

# SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF THE ADMISSION PROCESS AT MAGDALEN IN 1938-9

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## **My family circumstances and schooling**

I was born in 1921. My family had no tradition of attendance at university, but in 1929 my elder brother (eight years older than me) was encouraged at school to consider such a course, and in 1932 he obtained an open scholarship at BNC (and other awards) and came up to Oxford in that year. From then on my objective was to follow suit.

My father was a railway official, and had had just sufficient resources to send my brother as a fee-paying pupil to Stockport Grammar School from 1925-28, when he obtained a Cheshire County Intermediate Scholarship which paid his fees (and I think a small maintenance grant) in the sixth form from 1928-32. He was therefore enabled to send me as a fee-paying pupil to Stockport Grammar School from 1931, when I entered in the class below the main intake of scholarship pupils at the start of the four year course for School Certificate. During the year in that class I sat for the County scholarships, but unsuccessfully. Whether there was any discrimination against people who were already fee-paying I do not know, but when the scholarship holders arrived at the school the next year they were mostly below me in position in class. The annual fees at Stockport were at that time £22-10-00, plus about a couple of pounds for text books.

I was at Stockport Grammar School from 1931-36, when we moved from Cheshire to Derby, immediately after I had taken School Certificate. I then went as a fee-paying pupil to Derby School, which was then of similar status to Stockport Grammar School and charged £24-00-00 per year. Both schools had histories spanning several centuries and both were accustomed to sending one or two pupils a year to Oxbridge. However their subsequent histories diverged markedly: Stockport went over to direct grant status and then went private, whereas Derby lost its identity completely through simultaneously moving to new premises and becoming comprehensive.

## Choice of College

In the summer of 1933 I had come to Oxford with my parents to visit my brother during his first year. We called at Magdalen to see his old school friend Hal Openshaw (demy 1931-6, senior demy 1937-8) who showed us round the College, including a trip up the tower and on the river. At the age of 11, I was most impressed and announced "I am going to come here".

I did not take the first step towards admission until after I had taken Higher School Certificate for the first time in 1938. I had in fact applied for County and State scholarships on the basis of performance in that exam, but without success - one did not really expect to succeed in that respect at the first attempt, especially at the age of 16. In the autumn of 1938 I therefore applied to sit for the scholarships offered by the two groups of colleges that joined together for the scholarship examination in December of that year. One had to list one's order of preference among the colleges, and I put Magdalen first. This was partly on account of my childhood impressions of five years earlier, and partly on the grounds that Magdalen was offering four scholarships in science, whereas none of the others was offering more than two.

Obviously I could not know whether this would be offset by a greater number of applicants, but decided to take a chance on that.

## The Examination Process

The examination took place in 9th week of Michaelmas term, and one was accommodated in the college of one's first choice from Monday evening to Saturday morning. The written papers were taken in the hall of University College from Tuesday to Thursday inclusive. The afternoon papers did not start until 3.45, and tea and bread and butter were provided on the tables with the question papers. One did two papers in each of one's major subjects (in my case chemistry and physics) and one in one's minor subject (mathematics). Then on the afternoon of the Thursday one had to do a language paper and a general essay paper. The language paper consisted of four short passages for translation into English, one each from Greek, Latin, French and German. I had done no Greek and only a very little "German for Science Students", so I did the French and made some attempt at the Latin, though my Latin was very rusty after two and a half years away from the subject.

Practical exams were on the Friday, Physics in the morning in the Dyson Perrins Lab and Chemistry in the afternoon in what was then known as the Old Chemistry Department (i.e. Inorganic Chemistry). For the physics experiment we were given: an electric light bulb with leads soldered to it, a beaker, a thermometer, and a fairly large sheet of tinfoil. And we had to devise a way of determining the fraction of the radiation emitted

by the light bulb that was not absorbed in glass and water. In chemistry we had to determine the solubility of lead chloride in various concentrations of hydrochloric acid and interpret the results.

The circumstance that the physics exam was held in an organic chemistry lab explained the fact that all the physics questions in old papers were restricted to experiments with heat and did not extend to other branches of physics. This had puzzled my physics master at school.

## **The Interview**

When I returned to College from the afternoon paper on the Thursday there was a message waiting for me requesting me to attend for an interview in the rooms of Dr H M Sinclair at 9.30 pm. Naturally I was there in good time, but I was not called in to the interview until 11 o'clock! Dr Sinclair apologised for the fact they were running late but disclaimed responsibility for my name being the last in alphabetical order! Dr Sinclair chaired the proceedings, but I was questioned on my interests in chemistry by Dr Sutton, and Dr Johnson (the physicist) was interested in my having chosen to write an essay in the general paper on "large astronomical telescopes". In this connection he probed quite deeply into my knowledge of modern theories of cosmology. It was very impressive that the team had been able to mark not only the papers written on the two preceding days, but even the essays written that afternoon.

During the chemistry practical the following afternoon a representative of my second choice college had a brief chat with me, and then Dr Sutton also came and had quite a prolonged further discussion of things that had been said at the interview.

## **Getting the Result**

Before leaving on the Saturday morning I left with the porter the necessary cash to send me a telegram when the results came out. Late on the following Tuesday afternoon I received the telegram, which said "You have won History Demyship"!

This sounded promising, though one was naturally worried that if the porter had got the subject wrong he might also have got the name wrong. However my fears were put to rest about an hour later when I received an unlooked-for telegram from Hal Openshaw (my old contact in the College) saying "Congratulations on Demyship".

## **Financial Considerations**

Early in 1939 the College wrote to my father to enquire as to his financial position, and on the basis of his reply said that it would pay me the full £100 per year value of the Demyship. With this award it would just about have been possible for me to come up, but with a view to making life easier I went on to apply again for County and State Scholarships on the results of my second Higher School Certificate to be taken in the summer of 1939. This time I was successful enough to win both, but the State Scholarship authorities then took over control. On the basis of their enquiries into my father's means they ordered the College to reduce their grant from £100 to £50 per year, told the County to give me £40 per year, and themselves gave me £40 per year plus fees. I suppose the latter amounted to about £40 in those days so I was only a little better off than I would have been with just the Demyship. However I had the very valuable security that my whole costs would have been met should my father have died. I also received a small increase in grant in my fourth (Part II) year when I was required to be in residence for about 40 weeks because the research was on "war problems".

## **Effectiveness of the Admissions Process**

I can only comment on this as far as the science demyships were concerned. There was certainly no bias toward public schools – all four of us who were successful were from grammar schools. I am now the only survivor, the other three are all dead so I can write of them without fear or favour. If one assumes that the selectors were seeking people who would go on to first class academic careers then they scored 50% success. Harrison (the medic) obtained a chair at Liverpool before he was 30, and would doubtless have gone to even greater heights if he had not died prematurely. Cain (the zoologist) had chairs at Manchester and Liverpool and eventually an FRS. Schofield (the physicist) and I (the chemist) both only got seconds. Schofield never had any intention of departing from the manner of life in which he had been brought up. This was epitomised by the very "non-U" way in which at the end of a meal he always carefully arranged his knife and fork crossed on his plate. He was quite untroubled by the way in which one of the scouts (Mobey) always pointedly rearranged them before clearing the plate away, and on one occasion Mobey remarked to me "I shall never teach him, shall I sir?" It was quite in character that he returned to his roots to teach physics in grammar schools in Lancashire, and he would probably have done the same even if he had got a first. As for me, my second class result was a bitter disappointment, but I subsequently did my best to justify the selectors' choice. I took an external maths degree (another second I am afraid) and an external PhD (in crystallography), both while in full-time employment

in industry. And I eventually returned to Oxford as Lecturer in Geochemistry and was ultimately appointed Reader in Mineralogy.