



1979-2009

Women at Balliol



Celebrating Thirty Years



Where it all began...

It is very difficult to realise that the first women Fellows made their appearance at Balliol well over thirty years ago (myself in 1973, JRFs Maxine Berg in 1974 and Connie Jo Veldink in 1975, and SRF Gillian Morriss in 1977), and difficult to remember what the place was like with no official women members around. I say official, since Balliol, though a single-sex institution, was not a monastery, and women old and young – chiefly young – were constantly to be seen around the quads and the JCR, and at College societies. Though the longest-serving scouts were men, there had been women scouts and hall staff for some time and the College Office was a female domain. Most of the Fellows were married and many of them fathers of daughters, so they cannot have been wholly unprepared for the new life-forms about to invade their habitat.

When first elected I agreed to do a few newspaper and radio interviews. The main question was always 'What was it like with all those men?' The interviewers were obviously hoping for tales of ostracism and/or pouncing, and my un-dramatic answers must have been a disappointment to them. But they were true: the Fellows were undemonstratively welcoming and my pupils seemed unfazed by having their tutorials with a woman. The joviality of Miles Spackman, my scout, was barely dented even when I finally dared bring in a bucket and scrubbing-brush and reveal 1930s flowers on the linoleum of my room.

Other seventies memories: trying to cycle in a maxi-skirt (not recommended); serving on innumerable committees ('we must have a woman...'); trying to learn to play the Chapel organ and to cox the first and only SCR eight; and seeing proper Balliol pantos, with a principal boy and a dame and a chorus line in leotards, fishnets, and red rose garters. I'd have loved to be in that. Too late now, alas...

Now it's the age of political correctness (no more traditional pantos) and health and safety (no more cooking on precarious rings on the staircase landings). But more importantly, it's an age when women are no longer a novelty but an absolutely central part of Balliol life. We make a quarter of the fellowship and 40 per cent of the student body: still room for improvement there!

Carol Clark



Rhian Bliss and Katie Hodgson (1986)

Celebrating Thirty Years

1979

The first impression you had as a woman student was that the place was friendly, but strange: women were less than 10 per cent of the population and all the tutors but one were men! An odd world.

I remember trying to talk to other women in the JCR bar, and having to cross a double fence of young men to reach my objective. During the first few months, before everyone got accustomed to our presence, we were considered an exception, especially by the older students. To me, coming from a country where co-education is the rule, it was really the world upside-down.

Although academically there was never any problem, it took a while before we could take part in sports: not enough players for any team! The Erratics (Balliol's second cricket team) were the key: they immediately accepted a mixed team. All the other sports followed and soon we were part of the game: 'honorary men', but socially acceptable!

Jokes apart, it took some good will from everyone, but in a few months we felt appreciated and not just tolerated in the JCR or in tutorials. I believe men students got over their fear of the 'strange animals', once they realized that we could keep our point in discussions at tutorials and not burst into tears (I assure you that is what a man told me at the time!).

All in all, it was great experience, like being pioneers charged with the task of making normality feel normal!

Elena Ceva-Valla



Elena Ceva-Valla (1979)

'When the history of the College is next written there is no doubt that what will be described as the most significant event of the past year will be the admission of women to the College. Old members always ask anxiously 'does it make a lot of difference having women in the College?' The fact is that the presence of women has already come to seem so natural and such a matter of course that it is hard to know how to answer. The admission of women to Balliol reminds me of the introduction of decimal coinage into Britain. Before it happened, people were most apprehensive...very soon after it happened it became quite hard to imagine how we had managed to do all those complicated calculations with shillings and pence.'

Anthony Kenny, Annual Record 1980



Elizabeth Nisbet (1979)

1979-1989



1979 Women's VIII

'Balliol women have also distinguished themselves academically in the two years since they have been at College. In 1979/80 of all the women who took classified degrees two thirds obtained Firsts and in the present year the women have again made a contribution out of proportion to their numbers to the total of 17 Firsts obtained in Mods.'

Anthony Kenny, *Annual Record* 1981

First women's VIII: then and now

In that spirit of giving everything a go, common to freshers of whatever vintage, a small group of 1979 women formed the first Balliol women's VIII (pictured). Some of us had already excelled at sport, most hadn't, but we were all determined, not afraid of the phrase '6am OTW' and, eventually, pretty fit. We managed to 'row on' for Christ Church Regatta that first Michaelmas term, and then in Torpids and Summer Eights later that year. We went on to win our blades in Torpids 1982 and ended up in the women's first division after Summer Eights that year. That, though, is nothing compared to the current women's first VIII, who, in 2009, finished second on the river.

Several of us kept in touch after we left (sadly, wonderful Cynthia Stallman, third from top in the picture, died in 1992) and last year someone suggested marking our impending 50ths with a reunion row. The 30th anniversary gave us the perfect opportunity. Assisted by Anna Lewis and others from the current crew, five of us vintage women met at the boathouse at 8.45am for a 9am OTW on 21st November 2009. One of our number had flown in from Pakistan, another from Canada, and a third from Ireland. We had all checked our life insurance and argued about whose mad idea this was. Seeing our cox arrive in a lifejacket didn't help, although she assured us it was now mandatory, rather than a sign of nervousness on her part.

Getting the boat on to the water, and working out what the cox's commands actually meant turned out to be the hard part. Once on the water, and after a few tentative paddles, we found our rhythm. Soon all eight of us were rowing together. Even though we must have looked terrible, we felt fabulous. We celebrated with champagne and malt loaf in the boathouse, toasting ourselves, the current women (who went on to win in Christ Church Regatta that afternoon) and our absent friends.

Rebecca Colenutt (née Hardy)



1979-1989

An international graduate student's perspective

I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to come to Oxford on both Canadian and UK government scholarships. A professor from Dalhousie (my undergraduate university) had highly recommended Balliol, so I was thrilled to be accepted in 1984 to begin a Masters program by research in neurophysiology at the Nuffield Laboratory of Ophthalmology – then located a quick cycle ride away from Balliol on Walton Street.

Like many other Balliol graduate students, I lived at Holywell Manor, although much of my time outside the lab was also spent in college, enjoying meals and conversations with other students in Hall.

Without laptops or email in those days, it was a challenge to type and print my MSc thesis on the University mainframe computer – afterhours – including many bicycle trips to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Headington Hill.

My fondest memories of Balliol include the excitement of Matriculation Day, rowing in the Women's Second Eight, parties at the Manor, being royally entertained at Victorian Society events (including a dinner/cruise on the Thames), hearing the organ played in Hall on a few special occasions, witnessing the magnolias in full bloom in the Main Quad in spring, and drinking countless coffees with friends in the JCR (highlighted by dreamy, unparalleled moments savoured on lawn in Trinity Term)!

Nora Cutcliffe (1984)



Nora Cutcliffe & Carol Nairn (1984)



Balliol Ladies' Tennis Team, 1985

'May 1989....for someone who'd seen the very beginning of the process, there was something very exciting in seeing Hall completely full of women, fresh young faces and colourful clothes under the surprised gaze of the whiskery old faces on the walls.'

Carol Clark, *Floreat Domus* 1999

1979-1989



1988 Torpids

From the first MCR President

I recall some key events from Michaelmas term 1989 when I started as a graduate engineering DPhil student: the fall of the Berlin wall and the beginning of the foundation of Balliol MCR. As its founding president, I can tell you how the latter happened.

On arrival at Balliol from Denmark I noticed two things: that the Holywell Manor Bar could do with some refurbishment, and what an amazing diverse and very bright bunch of fellow students I shared the Manor with. The graduate student body at the time was the Balliol Graduate Society, which acted as a sub-set of the JCR. It had its election for the various posts and it was suggested that I ran for secretary. My response to that was: 'I am going to run for President'!

During my presidency I successfully carried out the ballot that precipitated the foundation of Balliol MCR, wrote the first constitution, and was the student representative supporting the refurbishment of the bar, among other things. In Spring 1990 Balliol's MCR was born and I attended the SCR executive meeting as MCR president shortly thereafter with the JCR president, who was also female.

I was captain of a Balliol women's basketball team in the mid 1990s. I made it to the University basketball women's team in 1993-94 and we were the first Oxford women's team to win the Universities National championship. On the team we had the Olympian representative for Canada, Jodi Evans, who was also the first woman to play at the Oxford men's basketball team's varsity match which caused controversy at the time. Imagine that!

Dorte Rich Jørgensen



The Magic Flute, Oxford Playhouse (1986) Tracey Wolffe (née Gold) (centre)



Katie Hodgson (1986) - 1987 Rocky Horror



Tracey Wolffe (née Gold) off to Somerville Ball

1979-1989



Jane-Frances Kelly (1989)

1989

I was the only person in College doing my course, but it was still the case that I learnt so much more from my Balliol peers than from my tutors; still the case that my experience of Oxford was overwhelmingly one of Balliol rather than of the University more broadly.

During my years at Balliol, I discovered salad, and pubs, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Italy, and coffee. It was the place where I first fell in love, picturesquely, walking hand in hand around quads, pre-Raphaelite hair down to my elbows.

But much more importantly, Balliol was the stage on which I turned from an intimidated 17-year-old with nothing say, to recognizably the person I am now. Of course it was a transformatory experience, of course it affected everything that came after. I came out knowing myself and the world in completely different ways. It rewired my brain, and left it primed to keep learning for the rest of my life.

In the lingo of philosophers, there is very clearly ‘something that it is like’ to be at Balliol. There is something that Balliol is ‘about’.

Working with the Vice-Chancellor of an Australian university recently, I came across Woodrow Wilson’s 1905 speech ‘Princeton in the Service of the Nation’, where he argued that a great university produces graduates who will participate in the world’s transactions, becoming ‘the world’s servants’. He declared that Princeton existed to: ‘give young men such training as...would fit them handsomely... or the grave duties of citizens and neighbours...[men] whom the world could trust to do its daily work...The business of the world is not individual success, but its own betterment.’

Balliol was a place which managed to combine purpose with enough space to tolerate and embrace many ways of being, and indeed a fair amount of downright eccentricity. It also, by the time I was there, took women!

Jane-Frances Kelly

Retirement of the College Secretary

This Easter, Balliol bid farewell to Julia Hore as College Secretary, a post she had held since 1980 (although she first came here in 1973).

The arrival of the first female students was no small change. Julia recalls debates over whether or not to put up full-length mirrors in bedrooms, and the move away from referring to students by their surnames.

Anna Lewis
(*Floreat Domus* 2007)

Balliol Women's Dinner 1992 (from the Annual Record)

The first ever Balliol Women's dinner...was attended by 100 female undergraduates, graduates, lecturers and dons, in addition to guest speaker, Jenni Murray, presenter of Radio 4's Woman's Hour. This was a chance for the women of Balliol to come together and celebrate the vital contribution of women to College life, but also to remind ourselves of the need to encourage more women to apply, considering the predominance of men within College.

The Dinner was a great success and Jenni Murray proved to be a provocative and highly amusing speaker, covering issues from post-feminism ('keep your bra, and burn your brain') to her own family life. It is difficult to imagine a woman of Murray's presence would be intimidated by even the most raucous of Balliol's rugby players. However, she divulged her method of dealing with intimidating men—simply imagine them lying naked on a table, and their aura of power will fizzle away.

Our original request for a speech on the theme of how Jenni Murray manages to combine her career and her family life was met with indignation. 'That', she said, 'is the one question which makes my blood boil! Nobody would ever put it to Brian Redhead. If we are going to survive as a species, men have to start asking and answering the same questions.' Her message to Balliol's women, then, was that ambitions cannot be pursued within the confines of the traditional stereotypes: women should feel no guilt about combining motherhood with a role and value outside the home.

The effects of the Dinner are still reverberating through College. Specially designed T-shirts, made to celebrate and publicise the event, proved to be very popular, even among the men's first VIII, who flaunted the T-shirts emblazoned with the campaign slogan, 'Making Balliol apply to Women, and Women Apply to Balliol'.

Gemma Blair, Helen Griffiths, Kate Prasad



Gemma Benson (née Blair) (1990)



1994 Matriculation, by Norman MacBeath

1989-1999



Balliol Women's Hockey Team 1998

Hockey and Football

When I arrived in 1995, Balliol didn't have a women's hockey team. There was a mixed team, though they often had to borrow women players from other colleges. In 1996 the mixed team attracted enough women that we could look to fielding a women's side as well, and both teams continued throughout my time. The mixed team was usually strong and played some memorable matches, usually losing to Teddy Hall but beating many other sides. Displays of talent and pure determination abounded! I was definitely in the latter bracket, playing with all manner of injuries.

After initial massive enthusiasm, the women's team struggled to find players, but made up in commitment what we lacked in numbers. The men also struggled for players sometimes, and in my four years there were four people who played for all three teams – three women and one man (now my husband) who, when we arrived to play a match with just three women in our squad was approved by the opposition as an honorary woman!

Women's football was never something to which we could apply the old 'effortlessly superior' cliché; in fact much of the time in my first couple of years it was a rather exhausting exercise in minimising the scale of our defeat. Few girls were allowed to play at school and so many of the team were willing but un-tested players. To be fair, when we were able to field a full team we often put in great performances, but a full team was a rare luxury. There were many occasions when the stalwarts of the team could be found in the JCR at lunchtime trying to chase down anyone who was willing to put on a footy shirt. The shirts in question were any kit we could borrow from the men.

On the pitch it was a 'never say die' attitude that carried the day. Once we fielded four players against a full squad from St Catz and held them well until half time! I'm proud to say that we chose to lose heavily on the pitch rather than take the then regulation 4-0 defeat for not playing.

By the 1997-98 season more players arrived with footballing experience and we even had substitutes sometimes. The team went from strength to strength, performing well in the annual five-a-side summer

'Balliol men have not been so prominent in sport this year. However, the women have more than compensated for that. We should note in particular the rifle shooting prowess of Roopa Unnikrishnan who went to the international meet in Germany with the support of the Cadle Fund and returned ranked twenty-third in the world.'

Colin Lucas, Annual Record 1996

1989-1999

Barris College Women's Football

LEAGUE DIVISION WINNERS



tournament. The next year saw a dramatically stronger squad take promotion by winning division 4 and playing with some style, finally clinching the title by beating Worcester 2-0 in a match described as 'proper football' by some of our fans.

Suzanne Truss (née Thomas),
 Captain of the Women's Football Team 1996-97

The 1998-99 Division 4 winning team: The women - left to right back row: Katie Low, Charlotte Edwards (Captain 1997-98), Becka; middle row, Rachel Cobby, Tara, Louise Archer, Anna Turley, Stella Campbell, Georgina Hardy, ??, Rosie Fisher; front row, Suzanne Thomas (Captain 1996-97), Sarah Longair, Suzi, Alice Goodwin (Captain 1998-99), Sian Price, Chris Frayne, Liz

1989-1999

1999



Maya Bahoshy (2006) chalking blades in 2007

When I arrived to start my first term at Balliol it was only my second visit to the UK – the first was when I came to Oxford for my interview.

Coming from Sweden, I was not quite sure what to expect, as I had heard that Oxford was a very traditional place. I am happy to say that I don't remember ever feeling I was treated differently because I was a woman, and the atmosphere at Balliol made me feel I could do anything I wanted.

I read medicine, so I stayed at Balliol for six years and had a lot of time to explore, becoming involved in debating and ballroom dancing. What I enjoyed most was being part of such an interesting student community at Balliol and the University as a whole. In the later years I lived at Holywell Manor which I particularly enjoyed as the student body was extremely international. That, together with the diversity of academic interests represented, made me learn so much outside my academic work.

One year I was the MCR president, which was an interesting mix of being intensely involved in the social life of the MCR and gaining an insight into College politics!

As a woman, what did concern me was society outside the University. It seemed difficult for women to combine career and family life. What puzzled me was that the debate was only ever about women – for example about making it easier to work part-time. If, instead, paternity leave was increased and it was made easier and more acceptable for men to work flexibly, it would greatly relieve the pressure on women. It is easy as a couple to say 'we will share fifty-fifty', but if the societal structures and attitudes are against it, even the best of intentions will fail. I hope Balliol people – women and men – can lead the way.

Lina Nerlander



Women's Basketball Cuppers Winners 2007, from left to right back row: Kate Manns, Justine Potts, Nattasuda Mettaprasert; front row: Erin Babinsky, Patricia Costa Pozza (Captain 2006-2007), Miriam Bazan-Peregrino (Captain 2004-2006)

1999-2009



In 2007 the Lindsay Bar was given a makeover by students. History undergraduate Christopher Skillicorn (2003), or 'Skilly' as he is universally known, covered the walls with a mural charting the history of Balliol.



Balliol MCR women dress up for one of Holywell Manor's famous bops, to the theme of 'Beards and Burlesque', Michaelmas Term 2009

1999-2009



Tea at Holywell Manor, 2009

Bluestocking

An imaginative online journal *Bluestocking (Women as Creative Thinkers)* has been launched by Mona Sakr (2005), a Balliol undergraduate who is reading Experimental Psychology. *Bluestocking* aims to bring the work of female thinkers into the mainstream by presenting and discussing it in a critical and insightful way.

The idea is that many women throughout history have been as inspirational – and have had as large an impact in their own time – as the men that history has spent more time recording. Anyone can submit articles, which are edited and published in twice-termly issues. The *Bluestocking* team, led this year by Balliol’s Rebecca Gregory (2004), Master’s student in History, also lead discussions, conduct interviews, and organize events to launch issues.



Carol Norberg (née Nairn), Nora Cutcliffe, and Nudrat Majeed at the Women’s Lunch, 2009

Mona explains: ‘I could never have anticipated the variety of women that would appear as subjects of discussion in *Bluestocking*. From the current issue, I’ve learnt about 12th century gynaecologist Trota di Ruggiero, and palaeontologist Dorothea Bate, to name just two women. *Bluestocking* is such a wonderful resource because re-writing history (and writing women into history) only works when it is a collective activity.’

Anna Lewis (*Floreat Domus* 2008)

Today, Bluestocking is a University-wide journal.

1999-2009

2009

It's amazing to think of a time when Balliol didn't have any women students, yet thirty years is not that long ago!

Not being able to go where we like and do what we want because of our sex certainly seems anachronistic, although there is still a sense that there is a long way to go yet before we can truly celebrate equality here in Oxford University. We are still in the minority; only 30 per cent of the MCR are women, and I hear the JCR is still majority male, and there are many more male Fellows than female in Balliol.

Having said that, I don't think there is a real sense of unfairness in our day-to-day life. One woman graduate told me it took her three years to figure out that women were in the minority, and I must admit on my first day here I was more impressed by the diversity of nationalities than by being in the minority (it took me a while to figure out that I was often the only lady in the bar in the evenings!).

We have a fantastic MCR Women's Officer this year, who has really made an effort to bring us all together, which is great for creating friendships with people from the whole College, from all departments and countries. It is refreshing when we come together as women only – it is then that you realise how much you miss having a girly natter once in a while!

Importantly, it was our Women's Officer who campaigned to get a picture of Dervorguilla up in the hall; hopefully one day there will be many more pictures of women up there (maybe when we celebrate the next thirty years of women in Balliol!).

It is not hard being a woman in Balliol – we are respected and are definitely integrated members of the College. I do hope, though, that soon the imbalance of female graduates and Fellows may be addressed and we can one day celebrate a college that is equal in its ratio of women and men.

Tasha D'Cruz



Women's Lunch, 2009



Tracey Wolfe (née Gold) feeding her daughter in Balliol's Front Quad

1999-2009

Timeline of 'Firsts'

- 1973 Carol Clark is Balliol's first woman Fellow
- 1974 Maxine Berg is Balliol's first woman Junior Research Fellow
- 1979 Elena Ceva-Valla is first woman undergraduate to arrive
- 1980 Kate Pritchard is first female cox for Balliol
- 1981 Cathy Milsum is first Balliol woman to take a degree
- 1982 Catherine Roe is first female JCR President
- 1984 For the first time, a Balliol woman marries a Balliol man
- 1990 Dorte Rich Jørgenson is first MCR President
- 1990 Judith Brown is Balliol's first woman Professor
- 1993 Balliol opens its Day Nursery
- 1995 HIH the Crown Princess Masako of Japan becomes Balliol's first female Honorary Fellow
- 1997 Yvette Cooper is first Balliol woman elected to Parliament
- 1997 Emma McAllister is first female leader of the Chapel Choir
- 2009 Nancy-Ann DeParle is first of four Balliol women elected to Obama's government
- 2009 Arabella Currie is first Balliol woman to win the Newdigate Prize for poetry

Celebrating Thirty Years