BALLIOL COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

FLOREAT DOMUS

NEWS AND FEATURES FROM THE BALLIOL COMMUNITY | JUNE 2025

The many worlds of quantum theory 10
The Pope of Soap 18
The art and culture of book collecting 39
Outreach impact 6
Gethin Anthony's acting journey 20
JCR Presidents across the decades 30
The Balliol Dynasty ends after 64 years 45

CONTENTS

FLOREAT DOMUS

FROM THE MASTER 1

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

Awards 2

Refurbishing Balliol's Hall for future generations 4

Outreach impact
Bella Ma 6
James Godden 7
Olivia Barber 8

QUANTUM PIONEERS

The many worlds of quantum theory 10
David Wallace

Quantum computers: the weirdness is the point
A. Douglas Stone 11

Quantum physics in action
Raghavendra Srinivas 13
Molly Smith 15
Wenmiao Yu 16
Vera Schäfer 17

SCREEN & STAGE

The Pope of Soap 18
John Whiston

An actor's journey 20
Gethin Anthony

Balliol born and bred filmmakers 22
Judy Tossell and Jens Meurer

Crafting stories for the screen 24
Derek Wax

A superposition of worlds 26
Angus Jackson

The art and business of theatre production 28
Ramin Sabi

Theatre at Balliol 29
Rosabel Mahendra

JCR PRESIDENTS ACROSS THE DECADES

Michael Burton 30
Geoffrey Chambers 31
Catherine Roe 32
Andrew Copson 33
Jack Hawkins 34
Ben Marshall 35
Amerleen Hundle 36

BEYOND THE PAGES

On books 37
Adam Smyth

Book curses 38
Eleanor Baker

The art and culture of book collecting 39
Mark Storey

Mandelstam's *Tristia* at Balliol 41
Thomas de Waal

OTHER FEATURES

Halcyon hours on dancing ledge 43
Stewart Tiley

The Balliol Dynasty ends after 64 years 45
Lord Patten of Barnes

Bookshelf 48

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Front cover: Prospective students touring the Oxford Botanic Garden as part of the Frontier access programme. Photo by Stuart Bebb.

Back cover: Students having lunch in the Hall at Offer-holders' Day. Photo by Nasir Hamid.

From the Master

Dame Helen Ghosh DCB

Recognise this? This is the newly built Hall, designed by Alfred Waterhouse, soon after its opening in 1877. The building of the new Hall was symbolic of our rapid growth, both in status and in number of students in the latter half of the 19th century. In 1850, we had 87 students in residence; by 1885, that number had doubled to 165. Far too many to squeeze into our mediaeval Hall, which now forms part of the Library. As you can read on pages four and five, we will need, over the next couple of years, to be doing work on the building, to make the roof waterproof, and the stonework secure. And we hope, at the same time, to refresh the interior and restore some of its earlier glories.

Buildings, and how we use them, matter in creating the ethos of an organisation. The staircases around which Oxford colleges are traditionally built reflect our communitarian and interdisciplinary values: students living cheek-by-jowl with academics and with fellow students from many disciplines. And I was struck, among the fascinating memoirs of our JCR Presidents (see pages 30–36), that Jack Hawkins (President 2006–2007) draws a parallel between the physical impregnability of 'Fortress Balliol' on Broad Street and the nature of our community. 'The architecture, culture, and history exist to protect us, our ideas, and to give us the courage to voice them', he writes.

The Hall certainly has a special place at the heart of College life, as the setting where we mark all sorts of rites of passage. My own Freshers' Dinner, more than fifty years ago, remains vivid in my mind, and I am sure readers recall theirs in Balliol just as clearly. As I say to the Freshers attending, the formality of the event is not supposed to be daunting; it is a sign of how much we value their arrival and want to welcome them among us. Only three or four years after that first formal dinner, our finalists find themselves back in Hall for the annual St Catherine's Day feast, at which I bid them a slightly premature farewell (the saint's feast day falling in November) and send them off into the world with injunctions to do what they can to transform it, and to remember the College fondly.

Cornell University Library

The newly built Hall, designed by Alfred Waterhouse, photographed soon after its opening in 1877

And you do remember fondly, if the number of Old Members returning throughout the year to the Hall for Gaudy dinners and lunches, the annual Snell Dinner and other celebrations are any measure. The Snell began as an inspection visit by a handful of Trustees of the Snell Foundation from Glasgow University in the late 17th century, to make sure we were looking after 'their' Exhibitioners. Nowadays, it is one of our grandest feasts, with current and previous Exhibitioners among the guests, bagpipes and, of course, whisky.

Then there are the final rites of passage, when we say a last farewell in celebration of those who have served and enriched College life. In this past year, the Hall has seen two such memorial events: the first for our much-valued College Doctor, Chris Kenyon, who died suddenly in September 2024; the second for Emeritus Fellow Alan Montefiore, the distinguished philosopher and 'the life and soul of PPE', as one former pupil described him, who died last November. For both, the Hall was packed with family, friends, colleagues, and students, gathered to hear professional and personal tributes, and to listen to the varied soundtracks of their lives.

In between these milestone events, the Hall plays many parts. Old Members may well shudder at memories of sitting dreaded Collections there, but on the fun side, it is also the scene of silent discos and roulette when a Ball is in full swing, and of competitive balloon launches at the Fellows' Christmas Dinner.

We are privileged currently to have a wonderful generation of student musicians in the College, many of them members of University orchestras and choirs, and happy to step forward to perform at the Sunday evening Concerts in the Hall, which are still going strong after 135 years. But as 'Frontier' Fresher James Godden would agree (see page seven), the highlight of our current musical life must be the near-annual visits from Supernumerary Fellow, Sir András Schiff, who loves to play on the Hall's splendid Steinway in concerts commemorating his former mentor, George Malcolm (1934, Honorary Fellow 1966–1997).

So when we raise our traditional toast, 'Floreat Domus' – *May the House Flourish* – at the end of one of our celebratory events, I'd like to think that we are wishing not only for the continued health of the College as an outstanding academic and social community, but also expressing our affection for the place itself and all it means to us. *Floreat Domus!*

Awards

New Year Honours 2025

Lucien Gubbay (1949): Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), for services to interfaith relations.

Ralph Homer (1954): Medal of the Order of the British Empire (BEM), for services to vulnerable people. The BEM recognised his 53 years as a Samaritans volunteer, including six years as a trustee. During that time, the Samaritans began negotiations that resulted in the single free-to-call helpline number 116 123.

Sir John Lazar (1983): Knight Bachelor, for services to engineering and technology. In September 2024, John was elected as the new President of the Royal Academy of Engineering.

Professor Richard Susskind (1983): Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), for services to information technology and to the law. Lately Technology Advisor to the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, his main research interests are legal technology, court technology, and the impact of AI on the professions.

Abigail Appleton (1984): Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), for services to further education. Principal of Hereford College of Arts, Abigail was recognised for her outstanding contributions to creative education and her leadership in advancing Hereford College of Arts as a centre of excellence in arts. She writes: 'I feel very honoured to receive this award and thrilled for the recognition of Hereford College of Arts and the importance of creative education, which matters so much – not just for individual students, but for wider society.'

Tamara Finkelstein (1986): Dame Commander of the Order of the Bath (DCB), for public service. Tamara is a British civil servant and the Permanent Secretary for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Miles Celic (1991): Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), for services to finance and professional services. Miles is Chief Executive Officer of TheCityUk, an industry-led body representing UK-based financial and related professional services.

Senior Members

Lord Patten of Barnes (1962, Honorary Fellow) was appointed as the founder member of the Europaeum's new International Advisory Council, comprised of leading public figures committed to advancing the organisation's goals and work.

Andrew Graham (Master 2001–2011, Honorary Fellow) was appointed as the new Chair of the Europaeum Board of Trustees. He previously served the Europaeum as a Trustee, Chair of its Academic Council, and Founder of its Scholars' Programme.

Professor Sir Peter Donnelly's (1980, Honorary Fellow) healthcare company, Genomics, was recognised in *The Sunday Times 100 Tech* 2025 as one of Britain's fastest growing tech companies. Genomics aims to transform health through the power of genomics, leveraging large-scale genetic information to advance preventative medicine and improve drug discovery.

Professor Adam Smyth (A.C. Bradley-J.C. Maxwell Fellow and Tutor in English Literature) was awarded the 2024 Bainton Prize for Best Reference Work for his edited book, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of the Book in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Matthew Langton (Associate Professor of Inorganic Chemistry, Fellow and Tutor in Inorganic Chemistry) was selected for a European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant this year. The grant aims to support outstanding scientists and scholars in establishing independent research teams and advancing their most promising scientific ideas.

Old Members

Douglas Stone (1976) was awarded the 2025 Max Born Award for his work in optics research.

Professor Philip Maini (1979) was awarded the Sylvester Medal 2024 by the Royal Society for his contributions to mathematical biology, in particular the interdisciplinary modelling of biomedical phenomena and systems.

Derek Wax's (1980) four-part BBC drama, *The Sixth Commandment*, won Best Limited Series at both the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) and RTS (Royal Television Society) awards in 2024.

Mick Herron (1981) was awarded the Crime Writers' Association (CWA) Diamond Dagger award in recognition of his lifetime achievement in crime writing.

Sir John Lazar (1983) was elected as the new President of the Royal Academy of Engineering.

Professor Karma Nabulsi (1989) received the 2024 Service Award by the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES). She was recognised for her outstanding services to Middle Eastern Studies, particularly in relation to 18th- and 19th-century political thought, the laws of war, and the contemporary history and politics of Palestinian refugees.

Christopher Tayler (1994) won the 2025 Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.

Karma Phuntsho (1997) received the 2024 Ramon Magsaysay Award for his transformative contributions to Bhutan's future.

Professor Mahmood Bhutta (2008) was awarded the 2024 President's Medal by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow.

Henry Spelman (2010) was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize in recognition of his work on early Greek literature.

Ana-Diamond Aaba Atach (2021) was named the 2024–2025 recipient of the Alistair Horne Visiting Fellowship at St Antony's College. The fellowship supports young historians in writing a significant non-fiction work for a general audience. She is the tenth woman to receive this honour since the fellowship's inception in 1969.

See more awards for Old Members in News and Notes, a supplement to this magazine.

Refurbishing Balliol's Hall for future generations

For nearly a century and a half, Balliol's Hall has stood as a treasured landmark. Since its completion in 1877, it has played a central role for students, staff, and Fellows alike, serving as a place for student dining, collections, graduations, open days, music concerts, and banqueting. For generations of Balliol members, the Hall has been the venue for Freshers' Dinners, as well as countless other memorable moments – from performances in front of a packed audience to forging lifelong friendships and even wedding celebrations.

Now, 148 years since its construction, the Hall needs careful restoration to ensure it can continue to serve future generations. Beginning over the next academic year, the College will embark on an important project to restore and sensitively refurbish the Hall. The planned works will focus on essential repairs to the roof, facades, and windows, alongside improvements to the flooring, panelling, and wall finishes. Additionally, essential accessibility upgrades will ensure the Hall remains welcoming and inclusive for all members of the College community.

As Balliol embarks on this project, there will be opportunities for alumni and friends to get involved. Stay tuned for updates on how you can support the restoration of the Hall and help ensure that this cherished space continues to inspire and nurture Balliolites for generations to come.

Stuart Bebb

The present Hall

A brief history of the Hall

1873-1886

Following the College's decision in 1873 that a new hall was needed, construction began under the direction of Alfred Waterhouse, the leading architect of Victorian Gothic Revival and a prominent figure in the architectural landscapes of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. While archival records do not provide a definitive explanation for the decision to build a new hall, it is likely that the increasing need for space for undergraduates was a primary factor. Prior to 1877, Balliol members dined in the hall that now forms part of the College Library.

On 16 January 1877, the Hall was officially opened with an inaugural banquet, attended by current and former College members. The Henry Willis & Sons organ was added shortly afterwards, in 1885, coinciding with the inauguration of the Balliol College Musical Society Sunday Concerts, a series which continues fortnightly in term.

The old Hall, now part of the College Library

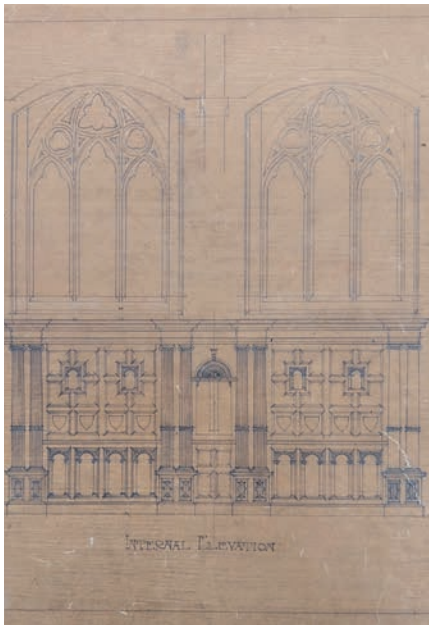
The Hall after its completion in 1877

1891–1909

Following its completion, the Hall required little in the way of structural maintenance, allowing the College to focus on modernisation efforts. During this period, works carried out focused on new innovations and improvements, such as the installation of electric lights and upgrades to the heating system.

1909–1910

Under the direction of architect Paul Waterhouse, son of Alfred Waterhouse, the Hall underwent its first significant transformation. The lower sections of the north and south windows were blocked, creating additional wall space which was covered in wood panelling, dramatically altering the atmosphere of the space. To enhance the Hall's aesthetics and to recognise benefactors, new crests were added to the windows, while the panelling was enriched with focal embellishments, including the inscribed wording above the High Table and beneath the organ. The chimney pieces were refreshed, extended, painted, and gilded, and new electric light fittings were installed



A sketch of the wood panelling that was installed under the direction of Paul Waterhouse

1911–1959

The Hall remained largely unchanged, with works focused primarily on upkeep and maintenance.

1960–1989

This period saw a shift toward modernisation. In the 1960s, Waterhouse's flanking ranges were demolished to make way for a modernist Senior Common Room to the east and new accommodation to the west. A new servery was installed to improve catering operations. Between 1981 and 1982, a project of substantial remedial work to the Hall roof was initiated, largely to address issues of water ingress and wear to the masonry.

1990–1999

The late 20th century saw continued efforts to modernise the Hall, particularly with upgrades to kitchen equipment and facilities.

2012–2014

As part of the major renovation to the College kitchens, planned ahead of and delivered immediately following the College's 750th anniversary celebrations, a new floor was laid, the servery area was updated, and significant modifications were made to the Buttery, including the installation of a passenger lift to the Hall.

2026

New refurbishment project begins, heralding another important milestone in the Hall's history.

Many thanks to Balliol College Library and Archives for providing the photos and in-depth research into the history of the Hall.

Outreach Impact

Balliol's sustained contact programmes – Floreat for humanities subjects, Frontier for life sciences, and Fibonacci for mathematics – continue to support talented Year 12 students from state schools across the UK. The impact of these initiatives is clear: 80% of Floreat participants applied to Oxford this year, with 44% securing offers, including six at Balliol. Meanwhile, the Frontier and Fibonacci programmes led to six Oxford offers, with three students set to join Balliol this autumn.

For many, these programmes go beyond academic preparation – they build confidence, foster a sense of community, and inspire students to pursue their ambitions. In this Q&A, three first-year students tell us about their outreach experience – how they were inspired to apply and the support they received throughout the application process – and share what life is like now as Balliol students. Thank you to all our Old Members and Friends for your generous support of Balliol Outreach – this vital work would not be possible without you.

Bella Ma (2024, History and Politics)

from Queen's Park Community School, London, participated in the Floreat Access Programme in 2022

Reflecting on your experience of the Floreat Access Programme, were there any moments or activities that left a lasting impression on you?
I was really struck by the format of Oxford tutorials that the programme introduced me to: each week, a reading list was sent out with accompanying questions to consider, followed by an online discussion after a presentation given by an expert in the field. Although at first it was daunting to be confronted with a long list of academic papers on topics I knew little about, I soon got the hang of sifting through information, prioritising key sections, and writing lists of anything I didn't understand which I could raise later. The other students always brought ideas I'd never considered to our lively debates, and we bounced off each other very naturally.

Can you share a specific example of how the programme directly supported you in your application process?
I really appreciated the discussion-based approach to learning, of exploring the interdisciplinary links between subjects I had only learned about in isolation at school. I wasn't yet sure which course to study at university, but as I found myself drawn to the historical and political aspects of each topic – whether it was art on either side of the Iron Curtain,


Bella Ma (2024, History and Politics)

or the press scandal surrounding the Profumo Affair – I realised that a joint honours in History and Politics would be perfect. The Floreat course proved invaluable to me, not only in helping me decide which course to take, but also in introducing me to the exceptional education provided at Oxford and giving me the confidence to apply.

How did you find your first term at Balliol? Was there anything that you found particularly surprising or impactful?
Like most other Balliol students, I imagine, my first term was a whirlwind! The ancient surroundings, hectic pace of life, academic rigour, couldn't have contrasted more with my former London sixth form, and yet before long I was able to feel completely at home. Our College is wonderful – there are so many spaces and opportunities for students to bump into each other that 'see you later' can always be said with reassuring certainty. Academically, I have never been so challenged. I found it difficult not to be demoralised after the feedback on my first History essay, but by being honest with my tutor, and trying my best to take on his suggestions, by the fourth essay, I had apparently found the knack!

As you look ahead to the rest of your time at Balliol, what opportunities, goals, or experiences are you most excited to explore and why?
Looking ahead, I am very excited to have been elected one of Balliol's Welfare reps, along with my lovely friend Frieda. We know how overwhelming life can sometimes be here, and how difficult it might feel to tell others you are struggling – which is why we want to do everything we can to support our student body. Nothing matters more than our physical and mental health, and fortunately Balliol is such a caring, tight-knit community that no-one should feel alone. I am deeply grateful for the opportunities that Floreat gave me and would really encourage any state school students curious about Humanities at Oxford to apply.

James Godden (2024, Biology)

from Abbeygate Sixth Form, Norfolk, participated in the Frontier Access Programme in 2023

Reflecting on your experience of the Frontier Access Programme, were there any moments or activities that left a lasting impression on you?
One of my lasting impressions from the Frontier Programme came from the opportunity to stay at Balliol for a few days in the summer: it was so welcoming and friendly! I was fortunate to meet many lovely people, and getting to know them made me feel that Balliol was a place where I would fit in and really enjoy studying. I am very appreciative of all the opportunities that the whole programme gave me.

Through the series of online lectures, we were exposed to fascinating topics and research from across the sciences, at a very different level to my school studies. This experience greatly expanded my knowledge and allowed me to think deeply about what I was most interested in. It ultimately confirmed that it was biology that I wanted to study.

Can you share a specific example of how the programme directly supported you in your application process?
During the residential part of the programme, we were exposed to tutorial-style teaching. This was a fantastic chance to engage with my subject at a much higher level than I had experienced before through studying A Level Biology. This experience helped me develop greater confidence and skills in expanding my ideas through discussion, which proved to be invaluable for the interview process. It also showed me that this was something I was capable of doing, making me feel less worried when I got to the interview stage.

How did you find your first term at Balliol? Was there anything that you found particularly surprising or impactful?
I absolutely loved my first term at Balliol. I have really enjoyed the work and have found it to be some of the most interesting that I have ever done. The tutorials are particularly engaging – it is a very special experience to be able to explore topics in such depth with our tutors.

Balliol and Oxford also offer so many opportunities beyond academics. This term, I have enjoyed becoming involved with the cricket club and the boat club, relishing the opportunity to do things I otherwise would not have been able to, such as hearing Phillip Pullman speak at the Oxford Union and András Schiff play at Balliol. I have also made a great set of friends, which has made my time even more enjoyable.

As you look ahead to the rest of your time at Balliol, what opportunities, goals, or experiences are you most excited to explore and why?
I am looking forward to continuing to study the subject that I love and making the most of all the brilliant opportunities we are given.

James Godden (2024, Biology)

Olivia Barber (2024, English Language and Literature)

from Abbeygate Sixth Form, Norfolk, participated in the Floreat Access Programme in 2023

Reflecting on your experience of the Floreat Access Programme, were there any moments or activities that left a lasting impression on you?
The Floreat Programme ends in a residential at Balliol during the summer holiday. This was a really important influence on my uni applications; only months away from the early entry deadline, being able to experience a taste of Oxbridge life was an amazing opportunity. The most important part for me was meeting like-minded people on the programme – students also unsure of the stereotypes surrounding Oxbridge culture. I think it's safe to say that all of us were reassured by the end of our two-night stay: the students and staff we spoke to were keen to emphasise that Balliol is a College focused on being progressive and student-led. Later, when I joined the College, I would learn just how truthful they had been: Balliol has a student-led culture; the bar is entirely managed by students, and the choir excludes no one, holding no auditions. Looking back, hearing about these examples on the residential had a huge impact when it came to making decisions for my application.

Can you share a specific example of how the programme directly supported you in your application process?
Weekly Floreat seminars were really important in teaching me to be confident in myself. The online meetings were an opportunity not only to form and express my own opinions, but to learn from the contributions of everyone else on the programme. Even through online calls, I felt the group developed a camaraderie which easily translated to friendship when we met in the summer. Further, reading across a variety of subjects exposed me to types of writing I'd never encountered before, forcing me from my comfort zone and almost certainly helping me adjust to academic research when I reached university.

How did you find your first term at Balliol? Was there anything that you found particularly surprising or impactful?
My first term at Balliol was much easier than expected. I spent my last days at home convinced I'd be unable to find friends I could relate to and be comfortable with, but thanks to the way Freshers' Week is designed, I met new people every day. It didn't take long to realise these would be friends for life. The English tutors were also really friendly, ready to ease us into the course, introducing us to new challenging concepts without being overwhelming.

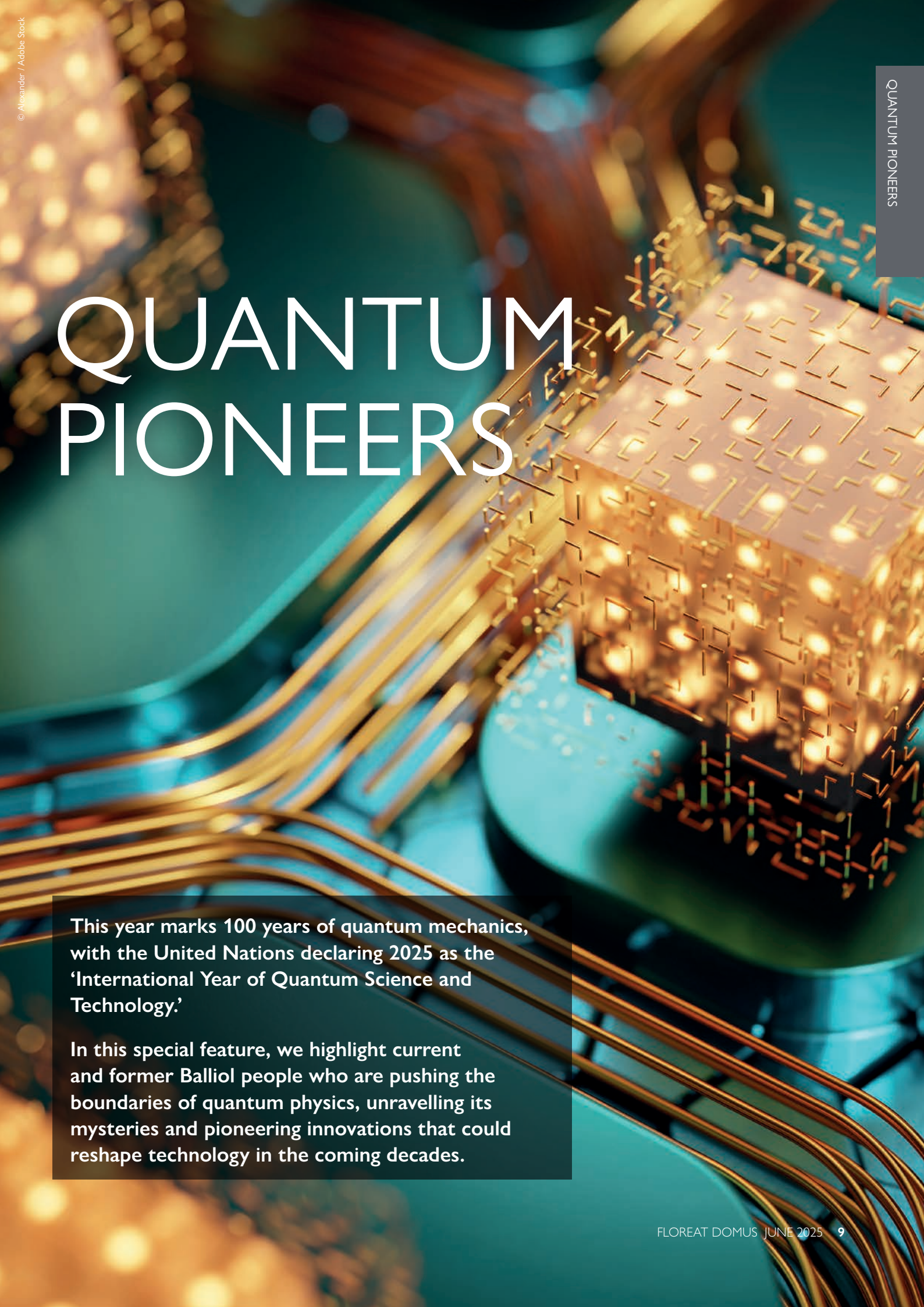

Olivia Barber (2024, English Language and Literature)

As you look ahead to the rest of your time at Balliol, what opportunities, goals, or experiences are you most excited to explore and why?
Entering my second term at Balliol, I want to become more involved in College sports. I joined the College netball team in first term, and it proved to be a friendly and casual way of accessing exercise and competition. The netball team has also been a great way to make friends, with training, matches, and socials structuring my week all term. This is something I really want to continue, meeting teams from other colleges and working with my own team. Another aspect of college life I'm excited to explore is my new role as John De Balliol on the JCR committee, to which I was voted into this term.

The support of alumni donors has been crucial in driving Balliol's outreach efforts, enabling more talented students to access Oxford. In 2025, 22 students from Balliol's outreach programmes received offers from Balliol – a 46% increase from last year, meaning that 1 in 5 undergraduates joining the College this October will have benefitted from these initiatives. A further 118 outreach participants secured places at other Oxford colleges, reflecting a 30% rise from last year.

If you would like to support Balliol's outreach work, please visit: www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/support-outreach

QUANTUM PIONEERS



This year marks 100 years of quantum mechanics, with the United Nations declaring 2025 as the 'International Year of Quantum Science and Technology.'

In this special feature, we highlight current and former Balliol people who are pushing the boundaries of quantum physics, unravelling its mysteries and pioneering innovations that could reshape technology in the coming decades.

The many worlds of quantum theory

Professor David Wallace (Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy 2005–2016) explains the mind-boggling mysteries of quantum theory

Quantum theory is the triumph and the scandal of physics. The triumph: it explains phenomena as small as the Higgs boson and as large as the ripples in the night sky from the Big Bang; it is the basis of technologies as wonderful as the silicon chip and as terrible as the nuclear bomb; its experimental tests are manifold, and it has never failed one. Perhaps natural selection can compete with it for significance and scope; little else can.

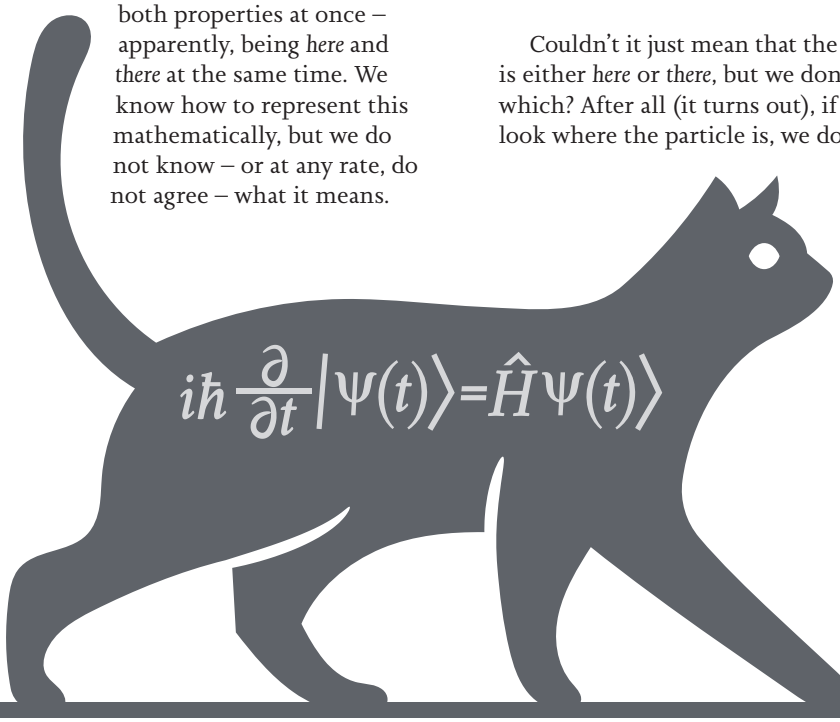
The scandal? A century after its birth, still physicists have reached no consensus as to how to understand it. At the core of quantum theory is the *superposition principle*, which says – roughly – that if a particle or other system could have one property, or another (say, being *here*, or *there*), somehow it could have both properties at once – apparently, being *here* and *there* at the same time. We know how to represent this mathematically, but we do not know – or at any rate, do not agree – what it means.


David Wallace

Couldn't it just mean that the particle is either *here* or *there*, but we don't know which? After all (it turns out), if we just look where the particle is, we don't see anything weird: we just see it either here or there, with no way to know which. But the strange phenomenon called *interference* makes this almost indefensible: it is common to set up experiments where the 'here' and 'there' parts of the superposition interact with each other, reinforcing or cancelling out in ways inexplicable on this account.

Well then: couldn't superpositions just be weird ways for the microworld to be, indescribable in everyday language but harmlessly confined to microscopic scales? Not according to quantum theory itself. If we use that theory to describe the process of *measuring* a microscopic system (and what else should we use, since measurement devices are themselves made of atoms?) then the superposition becomes macroscopic: no longer a particle at once *here* and *there* but a pointer on a device pointing at once to 'here' and 'there'. To borrow Schrödinger's vivid example: if the device is set up to kill the college cat if the particle is *here*, and to spare it if *there*, then after the experiment, the poor creature is neither alive nor dead but in a superposition of both. These macroscopic superpositions seem nonsensical; at any rate, they are not what we see when we test quantum theory.

Or are they? Humans, too, are made of atoms; if we ask the *theory* what we see, it does not say 'you will see a weird undead cat'. It says, 'you too will enter a superposition: of you seeing a live cat and you seeing a dead cat'. In the language of the infamous 'many-worlds interpretation' of quantum mechanics,



there are now two versions of you, just as, before, there were two cats. This seems absurd, and yet it appears to be a literal, conservative, reading of the mathematics of quantum theory.

Many students of quantum theory now lean towards the many-worlds interpretation; more do not. A few brave souls seek to change the theory itself, to cure Schrödinger's cat through new physics. More common is to drop the idea that measurement is just more physics, and to give a more exalted role to the conscious observer. Most common of all is to set such questions aside, to 'shut up and calculate', as physicists put it. But the difference between this mundane advice and the extravagance of many worlds is less about what the theory says, and more about deciding how much of it to take seriously.

'Quantum theory is the triumph and the scandal of physics.'

We have been thinking about these questions for a century, and fruitfully so, with insights going from conceptual puzzle to concrete problem and back again: the burgeoning field of quantum computation, for instance, has its origins in deep thinking about what quantum theory means. There is far more to learn, but one thing is already known beyond doubt: the world is stranger by far than we thought it was before the quantum revolution.

Quantum computers: the weirdness is the point

Professor A. Douglas Stone (1976), Deputy Director of Yale Quantum Institute, on unlocking the power of quantum computing

Quantum Mechanics (QM), the breakthrough physics theory that shaped our modern understanding of atoms, molecules, and light, turns 100 this year. During that time, the theory has generated many technological breakthroughs like nuclear energy, the laser, and semiconductor chips, yet the fundamental conceptual framework hasn't changed. So why, recently, have America's major tech giants (Google, Microsoft, IBM, Amazon), along with national funding agencies and corporations worldwide, decided to put billions of dollars into new research centers, all with the letter 'Q' in their names?

The reason lies in a re-examination of the theory that revealed unsuspected properties of great interest and potential utility, hiding in plain sight. The 'Second Quantum Revolution' began when physicists, mathematicians, and computer scientists started considering what quantum mechanics implies for the storage, processing, and transmission of information, creating a potentially transformative field: quantum information science. In an historic irony, this field hinges crucially on the weird features of quantum mechanics that Einstein hated and modern physicists tended to ignore (until recently). Nonetheless, the theory's peculiar properties have seeped into the popular consciousness through buzzwords such as 'Schrodinger's Cat' and 'many worlds'. And now times have changed; in this new field of science, the weirdness is the point!

A. Douglas Stone

'The weirdness of quantum mechanics is a feature, not a bug!'

The most striking idea of this emerging field is that it is useful to store and process information within a 'quantum object' (most simply, either an atom, or a nano-engineered 'artificial atom'). Physical objects which behave quantum mechanically exhibit three key properties: quantisation, superposition, and entanglement. Quantisation refers to the fact that a quantum object, such as an atom or molecule, cannot contain an arbitrary amount of energy. For example, when a molecule vibrates along a chemical bond, we can think of the bond as an

elastic band. But according to quantum mechanics, this band behaves strangely, in that it can only be stretched by 1,2,3… inches and nothing in between. This means that the chemical bond can only store certain allowed amounts of energy, which define certain 'states', unlike a macroscopic elastic material. Thus, at the level of atoms and molecules, Nature has some intrinsic graininess which is too small to be seen in our macroscopic world. For example, the light from an ordinary light bulb consists of photons with quantised energies, but in quantities of trillions or more per second, making their discreteness undetectable.

It gets weirder. A molecule or atom, *before* it is measured, can exist *simultaneously* in two (or more) energy states, called a superposition. When measured, each such molecule would randomly reveal one of the two quantised energy values, and never anything in between. However, which result you get on a single try is fundamentally unpredictable and the theory only tells you the probability of getting one or the other value over many trials. Importantly, according to quantum theory, the molecule, prior to measurement, is not in an unknown but definite state; it is truly in two incompatible states at the same time. If you assume it always had a definite value before you measured it, you run into contradictions. Very weird.

Finally, there is entanglement. Imagine preparing two atoms, each in a fuzzy superposition, but in a way that the total energy of the two is fixed (which is possible). Then, when you measure the energy of one, the energy of the other one would be determined and no longer fuzzy, even if the two atoms are separated by a large distance. Such a state of two molecules is called 'entangled', and measuring one appears to create a 'spooky' connection to the other. Einstein felt that this must be wrong, and that a better theory would emerge, where the results of distant measurements didn't affect one another. But in the 1960s, the physicist John Bell devised an experiment which could decide whether Einstein's conjecture was right or wrong. Starting around 1970, as more and better versions of the Bell experiment were done, the needle consistently pointed towards QM and against Einstein. Moreover, not only did these experiments rule out Einstein's hope for a less weird theory, the measurements of entanglement were always in excellent agreement with the predictions of quantum mechanics. This body of work was recognised with the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics; entanglement is here to stay.

All the properties of quantum mechanics explained above were known since the mid-1930s, but focusing on them was considered more of a philosophical pursuit, irrelevant to physics research and to applications of physics. But finally, in the 1980s, quantum scientists began exploring whether the weirdness of quantum mechanics could be harnessed to do difficult and useful information-related tasks. It was proposed that

'Nature has some intrinsic graininess which is too small to be seen in our macroscopic world.'

binary information (bits), represented as a 'one' or 'zero', could be stored in a quantum system by choosing two states to manipulate and defining them as representing a zero or one. Such an object is now called a quantum bit or qubit. But unlike regular digital bits, which are either definitely zero or definitely one, qubits can be stored in an infinite number of fuzzy, uncertain superpositions of zero or one. At first glance, this does not seem like progress. After all, how could storing bits in a way that doesn't reliably give you a one or a zero be helpful?

That is why it was a truly world-changing discovery when it was shown theoretically that an ideal quantum computer – one that could store and process many such qubits – would be able to solve problems beyond the power of any conceivable conventional computer, even if it ran for millennia. The most striking example is that an efficient quantum computer could break, in a reasonable time, one of the main codes used to securely transmit credit card information over the internet. Very crudely, the superpower of a quantum computer is to be able to explore many possibilities simultaneously due to the superposition principle. However, to work better than a conventional computer, the quantum computer must create both superposition *and* entanglement of qubits; the weirdness of quantum mechanics is a feature, not a bug! This discovery has initiated a global race to build an efficient quantum computer, probably the most difficult thing ever attempted in nanoscience and engineering.

A quantum computer represents a new kind of machine, which relies on maintaining fragile quantum states for long periods. Building such machines had not previously been attempted, but several types of hardware are now maturing, all involving extreme measures to simultaneously isolate and perfectly control microscopic quantum systems. The main approach taken by tech companies (pioneered at Yale) involves cooling down artificial atoms embedded in circuits on a chip to a temperature colder than interstellar space and controlling them with microwaves. Another promising approach is to trap hundreds of real atoms with light fields in an ultrahigh vacuum and manipulate them with laser pulses. Today's machines remain too primitive and error-prone to do useful computations beyond what can be done with conventional computers. But stay tuned, because the field is rapidly progressing.

The essential promise of quantum computers is to solve complex computational problems of relevance to science and society that conventional computers cannot solve efficiently. Such problems arise in cryptography, certain areas of finance, scheduling information flow on the internet, and are ubiquitous in science and engineering. While there is no single unique target for this technology, many investigations in chemistry, biochemistry and drug design are hindered or blocked because the required computations are impossible due to the time or data storage required. So, we quantum scientists are embracing the weirdness. If the quantum computer and other quantum technologies reach their potential, the benefits to society in areas like energy harvesting, environmental, and health science will be enormous.

Raghavendra Srinivas working in the lab

Raghavendra Srinivas (Early Career Fellow in Physics)

I vividly remember the first time I fell in love with atoms. It was during my undergraduate lab experience, working on a summer project in Bjorn Hessmo's group in Singapore. We had just aligned the laser beams well enough to trap a cloud of about a billion rubidium atoms. Rubidium has a fluorescent transition at 780 nm, just within the red part of the visible spectrum, so I could see the blob of red atoms with my bare eyes. I remember thinking it was the most beautiful thing in the world. Since then, I have never left an atomic physics lab.

What I love about experimental physics is that it's never boring. The work spans a wide variety of tasks, from optics and vacuum systems to programming and data analysis, so it never feels routine. There is also a constant problem-solving aspect to it; 90-99% of the time, something is broken, and you have to figure out how to fix it. But when everything works, and you're performing the experiment you designed, it feels magical. Experimental work also fosters a deep appreciation for the team you're working with, and I've been fortunate to be part of fantastic teams throughout my career.

My journey in experimental quantum physics continued in Boulder, Colorado, where I worked in Dave Wineland's trapped ion group. There, we were trapping one or two charged atoms, or ions, and the goal of my PhD was to develop new techniques for entangling these ions without using lasers. At the time, the best-performing entangling operations relied on lasers, which posed scalability challenges. My PhD work demonstrated that laser-free methods could achieve comparable results, using more mature radiofrequency and microwave technology that can be more easily integrated into ion traps. I'm continuing this work part-time at a trapped ion quantum computing company, Oxford Ionics.

'What I love about experimental physics is that it's never boring.'

I truly fell in love with the trapped ion platform, where we can control and manipulate the quantum states of

single atoms. At David Lucas' (Lecturer in Physics, Fellow and Tutor in Physics 2009-2025) group in Oxford, I worked on a quantum networking project that generates entanglement between ions in two remote ion traps. Among other achievements, we demonstrated that this network could enhance frequency comparisons between optical atomic clocks in separate locations. Such advancements could enable probing the space-time variation of fundamental constants, geodesy, and even the search for dark matter. I was later awarded an EPSRC Quantum Technologies Career Development Fellowship to continue this work.

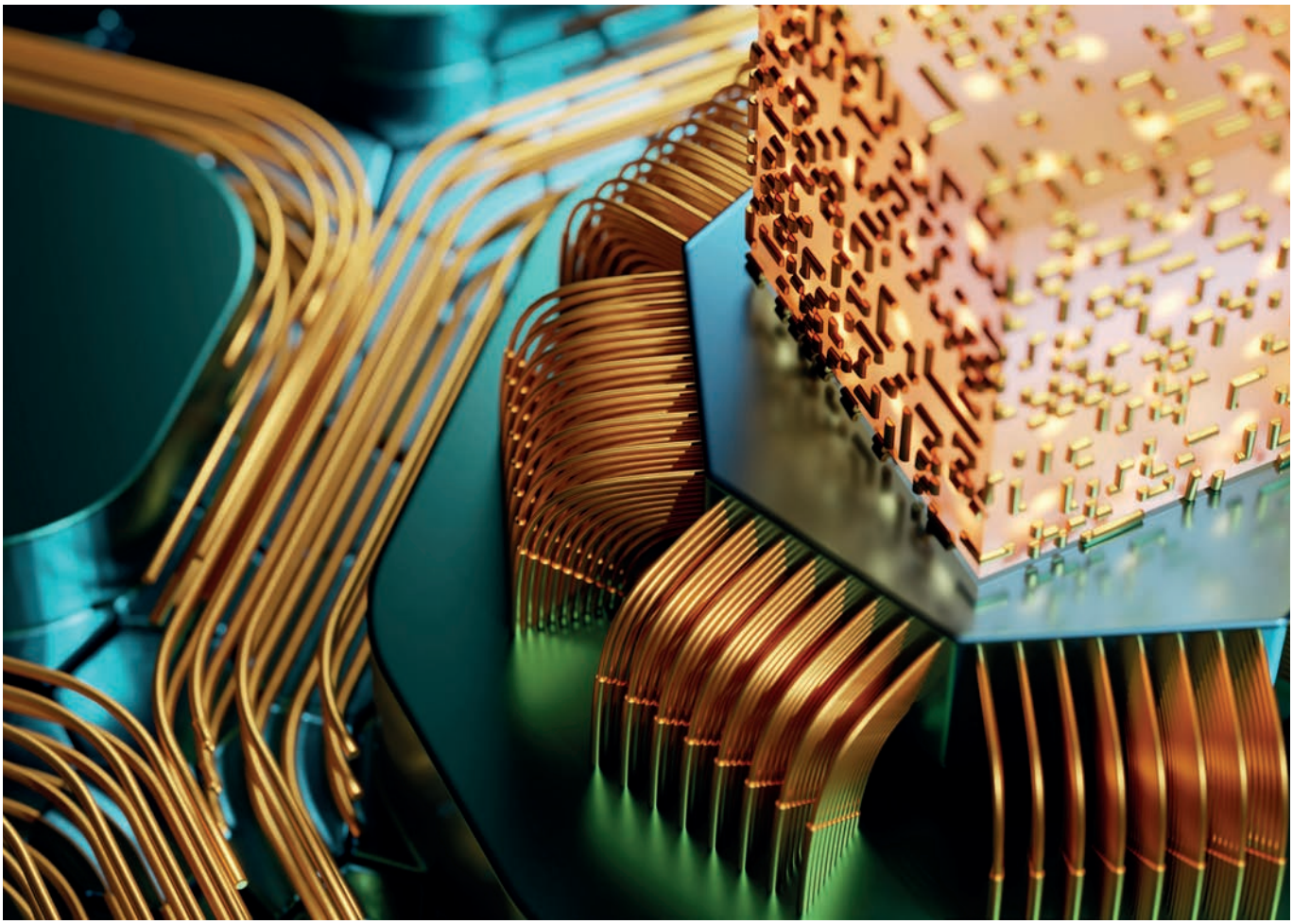
Beyond controlling the internal spin states of ions, my more recent work has focused on their motional states. Here, we can create exotic states of the ions' vibrations, such as squeezed states, where the uncertainty in one variable – like position – is reduced at the expense of increased uncertainty in another variable, like momentum. We've developed techniques to create even more exotic states, with potential applications in quantum-enhanced sensing, quantum simulation, and continuous-variable quantum computing.

'One of the most compelling applications to me is fertiliser production.'

The potential of quantum computers is immense. One of the most compelling applications to me is fertiliser production. Nitrogen fixation consumes about 4% of global energy through a high-pressure, high-temperature industrial process, while an enzyme in soil bacteria achieve this at room temperature and pressure – though the mechanism remains unknown. A sufficiently large quantum computer could elucidate this mechanism, potentially revolutionising fertiliser production. Other promising applications include drug discovery, materials science, and potentially many more yet to be discovered.

Reaching these applications will take time. While quantum computers are improving rapidly and have outperformed classical computers in specific tasks, many practical applications remain years away. Estimates range from a few years to a decade, but it's important to acknowledge the significant progress made in recent years, which will likely accelerate with increased investment.

More than 70 years ago, Erwin Schrödinger remarked, 'We never experiment with just one electron, or atom, or small molecule. In thought experiments, we assume that we do; this invariably entails ridiculous consequences.' Today, we live in a reality where we can not only manipulate single atoms but also dream of building computers out of them. While there's still much uncertainty, it's an incredibly exciting time to be part of this field.



Molly Smith (2022, DPhil Atomic and Laser Physics)

My interest in quantum physics began during my undergraduate degree when I started learning about how individual atoms interact with light. I was particularly fascinated by how, in the last 100 years, scientists have thought up brilliant experiments to observe and explain the mysteries of what is happening on such tiny scales. This led me to spend a summer working in a research lab producing pairs of entangled photons. At the end of the summer, we turned the experiment on for the first time and saw data confirming the presence of many pairs of actual entangled photons. I was in awe of what I was seeing. It was then that I decided to pursue a PhD in quantum physics.

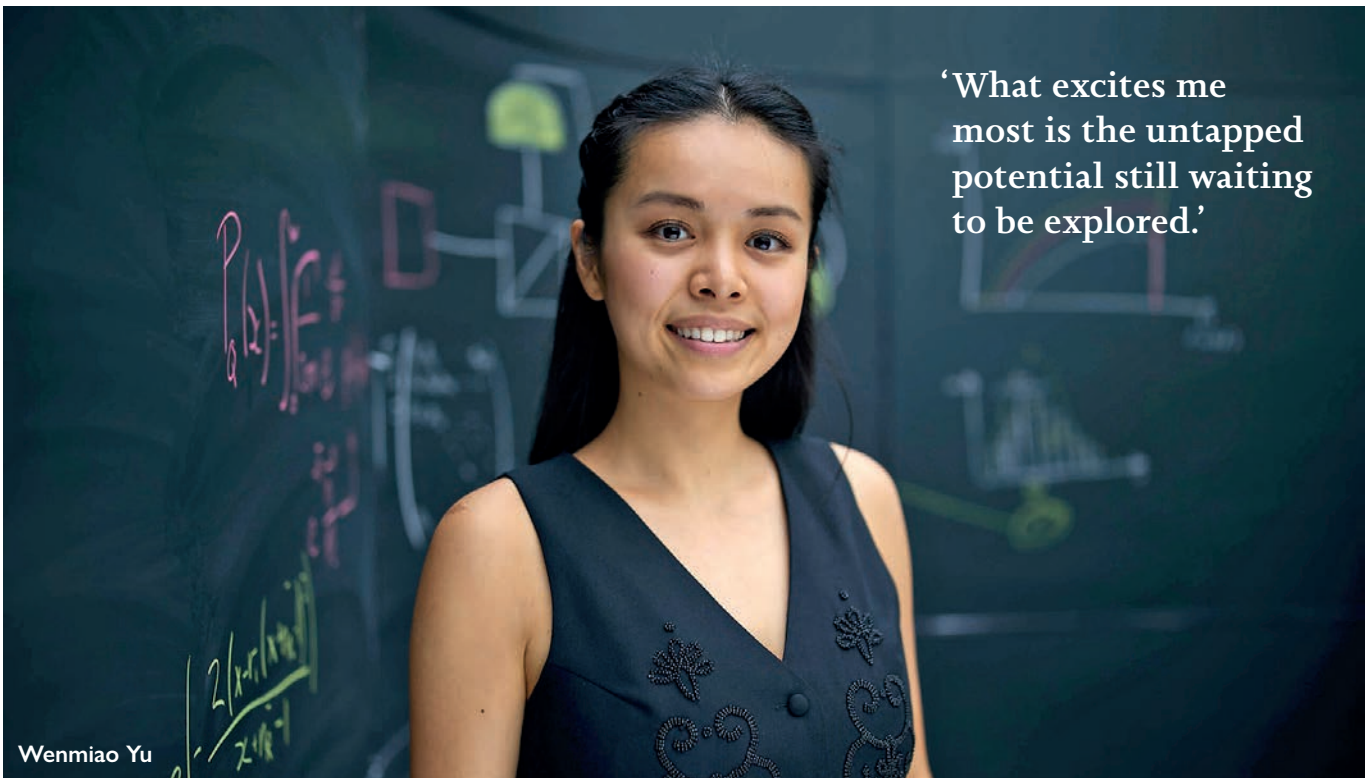
I am now in the 3rd year of my DPhil studying Atomic and Laser Physics here at Balliol, researching trapped ion quantum computing. We use electronic chips, which are roughly the same size and shape as a SIM card in your phone, to generate electric fields which we use to trap individual calcium ions just above the chip surface. We can then use the energy of the ions to encode information, for example, we could call a lower energy state '0' and a higher energy state '1', forming a quantum bit (qubit) in each ion. To use these ions as a quantum computer, we need to be able to precisely change the state of each ion to implement logical gates. This is usually done by exciting the ion using a laser. However, for my DPhil project, I am working on manipulating the ions using microwaves instead. Since microwave sources are much cheaper and less prone to breaking than lasers, they could provide a path forward for scaling trapped ion quantum processors from a few ions to the thousands required for large scale quantum computation.

For my most recent result, released in December 2024, we used our experiment to demonstrate quantum gates with the lowest error rates ever achieved on any quantum computer – the odds of an error occurring on our experiment are now the same as the odds of winning the National Lottery Thunderball! Compared to normal computers, most quantum computers have error rates which are far too high to run any 'useful' computation. However, through our work and the work of many other quantum scientists, we are gradually pushing these error rates lower and lower.


Molly Smith

Recently, I have been seeing more and more in the media about quantum computing – both hype around its potential and the progress we are making, and also disappointment over unfulfilled promises and fear around how it could be used. We are reaching a point where scientists are able to use small, noisy quantum computers to start to solve real problems. However, I believe it will take a lot of technological advancement and many more years of hard work for quantum computers to live up to their potential. In the meantime, research is already underway across the world to assess the ethical implications and establish laws required so our society will be ready for quantum computers long before any technological breakthrough occurs.

As a recipient of the Ramage and Devorguilla Scholarships, I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this exciting and rapidly evolving field.



Wenmiao Yu

Wenmiao Yu (2015)

Co-founder of Quantum Dice

The declaration of 2025 as the International Year of Quantum Science and Technologies is a momentous opportunity for the global quantum community to reflect on how far we’ve come and chart a path forward. As a cofounder of Quantum Dice, a spinout from the University of Oxford, I find this milestone particularly exciting as it shines a spotlight on the transformative potential of quantum technologies in shaping industries and improving lives.

At Quantum Dice, our mission is to secure the future of encryption through the development of self-certifying quantum random number generators (QRNGs). Random numbers are the foundation of modern cryptography, and truly random numbers – free from patterns or predictability – are essential for securing sensitive communications, financial systems, and personal data. We have had the privilege of working with enterprise early adopters such as BT, SpeQtral and iQuila on bringing QRNGs into existing encryption systems. However, the applications of high-quality randomness extend far beyond encryption.

A key example of this lies in the financial services industry, where randomness is crucial for accurate simulations. In partnership with HSBC, Quantum Dice demonstrated the commercial value of provable, high-quality randomness in enhancing Monte Carlo simulations – a mathematical technique used to estimate the possible outcomes for an uncertain event. We are now working with multinational companies to take the benefits that QRNGs bring to simulations beyond the financial services sector.

One of the most rewarding challenges of working with my cofounding team of quantum entrepreneurs has been balancing the scientific rigor required to develop quantum technologies with the practicalities of engineering solutions that meet market needs. In our early days, much of our focus was on creating the QRNG market. Today, as we work with partners like BT and HSBC, the challenge lies in ensuring our devices integrate seamlessly into existing systems while maintaining their quantum (and commercial) advantages. The journey from laboratory prototype to deployable product has been full of lessons, not least the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration across quantum science, marketing, and product design.

I am excited to be one of the UK delegates to attend the opening ceremony of the 2025 International Year of Quantum Science and Technologies at the UNESCO HQ. The event offers an excellent platform to showcase how quantum technologies are evolving from academic curiosities to impactful tools. The growing adoption of QRNGs in industries such as telecommunications, finance and defence exemplifies this shift; QRNGs are just one strand in the quantum industry.

What excites me most is the untapped potential still waiting to be explored. As the quantum sector matures, we are likely to see its impact ripple across industries – from healthcare to logistics to climate science – unlocking solutions to some of society’s most pressing challenges.

Vera Schäfer (2014)

Junior Research Group Leader, Max Planck Institute, Heidelberg

150 years after many physicists believed that physics was largely understood and 'finished', we have more big open questions than ever. We don't know what most of the matter and energy in our universe are, why there is more matter than antimatter, or how to combine the two major theories of the 20th century – quantum physics and general relativity.

Physicists use different strategies to find answers to these questions, from using telescopes to look far back in time and into the vastness of the universe, to recreating rare high-energy events in particle accelerators like the Large Hadron Collider at CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research). Others use the most precise measurements, such as those conducted with LIGO (Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory) or atomic clocks, to search for tiny signals. For the latter, trapped ions are ideal: they are single charged atoms trapped in a vacuum by electric fields, making them highly isolated from environmental influences. This allows them to function as an undisturbed quantum system that we can control and interact with in a highly precise manner using lasers. In addition, their atomic transition frequencies are one of the most precisely measurable quantities and directly depend on the fundamental laws of physics.

During my DPhil at Balliol, I worked with trapped ions for quantum computing, focusing on enhancing the precision with which we can manipulate individual ions. Now, I've shifted my focus: instead of manipulating ions, we aim to measure their properties as precisely as possible. For this purpose, highly charged ions – where many electrons have been removed from the shell – are especially interesting as their remaining electrons are tightly bound to the nucleus. This significantly increases their interaction with the core, making them more susceptible to, for example, relativistic effects.


Vera Schäfer

'One of the essential questions we seek to answer is whether fundamental constants are truly constant, or whether they can vary over time or space.'

While highly charged ions are difficult to control directly, quantum logic spectroscopy – a technique inspired by quantum information science and closely related to the highly precise operations we performed during my DPhil – can be used to perform measurements indirectly via a well-controlled singly charged ion qubit.

One of the essential questions we seek to answer is whether fundamental constants are truly constant, or whether they can vary over time or space. Fundamental constants are numbers that quantify basic physical interactions and properties, such as the speed of light. While we don't have any theories that predict their value, they define the strength of all physical interactions. Even slight variations could drastically change our universe and make human life in its current form impossible. Because we only know their values from measurements, it is possible that they are not truly constant but instead change at an extremely small degree, below our current measuring capabilities.

Several theories beyond the established standard model predict such variations. For instance, scalar ultralight dark matter, a type of dark matter that is so light that it behaves more like a wave in quantum physics than a massive particle, could lead to tiny fluctuations in fundamental constants. Another example is loop quantum gravity, a theory that could combine quantum physics and general relativity.

At the Max Planck Institute in Heidelberg, we plan to use quantum logic spectroscopy to precisely measure transition frequencies in highly charged californium, an element especially sensitive to possible variations in the fine-structure constant – a fundamental constant which quantifies the interaction between light and charged particles. By measuring these transition frequencies more precisely than ever, we can test if they agree with our current understanding of physics or perhaps uncover something unexpected.

The Pope of Soap

John Whiston (1977), the man behind some of the UK's most iconic soaps, shares his remarkable career in TV

Jasper Griffin (1956, Tutorial Fellow in Classics 1963–2004, Emeritus Fellow 2004–2019) dubbed me 'The Papal Legate' at The Arnold & Brackenbury Society because my father was a Papal Knight. So it seems appropriate that for the last decade or so I've been called 'The Pope of Soap'. I look after ITV's two soaps, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*, a job that satisfyingly gives me the powers of a Roman emperor. I can kill who I like with a flick of my thumb. Or keypad, as it is these days. In fact, such is the nature of soap that I am compelled by the tyranny of ratings to regularly kill people, be that by serial murder, fire, explosion, trams, trains, bus crashes, floods or lightning strikes. It also allows me to work with thousands of the most creative people in TV, tackling subjects that matter: from bullying to knife crime, from motor neurone disease (MND) to domestic abuse. The chilling social impact of soaps becomes clear when, for example, in the middle of an underage grooming story, a mother writes to you and says her daughter turned to her while watching *Corrie* and said 'Mummy, I think that's happening to me'. Soap, with its familiar characters and credible canvas can hit parts that other drama struggles to reach. Plus, we do it five nights a week. The ITV soap machine produces six hours of drama weekly. That's the equivalent of two feature films of the highest quality drama every single week. I once got in trouble with the *Daily Mail* for saying that soap writers were right up there with Shakespeare. But I do think that. Oh… and it's also the most fun to be had in TV. I should know, I've done pretty much everything else.

'I once got in trouble with the *Daily Mail* for saying that soap writers were right up there with Shakespeare. But I do think that.'

After Balliol, I mooched around pointing a light at Rowan Atkinson as he toured the UK. One night in Croydon, I counted the number of seats and calculated that Rowan was earning £17,000 that night and I was earning £70. Time for a proper job. I asked someone what was the hardest job to get. They said 'General Trainee at the BBC'. Armed only with Balliol arrogance, I applied. A few weeks later, I was very solemnly signing the Official Secrets Act and that afternoon was sent to work on *Pop Quiz*. Churning around every BBC department and attending every course, I found a niche making arts documentaries about Northern Ireland poets. I later found out someone had thought I was from Northern Ireland because of my accent and so had sent me, as a 'local lad', to that troubled state, where

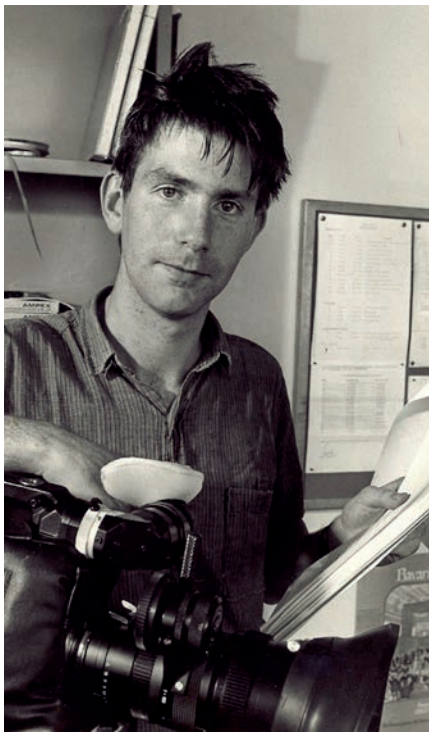
John Whiston outside the iconic Rovers Return Inn

'Soap, with its familiar characters and credible canvas can hit parts that other drama struggles to reach.'

bombs were just round the corner. I come from Edinburgh. Sadly, they weren't making Northern Ireland poets as fast as I was making films about them. So when I ran out, I returned to the mainland and produced book programmes, eventually landing as one of the founding producers of *The Late Show*. Fukuyama had just declared *The End of History*. Didn't feel like that to us. There seemed to be no end of history happening while we were making that show. Indeed, in an attic somewhere, I have a photograph of Salman Rushdie stuffing his mouth with sponge cake at *The Late Show* launch party right before Special Branch rushed in and took him into hiding for the next ten years. Zelig-like, I seemed to find myself a witness to a hell of a lot of Big History in the 80s and 90s, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. I made a series of films from there called *Tales From Prague*, as oppressed voices finally made themselves heard after 41 years of dull, but vicious, communism. One film, *Absurdistan*, involved trucking a vast bust of Stalin around the streets of Prague and felt like it caught the moment. A few months later, I was run out of LA and told I'd never work in TV again because of a series I made called *Naked Hollywood*. After the nastiness of the Stasi and the StB, a few puffed-up CAA agents felt like small fry. The BBC gave me a broad canvas and I was able to say interesting stuff – that was a rich gift.

After a while, I found another niche – employing people far funnier than me (Caroline Aherne, Peter Kay, Craig Charles, Vic and Bob, Lee and Herring to name a few), and then going to the feared BBC Programme Review Board every Monday to be given a serious grown-up row for whatever mischief I had let happen the previous week. *Pets Win Prizes* was one of mine. Questions were asked in the House about the dumbing down of the BBC. But who doesn't want to see dogs playing pool?

Running a BBC department in Manchester, it was inevitable that the



ever-expanding Granada would headhunt me. They sent me to run Yorkshire TV, which they had just acquired. 'The Duke of Yorkshire' was another dodgy soubriquet that stuck for a while. There I discovered the delights of drama, some inherited like *Heartbeat* and *Touch of Frost*, and some created like Thora Hird's Emmy-winning dementia drama *Lost For Words*. Bit by bit, I moved around and up the Granada ladder till I was running all of ITV's TV production. I launched shows such as *Vera* and *The Chase*. I brought back *University Challenge* and I cancelled *Mastermind*. But inexorably, I got sucked into the corporate shenanigans of TV Land which rivalled… well… *Rivals*, I guess. These ranged from a board meeting where the note-taker dropped her pen, clutched her cheeks like the Munch painting, and let out a prolonged scream when it looked like the company would go insolvent by week's end, threatening the pension scheme and 3,000 jobs, to clandestine dinners at chefs' tables in Mayfair restaurants with hedge fund billionaires urging us to take the company private and make ourselves rich beyond avarice. Or because of avarice.

'Soap is about plurality of opinions and breadth of emotions.'

As I unaccountably survived corporate regime change after regime change, and as all around me got lucratively fired, I did look over my shoulder at fellow Oxford filmmakers, such as Balliol's Derek Wax, who managed to stay away from the lure of management, kept saying important stuff about important things and kept nabbing sackloads of BAFTAs. Which was why, when the wheels turned again and ITV said I could either sack myself, lucratively, or choose which bit of the ITV empire I wanted to keep, there was no hesitation.

I chose the soaps.

Soap may get derided for its clichés and its formulas, and it's no longer the coolest thing for your kids to boast about when asked what their father does. A soap actress once described soap to me as, 'Well… it's just two people shouting at each other in the street'. Her character died later in some implausible natural disaster – the Soap Gods, like those of Aeschylus and Hardy, grind slowly, but they always get their man. For all that criticism, soap reaches people. Millions of people. Every day. And it's not about creating a blueprint for how I happen to think everyone else should live their lives. Soap is about plurality of opinions and breadth of emotions. And it's about showing that, however bleak life might be, there are people facing similar challenges and doing so with humour and humanity. Can TV do much more in people's lives? Probably not. Certainly not without divine intervention from the Soap Gods. And I'm just a Pope.

Bryon Bryson

Gethin Anthony

An actor's journey

Lilia Kanu (2021) speaks with actor Gethin Anthony (2002) about his acting career

As Gethin Anthony reflects on his acting journey, a warm, nostalgic smile graces his face, as though the memories are unfolding before him – each one more vivid than the last. From the encouragement of his secondary school maths teacher, Steve Thompson, who sparked his love for theatre, to the advice from his peer, Helen Brown, who directed him as Cyrano in 2004, to the contact card his now-agent, Dallas Smith, left at the Playhouse door – Anthony's recollections reveal a deep appreciation for the collaborators and mentors who have shared in and shaped his path.

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Anthony attended the Tiffin School in Kingston-upon-Thames. His first taste of acting was similar to most: 'I think I was the sheep in a nativity play,' he recounts jovially. 'But my first real experience of theatre was when my teachers did a production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* with us, a cast of 11- to 13-year-olds.' This early experience would be the 'intoxicating and all-encompassing' memory that ignited his passion for acting. Anthony is best known for his roles as Renly Baratheon in *Game of Thrones* (2011–2012) and Charles Manson in the NBC series *Aquarius* (2015–2016). He also has extensive experience on the stage, having performed in venues like the Old Vic and the Swan Theatre, the

latter for a *Royal Shakespeare Company* production of *Boris Godunov* (2012–2013).

Although Anthony had known from a young age that he wanted to act professionally, he arrived at Balliol in 2002 to study English Literature after a teacher snubbed his scholastic efforts, an encounter that only strengthened his resolve to apply. We spent a while talking about all the 'beautiful and bonkers productions' he participated in throughout his time studying at Oxford. When I asked for a number, Anthony estimated he had been part of fifteen productions across his three years at Oxford. What was even more impressive was his having done a third of that number all in one term! 'I would say yes to everything,' he explained with laughter, 'I went with the intent of getting involved in the drama scene, which I knew was amazing at Oxford, and I'd seen that a lot of Balliol students had historically been interested in drama.'

He added, 'I still marvel at it,' referring to the liveliness of Oxford's drama scene. 'Unless you're there doing it, you don't realise how many independent theatre productions can be put on in one city.'

He described Balliol's own drama scene being as 'vivid' twenty years ago as it is today. 'I know there was a massive Balliol contingent in the University's theatre scene. I was co-president of OUDS with Chip, who was in the year above me at Balliol. Our treasurer, Anne Marie, was also at Balliol.' I revealed that the Michael Pilch Studio, Balliol's own student-run theatre which opened in 1997, is one of Balliol's best assets that many, if not most, students active in the drama society today had no idea about when applying. It seems it was a similarly elusive space when Anthony was attending: 'I remember being part of productions and rehearsing in other colleges, to come back to Balliol and find out there's something going on at the Pilch that you didn't even know about.'

When asked about his favourite roles or productions from his time at Oxford, Anthony's role as the titular character of *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Oxford Playhouse – for which he was applauded for his 'brilliant' and 'spellbinding' portrayal in the reviews I found – came to the forefront of his mind. 'I just knew it was a very special opportunity because few people get to play those roles in such spaces. There was something about it.' There is a certain *je ne sais quoi* of being a young actor and performing on a stage that has been graced by legendary names and remarkable talent – a feeling that resonated with me greatly, reflecting on my recent experience on the Playhouse stage.

'Probably the greatest stroke of luck I've ever had in my life is that my agent today, Dallas Smith, came to see Cyrano.'

'I learned so much about life doing that show,' Anthony reflects. 'I remember taking it incredibly seriously and I was probably getting a little bit too in my head about it. One day the wonderful director, Helen [Brown], shared a story with me.' The life lesson stuck with him: 'It's right to put your best effort and focus into something. But the second that tips over into somehow constricting you emotionally or isolating you from others, then what's the point? The point is to communicate, the point is to connect. There's nothing worth having in life that isn't worth sharing, so if you isolate yourself in a job that is about connection, you're not going to get very far. If you can't bring people along with you, what's the point?'

His journey into acting professionally after Oxford 'wasn't a straight line,' he explains. 'Probably the greatest stroke of luck I've ever had in my life is that my agent today, Dallas Smith, came to see Cyrano.' He began auditioning professionally after university, gaining valuable insight into the casting process, but still dreamt of professionally training at drama school. Two years later, he began his training at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. His experiences at Oxford, LAMDA, and beyond, contributed to his love for the connectedness of the craft: 'I think the lesson I keep relearning, up to this very day, is that in practice, you learn the most from your peers. And really, the thing to do with life is to get together with a band of folks and make something.

'At university, that is incredibly well-supported and organic: 20,000 of you are roughly the same age and live in the same place. It's a wonderful experience, and to recreate that in the world is quite hard. When leaving university or drama school, it feels as if the world wants to isolate you and that you should just wait your turn. I constantly felt that I had to wait to ask for permission and not bother other people. Even in the most fortunate position of having an agent, you do have to wait until you're called upon for a job.' Anthony emphasised that whilst gratitude for the 'articles of affirmation' that indicate success in the industry is important, it is equally as valuable to remember the essential joy that characterises what dramatic art is about: 'Getting together and starting something with your peers.'

Aware of the many aspiring creatives and actors at Balliol and Oxford, I asked for his advice and his view on acting's future. 'Well, all the rules about acting that were relevant in my generation, they're all changing,' Anthony reflects. 'Before me, repertory theatre was the thing. Then around my era, there was this explosion of television – this explosion of opportunity, but also competition because the relevance of whether people are trained or not was diminishing, and more people were getting represented.'

He is deeply curious about the future of dramatic art: 'What will acting be in a future where cinema might not have the

same relevance? I truly believe theatre will always be around, but will it have the same cultural relevance? Will people receive stories through their television, their phone, or something else? Who knows what that means for performers in stories?' One of the biggest questions that defines the profession is 'whether being an actor is really being an actor or being a storyteller?'

With a chuckle, he admits, 'No one knows any of these things.' But to aspiring actors, he says, 'If you know you *need* to do it and you *really* want to do it, then you can be the person who helps figure all that out. The opportunity, I think, for storytelling and performance is really going to change. I'm excited for you, though.'

'I think I was the sheep in a nativity play.'

Beyond acting, Anthony is currently using his platform to bring awareness to Groundswell (groundswell.org.uk), an organisation that helps individuals experiencing homelessness access healthcare. 'I'm a type one diabetic,' he shared, 'and when meeting with different organisations, I hit upon the question: if I were living on the streets right now, how on earth would I manage my diabetes?' Groundswell's advocates provide check-ins, emotional support, and help with GP registrations. They accompany individuals to healthcare appointments, ensuring access to vital treatment.

It was truly a pleasure to speak with Gethin Anthony about his time at Balliol and his acting career. He is an inspiration to current students who have a passion for acting, me included. In an industry that can be daunting, I hope my fellow creatives will listen to Anthony's call to get a group of people together and create something beautiful (and bonkers)!

Balliol born and bred filmmakers

Judy Tossell (1984) and Jens Meurer (1984) met as Freshers at Balliol, and their shared love for cinema sparked a lifelong partnership in filmmaking. In this piece, they reflect on their journey from student cinephiles to founders of Egoli Tossell Pictures

Egoli Tossell Pictures calls itself a *European* production company based in Berlin. Over the years, ETP has become one of the most prolific independent producers, always making films internationally, but for better or for worse – only for cinema. Some of you may know *Hector and the Search for Happiness*, starring Simon Pegg, *Russian Ark*, the first-ever single-shot, unedited feature film by Alexander Sokurov, or Olivier Assayas' epic *Carlos*, which won a Golden Globe.

What few people know: Egoli Tossell's roots lie soundly at Balliol. Namely in the year 1984, when two new members – who at that time had little idea they would one day be filmmakers – met during Freshers' Week (at the Cheese and Wine Club, to be exact): classicist Judy Tossell and historian Jens Meurer.

'What few people know: Egoli Tossell's roots lie soundly at Balliol.'

Judy and Jens would go on to spend nearly forty years living and working together, with three children and more than a hundred films produced. They discovered their shared love for cinema in Oxford, mainly at the Penultimate Picture Palace and the Phoenix – often followed by *Funghi Ripieni* at Mama Mia's. *Elephant Man* might have been the Eureka moment.

And yes, there were a few early signs of what was to come when they both joined Michael Hoffman's Oxford Film Foundation, in whose vaults must still lie some of the rushes of Judy's almost-breakthrough acting career.

As it were, many years later, Egoli Tossell teamed up with the by then award-winning Hollywood director Michael Hoffman to produce *The Last Station* – a German-Russian co-production about Tolstoy's final year, which earned Helen Mirren and Christopher Plummer an Oscar nomination each (Plummer's first, at age 80).

The filmmaking began more seriously when Judy – after being rejected by the BBC with her idea of a modern cooking show – moved to

Judy Tossel and Jens Meurer

Berlin in the spring of 1989. She arrived without speaking a word of German and with no inkling of the upheaval about to hit the then-divided city, which remains her home to this day. Her start was an internship with the formidable female producer, Regina Ziegler. Six years later, Judy started her own independent production company, Tossell Pictures. Judy's debut feature film production was *England!*, which launched the career of one of Germany's leading directors, Achim von Borries (*Babylon Berlin*).

Jens followed her to Berlin after a stint of *not* becoming a journalist at Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, opting instead for documentary film. His lucky break was an educational project that saw him spending the best of four years, from 1989 to 1993, in the Soviet Union and Russia, as the former was literally disintegrating around the film crew, shooting a four-part series on 35mm – the only technical format that this East German, West German, and Soviet co-production could share. Out of this, and Jens' documentary in South Africa at the time of the country's first free elections, evolved his Egoli Films shingle (as *Variety* would call it). *Egoli* is the Zulu name for his part-hometown of Johannesburg.

Both production companies thrived in the exciting 1990s Berlin atmosphere – cheap, raw, and full of possibilities. Egoli Tossell Pictures was created when Judy and Jens' second boy, Joseph, was on his way, and it made no sense to have *two* competing independents in *one* family, so they merged.

A long stretch of highs and lows followed as Egoli Tossell grew into one of the larger production houses in Germany, with a string of international productions, including Christopher Plummer's swansong *The Exception*, Alice Throughton's Oxford-set but Hamburg-filmed *The Lesson*, starring Julie Delpy and Richard E. Grant, Paul Verhoeven's *Black Book*, and Ron Howard's *Rush*.

Judy recently wrapped *One Night Only* in Ireland, an uplifting homage to small-town cinema. Jens returned to documentaries (shot on film) with *An Impossible Project*, about the unlikely Doc Quixote who saved Polaroid. And probably the *funniest* film about Brexit you are likely see, *Seaside Special*, received four stars from Peter Bradshaw, who described it as 'unironically brilliant… refreshingly uncynical.'

Egoli Tossell Pictures itself has completed its run of 25 years and will go back to Egoli Films and Tossell Pictures in 2025.

Crafting stories for the screen

Derek Wax (1980) describes his journey from directing plays to producing award-winning TV

I run Wild Mercury Productions, which I founded in 2017. We produce television drama for UK broadcasters and streamers. Recent productions include the factual mini-series *The Sixth Commandment* (BBC), two series of the thriller *The Rig* (Amazon), and the mini-series *Fear* (Prime Video). I work with a small development team, deciding which projects to develop before pitching them to the marketplace.

At Balliol, I read English, but my imagination was also sparked by late-night trips to the Penultimate Picture Palace to see *Apocalypse Now*, the *Godfather* films and lots of European cinema, and to Stratford to see Michael Gambon's *King Lear* and other superb productions.

Coming back to earth, I directed one play during my time at Balliol and was involved with the Balliol Dramsoc and Arts Committee, but I certainly wasn't hitting the ground running as a producer or director aged twenty. Instead, I took in as much great theatre and cinema as I could and spent some time after graduating deciding whether to pursue theatre or film – and how to go about it.

As is still the case today, there was no clear pathway into producing. You had to get involved in small projects, hope they were successful and that they moved you forward. Initially, I aspired to direct. After Balliol, I started directing in fringe and regional theatres, learning a huge amount by working on new plays. In the late 1980s, I worked as Assistant Director on a Chekhov play which helped me become a Staff Director at the National Theatre. Leaving the National in 1990, I formed my own theatre company to direct more ambitious productions, mostly new plays. One such play, *No*

Derek Wax (left) and Tim Spall at BAFTAs 2024

'I had the opportunity to develop and produce dramas that took viewers into intriguing and rarely explored worlds.'

Remission at the Lyric Hammersmith, was set among lifers in a prison cell after a riot. I cast an actor in his early twenties called Daniel Craig in a leading role. What happened to him, I have often wondered.

I was producing and directing theatre in London until my early thirties. Although creatively rewarding, financing plays was a struggle. When my wife and I were expecting our first child, it felt like a reality check. An opportunity came to move into TV and I joined the BBC drama department, who were seeking script editors with experience working with writers. Being a script editor – reporting to the producer – may have seemed a step down from directing, but it was a great opportunity to learn a whole new set of skills.

The BBC was very different in the mid-1990s, with most drama output coming from a few in-house departments like ours, a real creative hub. By the 2000s, competition grew as the independent sector emerged, and I could see exciting opportunities outside the BBC.

I was longing to produce and got my break after five years, making a low-cost series for the fledgling channel BBC Choice, which became BBC 3. The first one, which I also directed, was a comedy about Denis Law's backheeled goal in a 1974 Manchester derby. I was at the game myself, as was the writer, Peter Bowker. One project led to another – I left the BBC to produce dramas for Red Productions in Manchester, then joined LWT/Granada in London, where I developed and produced a mini-series *Sex Traffic* for Channel 4. The drama received critical acclaim and won eight BAFTAs in 2005. Managing a global production was a significant new challenge, but I was deeply invested in this project that had something important to say and helped change perceptions.

Following this, I was invited to join Kudos (known for *Spooks* and *Life on Mars*) as an Executive Producer. Over 12 years there, I had the opportunity to develop and produce dramas that took viewers into intriguing and rarely explored worlds. *The Hour* examined the creation of BBC current affairs during the 1950s Suez crisis; *Humans* imagined

a parallel present where humanoid robots are everyday accessories; *Tsunami: the Aftermath* explored the lives of survivors in Thailand after the 2004 disaster; *Occupation* focused on the way the Iraq war affected three British soldiers; *Lip Service* was a comedy drama about gay life in Glasgow; and *Capital*, based on a John Lanchester novel, delved into the lives and dilemmas of the residents of a street in Clapham.

After 12 years, I felt it was time to start my own company. I founded Wild Mercury, named in honour of Bob Dylan, whose songs rattled the walls of my room and, at times, the whole of Staircase 11 at Balliol.

Some people assume a producer's role is mostly about raising money, but in TV, it's quite a different story. It involves overseeing the whole creative process, from the germination of an idea – whether generated in-house or brought to us by a writer – through to delivery. If we decide to develop an idea into a script, we pitch it to a broadcaster. Development can take a couple of years, and if a project is commissioned, I'm involved at every step, managing alongside my producing team, hiring heads of department and a crew of up to 200 people per series, and collaborating with writer, director and the commissioners. Above all, my role

'My role is about supporting writers in shaping their ideas and realising their vision.'

is about supporting writers in shaping their ideas and realising their vision – a key part of the collaborative process essential for creating compelling drama that resonates with audiences.

The Rig, our Amazon series, came about from a chat with young writer David Macpherson, who had no prior writing credits but brought a compelling vision and deep knowledge of working life on oil rigs. Believing in his idea, we invested in a script we could pitch, leading to Amazon commissioning the series as one of their first UK originals.

With factual drama *The Sixth Commandment*, we worked with a very experienced writer, Sarah Phelps. However, I began developing the project due to a personal connection. I was at Manchester Grammar School in the 1970s and remember Peter Farquhar as a brilliant English teacher. The drama told the true story of his manipulation and murder after retiring as a master at Stowe School, but also expanded beyond that into a broader story about loneliness and emotional connection. I was delighted that Timothy Spall won both a BAFTA and an International Emmy for his performance as Peter.

The Sixth Commandment won the BAFTA for Best Limited Series in 2024, and is a project I'm proud of, alongside BAFTA wins for *Sex Traffic* and *Occupation*, and an International Emmy for *Capital*. But it's not all about awards; it's about investing time and passion in projects you really believe in. Of course, some projects may never move forward. Seeing successful projects come to fruition makes it all worthwhile. At any given time, we typically have about ten projects in funded development and another twenty in earlier stages, waiting for the right moment to pitch.

I love working with writers, directors, and actors in a creative environment. Balliol opened my mind socially and politically – I particularly enjoyed my debates and friendships with the Balliol PPE students of that era. Many of my projects have been inspired by significant issues, but engaging the audience is vitally important. I have enjoyed keeping in touch with the College, including joining the Balliol Society Committee, and have always felt invigorated by what Balliol gave me.

(Clockwise from top left)
***Humans*, Channel4/Kudos 2018; *The Rig*, Amazon/Wild Mercury 2025; *Occupation*, BBC/Kudos 2009; *The Hour*, BBC/Kudos 2011; *The Sixth Commandment*, BBC/Wild Mercury 2023; *Capital*, BBC/Kudos/Hal Shinnie 2015**






Keith Pattison

Stage production of *Oppenheimer*

A Superposition of Worlds

Angus Jackson (1991) shares his journey through the intersecting worlds of film, TV, theatre, and immersive events

I grew up in Birmingham. My mum hadn't been to university, and Dad went only for a term in Glasgow. He'd already served in the army by then, and after a short time in further education, it was mutually agreed he'd missed the moment. I still remember my interview at Balliol with Bill Newton-Smith (Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy 1970–2005) and Roger Cashmore (Fellow and Tutor in Physics 1979–1991, Emeritus Fellow from 2004) to study Physics and Philosophy. Bill tried to get me to admit I was a brain in a vat, but Roger gave me an encouraging nod on the way out, for which I was very grateful.

I spent many of my student terms directing plays at various theatres. I knew directing was a passion quite different from my excitement about quantum mechanics, overseen by my tutors Dave Wark (Fellow and Tutor in Physics 1992–2000) and Jon Butterworth, or Philosophy, overseen by Bill. I was also playing percussion in the orchestras and editing the arts section of *Cherwell*. Three years later, at the final graduation dinner, Roger Cashmore was there again. He leaned across and meaningfully said to me, 'I don't mind how people spend their time here, as long as they don't waste it.' I jumped – I wasn't sure if he knew how much time I'd spent pursuing my interests outside the physics department, but looking back, I admire my refusal to be categorised.

'I saw everything and pitched projects left, right, and centre.'

I graduated and became an unpaid assistant theatre director on a few shows. I cast and directed a 12-year-old Amy Winehouse, then got a paid job at The Bush Theatre in London, a 100-seat theatre exclusively for new writing. I was told to watch and learn. There were plays by Enda Walsh and Conor McPherson, with actors including Cillian Murphy and Kate Beckinsale. It felt like the most important theatre in the world. I joined Channel 4's Drama department as a script editor – still wanting to be across more than one creative world – and was asked to direct a show at The Bush. I pitched plays I loved, and soon I was directing productions in Birmingham, Sheffield, and Clywd. After Patrick Marber saw my production of his play *Dealer's Choice* in Birmingham, Nick Hytner asked me to direct a new play at The National Theatre – *Elmina's Kitchen*, about a London Caribbean restaurant. It received great reviews, transferred to the West End, and went on to win awards.

Kwame Kwei-Armah, who wrote *Elmina's Kitchen*, was a great influence on me. We made a BBC film of the show and both got nominated for BAFTAs. I managed to move back and forth between worlds, doing a run of shows at The National while keeping a job at Channel 4 and Film4 for Tessa Ross and Juliette Howell. I saw everything and pitched projects left, right, and centre. My strategy is best described as

'play the cards you are dealt.' I enjoyed immersing myself in different worlds, as I had at Balliol. Periodically, some senior figures have advised me to be more defined, while others have encouraged me to keep the multiplicity.

Meanwhile, I was Associate Director of Chichester, directing one or two shows a year for Jonathan Church. We moved a lot of those shows to the West End. I look back now and realise how lucky I was to have a professional home. The actor Elliot Levey said to me the great thing about being invited to act in shows is that it's 'somebody else's hustle.' For me, that was *Goodnight Mr Tom*. David Wood adapted from Michelle Magorian's exquisite book, and Jonathan brought me on as director. We chopped and changed it, added songs, marshalled children and puppets, and won an Olivier Award.

Greg Doran, Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), saw a production of *King Lear* I had directed in New York and sent me Tom Morton-Smith's new epic play about Oppenheimer. Greg had no idea I had any background in physics – I'd more or less kept that quiet. I managed to contact Dave Wark and asked him to come and teach the actors about the physics involved. He agreed immediately and, by all accounts, had the time of his life. When an actor asked him a detailed question about atomic weight in front of everyone, Dave replied, 'That's the semi-empirical mass formula. Angus will explain it to you in the tea break.' I said, 'I really won't.' Dave said, 'Well, you should have been at my lecture in your fifth term, week three.' Dave sourced equations from Edward Teller's papers of the time and the actors chalked them all over the set every night, which was a huge blackboard beautifully designed by Rob Innes-Hopkins. Jon Butterworth, fresh from writing his fab book on the Higgs boson, got involved too, checking the equations from the front row. Sandy Foster, one of the brilliant actors, said in rehearsals, 'Don't worry, the equations are like lines, you just have to learn them, you don't have to know what they mean.'

Another RSC show of mine, a new version of *Don Quixote* full of songs and clowning, transferred to the West End. As a teenager I'd seen David Thacker's memorable production of *Coriolanus* with Toby Stephens, and I mentioned

Angus Jackson

'I knew directing was a passion quite different from my excitement about quantum mechanics.'

to Greg Doran I'd like to do the play. He responded by giving me a season of Shakespeare's Roman plays, to produce all four as a play cycle, and direct two, including *Coriolanus*.

The pendulum had swung all the way to classical theatre, and I could feel it starting its motion back. I became Creative Director of Secret Cinema for a live, immersive show of *Casino Royale*. Now I was pitching stories to Barbara Broccoli, securing five Aston Martins, 75 actors, and creating a live aerial helicopter fight stunt, performed in London and Shanghai. Secret Cinema is a crucible of brilliant individuals. These people love films and aren't constrained by anything.

Secret Cinema led to other opportunities. I got a commission to adapt a vast novel, and Tom Morton-Smith and I are co-writing a film set in a restaurant, as *Elmina's Kitchen* is. I directed an abrasive contemporary short film with Patrick Stewart for *The Guardian* set in the Southwark Bear Garden. I wasn't finished with the idea, so I wrote a play about bear baiting in 1583. I recently came full circle and directed a rehearsed reading of it at The National.

I just submitted a time travel drama to a receptive TV company. Alex Kaiserman (2007, Fairfax Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy) at Balliol gave a superb online lecture about the philosophy of time travel, and it led me back to Jon Butterworth and Dave Wark to discuss the physics one might actually use to time travel today. Every project seems to spark the next, like an accumulator bet for careers.

At the end of *Oppenheimer*'s run at the RSC, before embarking on our transfer to the West End (where, I am told, Christopher Nolan saw it), we had a celebratory dinner. The guests were an impressive mix of scientists and artists. Roger Cashmore was there. I told him I was the director of the play and reminded him that he interviewed me years previously for a place to study Physics and Philosophy. I also reminded him that he had made the comment on my last night about not favouring people who wasted their time at Balliol. He paused and said, 'Well I think we can now agree that you didn't.'


Secret Cinema: Casino Royale

Luke Dyson

The art and business of theatre production

Ramin Sabi (2010) discusses his creative process, the challenges of theatre production, and his innovative funding approach

My time at Balliol was central to my journey toward becoming a theatre producer. Starting out by writing and directing the College's entry to the University's 'Cuppers' competition (my metatheatrical retelling of Marilyn Monroe's life, reimagined as heroines across 2,000 years of literature, somehow did not win), I quickly realised that producing might be a better balance of creativity and organisation. Oxford's system – comprising many theatres and funding pots (including the Balliol Drama Society's, which I ran while there) – required pitching and applications, making the process of producing theatre much more akin to the real world than nearly any other student drama process. Not many universities allow students to take tens of thousands of pounds of personal risk to mount shows in the town's professional venue. The resources of the Michael Pilch Studio to rehearse and put on smaller productions was a great gift from Balliol, and my PPE degree encouraged the ideation of *A Theory of Justice: the Musical!*, which is still appreciated across the globe today (by a small niche of political theory afficionados).

I already had a production company upon graduating (the somewhat pretentious name of Deus Ex Machina Productions still exists to this day) so quickly set about producing Off West End plays while seizing opportunities to be a junior partner on big West End musicals. Now, the company has eight permanent employees and works with hundreds of people every year, creating plays and musicals in London and around the world, while also providing professional services to other companies.

The creative process for a new show usually starts with someone bringing an idea that interests me, has something to say about the world, and has an audience that would want to see it. Before starting, we model a potential commercial path, even if it's a decade away. Often shows are based on some form of intellectual property, so acquiring the rights becomes the first big hurdle. Next, we determine the best medium, develop a first draft, and assess where to launch in order to shape the creative journey. At that point, we attach a director and pitch to venues at the appropriate scale. Normally, we'd present a workshop of the show to attract partners and backers and learn more about what the material needs creatively. On securing a venue, we build a design team, cast, and craft a marketing strategy, identifying target demographics and necessary content. Once the production is up, a lot will change over the course of preview performances before we open to press. With musicals, it generally takes at least two productions to get the show right, so many changes happen in each iteration. If a show is successful, we explore additional markets or licensing opportunities.

Ramin Sabi

'With musicals, it generally takes at least two productions to get the show right.'

These are paths I've followed for *Ride*, a musical about the first woman to cycle around the world; a musical adaptation of global bestseller, *The Book Thief*; and about 20 new plays and musicals currently in development. A project that's taking a lot of my energy right now is solving one of the biggest challenges I face: raising money for each project from a wide range of individuals (the image of Max Bialystock flirting with grandmothers in New York is not far off from reality).

My solution? An investment fund that divides theatrical projects into different risk tranches (secured lending against tax credits, unsecured mezzanine lending, and high-risk, high-return equity investing). This division should allow institutional investors to access the sector at their preferred level and create a more business-focused approach to projects. The aim is to support other producers to spend less time raising money and more on the productions themselves – this will also hopefully allow people with strong projects but without large networks of wealthy individuals to break into leadership roles. Pending regulatory approval, this should be operational in 2025.

Theatre at Balliol

Rosabel Mahendra (2022, President of the Drama Society and Michael Pilch Studio 2023-2024) explains how theatre became an unexpected yet integral part of her time at Balliol

Coming to Balliol to study PPE, I never imagined that theatre would comprise such a large part of my time, nor in such unexpected ways. Following a dry spell during the COVID-19 years, where theatre involvement was limited to Zoom performances, a renewed sense of enthusiasm and increased funding opportunities produced an abundance of theatrical opportunities, not least at Balliol's own black box studio – The Michael Pilch Studio. In my second year, I ended up leading the Studio alongside a committee of other Balliol students, overseeing 20 shows involving students from across the University. These ranged from the experimental and absurd to more traditional plays: Ibsen, Chekov and of course, Shakespeare featured heavily among the shows students bid to perform.

Running the Pilch was not without its ups and downs – some of almost biblical proportions, such as when a flood sought to derail one performance. I reached a low myself when I drew a blank in a performance of Nöel Coward's *Present Laughter*, distracted by a fake moustache peeling off the face of another actor. Thankfully, soggy performances and bad adhesive were rare occurrences, and the theatre went on transforming each week from one elaborate set to another. These included revolving stages, creative uses of all kinds of fabric, and (real!) grass. Despite the occasional amateur theatre mishaps, there were genuinely impressive writing, performances, and technical delivery, making this unique opportunity to run a theatre all the more special and something I am incredibly grateful to Balliol for.

Beyond the Jowett Walk gates, I also had a delightful time floating around Magdalen's grounds rehearsing for a garden play production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – my first real experience performing Shakespeare. It was an intimidating prospect then to get a lead role in Sir Gregory Doran's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Oxford Playhouse. Acting alongside two other Balliol students, we were handed an incredible opportunity to work with the former Royal Shakespeare Company director. As part of his role as the Cameron Macintosh Visiting Professor, he decided to put on the last play of Shakespeare's First Folio he had yet to direct. Despite his vast experience working with the likes of Dame Judi Dench and David Tennant, he chose to work with students and consequently was faced with a different challenge: to shape actors and crew with comparatively little dramatic experience.

'Running the Pilch was not without its ups and downs.'

Rosie Mahendra in *The Cherry Orchard* at the Oxford Playhouse

Inevitably, I learnt a great deal under his direction. His warmth and kindness fostered an inclusive atmosphere that quickly dissipated whatever anxieties we had before arriving at rehearsals. These began with a focus on understanding the text well. Before staging the play, we would sit down and go through each scene line by line, not only to ensure we understood the text but also how it would translate into the production's contemporary setting. We were continuously encouraged to voice our thoughts, and this democratic style of directing bled into the culture of the production. Everyone was genuinely excited to be involved, which translated into the performances themselves. One of the best aspects of theatre is the camaraderie and collaboration that emerge from putting on a show – and Doran knew exactly how to foster this spirit.

The play is, in his own words, about 'young people, it's about them leaving home, it's about them making a way in the world for themselves.' Naturally, we found ourselves reflecting on our own experiences. For me, since coming to Balliol, theatre has played a central part in my life: it has not only been a source of great fun but has also shaped how I think and approach different aspects of my life. This has certainly enriched how I will look back on my experience here.

JCR Presidents across the decades

Michael Burton (1965)

JCR President 1967–1968

I look back at my time as JCR President (1967-1968) with enormous enjoyment. It was a time of change, and we were able to negotiate with the College a number of long overdue reforms – the end of 'gate hours', which required women to leave College by 11.00pm, and residents to return by midnight or risk climbing up the drainpipe in St Giles, and representation on College committees – for the first time, we had some say in the way the College was run. Apart from chairing the regular and often entertaining JCR meetings (motions to install a contraceptive machine in College featured at least twice), I had to liaise with the College on numerous matters, negotiating with batteling Jacko Jackson the Bursar or Willibund the Dean. There was a JCR President's book, left in the JCR for complaints and suggestions, which was frequently amusing but sometimes demanding. As President, I had to complete the right-hand page. About ten years ago, somebody found the book from my time and sent it to me, and I donated it to the College. The JCR ran a number of services for our members (still single-sex then and for some years thereafter), and I had a staff for which I was responsible, headed by the JCR Steward, Ray North, and a barman, along with an accountant down in the dark JCR office on Staircase 16 next to the JCR bar.

As JCR President, I became involved in University politics as a College representative and a member of what was then called the Student Council, at a time when students in the USA and elsewhere were involved in vigorous campaigns for change. It was, however, just before the student unrest in Oxford of the following year. We were involved at that stage in constitutional campaigns. The University was altering its Statutes, and we discovered a way to petition the Privy Council – whose approval was required for the new Statutes – to oppose the changes unless they included student representation and reforms to the Proctors' outdated disciplinary system. I became President of the 29 Petitioners, and our case was to be put before the Universities Committee of the Privy Council (which had never met since its formation in 1870!). To prevent the stalemate that followed, the University gave in (amid publicity which even reached the national press), setting up an inquiry and appointing Professor Hart to produce the Hart Report. A real example of successful direct action and achieved by constitutional means, without a sit-in! I had, meanwhile, been elected the first President of the Student Representative Council (SRC), the predecessor of the Student Union, and I was the Petitioners' chief spokesman. I still treasure one press headline: '"The Cat's among the Pigeons" says Burton'. I featured in Isis as their monthly 'Isis Idol'. The Hart Report ultimately recommended the official recognition of the SRC and its incorporation in the new Statutes, along with a reformed and modernised disciplinary system, exactly as we had sought.

'It was a time of change, and we were able to negotiate with the College a number of long overdue reforms.'

Michael Burton featured in *Isis* as their monthly 'Isis Idol'

All this somewhat impinged on my work, but I had changed after Classics Mods to Law, and was able to ease my way into my new subject under the wonderful suzerainty of Don Harris (Fellow and Tutor in Jurisprudence 1956–1976, Emeritus Fellow 1993–2020) and Neil McCormick (Fellow and Tutor in Jurisprudence 1967–1972, Honorary Fellow 2008–2009), whom I can still remember leading the charge down the staircases in a drunken version of staircase golf, after the annual Younger Society dinner, shouting in full Scottish brogue the war cry (named after our most boring land law textbook) 'Maudsley and Burn!' That may have been the same Younger Dinner at which I was appointed by a visiting dignitary, Freddie Mpanga, Attorney General to King Freddie of Buganda, as Admiral of the Fleet of Buganda (while appointing Trevor Milne-Day (1966) and Bill Elland (1966) to significant positions in the Buganda army and police force). Sadly, I was soon to discover that Buganda, landlocked, has no navy!

Can I please be Balliol JCR President again!?

Geoffrey Chambers (1975)

JCR President 1977-1978

When I came up to Balliol in September 1975, Christopher Hill had been Master for a decade. He was a famous and prominent Marxist. Curmudgeonly and contrarian, he was also kind and committed to the wellbeing and success of all the junior members of the College. Much more progressive than most of the Senior Common Room, he intervened to support and protect quite a number of undergraduates who had got sideways with the College administration over political, financial, or other matters.

When I presented myself for election as President of the Junior Common Room in Trinity 1976, kind and considerate as he had always been to me, I am sure Hill would have preferred my opponent – an old Etonian Maoist with deep family connections to the College and a very Balliolesque heritage of close relatives with noted roles in Parliament.

Happily for me, the unusual twin burdens of the unpopularity of Etonians in some circles and Maoists in others left an avenue for a Canadian moderate progressive to come up the middle.

My first meeting with the Master after being elected was a warm and cordial drink in his rooms in the Garden Quad. I had an agenda to lay out: a detailed position on fees, an adamant demand for divestiture of all College investments in South Africa, the re-establishment of a College newspaper, the admission of women, and a few other strident demands, as was the style of the times.

Hill was evasive on the matter of fees over which, to be fair, the College had very little control. He was supportive of our other goals but clear and adamant on the matter of taking Balliol co-ed. Over the next year, in the face of quite a lot of resistance from some members of the SCR and some quite prominent Old Members, Hill wove a constructive and successful campaign to a happy and historically successful conclusion, always allowing the credit for progress to be disproportionately attributed to Junior and Middle members of College. I blush to remember how proud we were to have achieved this major change and how little we appreciated the calm, determined, and skillful hand of the Master guiding the College community toward a major and necessary change.

We got the College weekly newspaper going again under the banner of 'Dervorguilla'

I am happy to report that the rest of our agenda also fared well enough. We had several very minor but pleasing victories on fees. We got some real and some symbolic concessions on South African investments. As I remember, Warburg Pincus didn't subscribe to our criteria regarding which companies were dirty-handed profiteers of apartheid. We got the College weekly newspaper going again under the banner of 'Dervorguilla'. We commissioned works of art and music from younger Old Members. We got the Manor more involved in College sports. And it was all great fun.

The great Balliol tradition of mild to serious contrarian commentary on public affairs has rendered great service to the modern world. In no particular order: Christopher Hitchens (1967), Richard Dawkins (1959), Rory Stewart (1992), Charles Taylor (1952), not to mention the more mainstream contributions of Harold MacMillan (1912), Roy Jenkins (1938), Denis Healey (1936), and Edward Heath (1935). To feel a connection, an inspiration from such figures is a great privilege and a spur to all of us to put our shoulder to the wheel and get something done.

My final shout-out in these reflections on the last half-century at the College is to the Balliol Historians of my year and after, who have produced works of real interest and value. Giles MacDonogh (1975) and Roddy Matthews (1975) come to mind, as does Dan Snow (1998), whose take on the siege of Quebec makes me proud to be a Balliol man and a Canadian.

Geoffrey Chambers asking Richard Nixon a question at the Oxford Union in 1978

Some members of the 1982 JCR Committee, with Catherine Roe in the middle

'When I oversaw the next election, it felt as though the issue of a President's gender had ceased to matter.'

Catherine Roe (1980)

JCR President 1981-1982

'Catherine the Great?' asked *Dervorguilla* following my election as Balliol's first woman JCR President in November 1981 (on the feast day of its patron saint, Catherine). The female to male ratio had recently improved with the arrival of the third year of women, but in those pioneer years we were still hugely outnumbered. Admitting women had taken so long – over 700 years – that the country had a woman Prime Minister first. Into this male history we stepped and, in the absence of College policies or support systems for women, simply got on with it.

Shortly after I arrived at Balliol, students went on a rent strike against price rises. They massed on the steps of Hall to protest. If one of the reasons you came to Balliol was its reputation as the college still closest to the great student protest days of the 1960s, it was thrilling. But the JCR was far from harmonious. It was multi-factional and, for many, General Meetings (GMs) were intimidating.

'I walked straight into a storm.'

I was seeking a broad-based mandate and did not expect opposition because I was a woman, though others saw it coming. Some supporters asked me to cut my (long, blond) hair. I declined but wore jeans and baggy jumpers throughout the campaign (putting on a dress the moment the ballot closed). Then, as it began to look as though I might win, everything changed. A small but influential group began to campaign against me in an underhanded and misogynist way. I realised winning mattered.

I was elected by an unprecedented majority ('an overwhelming triumph' said *Dervorguilla*) and am sure this result owed much to distaste for the sexist tactics used against me. I was happy to have won but apprehensive. The JCR was riven by factionalism, I was told; my Committee (mainly male) irreconcilably divided; the SCR would not take me seriously.

I walked straight into a storm. The front gate had always been open 24/7, but a poorly attended final GM under my predecessor had voted to close it. A disgruntled JCR returned after Christmas to a locked gate, and my first GM turned into a survival course, my predecessor and I slugging it out over whether the decision could be overturned, using the JCR Constitution as our weapon. Then, at my first Executive Committee meeting (where students were represented in the running of the College), he and I waged war again to the bemusement of the SCR members who might have expected a united student front. Though the SCR wanted the gate closed, enough of them voted with me to reopen it. They did not say so, but I sensed they felt they should show solidarity with the JCR's first woman President.

My baptism of fire was over. Things calmed down. GMs were sometimes strongly divided over political issues, but they felt less intimidating. The Committee worked together surprisingly harmoniously. The SCR never gave me the slightest indication that it could not take me seriously. When I oversaw the next election, it felt as though the issue of a President's gender had ceased to matter.

So much has changed since then. The free tuition we took for granted is gone. While we, in a Cold War climate, marched against nuclear destruction, students today march to save the planet from climate extinction. Colleges have an abundance of welfare-related policies and support systems. The gate is closed at night – how could it be otherwise when Balliol is buffeted by immense waves of tourists? And being a female JCR President is pretty normal.

Andrew Copson (1999)

JCR President 2001–2002

It was a good few years after the end of my time as JCR president before I had ultimate responsibility for the same budget or size of team (or staff) that I had then. That is what stands out in my memory of a period that is now over two decades ago – the fact that the Balliol JCR at the turn of the century, especially in comparison with other colleges, was such a large operation. It wasn't just that we boasted the only student-run bar. The JCR pantry's four meals a day fed more students than the College Hall! The experience in early adulthood of being responsible for such an operation, delivered in a deliberative way through general meetings has stayed with me. Underlying it all were implicit values of democracy and an ironically liberating sense that we were responsible for ourselves. The second thing that sticks with me is the memory that we were unambiguously the most redistributive of JCRs, taking JCR fees through battels and spending it on tampons, lube, extra condoms (for when the free ones ran out), pictures (one of the best collections in the University), food subsidies, and a lot more.

'The JCR pantry's four meals a day fed more students than the College Hall!'

The active and political nature of the JCR was a selling point of Balliol in the Alternative Prospectus when I was choosing a college, and so I remember quite a few protests too. A lot of these were domestic – protests against formal halls or new kitchen charges or raised rents. Aside from the domestic, but still within the world of student policy, there were occupations against fees (although it seemed clear that the battle for free university education had been lost by that point), and in the wider world, marches against sanctions in Iraq and for gay rights, like the scrapping of section 28. The latter had a particularly strong impact on me as it was the first time, as a young gay person, that I had experienced complete and total solidarity from straight people – no JCR members opposed these policies in meetings at all.

Politics was important but above all, the JCR was a community and a social space, and the job of the JCR committee was to look after that. When I arrived at Balliol, we were still shouting up at windows, leaving notes on doors, and sending letters through the pigeon post. When I left, almost everyone had mobile phones and life was well on its way to becoming online. Life in the JCR was probably the last solely offline community I experienced, and the communal aspects stick with me all the more because of that. We watched the first US missiles hit Afghanistan in the JCR TV room together. Notice boards were a genuine way of conveying information, and people found out what had happened the night before at breakfast together. Being responsible for maintaining that convivial atmosphere, physically and culturally, instilled a way of behaving that I've carried with me throughout my life.

Andrew Copson (right of banner) and other Balliol JCR membrs in Cornmarket Street for the Queer Rights march in 2000

'Life in the JCR was probably the last solely offline community I experienced.'

Jack Hawkins (2004)

JCR President 2006-2007

Balliol is something of a fortress – architecturally, with its imposing medieval walls and tiny front aperture, through which anyone above average height has to duck to enter; and culturally, with its left-leaning bent and active, progressive politics, sometimes at odds with the majority surrounding it. Its only physical vulnerability is the low wall by Trinity – an access point exploited for renditions of a Gordouli, lyrically arguing a superior sociopolitical heritage.

It's that sense of security that I remember most fondly about my time at Balliol. It gave me a safe space in which to learn and grow. A protective bubble that could, if one so chose, allow the great privilege of immersing oneself in learning, friendships, and all manner of discoveries safe inside Balliol's real, and metaphorical, walls.

Two decades ago, I was lucky enough to have the chance to do just this, and to spend one of my three years there as JCR President. Two decades ago! Long enough to realise that I don't think I did the role justice.

The responsibilities of a JCR President are twofold. It's about operational management, resource allocation, and team leadership, but more importantly, it's about upholding a set of principles: some long-held and generational, others more volatile, driven by fresh-thinking, and a passion not to unquestioningly accept the status quo.

Student groups tend to take on the mantle of challenging convention and testing the narrative of those in power. The JCR President, aside from the management of some light operational items, should embody the collective voice of the student body. While no democratic community shares identical views, the President channels their shared aspirations toward meaningful change. Not just as a mouthpiece, but as a catalyst that drives discussion, raises questions, and encourages debate.

Jack Hawkins (left) with his predecessor, Daniel-Konrad Cooper (2002)

That was the role, though I didn't fully appreciate it at the time.

Being a good JCR President should be a selfless act. It should be about using your time, skills, determination, and moral compass to continue the tradition of the role. Instead, I was led by ego. While I'm sure I gave good answers at the hustings, I'm not sure I was entirely truthful. With my colleagues or with myself.

'It's that sense of security that I remember most fondly about my time at Balliol.'

'Being a good JCR President should be a selfless act.'

I am, however, incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity. It taught me a valuable lesson – albeit one that took me many more years to realise – that leadership isn't about personal elevation but about elevating principles and people.

Fortress Balliol doesn't just keep the distractions of the world out; it holds a community together. A community that, when properly led, could stand for something greater than any individual ambition. The architecture, culture, and history exist to protect us, our ideas, and to give us the courage to voice them.

Twenty years on, I find myself grateful for that lesson, however delayed. Some things reveal themselves only when we're finally ready to learn them.

Ben Marshall (2010)

JCR President 2011-2012

Balliol is no stranger to politics. It was one of the reasons I applied – the activism, the autonomy, the assuredness; that, and being able to walk on the grass.

But while each generation feels its fight is the fiercest, the JCR in 2011/2012 felt especially fraught. The Browne Review had just recommended tripling the tuition fee cap, sparking the largest education protests in British history, and inside Balliol's walls, we harboured similar anti-establishment anger at the introduction of a miscellaneous 'domus charge' and whispers of losing control of the Lindsay Bar.

Every GM was peppered with 'us vs them' problems, and I – stumbling uncertainly from one thing to the next – had no idea how to solve them.

Thankfully (I realised later), these challenges were never one person's to solve. I remember reading before I knew how 'Michaelmas' was pronounced that the JCR isn't only the room, it's the people. One of the best lessons being JCR President taught me (and there were many) was how to get out of the way.

'But while each generation feels its fight is the fiercest, the JCR in 2011/2012 felt especially fraught.'

As the year went on, we saw a suite of innovations. The JCR Committee successfully lobbied the College to fly the rainbow flag – possibly the first time it raised a flag other than the crest or the Union Jack. Our treasurer developed a new rental formula to keep room prices accessible to more students. Pantry, the beating heart of the JCR, remained financially (even if not nutritionally) healthy, and our relationship with the College became healthier too. We capped off the year laying the foundations for a 750th Commemoration Ball, which was the perfect celebration of our long and colourful history.

It took several years after graduation before I worked as hard – and several more before life became close to as intense. That's something you don't realise you're signing up for when you decide to study, socialise, sleep (and run an organisation) all in the same place – especially when the place is a castle full of fantastically funny and insecure overachievers.

But when I look back, it's not the underground committee meetings or Sunday night essay crises that I remember; it's playing Bulldog barefoot in the quad, scoffing down 2kg of baked beans in the Jowett kitchen, napping on the newly upholstered JCR sofas, and chatting – with everyone about anything. In my mind, Balliol is usually sunny.

That's one reason I don't often go back. Every year, a new set of students has the chance to paint their own Balliol memories, maybe in chalk, but hopefully in something stronger. Part of the magic is that for seventy-six decades, the College – like the JCR – has been less about the place and more about the people who float through it for what might be a couple of the hardest and most precious years of their lives. The house flourishes when its students flourish, whatever that means for them.

For me, Balliol opened the door to a life I hadn't been capable of imagining. It's something I'll always be grateful for. If I could go back in time with the knowledge I have now and spend another year as JCR President, there are any number of things I'd do differently. But one thing I wouldn't change is running in the first place, even if just for the chance to say thank you.

'For me, Balliol opened the door to a life I hadn't been capable of imagining.'

Ben Marshall (front, in blue) playing a game of Bulldog with fellow students in the Garden Quad

Amerleen Hundle (2022)

JCR President 2023-2024

'This support and sense of community inspired me to run for JCR President.'


Amerleen Hundle

As a Year 13 student faced with the daunting task of selecting an Oxford college to apply to, I felt incredibly overwhelmed. Some colleges were larger, others wealthier, and some lacked facilities or sufficient accommodation. Yet, through all my research, one college stood out: Balliol. Renowned for its strong sense of community, friendship, and support, it seemed like the perfect place for me.

Three years later, I firmly believe choosing Balliol was the best decision I've ever made. Michaelmas Term of my first year was a challenging time – I struggled to balance the academic workload with the social life that others seemed to enjoy effortlessly. However, the unwavering support from tutors, welfare teams, and fellow students, particularly those on the JCR committee, helped me overcome those struggles and ultimately thrive within the University.

This support and sense of community inspired me to run for JCR President. I wanted every student to feel welcome at a college I was so proud to call home. Having such an incredible committee was instrumental in achieving this goal. The Women's Reps and LGBTQ+ Reps created supportive spaces for their respective communities, while the Ethnic Minority Officers organised race workshops to educate the College on racism and microaggressions. The Lindsay Bar continues to flourish, maintaining its reputation as the best college bar, and Balliol Bops have become popular events across the University.

One of my key ambitions as President was to revive the Pantry. Hearing stories and seeing photos of the Pantry before COVID-19 left me shocked at its decline. During my first year, the kitchen was rarely open and often poorly attended. I wanted to restore its vibrancy and make the JCR a lively space once again. Thanks to the outstanding efforts of my Foodies (Pantry Officers), who spent countless hours cleaning, completing health reports, and organising safety checks, I'm sure alumni will be happy to hear the Pantry is now open multiple times a week. From dinners and brunches to frequent cafés offering tea, coffee, cakes, and toasties, the JCR is once again filled with students.

Of course, the year has not been without challenges. In true Balliol spirit, political discussions have flourished, and we've worked hard to ensure debates are respectful while making meaningful progress. General Meeting motions surrounding the conflict in Gaza were particularly prominent. As President and Chair, I faced the difficult task of remaining unbiased and refraining from sharing personal opinions. Multiple open letters and statements were voted on and released, all while ensuring welfare representatives and safe spaces were available for anyone feeling uncomfortable, targeted, or discriminated against. It is vital to foster these discussions within the student body whilst looking after student welfare.

A highlight of my presidency was organising the JCR Presidents' Dinner, where former JCR Presidents and Vice Presidents were invited back to Balliol. Hearing their stories and experiences was fascinating, and I was in awe of the students who shaped the College in their time. I firmly believe the Balliol spirit remains strong – we simply need to continue bringing it to light.

I hope future JCR Presidents uphold this sense of community, political activism, and, of course, our rivalry with Trinity College, ensuring Balliol thrives for years to come.

On books

Adam Smyth (Professor of English Literature and the History of the Book, A.C. Bradley-J.C. Maxwell Fellow and Tutor in English Literature), author of *The Book-Makers: A History of the Book in 18 Remarkable Lives* (2024), invites us to look at books as objects with their own histories, as well as conveyors of texts

The light-bulb moment for me came when I was an MA student in the 1990s studying Renaissance literature, and for the first time, ordered up in the British Library the original copy of the printed anthology of poetry I was working on. I remember the title: *Witts Interpreter, or The new Parnassus* (1655). What arrived at my desk was a book, but not as I knew it. The binding was crumbling, and the internal stitching exposed; the endleaves were made not of clean blank paper, but of recycled pages cut-and-pasted from some other book; the title-page made no note of any editor or author, and all the poems were printed without attributions, despite the fact that I knew them to be by William Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, and Ben Jonson; and the margins of the pages were covered with handwritten annotations by 17th-century readers – pointing fingers, ticks and crosses, underlinings, drawings of little flowers, scribbled disagreements. This was a book, but it wasn't the tidy, rational, familiar object I was expecting: it was something weirder, a mess of improvisation, fragile and falling apart even as it vaulted down the centuries to meet me.

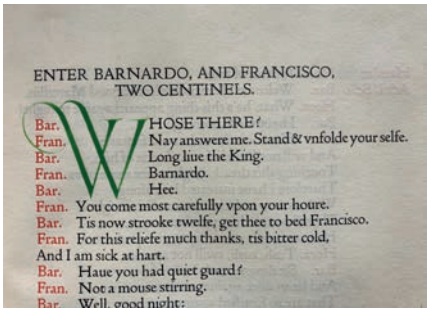
When we think of a book today, it probably seems a deeply familiar object – we know the weight of it in our hands, and we've grown used to its structure and logic: of sequence, of page turns, of reading as a movement through time and through space, of double-spread openings, of linearity held in check by the possibility of reading back. We place books on shelves or leave them on tables or we put them in our bag for the journey: we know what to do with them. Sometimes they fade into the background. But one of the purposes of book history is to unsettle this sense of familiarity, and to show that the book is never a neutral carrier of text, but a loud presence that shapes meaning.

Adam Smyth

'The book is never a neutral carrier of text, but a loud presence that shapes meaning.'

To consider the history of the printed book from its European origins in the late 15th century to our moment today is to be continually confronted with jolts of surprise. Until the 19th century, paper was made from recycled old clothes – those elegant white pages of theological speculation you're perusing in Balliol's Archive Room were once someone's underwear. ('And may not dirty Socks, from off the feet', wrote poet and Thames waterman John Taylor in 1620, 'From thence be turn'd to a *Crowne-paper* sheet?'). When the Bodleian Library's copy of Shakespeare's First Folio (1623) was sent to a local Oxford bookbinder who rejoiced in the name William Wildgoose, that binder tore up old sheets from a 1485 copy of Cicero's *Of Duties* and glued them in as binding supports. Read that Shakespeare today – which you can do, in the Weston Library – and you can still see these fragments of Cicero, hovering around the edges of Shakespeare's book. In Hammersmith at the start of the 20th century, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson set up the Doves Press to produce beautiful books that looked like medieval objects: printed in a type face that recalled 1470s Venice, and in vellum bindings that appeared medieval. Doves Press books, like their *Hamlet* from 1909, were purposeful anachronisms: books that didn't fit, attempts to refuse the drift of technology at a time when industrial book production was developing fast.

The book is a weird and magical object, and the task of book history is to remind us constantly of that strangeness.



ENTER BARNARDO, AND FRANCISCO, TWO CENTINELS.

Bar. WHOSE THERE?
Fran. Nay answere me. Stand & vnfolde your selfe.
Bar. Long liue the King.
Fran. Barnardo.
Bar. Hee.
Fran. You come most carefully vpon your houre.
Bar. Tis now strooke twelfe, get thee to bed Francisco.
Fran. For this reliefe much thanks, tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at hart.
Bar. Haue you had quiet guard?
Fran. Not a mouse stirring.
Bar. Well, good night:

By permission of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

The tragicall historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke **(Doves Press, 1909)**

Book curses

Eleanor Baker (Stipendiary Lecturer in Old and Middle English 2024-2025) explores the fascinating history of threats inscribed in books to protect them against thieves

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a monk working in the scriptorium of a medieval monastery. You sit in a wooden chair worn smooth by rough wool habits, and on the desk before you sits a book. You have contributed a great deal to the creation of this book: you have sat squinting at its pages in the thin winter sunlight as you penned its words; you have conquered the prickle of heat and frustration as you corrected errors while other monks enjoyed the sunny herb garden; you have prayed through the times your fingers were cramped with the effort of controlling your quill pen. But your work is now complete: its text is written, and its pages are sewn and bound. You feel, naturally, protective of it. It represents a great deal of time and labour on your part and is now a valuable object – both in terms of its material worth, and the knowledge it contains – and you are anxious to protect it. You dip your quill pen in the horn of ink one last time, and write these words on the blank flyleaf of the manuscript:

Balliol College Archives and Manuscripts

A manuscript with a curse on top of the page

Eleanor Baker

Qui librum istum alienaverit anathema sit. Amen.
May he who steals this book be anathema. Amen.

This may read like the start of a historical thriller novel, but the practice of writing these kinds of inscriptions in medieval manuscripts was rather common, and book-owners continue to write them now. I first came across these bookish maledictions while studying for my doctorate in medieval literature here at the University of Oxford, and they form the subject of my first trade-press book, *Book Curses* (Bodleian Publishing, 2024). *Book Curses* contains a collection of inscriptions on stone stele, legal documents, manuscripts and printed books from antiquity to the present day which, I argue, offer insight into how people across literary history have understood the value and threat of the written word.

Book curses range in their tone, as well as in their setting. As in the curse above, many of these curses threaten 'anathema', which can refer specifically to excommunication but also to a more general sense of cursing, and there are other threats – such as that of hanging, or damnation – which also feature in curses throughout literary history. Others, however, are more reflective of the time in which they were written and mention contemporary forms of judicial punishment or prevalent illnesses. That is not to say, however, that these curses were always penned or read as earnest threats, and indeed there are a great deal of curses which incorporate exaggerated threats or puns in a way that renders them more humorous than harmful. Children, adults, men, women, nobles, monks, students, cowboys and a man who calls himself 'Pookefart' (literally, 'goblin fart') all prove themselves to be vicious cursers, and their curses appear variously, from neatly written inscriptions at the end of manuscripts, to scribbles in margins, and commissioned bookplates pasted neatly into font covers.

Balliol College Library, too, possesses many manuscripts containing curses. The 12th-century manuscript MS 13 was previously owned by the Benedictine abbey of Humberstone in Lincolnshire, and they leave their book curse at the beginning of the first folio:

Hic est liber sancte Marie de Humbrestein. Si quis eum absportaverit vel furatus fuerit, anathema sit.
The is the book of St Mary's of Humberstone.
If anyone carries away or steals it, let them be anathema.

The manuscript was presumably donated by William of Gray, Bishop of Ely, who donated many of the medieval manuscripts which now belong to Balliol College – but no account of this is offered in the manuscript. Who knows whether Gray triggered the manuscript's curse.

The art and culture of book collecting

Mark Storey (1981) shares his passion for books – not just as literary works, but as artistic and historical objects

When I came up to Balliol in 1981 to read Modern History, I already loved books and libraries. On my first day in Oxford, I went to Blackwell's and I still remember the books I bought: a novel, a book on Joyce, and *The Tale of Genji*. Nothing to do with my course and unavailable in York, whose public library and second-hand bookshops had educated me thus far.

Oxford and History only encouraged my interest in books and libraries and after going down in 1984 to work in the City and spending 40 years in venture capital, it was only a matter of time and money before they began to play more of a role in my life.

I started helping libraries as a trustee and a donor – Balliol's St Cross, the London Library (where I was Treasurer), the Warburg Library, Senate House Library and the Friends of the Nation's Libraries (where I remain a Trustee).

However, the real bibliophilic (or bibliomanic) pursuit has been building my own library. What do I collect? At first, it was British private press books (Kelmscott, Doves, Eragny), but then European and American private press books, and finally, 20th-century artists books from most geographies. Artists' books or just books with art? Or the arts of the book? In front of a visually striking book, the distinctions are irrelevant and I have always felt that I was simply collecting Art.

For a fraction of the cost of collecting 20th-century paintings, you can assemble a collection of the books that contain the art of Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Ernst, or Duchamp. Books really mattered to these artists – many of them wanted to be writers, their friends were writers, and they shaped the books they wanted to own for love, not money.

Collage by Max Ernst from Paul Éluard's postcard album

Balliol did not improve my French – certainly not struggling through Toqueville for Prelims; but the Further Subject on French politics, culture and society from 1848 to 1939, which made me read Cobb and Zeldin and attend Haskell's lectures on French Art, was a revelatory experience that has stayed with me. As a result, French books are now the largest part of my library.

French books are different, and French book collecting is different too. Purchasing the best copy – the *édition de tête* or the fabled first copy – was just the start. Each tier of an edition was on a different paper (*japon* or *chine*) and might have extra suites. Collectors would commission bespoke bindings from their preferred artists and create miniature archives by 'truffling' books with unique drawings, letters or manuscripts. Dedications and bookplates also revealed the communities of collectors and artists within which these complex book-objects circulated.

French books in all their variety have drawn me – as they drew contemporary collectors in France and later the USA. After 1945, American institutions and collectors formed great libraries of French books, with little competition from Britain. This was despite British bibliophiles forming pioneering collections. Michael Sadleir (1908), who read History at Balliol before the First World War, built the best collection of French 19th-century lithographed caricatures (Daumier, Gavarni, Grandville) outside of France. It was just one of his pioneering, contrarian collections (Gothic fiction, popular fiction), all of which ended up, after his death, in the USA. The French books are now at the Morgan Library and form the basis of the definitive

Benjamin Péret's address book, opened on Max Ernst's address

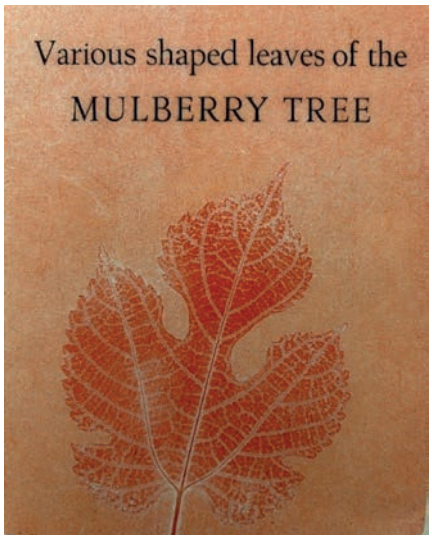
catalogue of French caricatures. Many of these prints are not represented in any library in Britain. I have a complete run of Philipon's weekly *La Caricature*, which ran from 1830 to 1835 and has almost 600 lithographs – largely by Grandville and Daumier, to which drawings, letters and extra prints have been added. Prices were low when Sadleir saw their importance – they are not cheap now, but the US competition has faded, and really interesting things can be had.

In the 1920s, Sadleir's interest in the 'phantasmagoric' lithographs produced in Paris before 1870 was shared by the surrealists and by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's unfinished work on the Paris arcades was inspired by these prints – and as a passionate book collector himself, could he have met Sadleir at one of the *bouquinistes* along the Seine?

I have always been interested in Surrealism, and some of my finds show what is still available. A few years ago, in their New York Book Fair catalogue, a Paris dealer offered one of Paul Éluard's albums of postcards. The 500 cards are kitschy, naughty, Victorian, and surreal both in their choice and their arrangement. The next item in the catalogue was a collection of mementos from the triangle of Éluard, his wife Gala, and Max Ernst. Included in the small box is Ernst's iron cross – he never liked it and was happy to give it away. His father had painted his portrait in uniform with the medal displayed – Ernst painted it out… more than once.

Max Ernst's medal, Éluard's postcards, Benjamin Péret's address book, an embroidery by Marie Monnier. These non-book items are more and more a part of my library. A library is about the culture of, and around, the book, as much as the book itself.

Marie Monnier was the sister of Adrienne Monnier, the bookseller and friend to Joyce and other writers in Paris in the 1930s. Marie illustrated several books and prints but her embroideries are what she is remembered for – she embroidered a rug for Joyce inspired by Finnegans Wake, now lost. My embroidery is of an Apollo butterfly. Paul Valéry wrote a tiny, beautifully written catalogue of



Mulberry leaf print by John Fass

'A library is about the culture of, and around, the book, as much as the book itself.'

her embroideries in 1924, which was quoted in Benjamin's famous essay of 1936, *The Storyteller*.

Monnier is an example of the diversity surrounding the book arts in Paris, which were open to an international band of exiles and outsiders. Women were very present (in a way that cannot be said of painting and sculpture) as book artists, designers, writers, binders and collectors. The mainstream history of art has not fully caught up with this diversity.

To finish, I wanted to mention one more Balliol book collector, Ken Auchincloss (1959). After attending Balliol, Ken became a magazine editor and publisher, most famous for his long stint as editor of *Newsweek*. I never met him (he died in 2003), but we were both members of the Grolier Club in New York. He collected private press books on an international scale. His collection was sold after his death by a London dealer, and it filled four catalogues. My favourite purchase was a group of small books, printed fastidiously on a tiny press in a bedsit at the Bronx YMCA by John Fass. Fass had worked as a book designer before 1939, but, in reduced circumstances, produced books, cards, and ephemera as the Hammer Creek Press. I bought as much Fass as I could from Ken's collection – the rarest being 20 nature-printed prints, made from leaves found in the Bronx Botanical Garden. I like to think that they were a favourite of Ken Auchincloss, and that he might have pulled them out to show how Fass explored the world though his books, printing and art, and in turn, how Ken could explore the world though his collection of books, printing and art… and in my turn, how I could do the same.

Mandelstam's Tristia at Balliol

Thomas de Waal (1984) recounts his 35-year journey translating Osip Mandelstam's Tristia.

In 1988, my last year at Balliol studying Russian, I became obsessed with a book of poems, *Tristia* by Osip Mandelstam, published in 1922.

A full 35 years later, my translation of a complete version of *Tristia* came out. In one of the poems, Mandelstam compares an ancient Greek poet's lyre to the shell of a crawling tortoise: 'So ponderous and laggard the lyre-tortoise.' I was much more laggard than that slow creature.

Mandelstam, Russia's greatest 20th century poet, is best known for defying Stalin and dying in the Gulag in 1938 at the age of 47. Yet his tragic death casts a retrospectively gloomy shadow over his poems which are rich, dynamic and exuberant. He was an unworldly, irascible, generous man, blessed with divine talents, who had more to offer in life than in death.

In the mid-1980s, as Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* took hold and I laboured away at my Russian grammar, Mandelstam's work was re-emerging from oblivion in Russia. Just one incomplete edition of his poems had been published in the Soviet Union since his death. It was as if Eliot or Yeats had been suppressed for four decades.

The most definitive collected works of Mandelstam at the time were the hard-to-find 1964 edition in the United States, whose main editor was the émigré scholar Gleb Struve (1898-1985). Imagine my delight when I discovered a signed copy in the College Library! Struve, it turned out had studied history at Balliol in 1918-1921, after fleeing Russia. It felt like a good omen.

Several translators had done versions of Mandelstam into English, but only as 'selected poems.' No one had translated all of *Tristia*. Yet the poet's widow Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote of the value he attached to the idea of a *book*, as 'a "major" work in lyric poetry, namely a book of verse all composed during the same period and having a certain unity.' In other words in a book of verse, the poems should strike up a conversation with one another and form a whole more than their parts. With the hubris of a 21-year-old student, I decided I would translate the whole collection.

Tristia is as revolutionary in its way as *The Wasteland* or the *Duino Elegies*, published in the same year. The poet is a modernist who tests the limits of language and imagery, without breaking them, but also a classicist whose verse is rendered in a rich variety of metres and in rhyme.

Thomas de Waal

'In a book of verse, the poems should strike up a conversation with one another and form a whole more than their parts.'

The poems were written in Russia, Ukraine, and Crimea between 1916 and 1921, an era as turbulent as any in history. Mandelstam's captures this 'time out of joint' obliquely, by delving into Russia's history and the ancient Hellenic world, through a series of disturbed first-person narrators. He mourns what he thought of as the end of Russia's 'Petersburg era' and its rich culture, and looks nervously to the future. The only poem in which he tentatively embraces the revolution is full of anxiety:

> Let us honour the momentous burden
> the leader of the people tearfully owns.
> Let us honour power's twilit burden,
> its weight too heavy to be borne.

As I got stuck into my project, ever more daunting vistas unfolded in front of me.

First of all, those complex rhymes and meters. 'I alone in Russia work from the voice' Mandelstam once proudly said. He composed, pacing around in a kind of trance, speaking the lines out loud in an incantatory voice. The English translations of Mandelstam in free verse did not convey this musicality and looked to me like a broken heap of interesting images. Joseph Brodsky declared, 'the English-speaking world has yet to hear this nervous, high-pitched, pure voice shot through with love, terror, memory, culture, faith.'

Moreover, Mandelstam's chaotic life and tragic death meant the poet himself never approved an authorised version of his works. His later poems were never published in his lifetime, but were memorised by his widow and hidden in pots and saucepans as she lived the itinerant life of a relict of an 'enemy of the people.' Most were not published in the Soviet Union until 1973 and some until the *glasnost* period

Tristia, translated by Thomas de Waal

Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam

'The poems from *Tristia* that resonate most for me in the current moment are those full of yearning for lost culture and what we still call 'free speech.''

of the 1980s. Struve's 1964 edition was a heroic long-distance effort with inevitable flaws.

The chaos extended to *Tristia* which was published in Berlin in 1922 without the poet's approval and in a scrambled order. His friend Mikhail Kuzmin simply presented a sheaf of poems to a Berlin publisher, missing some he had not been given. Kuzmin even chose the title, taking it from one of the finest poems in the group – something the poet belatedly accepted. Mandelstam had intended to publish a second book of poems, but the 1922 *Tristia* was an *ad hoc* arrangement, a brilliant jumble. That meant that my translation should be also an act of creative reconstruction and recreation, a new *Tristia*.

As life and work intervened, I picked the project up and put it down several times over the years. Thirty years later I had at best done half-decent translations of half the poems – less than one a year! Then, during the COVID-19 lockdown, I noted a looming date: *Tristia*'s centenary was approaching in 2022. A small but excellent poetry publisher, Arc, took me on. In the end we missed the deadline by a year.

Inevitably, my final rendition of 42 poems was a heroic failure, but I still felt they got closer to *Tristia* than anyone else had in English. When I began translating, I was younger than Mandelstam when he wrote the poems. When I launched the book at Pushkin House in London, I was older than the poet had been when he died. My old school Russian teacher Martin Vye came along, as did my Balliol friend Reyahn King (1984) who had encouraged me right at the beginning, and other Oxford friends.

The times had also changed. In the 1980s, the Russia I went back to every year was more free and open each time I visited. When I worked in Moscow in the 1990s as a journalist, Mandelstam was being celebrated and enjoyed by the younger generation. I bought new editions of his verse and commentaries in streetside kiosks and bookshops.

Now in 2025, Russia still wages a savage war on Ukraine and has reverted to the dark secretive place which crushed Mandelstam in the 1930s. The scale of repression may be smaller, but the bombast and the brutality are back. As Mandelstam wrote in a poem in 1930, 'Power is repulsive as the hands of a barber.'

Mandelstam is out of favour again in his homeland, but a good poetry collection never goes out of date. The poems from *Tristia* that resonate most for me in the current moment are those full of yearning for lost culture and what we still call 'free speech.' I am moved anew by a poem that I first translated and was the subject of my Finals dissertation, 'We Shall Meet Again in Petersburg.' In the middle of the 'Soviet night,' the poet hopes that he will join a company of kindred spirits and poets in a city whose name had been erased. For Mandelstam 'the word' is the antidote to fear.

> To pass through this night I need no permit,
> the sentinels present no fears,
> for the blessed word, alive and senseless,
> in the Soviet night I offer prayers.

Halcyon hours on dancing ledge

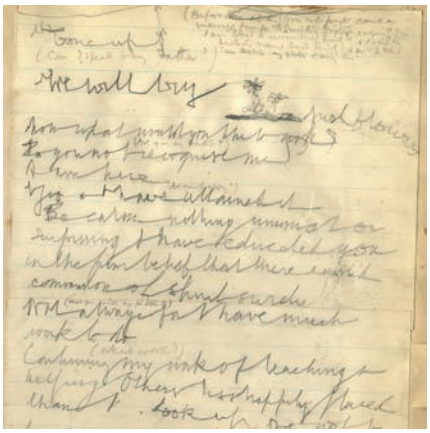
Stewart Tiley (Librarian) on the 'Interwar Balliol' exhibition held at the Historic Collections Centre in Michaelmas Term 2024

A troubled time of disunity and disaffection, with extremism on the rise, and the undercurrent of economic uncertainty coursing beneath the minutiae of everyday life. A time when governments seem at the mercy of global events. This was the 1920s and 1930s in Oxford. Perhaps the contemporary resonances are too lazily drawn, but these did provide fascinating and rich seams to explore in the recent exhibition, 'Interwar Balliol', which ran over Michaelmas Term 2024 in Balliol's Historic Collections Centre.

The opening of the period seemed haunted by what went before. There are spirits everywhere: Harold Macmillan (1912) said 'I did not go back to Oxford after the war … it was a city of ghosts'[i], and, of those who did return, Beverley Nichols (1917) noted 'we had come as "ghosts to trouble joy"'[ii]. These feelings of trauma and dislocation were epitomised in the opening exhibit, a book of spirit-writing produced at seances attended by the family of Balliol's Master, A.L. Smith. Some of this was seemingly communicated by the shades of soldiers who died during the conflict. Other exhibits from that moment included the periodical *Wheels*, produced by the Sitwells: Edith, Sacheverell (1919) and Osbert. These contain early work by Aldous Huxley (1913) and the first publication of Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting*, where the poet encounters an enemy soldier he has killed. The changing cover art of each issue, moving towards an increasingly fractured, vorticist aesthetic was the source for the front image of the exhibition's catalogue.

The accommodations and adaptations to changes in the political world negotiated by Balliol and its alumni was another strong theme. Balliol's centrality to the Indian Civil Service meant that many alumni were engaged in administering change in the British Empire. John Hope Simpson (1887) had been in the ICS, then administered refugees from the Graeco-Turkish War, reported on Jewish settlement in Palestine, and organised flood relief on the Yangtze[iii]. The letter displayed in the exhibition related to his time as Commissioner in Newfoundland, which was struggling with the legacy of the Great Depression. He describes how attempts to rehabilitate the fishing industry had left him with £30,000 of fish that he had to try and sell.

In Balliol itself, the Masters Arthur Smith and Alexander Lindsay exhibited a broad continuity in approach of engagement with the modern political and social scene. Both were involved in the Workers Educational Association, seeking to broaden outreach and promote social cohesion. A hand-written menu for a WEA conference held at Holywell Manor in 1939 survives, where delegates enjoyed 'Lentil Soup. Cold Beef & Lamb. Potato Salad. Bread & Cheese. Coffee' for supper. Lindsay helped initiate the new PPE course at Balliol in the 1920s as a radical attempt



Balliol College Historic Collections. From John O'Regan papers

Right: Spirit conversations with John O'Regan's mother and father, and a soldier

Below: Stills from the 16mm black and white film (silent) of the Balliol Players 1934 tour of Ajax

Balliol College Historic Collections. Societies: Dramatic Societies.ii.1

Balliol College Historic Collections. Papers of Noel Eldridge, 22

Balliol College Historic Collections. Papers of Noel Eldridge, 24/1

Left: Photograph of students celebrating the publication of Kingdom Come

Far left: Cover of Kingdom Come

to address the problems posed by political unrest across the globe, and to engage with the modern world, rather than the medieval and classical ones. It quickly drew in students such as Ted Heath (1935), Denis Healey (1936) and Roy Jenkins (1938). Amongst Lindsay's student hand-shaking notes, Healey and Heath follow one another consecutively: Heath is 'a very attractive chap' but his 'Capabilities [are greater than his] industry'; Healey is 'Rough & Heavy' although a 'v. nice fellow'. Soft power was a feature in the work of Masters' wives. A 1932 letter from Mahatma Gandhi in Yerwada Jail to Erica Lindsay begins 'Dear Sister …' as lingering testament to the hospitality offered by the Lindsays whilst Gandhi was involved in negotiations in London the year previously. Engaging with new media features in Lindsay's publication of his BBC addresses in 1940, *I Believe in Democracy*.

Student life was changing as well, although a trawl through the College rules of the time might not indicate that. There are rigid controls on absence, prohibitions on visiting pubs and the strict enforcement of the locking of the gate at 9.15 pm. Some managed to find ways around these by climbing out of windows, and a collection of bus and theatre tickets by Ferdinand Eugene Von Stumm (1934) shows life about town, but these strictures also led to the flourishing of College societies. There was the Musical Society and the Hysteron Proteron Club, which convened a termly 'backwards' day[iv]. Acting was viewed more circumspectly by College and it was only in 1920s that the Balliol Players were given the greenlight. A centrepiece of the exhibition was the newly digitised footage of the Players' 1934 tour, taking in performances and visits to Cheddar Gorge, Corfe Castle and Dancing Ledge. Debating societies like the Leonardo Society (in whose minute book both Heath and Healey appear) met. A term card for the Oxford University Fascist Society, and the rules of The Soviet Football Club indicate the existence of political extremes.

Academically, expectations were changing and the diversity of the social make-up of the student body was increasing. The aspiration to achieve a 'good' degree is indicated by the meticulous coloured timetables Von Stumm drew for himself. Demand for an Oxford education put pressure on accommodation and led to the development of Holywell Manor, documented in photographs, plans, and fund-raising material. Growth necessitated the professionalisation of College staff, and documents relating to the appointment of the first Domestic Bursar, Augustus Duke, in 1920, and his successor, Annie Bradbury, in 1939, survive. Changes in working conditions for scouts – including fixed wages and permanent employment – meant they no longer had to leave Oxford as servants to students, or seek seasonal work in seaside towns over the vacations, as recounted in newspaper interviews with Balliol staff.

If the past cast a shadow over the beginning of the period, the future cast a shadow over its final years. Anxiety over international tensions looms large. The diplomat Harold Nicolson's (1904) diaries detail his break with his friend, Oswald Mosley, who had determined to form the British Union of Fascists. A 1938 letter from Ken Thomas (1935) working in the Balliol-Trinity Chemistry lab talks about the 'very hush-hush' projects he is now involved in (developing gas-mask technology). Even Balliol's Master was out on the streets of Oxford as a candidate in the by-election of 1938, standing against appeasement, as detailed in the *Picture Post* and also in a hand-written note by Alexander Giles (1936), telling his parents 'The Master has just announced … that "he has gone mad"'. Publications appeared to support the war effort. In a photo of the launch of *Kingdom Come*, two students stand disrobed after swimming, one with the magazine strategically positioned over his midriff. The other, wrapped in a towel, is the editor, Noel Eldridge (1936). Five years later, his final letter home from the front would contain a poem for his mother's birthday:

> 'My thoughts then darling are the things we knew
> The spendthrift past, the careless days
> We did not value with the juster thought
> The quieter beauties we too little shared.'

All our thanks to everyone who attended the exhibition as well as to Professor Martin Conway, Professor Simon Skinner and Graham Avery (1961) for their generous contribution of scholarly essays to the catalogue.

[i] Harrison, B. (ed.) (1994) The History of the University of Oxford, Volume VIII: The Twentieth Century. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.81.

[ii] Nichols, B. (1922) Patchwork New York: Henry Holt, p.102

[iii] Stearn, R. T. 'Simpson, Sir John Hope (1868–1961)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/77017 (Accessed 31 May 2024)

[iv] Sherry, N. (1990) The Life of Graham Greene Volume 1: 1904-1939. London: Cape, p. 120 [Balliol College Historic Collections. GGJR 15/136]

Lord Patten at an Encaenia procession

The Balliol Dynasty ends after 64 years

Lord Patten of Barnes (1962, Honorary Fellow) reflects on his 21 years as Chancellor of Oxford

When I announced in a letter to the Vice-Chancellor early last year that I intended, after 21 years, to step down as Chancellor, someone asked, 'So who is Balliol putting up next?' I replied that it might have been usual for the Chancellor to come from Balliol, but it wasn't actually mandatory. There was no assertion of this constitutional fact in the University's regulations. Thus, a third Balliol man in a row – Macmillan (1912), Jenkins (1938) and then me – takes his leave, on this occasion while still able to walk out from the Divinity School more or less unaided.

So I will become the first Chancellor Emeritus in just over 300 years and I'm not fleeing into exile as a Jacobite unlike the last emeritus. Balliol makes way for an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen. No problem there: William Hague is a clever man, a very good historian and diplomat, and an excellent speaker. He can be forgiven for going to a relatively new college in comparison with the alma mater of the last three chancellors. Above all, William Hague loves Oxford.

'It has been a great privilege to end my public life as I began it, in this extraordinary, liberal, and even occasionally anarchic academic community and powerhouse of scholarship.'

When I expressed the view that, after 21 years, it seemed to me the time had fled quite far enough to make the appointment of a new Chancellor desirable, I made the point that I would prefer to have a farewell dinner than a memorial service, at which my role would be both silent and stationary. The University obliged. It held a dinner for me last summer in Keble College, that great temple of 19th-century intellectual self-confidence. Some wondered whether the venue was entirely suitable. For me there was no question that it matched all the

requirements. It was, for a start, the place where my Oxford years began.

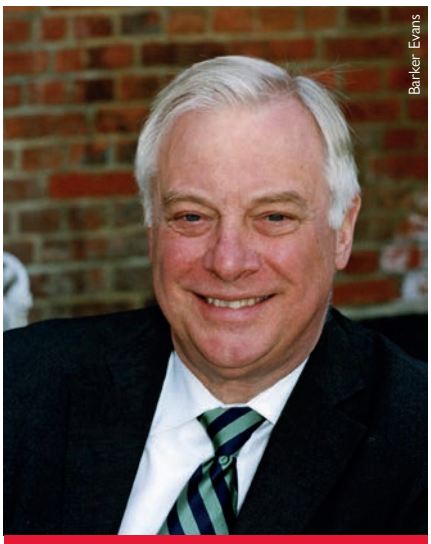
A pupil on a scholarship from a Catholic direct grant school in the London suburbs, I had been prepared for the English scholarship exams at Peterhouse, Cambridge in January 1961. But in those days, Oxford colleges held their own examinations in the preceding December. My history master thought it would be good practice for me to have a go at the Balliol examinations in advance of Cambridge, and he was particularly keen on having a try for Balliol where he had himself been educated and taught by Christopher Hill (1931, Tutorial Fellow in History 1938–65, Master 1965–1978), one of the very best English Marxist historians. So, in a bitterly cold December in 1960, I sat in the hall at Keble (which for examination purposes was in the same college group as Balliol) trying to remember enough history to satisfy Christopher Hill and his colleagues.

Inevitably, my essays were littered with quotations from John Donne and Shelley sedulously prepared to entertain English dons in Cambridge. Somehow it all worked, though I remember struggling with an essay on the causes of the 30 Years War while only having revised for a potential A-level question on the consequences of that conflict. Perhaps John Donne, dead before the consequences were entirely clear, provided an insight into the correct answer to this question.

In any event, to the general surprise of my school masters but the delight of my parents, I was awarded an exhibition. Too young to come up to the University the following year, I eventually arrived in the autumn of 1962 and that, I suppose, is where Balliol and the University as a whole began to make me.

I have never much cared for Belloc's poem about being made by the college. I've always thought it rather self-regarding with echoes of Milner, certainly not my favourite figure in British imperial history. But I was, in a real sense, shaped by those who taught me at Balliol and by my friends there, the closest of them like Edward Mortimer (1962, Honorary Fellow 2004–2021) and Henry Hodge (1962), both now alas dead.

Christopher Hill was my moral tutor; he was a Marxist and an atheist, which was a moderate challenge to a young Catholic from a conventionally lower-middle-class family. He was a very kind man, responsible for my meeting at one of his parties a student at St Hilda's, Lavender, who became my wife. I think I learned from him the difference between an argument and a quarrel, and also that the intellectual heavens encompassed more than my own opinions and prejudices.


Barker Evans

'It is a burning injustice that fewer working-class boys and girls from poorer backgrounds get to any university at all, compared to those from more comfortable circumstances.'

John Prest (Fellow and Tutor in Modern History 1954 – 1995, Emeritus Fellow 1996–2018), an immensely courteous man, taught me 19th-century history, and Richard Cobb (Fellow 1962–1972, Honorary Fellow 1977–1996) – one of the greatest historians of the French Revolution – taught me about France with an astonishing range of anecdotes which were particularly funny and outrageous after refreshment had been taken. Above all, there was Maurice Keen (Fellow and Tutor in Modern History 1961–2000, Emeritus Fellow 2000–2012), one of our greatest mediaevalists and the author of the best book on chivalry. I think that Maurice was the very model of what one would always want an Oxford don to be like. He was immensely kind and loved teaching young men and women above all else. However sketchy one's knowledge of the subject he was teaching, he never looked down on his pupils and encouraged all to be more thoughtful and sensible in what we said about the past, the better perhaps to understand the present and future. He was quietly generous to anyone in trouble. After his death, Colin Lucas gave a eulogy about him in the University Church which should be reprinted regularly in this journal. It summarised what is so important about Oxford and the tutorial system. I discovered as Chancellor that its arguments are just as valid today. Though costly, it is imperative to remember that this way of teaching leaves an indelible mark on students and is one of the most distinctive and important features of an Oxford education.

After a scholarship from Balliol to the United States, I began almost by accident a career in politics and public service, which had me gallivanting around the world from Oxford to Washington to Westminster to Hong Kong to Brussels and then back again to Oxford, a little improbably elected as Chancellor after the death of Roy Jenkins in 2003. It has been a great privilege to end my public life as I began it, in this extraordinary, liberal, and even occasionally anarchic academic community and powerhouse of scholarship.

So, what has changed while I have been Chancellor? Truth to tell, not very much. The well-being of the University, balanced occasionally a little precariously between colleges and the central University, depends on wise academic leadership. This leadership has to recognise that the central University cannot simply get what it wants by snapping its fingers. This means that sometimes it takes a little longer than is strictly desirable to make and implement the right decisions. We usually get there in the end.

The Chancellor has no executive role in this process, though the position is more than ceremonial. When Louise Richardson was demitting her office as Vice-Chancellor, she asked for a list of some of the main things I had

been doing as Chancellor. Even I was surprised by how many there were.

The Vice-Chancellor and her academic colleagues, leading one of the very best universities in the world, should be able to count on the support and understanding of the government, whatever its political flavour. In my experience, governments are keen enough to take the credit for what our world-class universities achieve, but their contribution is somewhat limited, except I suppose in the number of Secretaries of State for Education who pass through the Department of that name, occasionally hardly long enough in post to leave a calling card. While Louise was Vice-Chancellor for seven years, there were nine Secretaries of State during that time.

Irene Tracey has not had to deal so far with that revolving-doors approach to government, at least not yet. She is of course the first completely homegrown Vice-Chancellor that anyone can remember. She has to cope with running a great university in a higher education system which is inadequately funded and poorly structured. This has left younger academics badly paid and even the most significant areas of research under-financed. At Oxford, we must increasingly rely on private fundraising to bridge these funding gaps. Fortunately, we have done very well raising funds in the last few years through collaboration with industry and spin-offs, and through a high success rate in attracting research grants from many different sorts of institutions. We have also done remarkably well in attracting support from philanthropists and the private sector in general. Over the last 20 years, we have raised five billion pounds, colleges and University together, in private gifts.

‘The most important attribute the University possesses today is the deep affection those who work in it and for it have for the institution.’

Looking across the board, our successes range from health-related activities (our health sector departments come top in the world year after year) to high-tech studies and several areas of the humanities, not least modern languages. The new Humanities Centre, which will bear the name of its principal funder, an American philanthropist called Stephen Schwarzman, will be a great contributor to the humanities as a whole.

Other philanthropists are enabling us to broaden access to the University without lowering standards. The Moritz-Heyman scholarships are a model of how this can be done without any negative effect on the quality of our student intake. Overall, we have a continuing challenge to ensure that the best pupils, whatever their background, have a chance of coming to our great University. It is a burning injustice that fewer working-class boys and girls from poorer backgrounds get to any university at all, compared to those from more comfortable circumstances.

I have no doubt at all that the collegiate structure of the University gives us flexibility and variety that enhance what the University as a whole can achieve. But, of course, colleges would be of considerably less significance if there was no University, just as the University depends on the colleges. This does not, however, overlook some of the attendant problems which the University itself cannot tackle. They can only be managed in a better direction by colleges themselves. One key issue is the differences in resources available to colleges, which often are not reflected in achievements in the Norrington Table. Addressing this will not be easy for colleges, but it is vital. Colleges will need – inevitably spurred on by outside pressures – to do more to ensure that the experience of students – undergraduate and postgraduate – is more consistent right across the University, regardless of college. I am not sorry that this will be an issue for the leadership of others.

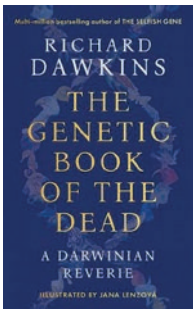
I am naturally aware that, at a time when resources from the public sector will be in short supply, the management of all universities will become more difficult. But I’m sure that my successor and future university administrators will be well up to the task. The most important attribute the University possesses today is the deep affection those who work in it and for it have for the institution – an institution that does so much good for its members as it pushes the frontiers of scholarship. In this real sense, Balliol and the University as a whole did make me, and I guess most readers of this article would say the same. All of us hope that the next generation will be given the same opportunities that we have had.

John Cairns

Greeting the Emperor and Empress of Japan during their visit to Balliol in 2024

Bookshelf

Professor Richard Dawkins (1959)
The Genetic Book of the Dead
Apollo, 2024

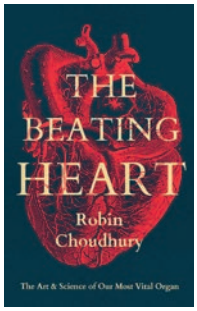


Richard Dawkins takes a fresh look at evolution, portraying the bodies, behaviours, and genes of living organisms as records of their ancestors' worlds. A desert lizard's camouflage isn't just for survival; it's a reflection of the ancient landscapes where its ancestors once lived. Evolution, shaped by Darwinian natural selection, extends deep into every cell, allowing future zoologists to read an animal's traits like a history book. Dawkins explores nature's astonishing precision alongside its apparent flaws, challenges critics of the gene-centered view, and provocatively suggests that our genes may function as a vast colony of cooperating viruses. The book has been selected by *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Economics*, and *Financial Times* as one of their best books of 2024.

Michael Bartlet (1975)
Mediation and other forms of Alternative Dispute Resolution
Routledge, 2024

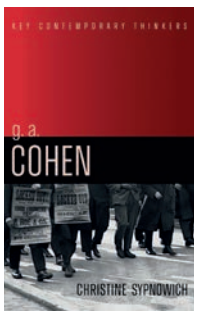
A mediator and senior lecturer in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and public law at SOAS, University of London, Michael Bartlet provides a comprehensive and practical introduction to ADR, examining its principles, applications, and role within civil law, and covering key areas such as mediation, arbitration, restorative justice, and online dispute resolution.

Professor Robin Choudhury (1986, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine and Senior Research Fellow in Biomedical Sciences)
The Beating Heart
Apollo, 2024



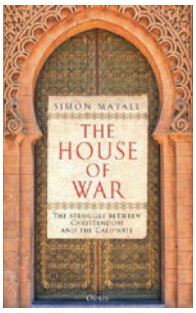
Cardiologist Robin Choudhury explores how different cultures have represented the heart throughout history. He examines how these depictions reflect the religious, social, and philosophical ideas of their time. Alongside this, he traces the evolving scientific understanding of the heart – from Aristotle's early observations to Renaissance anatomy, the rise of experimental physiology, and the modern discovery of how the heart beats on a molecular level. Beautifully illustrated, this book takes readers on a journey through four millennia, blending medical insight with a deep appreciation for the visual arts.

Christine Sypnowich (1983)
G.A. Cohen: Liberty, Justice and Equality (Key Contemporary Thinkers)
Polity, 2024



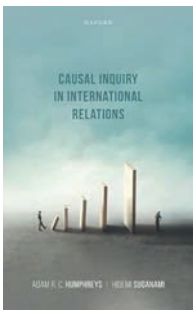
G. A. Cohen was a leading political philosopher, known for blending analytical philosophy with Marxism to explore liberty, justice, and equality. Christine Sypnowich examines his work through five key paradoxes, covering his engagement with libertarianism, critique of John Rawls, shift toward conservatism, and the tension between individual responsibility and socialism.

Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall (1975)
The House of War: The Struggle between Christendom and the Caliphate
Osprey Publishing, 2024



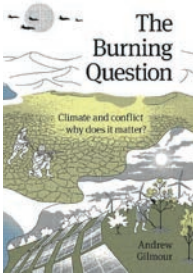
Simon Mayall, an expert on the history of the Middle East, tells the story of the 1,300-year struggle between Christian and Muslim powers for dominance – political, military, ideological, economic, and religious – from the 7th-century capture of Jerusalem by Caliph Umar to the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. He highlights some of the most significant clashes of arms in history, including the Crusades, the fall of Constantinople, the sieges of Rhodes and Malta, and the Ottoman advance into Europe. Blending broad historical context with battlefield narratives, *The House of War* explores the pivotal conflicts and leaders who shaped the course of both the Middle East and Europe.

Adam Humphreys (1998)
Causal Inquiry in International Relations
Oxford University Press, 2024



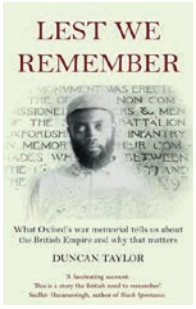
Adam Humphreys challenges the dominance of generalisation in social science, advocating for case-based research backed by empirical evidence. By bridging philosophy, methodology, and empirical research, he offers a fresh perspective on how we understand causation in world politics.

Andrew Gilmour (1983)
The Burning Question: Climate and conflict – why does it matter?
Berghof Foundation, 2024



In *The Burning Question*, Andrew Gilmour draws on his extensive experience in conflict zones – from Afghanistan and Iraq to West Africa and the Balkans – to explore how climate change fuels social and political instability worldwide. This is the first ever book-length treatment that examines the connection between climate change and conflict, offering insights into how we can mitigate these growing threats. With a background in the UN and as head of the Berghof Foundation, Gilmour advocates for solutions through public policy, community action, and innovation. He also highlights the impact of climate-driven conflict on migration and what can be done to address it.

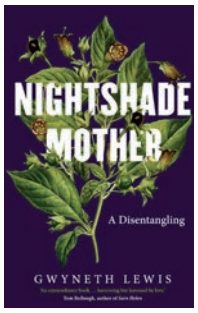
Duncan Taylor (1980)
Lest We Remember
Kropotkin Press, 2024



Is Britain ashamed of its past, and should it be? *Lest We Remember* explores the question through an unlikely starting point: a neglected war memorial in Oxford. Tracing surprising links between Oxford and the British Empire, it journeys from Afghanistan to Uganda, uncovering complex histories. Using diaries and archival material, Duncan Taylor weaves a narrative of personal experiences within the broader imperial context, encouraging readers to reconsider how Britain remembers its past.

'A fascinating account. This is a story the British need to remember' – Sudhir Hazareesingh (1983, Coolidge Fellow and Tutorial Fellow in Politics, and Senior Fellow), author of *Black Spartacus*

Gwyneth Lewis (1985 and Honorary Fellow)
Nightshade Mother: A Disentangling
Calon, 2024

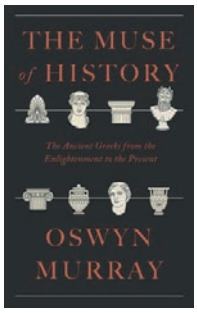


In *Nightshade Mother*, Gwyneth Lewis, the inaugural National Poet of Wales, examines her lifelong struggle with an emotionally abusive and controlling mother. Based on decades of diary entries, and through literary references and powerful metaphors, Lewis explores the psychological effects of maternal control and the role of art and language in processing trauma. Named a *Guardian* Book of the Year, this memoir offers an analytical yet deeply personal account of resilience, self-exploration, and the search for reconciliation with a difficult past.

Professor Ian Goldin (Professor of Globalisation and Development and Senior Research Fellow)
The Shortest History of Migration
Old Street Publishing, 2024

Human migration has been essential to our survival for hundreds of thousands of years, but today, rising barriers threaten both migrants and society's future. *The Shortest History of Migration* traces the movement of people across time and continents, using historical records and genetic research to uncover stories of resilience, conflict, and transformation. From the legacies of empire and slavery to modern displacement, the book explores how migration has defined civilizations. Looking to the present, Ian Goldin combines historical perspective with contemporary data to advocate for a more humane approach – one that embraces migration's vast potential for progress.

Oswyn Murray (Emeritus Fellow)
The Muse of History: The Ancient Greeks from the Enlightenment to the present
Harvard University Press 2024



The Muse of History explores how interpretations of ancient Greece have evolved over the past three centuries, reflecting the concerns of each era. Oswyn Murray examines how Greek history was used to shape republicanism, democracy, and responses to 20th-century ideologies like nationalism and communism. Through the works of key philosophers and historians such as Hegel, Braudel, and Foucault, the book provides a fresh perspective on the historiography of Greece, revealing how contemporary influences shape our understanding of the past.

'This majestic book by Oswyn Murray has been long and eagerly awaited… and its quality and scope exceed expectations.' – *BBC History Magazine*

Professor Carol E. Harrison (1990)
Zouave Theaters: Transnational Military Fashion and Performance
LSU Press, 2024

Zouave Theaters explores the rise and fall of the Zouave uniform, a striking 19th-century military fashion that transcended borders and social norms. Originating in French colonial Algeria, the uniform became a symbol of ethnic, racial, and gender fluidity. Carol E. Harrison and Thomas J. Brown reveal how Zouaves served in armies across the world and performed in theatrical spectacles blending drill and drag. Examining the interaction of military culture and the arts, the book uncovers the Zouave's lasting influence on painting, photography, illustration, and film.

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