

Magdalen in Wartime 1939-45*

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Numbers in residence

Numbers were of course greatly reduced throughout the war, but most people who wished to do so were able to obtain sufficient deferment of call-up to take a First Public Examination or the special exam for a “war degree”. In order to maximise their time in Oxford quite a lot of people came up one or two terms earlier than normal in Hilary or Trinity terms, and there was a tendency to denominate people by their terms of residence rather than by their year of residence. Of course some people went into the forces straight from school, but those who came up mostly had from three to six terms in residence. Exceptions were medical students and chemists who were considered sufficiently valuable to the war effort to be deferred to take their full course subject to annual progress checks. For chemists, of which I was one, this included the fourth year Part II research project, provided that it formed part of one of the established war research teams; mine was related to gas mask charcoals.

We were warned in October 1939 that the college might be taken over for war purposes and that in this event, we would be moved to New College. Within weeks St Swithun’s staircases 1-6 were emptied of undergraduates in readiness, but no takeover occurred until January 1941. This was for RAF offices dealing with recovery of crashed aircraft, and extended to St Swithun’s 7 but no further. The extent of the take-over matched the reduction in undergraduate numbers so that almost everyone was able to have rooms in college without sharing. Fellows retained their rooms on staircases that were taken over.

Immediately after the take-over much merriment was caused by a notice that appeared on the door of the lavatories under the archway in St Swithun’s. It read: “*Conveniences, camp followers (fem), for the use of*”. After a little while it was replaced by the more succinct “*W.A.A.F.*”

*This seems to have been written for a College publication and as such was titled “Magdalen in Wartime 1939-45 by E J W Whittaker: demy 1939-43”. The material is similar to the other chapter “Oxford University in Wartime”. [RW]

Accommodation and living arrangements

During the long vac of 1939 I was notified that I had been allocated rooms on the ground floor of New Buildings. However, on the outbreak of war all allocations of rooms were rescinded. The College decided that those in their second or third years who were returning to college had already enjoyed college life to the full for one or two years, whereas freshmen might have a very short and uncertain chance of doing so.

To compensate us we were therefore allocated the best rooms in college. By the luck of the draw I got what were in some respects the best of all, on the second floor of St Swithun's 7. This meant that I had a wash bowl with h&c in the bedroom, and a bathroom and lavatory on the landing; luxuries that only existed on that staircase, in Longwall, and in the Annexe. Moreover, in addition to this my windows had a magnificent view over the President's garden, with New Buildings in sight to the left and the Tower to the right.

the re-allocation was accompanied by (and in fact made possible by) a complete re-organisation of the system of charges. Instead of room rents that depended on the relative desirability of different rooms, and charges for meals based on signing of chits for what one had, a flat rate of 12/- per day was made for accommodation and full board, inclusive of attendance and the former minimum payments of 30/- per term to one's scout.

With regard to meals the flat rate system had both advantages and disadvantages. As a fairly impecunious undergraduate I might have been able to live slightly more cheaply under the old system, but it absolved me from worrying about economising, or balancing cost against nourishment and sociability. In fact until food rationing really began to bite we lived right royally. breakfast was always plentiful, and dinners remained of remarkably good quality right up to 1943, though the quality of lunches gradually declined. Eventually we had to draw out margarine and sugar rations for each week on a Monday morning and take them with us to Hall each day for breakfast. The main disadvantage was a social one. The system militated strongly against eating out with one's friends from other colleges, whether in restaurants or in other college halls. Because practically everyone was in Hall for dinner every night it also led to a strong tendency to the formation of cliques, with everyone sitting in the same place every night. This did not apply at breakfast and lunch because these were informal, with people arriving and departing over a period of time.

The abolition of the signing of chits was not of course total. It still happened if one brought a guest into Hall, and one still signed chits for such things as bread, milk, and beer from the buttery, and for cakes and drinks from the JCR.

The College Servants

Because some scouts were away on war service those remaining had to serve more than one staircase, in some cases at any rate. When I first arrived in October 1939 my scout, Messenger, apologised that on this account he had not had time to unpack my trunk, which he regarded as part of his normal service. Nevertheless the service one received from one's scout was still remarkable. He called one in the morning and drew the curtains back, and put out one's shoes for "the boots" (Luker) to polish on his round – and all this after cleaning one's sitting room before one got up. He made one's bed in the morning and turned it down in the evening, and drew one's blackout curtains of one had not already done so before his evening round when he washed up one's tea things. Each week he entered one's items of washing in one's laundry book and despatched them to the laundry on a Monday morning, and he brought them back in a neat brown paper parcel on a Saturday. he had some assistance with cleaning the rooms with a woman cleaner with whom he could arrange the mending of one's socks. If one gave a lunch party in one's rooms he arranged the order with the kitchen, brought the food across, and waited at table. If one was ill he put one on the "aeger list" and brought one's meals across from the kitchen. Until the appointment of a College Nurse in 1940 he was also responsible for calling the doctor.

The inclusion of the gratuity to one's scout (minimum 30/- per term) in the flat rate charge led to some uncertainty as to what to do, as one felt that he would expect some sort of tip, even on a reduced scale. No doubt some people gave more, but I always gave him 5/- per term and never by word or look did he seem to imply that he felt more was due.

One's mail was placed in the lodge not in one's own pigeon hole but in that of one's scout, so that he could bring it across if one had not already collected it from the box marked with his name. A friend of mine confessed that when he first came up he could not understand the purpose of these prominent boxes "labelled with the names of Chinese dynasties" as he put it. He was referring to the boxes labelled "Ming" and "Ing", the names of two of the scouts. Another man with a curious name was Tallboys, the Chapel Porter. With a name like that it was inevitable that he should be much the smallest person in the college.

Closure of the College Gates, and other rules

The gate of the College was locked at 9.15 pm, and after that one had to knock to get in. Unlike most colleges one did not have to pay for being admitted, because of the generosity of one of our predecessors who had left a legacy to "free the gate for ever". Nevertheless it was a very annoying restriction because after 9.15 one was not allowed

to go out of College, and I quite often used to go out between 9 and 9.15, not because I really wanted to but so as not to feel shut in! The latest time for knocking in without facing disciplinary proceedings was of course midnight – in accordance with University regulations. In Michaelmas term 1939 the University had been very worried about the problem of keeping order in the streets in the blackout, and in order to diminish this problem brought the curfew forward from midnight to 11 pm. However, in the event there proved to be no problem at all; most of the traditionally more exuberant trouble makers were in the forces and everyone who was left was in serious mood, so in January 1940 the rules reverted to normal.

Although the University rule was the same in term and vacation, the final closure of the College gate was 10 pm in vacation. This was said to be to relieve the porters from late night duties, but it was very annoying and restrictive.

After the take-over of St Swithun's 7 in January 1941 I lived for five terms in the Annexe, and it was of course possible to be let out of College to return to the Annexe after 9.15 pm (or vice versa), but one's departure was recorded and was supposed to match one's knocking-on time at the other end. Whether anyone ever checked up on this I do not know.

The gate of the Annexe (and other related disciplinary matters) was controlled by the scout who doubles as porter and general janitor and lived with his wife in the ground floor flat. Varney, who held this position in my time, told us that his predecessor (when the Annexe was first opened) had lost his job for corrupt connivance with undergraduates breaking the rules, and he made it clear that he had no intention of taking any risks in that direction.

In those days one was only allowed to have women on one's rooms in College between 1.00 pm and 7.00 pm, though in Trinity Term this was extended to 9.00 pm. In the summer of 1942 some enterprising undergraduate managed to persuade the authorities that the time of 9 pm had been set according to British Summer Time, and that it should therefore be adjusted to 10 pm British Double Summer Time, then in force. Amazingly this suggestion was accepted, and a few days later my girl friend (now my wife) took advantage of this to stay till around 9.55 when she went downstairs and rang for Varney to let her out. he let her out after expressing his disapproval, and then charged upstairs to expostulate with me at this flagrant breaking of the rules. he was quite amazed when I told him that the rule had been changed and he was quite put out that he had not been informed officially.

Chapel

The Dean of Divinity was Adam Fox, who was simultaneously Professor of Poetry, and a great character. he had recently written and published a long epic poem called "Old

King Cole” which seemed to have more literary affinity with nursery rhymes than with great epic poetry of the past. Services in Chapel were sung evensong every day, sung mattins on Sunday at 9.30 am, holy communion at 8 am on Sundays, holy days and one weekday, and Dean’s Prayers at 8 am on other weekdays.

A regular attender at every Chapel service was Benecke, the oldest resident fellow. I was probably one of the most frequent attenders among junior members, and on one occasion on the way out of Chapel after the choir had been singing the “Benedicite, Omnia Opera” Adam Fox said to me “I sometimes think that Benecke and I and you are Ananias, Azarias, and Misael; the academical clerks are the holy and humble Men of Heart; and the choristers are the Spirits and Souls of the righteous.”

One Saturday evening I was returning from evensong to my rooms in St Swithun’s 7 wearing my surplice, Saturday being a “surplice day” for demies. The staircase was only dimly lit by a dark blue bulb to avoid light emerging from the open doorway in the blackout, and I heard some people coming down the stairs so I drew back to one side to make way for them. It was one of my neighbours shepherding three girls down the stairs, and when the first of them reached me she suddenly saw this lurking white-clad figure and let out an enormous scream.

Living out of College

In my fourth year I chose to live in lodgings in Iffley Road. because the College did not then hold one’s ration book one was only permitted to sign in to dine on Hall twice a week. lunch was then generally at the British Restaurant in the Town Hall, where one joined a long queue for a very adequate meal without frills, and in fairly sordid conditions, for less than a shilling. For the evening there were such establishments as the Stowaway in the High, the prototype Chinese restaurant where one could fill oneself up with such delicacies as spam chop suey, spam chow mein, or spam curry for 1s 4d, inclusive of rice.

Air raid precautions

The College’s first Air Raid Warden was Adam Fox who managed to combine pastoral visitation as Dean of Divinity with checks on inadequately screened windows in the blackout.

When “fire-watching” became a national requirement undergraduates were put on a rota, six per night, to sleep in a special room – initially in Cloisters but later on the top floor of Founder’s Tower. They were given a certain amount of training in climbing

over the roofs in the dark and in the use of stirrup pumps. In the event of an alert they would have gone on duty to deal with incendiary bombs on roofs etc. In vacations volunteer undergraduates could stay up to fire-watch every night for a period of one or more weeks, and as they were recompensed for this with free board and lodging it was quite a popular arrangement. I once did four consecutive weeks in the summer of 1941 when the weather was marvellous and we slept in the open on the roof of Founder's Tower.

The College also acquired a trailer pump for fire-fighting and several pump crews were trained by a regular fireman. Night exercises could be very wet and great fun, it was not until after my time that there developed inter-college competitions for the fastest mobilisation of trailer pumps.

Miscellaneous

For a time C S Lewis was Vice-President, and he was a familiar figure around the College, as indeed was his brother []¹ calling to see him. Little did we think he would become a cult figure to be portrayed on film and television.

Some time after the election of Sir Henry Tizard as President there was an occasion when we were sitting in Hall ready for dinner and awaiting the arrival of the procession of dons to the high table – they entered from the Buttery end, not over the cloisters roof in those days. One of the scouts came in and told us “The new President is dining in Hall for the first time tonight and the Vice President would like there to be some spontaneous applause when he comes in”.

In have heard it supposed that it was a misfortune to be up in war time, but this was far from the case. most aspects of university life were in full swing and could be fully enjoyed. it was a time when some of the petty restrictions of the past had been lifted and the later pressures on students had not developed. Numbers being low, library and teaching facilities were very adequate. The undergraduate intake had been considerably democratised but gracious living conditions still obtained. And no subsequent generation has been able to enjoy as we did the architecture of Oxford by moonlight with no street lights and virtually no traffic.

¹Left blank in manuscript: this was W H Lewis, known as Warnie. [RW]