

# Autobiography chapter: Oxford University in Wartime

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As I came up in 1939 and had some knowledge of university life before the war via my elder brother I was well placed to be aware of the changes made by the war.

## **Accommodation and living arrangements in college**

Before the war allocation of rooms to freshmen in Magdalen had been fairly arbitrary, while subsequent years had a degree of choice subject to their seniority and their ability to pay for more expensive rooms, the rent of which was a function of their desirability. During the long vac of 1939 I was notified that I had been allocated rooms on the ground floor of New Buildings. However after the outbreak of war two changes were made. Room rents were abolished and the signing of chits for meals in hall was abolished. Instead a flat rate of 12/- per day was made for accommodation and full board (lunch, dinner and breakfast), inclusive also of attendance and the minimum payment of 30/- per term to one's scout. At the same time the college decided that those in their second and third years who were returning to college had already been able to enjoy one or two years to the full and the first years might have a very short and uncertain chance of doing so. All bookings of rooms were therefore cancelled (of course some were cancelled anyway by people who had already joined up) and the best rooms were allocated to the first year at no extra charge. By the luck of the draw I got what were probably the best rooms in college, on the second floor of St Swithun's 7 in the newest part of the college, built about 1933. This meant I had a wash bowl with h and c in the bedroom and a bathroom and lavatory on the landing. These luxuries only existed on that staircase, the three staircases in Longwall, and in the Annexe. In addition to this however my windows had a unique view over the President's garden, with New Buildings in sight to the left and the Tower to the right. The rooms had previously been booked by a wealthy baronet.

With regard to meals the flat rate system had both advantages and disadvantages. As a fairly impecunious student I probably had to pay rather more than I might otherwise

have been able to do, but it absolved me from worrying about economising on food and balancing cost against nourishment and sociability. In fact until rationing really began to bite we lived right royally. Breakfast was always plentiful, and dinners remained remarkably good right up to 1943, though lunches declined noticeably in quality. Eventually we had to draw our margarine and sugar rations for each week on a Monday morning and take them with us to hall each day for breakfast. The disadvantage was the social one: the system militated strongly against eating out with one's friends from other colleges, whether in restaurants or other college halls. Because practically everyone was in Hall for dinner every night there was a strong tendency to sit in the same place every night; this did not apply at lunch and breakfast because these were informal and people came and went over 1¼ hours at breakfast and half an hour or more at lunch.

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 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 if 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.

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 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 remarkably good. He called me in the morning and drew the curtains back, and put out one's shoes for "the boots" to polish on his round. He made one's bed in the morning and turned it down in the evening. He washed up any crockery that one used, and he entered one's items of washing in one's laundry book and despatched it to the laundry on a Monday morning and brought it back in a neat brown paper parcel on a Saturday. If one gave a lunch party in one's rooms he arranged the order with the kitchen, brought the food across (about 150 yards) and waited at table. If one was ill he put one on the aeger list and brought all one's meals across from the kitchen as well as calling the doctor (this was before the appointment of a College Nurse in 1940). He had some assistance with cleaning the rooms from a woman cleaner, with whom he arranged the mending of one's socks!

## **The take-over of College buildings**

Some colleges were taken over right from the start of the war for military and office purposes – or in the case of St Peter's to accommodate the evacuated Westfield College,

London. Undergraduates of these colleges were accommodated in other colleges, and this frequently led to rooms having to be shared to deal with the numbers involved. Magdalen was scheduled for takeover and we would have been accommodated at New College, but it was not required immediately. Early in Michaelmas Term 1939 preparations were made for partial takeover, by moving everyone out of the old staircases in St Swithun's, that is all but my staircase. These people were accommodated elsewhere in College, and the numbers in residence were small enough for this to be done without any sharing. These staircases remained empty and unused for over a year, but in January 1941 the whole of St Swithun's quad was taken over by the RAF for officers involved with the recovery of crashed aircraft. We continued to be able to use the quad in moving about College and were much amused by the notice that appeared on the door to the lavatories in the archway between St Swithun's and Longwall quads. It read "*Conveniences, camp followers (fem), for the use of*". After some time this was replaced by a simpler notice that said "W.A.A.F."

As a result of this take-over I was moved to the Annexe on the far side of Longwall Street at the corner with the High. No further take-over took place in Magdalen.

It is my recollection that at least some college fellows were able to retain their rooms in colleges or parts of colleges that were taken over.

## **Closure of college gates**

In October 1939 the University authorities were very nervous about the problems of keeping order in the streets in the blackout. They therefore imposed an 11 pm curfew instead of the traditional one of midnight, and the women's colleges brought their traditional 11 pm curfew forward to 10 pm. In the event there turned out 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, and in January 1940 the rules reverted to normal.

College gates were generally closed at 9.15 pm and after that time one had to knock to be admitted by the porter and one's time of arrival was recorded. At Magdalen, unlike most colleges, this did not lead to a fine on a sliding scale of lateness because a benefactor had left a legacy to "free the gate for ever", but it was of course still an offence to arrive after midnight. Also one was not allowed to leave the college after 9.15 pm and guests could not be admitted even if accompanied by a member. The prohibition on leaving the college after 9.15 was the only college rule that I found really irksome. One could of course be let out of college to go to the Annexe or vice-versa, but one's departure was then recorded and was supposed to match one's knocking-in 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 doubled as porter and general janitor and lived with his wife in the ground floor flat. Varney, who held this position in my time, told me that his predecessor (when the Annexe was first opened) had lost his job for corrupt connivance with undergraduates breaking the rules, and he gave it to be understood that he had no intention of taking any risks in that direction.

The above times of gate closure applied in term time. In vacation the gate was not always locked so carefully at 9.15 but one had to be in by 10.00 as the final time. This was irksome. It was said to be to relieve the porters from night duties. Whether it had applied before the war, and whether it applied at other colleges I do not know.

## **Air raid precautions and other matters**

The College's first Airt Raid Warden was the Dean of Divinity, the Rev Adam Fox, who kept an eye on blackout enforcement and was on duty during air raid alerts. I believe the college gate was opened during such alerts. There were of course no actual raids on central Oxford. When "fire watching" became a national requirement undergraduates were put on a rota in term time, six per night, to sleep in a special room (initially in Cloisters but later on the top floor of Founder's Tower). In the event of an alert they would then have gone on duty to spot and deal with incendiary bombs on roofs etc. No alert ever occurred when I was on duty. In the vacation volunteer undergraduates could stay up to fire watch (every night for a period) and were recompensed for this with free board and lodging. There was considerable competition to get in on this activity for the sake of these perks. I once did four consecutive weeks in the summer of 1941 when there was unusually good weather and we slept on the roof of Founder's Tower. Fire watchers were given a certain amount of training in climbing over the college roofs in the dark and in the use of stirrup pumps.

The college acquired a trailer pump for fire fighting and several pump crews were trained by a regular fireman in its operation and in running out hoses, holding the "branch" (the nozzle) and directing the water jet. Night exercises could be very wet and great fun. After my time there developed, towards the end of the war, inter-college competitions for the fastest mobilisation of trailer pumps.

Air-raid precautions did not of course stop at the college gates. Fire-watching in university buildings was largely done by student volunteers in such buildings as the Bodleian, the University Museum etc. These fire-watchers were paid a few shillings per night; a payment which was said not to be for services rendered but to defray any possible extra expenditure. It was also possible for undergraduates to be air-raid wardens in the city; while resident in the Annexe I was for a short time an air-raid warden for Holywell and Longwall Street. In my fourth year (as a Part II Chemistry student) I became an

Assistant Gas Identification Officer for the city, which had a staff of two GIOs and two assistants. My supervisor Mr (later Prof) H M Powell was a GIO and he recruited me as his assistant. We were based at St Aldates Police Station and had to report there when the air-raid sirens sounded. We took part in “Exercise Carfax” – a mock land invasion of Oxford one Sunday in 1943 and actually collected some suspect toxic material. We were in process of arranging for its transport by despatch rider to the Regional Gas Advisor in Reading when the town fell to the invading troops.

These various extra-mural activities were obviously no respecters of university rules about curfews and gates, and led to the first dents in the strict application of the rules about pernoctating in college or licensed lodgings.

## **Call up, deferment, and length of residence**

The period in residence of those who came up during the war varied from one term to the full length of a normal course (three or even more years) depending on circumstances. Obviously if a person wished to join up as soon as he was old enough then he could do so. Otherwise, soon after registering for military service one was interviewed by the Joint Recruiting Board. This had the power to defer call-up, and usually gave deferment to the end of the current academic year – regardless of one’s subject. This permitted one to take a normal exam if one was due at that point of one’s course, or a special was exam which would qualify one for an unclassified “war degree” after the war if one chose not to return to complete one’s course. Time in residence thus depended on the position of one’s birthday (and consequently one’s registration date) with respect to the academic year, and quite a lot of people maximised it by coming up in the Hilary of Trinity term before they would normally have done. Thus most people had from three to six terms in residence before being called up, and one was often asked not what year one was in but what term (3rd, 4th, etc) one was in.

There were however two subjects that were deemed to merit further deferment to complete the normal course. These were medicine and chemistry – other scientists did not qualify but were drafted into radar after two years. In chemistry one took that war exam at the end of one’s first year if one had already registered, and deferment depended on a satisfactory result and was for a year at a time. Thus everyone took the war exam in their second year and with a satisfactory result could be deferred to take finals. On the result of finals one could obtain further deferment to do Part II provided that this involved research of value to the war effort in one of the reorganised war research teams. In order to maximise the contribution to the war effort, Part II work started in August and one took only nominal holidays at Christmas and Easter.

During the Part II year one applied for jobs in chemical industries, and company representatives came to Oxford to interview applicants in the way that came to be

known after the war as “the milk round”. Second interviews took place at the companies involved, and when one had been offered and accepted a job the company then applied to the Ministry of Labour for one’s services. The Ministry then “directed” one to work for that company under the Direction of Labour Act and one’s call up was further deferred, indefinitely, while one was so employed.

A few chemists were able to get deferment in order to do a DPhil, but only if they got a 1st and would be continuing to work in one of the teams on war related research.

Undergraduates who were destined for call-up were in general in the O.T.C. or Air Training Corps, but chemists in general were not. Other scientists were not either, but they had to do additional electronics courses to prepare them for radar work.

Theses produced on research in the war-research teams were classified and had to be handed in for safe keeping after examination. They also had to have non-committal titles – my Part II and BSc thesis was entitled “Some applications of X-ray crystallographic methods to war problems”.

## **Living out of college**

The only alternative to living in college was to live in licensed lodgings where one’s landlady provided breakfast, made one’s bed, cleaned one’s room, did one’s washing or sent it out to the laundry, and was responsible for recording one’s presence overnight. There must have been a considerable reduction in the occupation of licensed lodgings during the war, as these had been mainly for third year men who were then very few. I was in lodgings in my fourth (Part II) year.

Because the college did not hold one’s ration book if one was in lodgings one was only permitted to sign in to dine twice a week. Mid-day meals were in general taken at the British Restaurants of which there were several. The main one was in the small hall of the Town Hall and the queue for it normally stretched all the way down the stairs. It provided a very adequate meal without any frills and in fairly sordid surroundings for less than a shilling. For evenings when one was not in hall there were such establishments as the Stowaway in the High – the prototype Chinese restaurant where one could fill oneself very satisfactorily with such delicacies as spam chop suey, spam chow mein, or spam curry for 1/4, inclusive of rice!

## **Relations between the sexes**

The numbers of men in residence were greatly reduced since they mostly only stayed for an average of four or five terms. The only exceptions (apart from medical students

and chemists discussed above) were a few ordinands, a few conscientious objectors with unconditional exemption, and a few foreigners and a few of the medically unfit. On the other hand the numbers of women were not reduced but effectively increased by the presence of Westfield College, then composed wholly of women. They were not officially members of the university but in practice took part in university life as though they were. Thus the ratio of men to women was less than it had ever been since women were admitted to the university in the 20s and indeed less than it would be at least until the late 70s.

Women were permitted in men's rooms in college from 1 pm to 7 pm. In Magdalen this was extended to 9 pm in Trinity Term only but in 1942 some resourceful junior members pointed out that this concession had been made until 9 pm British Summer Time, and that as British Double Summer Time was now in force it should logically be extended to 10 pm. This argument was accepted by the authorities and then relaxation occurred.

Until the late 30s men had not been allowed at all into women's rooms in the women's colleges, but by 1939 this was permitted from 2 pm to 6 pm in LMH and St Hugh's, and between these times on Saturdays and Sundays only at Somerville, St Hilda's and St Anne's – although at St Anne's only if the woman was in her second or third year. Some Somerville women had to be accommodated for their second year in LMH because of a partial take-over of the Somerville buildings, and when they were in LMH they enjoyed LMH rules, so when the first group returned to Somerville in 1940-41 they demanded and obtained a similar relaxation there. This relaxation occurred at St Hilda's in 1943.

## **Arrangements for teaching and examinations**

In general these were not greatly altered except as a result of the conversion of the Examination Schools into a military hospital. As a result examinations had to be held in such unsuitable buildings as the Divinity School and the Taylorian.

In chemistry the time-table had to be substantially altered because it had been customary for a certain amount of laboratory work to be done from 5 pm to 7 pm. As it was not practicable to block out the chemistry laboratories lectures were scheduled between 4.45 pm and 5.45 pm instead of 9 am and 10 am, thus leaving the whole of the mornings free for practical work. With the early evening time-slot fully occupied by lectures, tutorials were moved to the mornings. This rearrangement occurred in Michaelmas and Hilary terms only, and in Trinity term the timetable reverted to tradition.

## **Some general observations**

I have hard 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 were low and the library and teaching facilities were very adequate. the undergraduate intake had been substantially democratised but gracious living conditions still obtained. As no subsequent student generation has been able to enjoy as we did the architecture of Oxford by moonlight with no street lights and virtually no traffic.