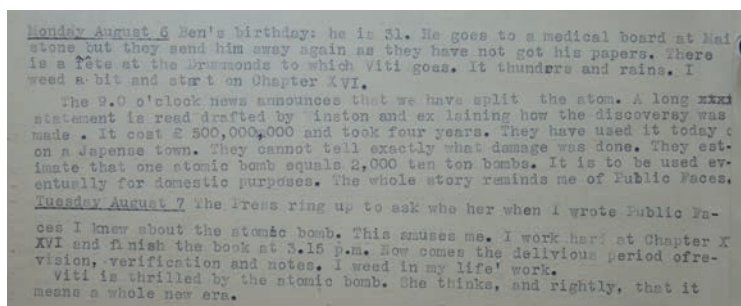
‘6 August 1945: The 9 o’clock news announces that we have split the atom ... They have used it today on a Japanese town. They cannot tell exactly what damage was done.’

This is how Harold Nicolson (1904) records the bombing of Hiroshima in his diary. His words seem to underplay the seriousness of this US military action, approved by the UK, which killed an estimated 140,000 people in a population of 250,000. Maybe he was distracted by events closer to home, having lost his seat in Parliament in

the July general election. Or perhaps his words convey the unprecedented nature of the atom bomb, the unimaginable scale of the damage only gradually being understood by someone far away from the blast. The next day Nicolson’s diary records his amusement when the papers phoned to ask whether he knew about the bomb when writing his 1932 novel, *Public Faces*.

Although his political satire did feature the development of a super bomb in the UK, it is more likely that he borrowed the idea from H.G. Wells’s 1914 serial *The World Set Free* than from government secrets. With hindsight the most chilling words on this page record his wife’s reaction: ‘Viti [Sackville-West] is thrilled by the atomic bomb. She thinks, and rightly, that it will mean a whole new era.’ Perhaps it was possible to see nuclear weapons as ushering in an era of peace after years of war.

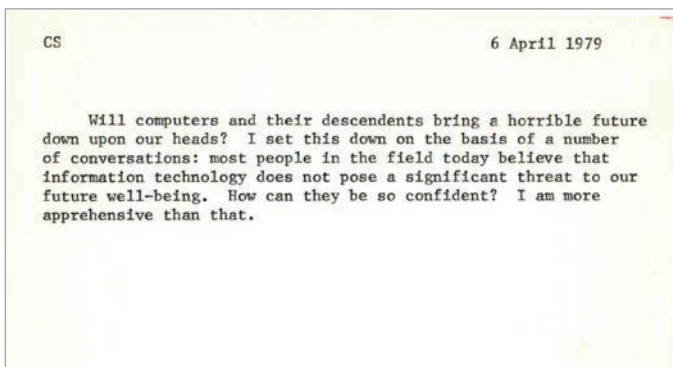
A generation later, Helen Caldicott did not share Sackville-West’s enthusiasm. As a 19-year-old medical student learning about genetics and radiation, she read the 1957 novel *On the Beach* by Neville Shute (1919). Shute imagines an accidental nuclear



Left: Luther Bible. [Balliol Library]

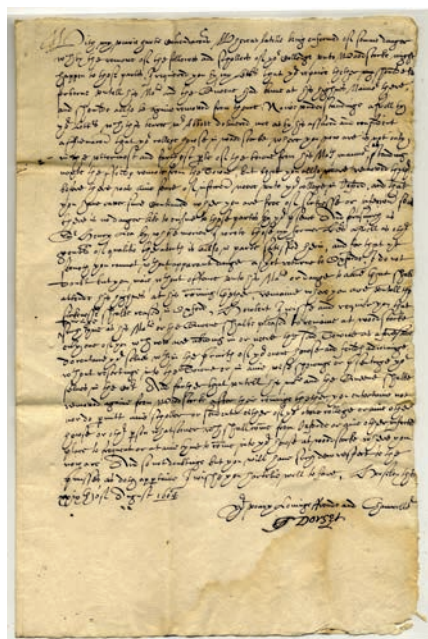
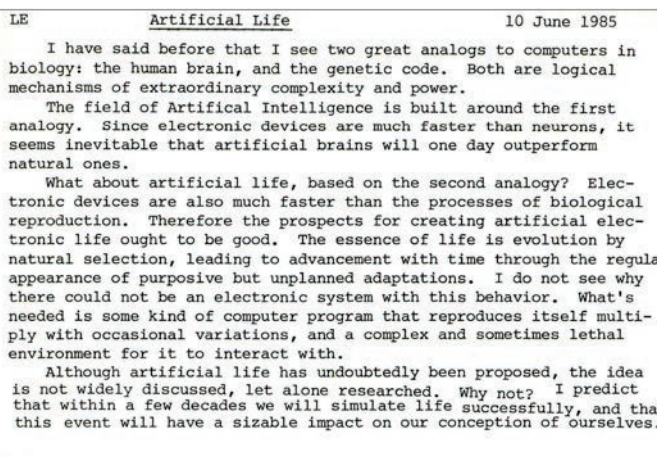
Above: Harold Nicolson’s diary entries for 6 and 7 August 1945. [BCHC/PP/NICO/25 folio 44 verso]

Reproduced with permission of Juliet Nicolson



Above: Index card: Computer doom. [BCHC/PP/TREF/10/8]

Right: Index card: Can computers think? [BCHC/PP/TREF/14/3]



Top: Social distancing in Woodstock: Letter from Thomas Sackville to Balliol College, 1604. [BCHC/Formal Archives. F.9.7.]

Above: Balliol College Hall in 2020 when restrictions were eased.

war in the northern hemisphere from the perspective of an Australian community waiting out their last weeks before death from creeping radiation. Inspired by her horror at Shute's vision, Caldicott went on to combine a career in paediatrics with a life-long commitment to anti-nuclear activism, inspiring Australian public protest that halted French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. Her 1978 book *Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do!* urges the power of public protest to change the trajectory of nuclear proliferation.

Computer Doom

Concerns about the possibility of humans being outthought or replaced by artificial intelligence (AI) are not new. The earliest references to 'thinking machines' appeared in an issue of the *New York Times* in 1927 and the concept of the 'Imitation Game' – a test of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour equivalent to that of a human – was introduced by Alan Turing in 1949. AI and its relationship to humanity is a common theme in science fiction. These are not necessarily negative, but the potential threat posed by a malevolent artificial intelligence is a familiar trope and famous Hollywood portrayals range from 2001 to *The Terminator*. Nick Trefethen (Emeritus Fellow) often comments on the issue in his index cards, a collection of his thoughts on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from mathematics to observations about day-to-day life, which he has been recording since 1970. Here you can see a card in which he expresses concerns about the potential dangers of AI. In another card, he speculates on the likelihood of human intelligence being surpassed by that of AI.

Pandemic

When the world went into lockdown in response to COVID-19, Balliol had to adjust fast – teaching moved online, the Hall was closed, students were confined to their rooms, and many staff worked from home or were furloughed. The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first time Balliol had to adapt to different ways of living and working in times of contagion. Plague, pestilence or sickness disrupted College life several times in the 16th and 17th centuries. The College fled to rural locations four times, leaving behind only a skeleton staff. In 1603–1604, when plague spread rapidly from London to Oxford, Balliol found refuge around Woodstock as had the King and Queen, James I and Anne of Denmark, who had moved into Woodstock Palace. The Viceregent and Fellows received a letter from Thomas Sackville, Earl of Dorset, Chancellor of Oxford University and Lord High Treasurer. Dorset warned College members to 'shelter in place' in their house at the opposite end of town from the royal.

This is a small collection of things featured in the exhibition, and we did find some reasons to be cheerful, though it seems quite difficult to think that when reflecting on the content above. Remember, none of these situations brought about the apocalypse!

The full catalogue is available to view here: <https://www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/balliol-library/exhibitions-and-outreach>

Or contact the library to purchase a printed catalogue for £5.

The Balliol Society: a hundred years

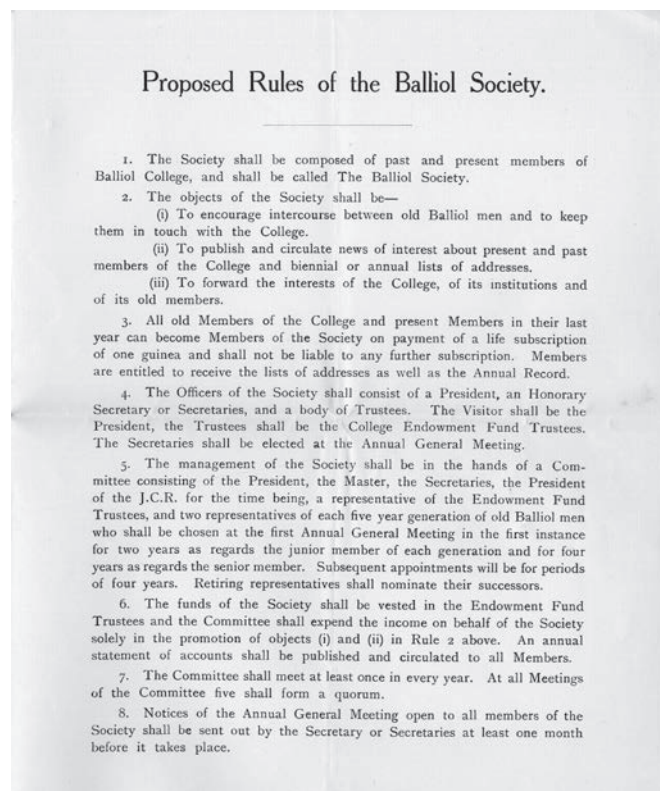
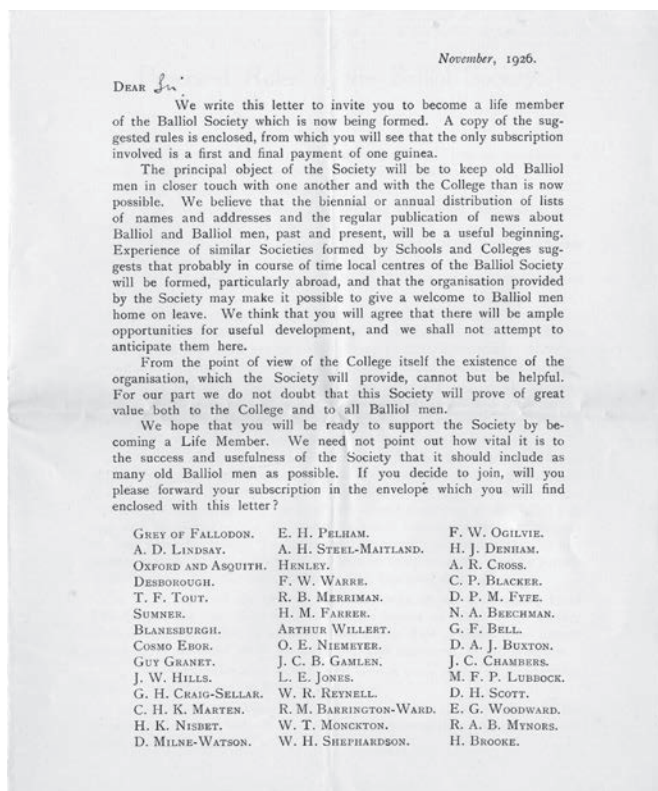
As we mark the centenary of the Balliol Society this year, Seamus Perry (Massey Fellow and Tutor in English, Master-elect), Honorary Treasurer of the Society, examines its origins and the personalities that shaped its first decades, and traces its development to the present day.

Kenneth Bell and the early years of the Balliol Society

The Balliol Society was launched upon the world with a neatly printed single-leaf letter sent out to former students in November 1926, signed by the Visitor, Lord Grey of Fallodon, the Master, A.D. Lindsay, and forty Old Members, among them Asquith.¹ The letter extended an invitation to become a life member of the Society for 'a first and final payment of one guinea'. The take-up seems to have been pretty

good: £1283 14s 8d had been raised by the time a group of the signatories met the following February to devise a constitution and start organising an inaugural dinner. The objects of the Society were decided: to publish interesting news about Balliol figures and to produce regular lists of names and addresses, but principally 'to encourage intercourse between old Balliol men'. (A slightly disconcerting way of putting it, perhaps: not until 1953 did the Society accept a proposal

to amend the wording to 'close relations'.) It was decided to ask the College's Endowment trustees to invest on the Society's behalf the sum of £1200 in 5% War Loan bonds, a course of action reported to the first AGM, held in March, the morning after the first dinner. The ticket price, covering accommodation and breakfast, was 12/6 – 'including cigars and cigarettes' – and £1 1s 0d 'if wine is drunk at dinner'. Both a menu card and a seating plan survive: the Hall was full. It looks like a

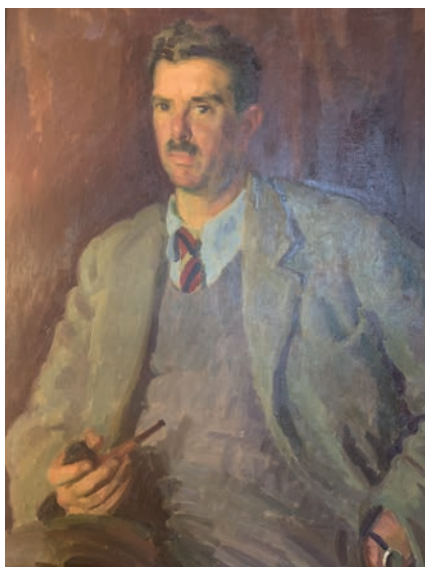


Letter inviting present and former Balliol students to become a life member of the Balliol Society

‘The Society’s main activity was its annual dinner in College, around Easter, which all Old Members would attend.’

substantial affair, including boiled salmon, escalope of veal parisienne, roast chicken and bacon, and a madeira pudding with a ‘bombe glacé de luxe’, all washed down with a 1920 Clicquot.

The organising inspiration for the Society was Kenneth Bell, Tutor in Modern History, who was promptly voted in as its first ‘Honorary Secretary’. Elected to his Fellowship in 1919, Bell was a demanding and brilliantly effective tutor who expected much of his students: ‘No one had a defter touch for drawing out all, perhaps more than all, that a pupil had to give’, remembered a colleague, ‘and if it is a crime, as well it may be, to get a man a better class than he deserves, Kenneth was an habitual offender’. He was also among the more convivial Fellows who, it is reported, considered one of Balliol’s principal teaching objectives to be how ‘to take your drink like gentlemen’. He was one of a pair of remarkable historians at the College who were, as Anthony Powell would recall, ‘the two outstanding Balliol dons of that era’. The senior History Fellow was the famous ‘Sligger’, F.F. Urquhart (1890), a Fellow since 1896 and for many years Dean, a refined and fastidious figure who was famous for having presided over a salon of exquisite undergraduates. The relationship with Bell was not without its strains. Bell, though once Sligger’s pupil, was evidently his polar opposite, as one of their students, Graham Greene (1922), recorded: ‘Bell’s pupils were aggressively heterosexual and were inclined, like himself, to drink large quantities of beer’. Greene adored him: ‘Kenneth’s a delightful individual’, he told his future wife, ‘the most brilliant lecturer in Oxford ... swears like a Billingsgate fish porter’. (Bell admired the young Greene too: ‘a clever lad who can write [and] has pluck & enterprise’, he wrote to his colleague Harold Hartley.)



Kenneth Norman Bell (1884–1951), Fellow and Tutor in Modern History (1919–1941), by Henry Lamb (1934). Presented to the College in 1955 by the widow of George Lawrence Kennedy (1901), the architect responsible for the new buildings at Holywell (1931–1932).

It was Sligger’s habit to slip away from a college event to the privacy of his rooms, while Bell would stay on late into the evening. Such a gift for sociability was evidently just what the Society needed to get going; but the daily administration seems to have fallen largely to the real secretary, a Miss Lemon, who, working from home, where she presided over the Society’s Addressograph, kept all the address lists up to date, managed the accounts, and supplied details of Balliol men to the College Record, a role she

‘The organising inspiration for the Society was Kenneth Bell, Tutor in Modern History, who was promptly voted in as its first “Honorary Secretary”.’

would fill until 1964. Bell had plucked Miss Lemon from a job in a Newcastle hospital: ‘He was indeed always sweeping people off their feet, and changing their lives’, as Oswyn Murray puts it. The Society’s main activity was its annual dinner in College, around Easter, which all Old Members could attend; but the early minutes also mention other business, including a rather more exclusive dinner at the Savoy held in honour of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York (Cosmo Lang and William Temple, both Balliol men). The Society did other things too: it contributed to the costs of an improved version of the College Record; and there is mention in the minutes of a ‘Holywell Manor fund’. The Society was evidently a highly effective way to spread the word about the purchase of the Manor site and the new accommodation to be built on it, and the College managed to raise the £50,000 or so quite quickly. The Society ‘made the building of Holywell Manor possible’, a paper to College Consilium went so far as to say in a report of 1964.

The dinners seem to have continued through the thirties, but other activities are difficult to piece together as the Society’s committee stopped meeting after 1929, leaving any decisions to what sounds a fairly desultory assembly in the JCR held the morning after the dinner – or rather, one suspects, leaving any real decisions to Bell. ‘I don’t think there has ever been a proper agenda’, Miss Lemon noted, sounding perhaps a mild note of censure, ‘and I have never seen or heard of a Minute Book’. This charismatic but rather improvisatory state of affairs came to an end in 1941, when the future of the Society belatedly became a topic of serious deliberation, partly because of the War, but, more locally, because Bell had resigned his Fellowship – and with him, it must have seemed, the sustaining genius of the whole enterprise had departed. Master Lindsay wrote to explain the situation to a number of prominent old members: ‘When Kenneth Bell resigned his Fellowship he also gave up the Secretaryship of the Society, and handed it over to Ridley as

¹ A copy of the letter is in the collection of documents relating to the Society held in the College Archives on which I draw elsewhere in this account. I am most grateful to Faye McLeod, the College Archivist, for pointing me in the right direction.

being on the spot'. (What he failed to mention was that Bell's resignation was widely thought to be at Lindsay's own insistence: Bell had left his wife, an action of which the Master took a dim view – that, at least, was Anthony Powell's sense of the matter.) For the duration of the War, Lindsay suggested, the Society should retain Miss Lemon's services and continue to support the College's publications, while recognising that the Record could only survive in a much depleted form: 'many of the individual details which give it its interest in normal times would at present, under censorship regulations, be unpublishable'. And then, when the War was over, 'the constitution and functions of the Society' could be reconsidered.

M.R. (Roy) Ridley, the Fellow in English, attempted to take stock of the Society of which he was now Honorary Secretary, but didn't get very far: 'The original constitution is a dead letter. No-one knows what it was, or cares ... It seems fairly clear therefore that we can start more or less from scratch'. Bell, meanwhile, no longer a Balliol Fellow, threw himself into war work at a dockland rest centre 'for those rendered homeless by enemy action, commonly called the "Bombed

Out"', as he explained to Ridley: his apparently imperturbable spirits were now dedicated to providing 'a cheerful friendly place in a desolate neighbourhood'. However, once the War was finally over, the vigorous Bell, now ordained a minister in the Anglican church and occupying a living in Coventry, began to think about his Society once again. One source of likely guidance clearly suggested itself immediately: 'I have got the Lemon coming to stay the night here on Nov 17th to discuss inter alia the resurrection of the Balliol Society', he wrote to his friend the Balliol historian A.B. Rodger (Fellow 1924–1961). He set out to Rodger in some detail the Society's constitution as it had been devised some twenty years before, but he recognised that the circumstances required a wholly new start: 'I suppose we could summon the surviving members of the last committee, but the trouble is that owing to sins of omission and commission on my part the bloody thing hasn't met since about 1927'. In her notes written for Ridley, Miss Lemon had testified to the difficulty of keeping tabs on committee members: 'The answers to the letter often said, "I knew I was on it once but didn't know I was now"'

His possibly awkward departure from the Fellowship notwithstanding, Bell obviously retained a fondness for the College. In March 1946 a leaflet was sent out to alumni under his name: 'There seems to be a feeling among such old members as we (the Master, the Fellows, and I) have been able to consult that the Balliol Society should continue to function as it has done in the past'. The response must have been warm as the Society's new start was duly enacted on 6 October 1946, at a general meeting held in the JCR, with the indefatigable 'Rev. K.N. Bell in the chair'. The Society as it is constituted these days has changed in various ways but still remains the direct descendant of Bell's creation. He stayed active in the Society until his death in 1951, and his immense contribution was marked by a memorial fund to which many members of the Society donated. Part of the money went on purchases for the library, and part on a stone tablet for the main hallway in Holywell, which reads: 'To the memory of Kenneth Norman Bell M.C. M.A., Fellow of Balliol, 1914–1941, whose creative imagination and quenchless energy inspired the establishment of Holywell Manor. Given by Balliol Men for the use and enjoyment of their successors'.



The inaugural annual dinner of the Balliol Society in 1927

The Society since Bell

After Bell's death, the Society continued with its new officers. The Scots historian A.B. Rodger (Fellow 1924–1961), who had been elected Honorary Secretary at the re-foundation in 1946, was succeeded in 1961 by the formidable figure of Russell Meiggs (Fellow 1939–1970, Honorary Fellow 1970–1989), renowned as the greatest scholar of wood in the ancient world and, it is reported, one of those Oxford dons so strikingly donnish that tourists photograph them in the street. Harold Keen, who was Secretary to the Curators of the University Chest, the University's principal financial officer, joined the committee as Treasurer from 1950. In 1952, he brought some grave news: the Society had been landed with a tax bill of £274. Its liability was incurred, Keen explained, because nowhere in Bell's founding documents had it been mentioned that its purpose was charitable: 'The present constitution allowed the Society to do almost anything with its money', Keen explained frankly to the AGM. So, the bill was paid and the wording duly amended: 'The objects of the Society shall be the advancement of the welfare and interests of the College by means of a charitable character'. This still involved, principally, working to keep Old Members in touch with one another, publishing news about them, and facilitating the updating of the College Register; and, of course, the annual dinner which, since the Society's resumption after the War, has continued almost without interruption. (It was combined with a more general festivity for the 750th anniversary year, and, less happily, suspended once

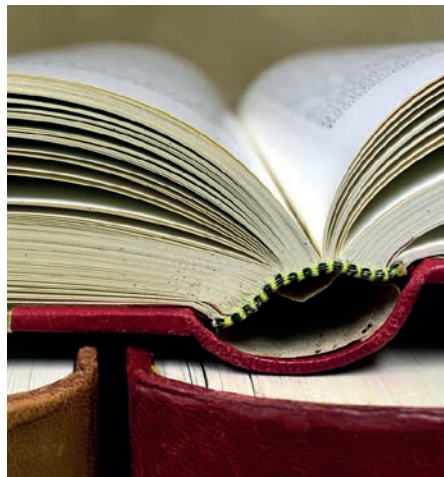
again thanks to the COVID-19 virus.) It has always been a popular event, but the clever idea of inviting particular cohorts has revitalised the occasion, making it now regularly a sell-out event. And besides such undertakings, the Society has made donations to the College, as indeed it still does. For some years it maintained a special Amenities Fund on which it drew to support good causes: the minutes

'The Society has supported many and various activities such as the Music Society concerts, sports, choir tours, and much else, including a large contribution towards welfare provision during the recent pandemic.'

record, among many other items, a subvention to pay for plant labels, a storage space for theatrical props, and 'a seat under a tree', presumably the circular seat in Garden Quad (recently restored). Some of its gifts have been slightly more visionary: in 1966, the Society welcomed the JCR's utopian project of purchasing a washing machine. More recently, the Society has supported many and various activities such as the Music Society

concerts, sports, choir tours, and much else, including a large contribution towards welfare provision during the recent pandemic.

Keen was succeeded as Treasurer in 1966 by Francis MacCarthy Willis Bund, the Chaplain and Dean, celebrated for the pastoral liberalism which the notorious drug-smuggler Howard Marks (1964) fondly described in his memoirs; and in 1970, upon his retirement, Meiggs was succeeded as Hon. Secretary by Maurice Keen (1954), Harold's son, a much-loved Fellow and Tutor in Modern History (1961–2000) whom many will remember. For a good deal of his time in office, the chair of the Society (ex officio the Visitor) was his lifelong friend Tom Bingham (1954, Honorary Fellow 1989–2010), who presided over the AGM with urbanity and patience in equal measure. Lord Bingham was occasionally called upon by especially engaged participants to fine-tune some minute aspect of the Society's constitution, which he always did with much good grace: this constitutes, perhaps, an overlooked element in the distinguished legal career of the Lord Chief Justice. Maurice Keen served until his retirement in 2000, handing the reins over to Douglas Dupree (Fellow and Chaplain 1987–2014, Emeritus Fellow) – at which point we are touching upon the present-day. 'We must always stay in touch with the Old Members', I remember Maurice telling me with some emphasis, a duty which the Balliol Society happily still exists to fulfil, and the College continues to benefit immensely from the Society's generous and lively interest in all our doings.



Further reading

Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (1971)

John Jones, 'A Clever Lad who can Write', *Balliol College Annual Record* (1991)

John Jones, *Balliol College. A History* (second edition; Oxford, 2005)

A.B. R[odger], 'Kenneth Norman Bell', *Balliol College Record* (1951)

Oswyn Murray, 'Three Friends', in *Holywell Manor: An Anecdotal History* (Oxford, 2007)

Anthony Powell, *Infants of the Spring: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell* (1976)

Bookshelf 2026

Sudhir Hazareesingh (1981, Coolidge Fellow and Tutorial Fellow in Politics)

Daring to be Free: Rebellion and Resistance of the Enslaved in the Atlantic World

Penguin Allen Lane, 2025



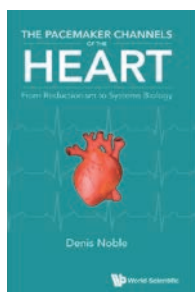
Sudhir Hazareesingh challenges traditional narratives of abolition by showing how enslaved people were central to their own struggle

for freedom. Spanning the Atlantic world from the 16th century to the end of slavery in the US, the book traces networks of resistance and rebellion, highlighting revolutionaries such as Toussaint Louverture alongside writers, maroons, and insurgents whose acts of defiance galvanised the movement for abolition. Drawing on archives and oral histories, he shows how enslaved communities shaped the fight for liberty through their own resilience, solidarity, and commitment to freedom.

Professor Denis Noble (Emeritus Fellow)

The Pacemaker Channels of the Heart: From Reductionism to Systems Biology

World Scientific Europe Ltd, 2025



As a founder of mathematical heart modelling, Denis Noble traces more than six decades of scientific progress, from the pioneering computational models of

cardiac rhythm in 1960 to today's integrative approaches to cardiac electrophysiology. Alongside this scientific journey, the book describes a profound shift in biological thinking

– from a reductionist, gene-centred view of life to a systems-based understanding of living organisms. In doing so, Professor Noble challenges the foundations of 20th century biology and offers insight into why genes alone cannot explain the complexity of life.

Peter Buckman (1959)

The Pumpernickel Mysteries

Word of Mouth Books



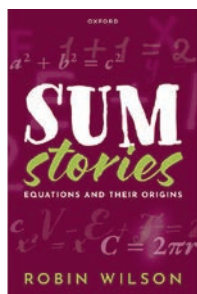
Set in London's Soho, this crime series follows three lifelong friends – and a perceptive

poodle – as they unravel murders with wit and experience. Leo Wengrowski, a septuagenarian solicitor, works alongside his psychotherapist partner Dr Marion Fitzwalter and his journalist friend Dennis Arbuthnot, whose contacts span police and underworld alike. Pumpernickel, Leo's black standard poodle, provides both comfort and unexpected insight. Across seven books, the four veterans confront contemporary crimes – and the oldest headline of all, murder – often outwitting the younger generations who seek their help.

Professor Robin Wilson (1962)

Sum Stories: Equations and Their Origins

Oxford University Press, 2025



In *Sum Stories*, Robin Wilson explores 18 celebrated mathematical equations through the questions and discoveries that shaped them. From geometry and arithmetic to calculus, combinatorics and logic, the book traces 4,000 years

of mathematical thought, from ancient counting systems and Greek geometry to Renaissance algebra, fractals and computing. Along the way, it examines the historical figures and stories behind familiar formulas. Illustrated with historical artefacts and diagrams, the book presents mathematics in an accessible way for general readers curious about the origins and development of mathematics.

Stephanie Norgate (1979)

Hartisborne

2025



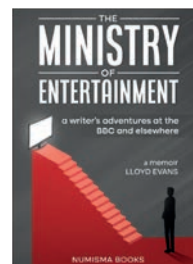
Hartisborne is a novel set across two timelines, 1763 and 1963, inspired by the Hampshire village of Selborne. Blending historical and contemporary narratives, it centres on a

fictional naturalist loosely influenced by the life of Gilbert White. A reflection on the natural world and the sustaining power of reading, the novel offers a richly imagined setting intended as a place of escape for the reader.

Lloyd Evans (1982)

The Ministry of Entertainment: A writer's adventures at the BBC and elsewhere

Numisma Books, 2005



The Ministry of Entertainment recounts Lloyd Evans's unexpected entry into the world of television comedy after a sudden invitation from the BBC

to write sketches. What follows is a journey through the highs and hazards of the broadcasting industry – from media contracts and executive

meetings to the challenge of securing a commission for his own show. Drawing on his past, including many reminiscences of Balliol in the 1980s, he seeks to channel the rebellious spirit of poets and novelist he spent time with into his TV work. The memoir explores ambition, rivalry, success and the unexpected consolations of failure.

Amit Chaudhuri (1987)

Château Rouge

Faber, 2026



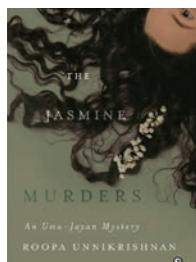
Amit Chaudhuri's ninth novel, *Château Rouge* follows a writer invited to Paris who finds himself living in a part of the city that confounds his expectations.

In time, his initial unease becomes a means of discovering a more elusive and less familiar Paris. The novel drifts through the city's side streets and overlooked corners, attending to moments of displacement and encounter. In doing so, it reflects on travel, otherness, and the nature of the novel itself.

Roopa Unnikrishnan (1995)

The Jasmine Murders: An Uma-Jayan Mystery

Aleph Book Company, 2026



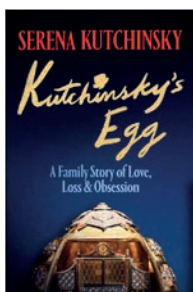
The Jasmine Murders follows Uma, who moves with her husband, Jayan, the new police chief, to the seemingly quiet town of Manamadurai,

where underlying tensions and a legacy of violence soon become apparent. When a man appears at their door carrying a severed head, a chain of disturbing events unfolds, drawing in questions of theft, buried secrets and communal unrest, against the backdrop of an approaching cyclone. As suspicion spreads, Uma becomes central to unravelling the mystery. The debut novel of Roopa Unnikrishnan explores psychological tension within a complex social setting.

Serena Kutchinsky (1998)

Kutchinsky's Egg: A Family Story of Love, Loss and Obsession

Simon & Schuster, 2026



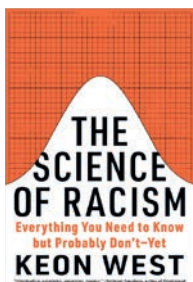
Kutchinsky's Egg recounts Serena Kutchinsky's search to understand her father's extraordinary ambition to create a jewelled egg surpassing those of Fabergé. Conceived

as a spectacular object – crafted in solid gold, set with rare pink diamonds and housing a miniature enamelled library – the project ultimately led to the collapse of the family jewellery business and her father's early death, after which the egg disappeared. Decades later, Serena retraces the story, from her family's origins in London's East End to its wider global context on a journey that transforms her understanding of her father, her childhood and herself.

Professor Keon West (2006)

The Science of Racism

Picador, 2025



Keon West draws on decades of scientific research to cut through divisive rhetoric and anecdote, presenting clear, data-driven evidence of how racism operates

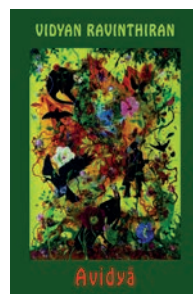
in contemporary society. From policing and employment to online marketplaces, the findings reveal truths about racism that are at once shocking and sobering and, at times, unexpectedly revealing.

'It is quite a feat to pull off a densely informative book about a horrible subject that also manages to be charismatic and funny.' – *The Guardian*

Vidyan Ravinthiran (2007)

Avidya

Blood Axe Books, 2025



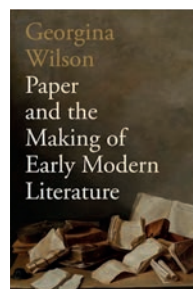
In 2017, Vidyan Ravinthiran travelled to northern Sri Lanka, where his parents grew up and from which they fled to the UK, visiting the war-torn

Tamil areas. This journey informs the poems of *Avidya*, a collection at once political and spiritual, whose multiple poetic forms are shaped by myth and philosophy, and by both Sri Lankan and global crises. His third collection, *Avidya* won the 2025 Forward Prize for Best Collection.

Georgina Wilson (2012)

Paper and the Making of Early modern Literature

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025



Georgina Wilson examines the vital role of paper in shaping the development of English literature in the 17th and 18th centuries. She explores how the material

properties of paper influenced authorship, composition, literary form, and textual reuse, and shaped the work of readers, writers, and critics. Through close readings of texts by Ben Jonson, George Wither, and John Taylor, she shows how physical features such as watermarks and paper devices informed both literary practice and imaginative possibility. Bringing together archival research and literary theory, she demonstrates how paper shaped not only books themselves but the discipline of literature.

Help shape Balliol's future

Since the time of John de Balliol and Dervorguilla of Galloway, gifts in wills and gifts made in memory have helped shape Balliol and support its community.

A gift in your will, or a gift made in memory of a Balliol loved one, is a lasting way to honour a Balliol connection and help secure the College's future.

Every gift, whatever its size, makes a difference: supporting students and scholarships, safeguarding Fellowships, caring for our historic buildings, and protecting the future of the tutorial system.

Over 200 Old Members and friends of the College have already chosen to remember Balliol in their will. Could you join them in supporting future generations of the Balliol community?

To learn more, including how you can make your will for free through the National Free Wills Network, visit www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/giftsinwills or contact the Development Office:

development.office@balliol.ox.ac.uk
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Thank you for helping to shape Balliol's future.



Those who leave a gift in their will are invited to join the Greville Smith Circle. Members are invited to an annual lunch in College as a token of our appreciation.

Statue of Dervorguilla of Galloway, installed in the courtyard of Master's Field in September 2025 thanks to the generosity of Jim Rogers (1964).