

Lifting the Veil of Time: The Servants of New College Restored



New College Staff, 1927
New College Archives, NCA DB/J2

It is often said that in any large organization, not just an Oxford college, the unsung heroes are the support staff, those hard-working souls beavering away behind the scenes to help ensure the cogs of the machinery continue to run smoothly.

In an Oxford establishment such as New College, besides those in administrative posts, many of such staff are domestic, the ‘college servants’ of old: the porters, kitchen staff, groundsmen, maintenance and stores workers and the cleaners, known locally as ‘scouts’. The last of these diligently clean staircases, toilets, kitchens and especially students’ rooms—without them, many an undergraduate may disappear mere weeks, if not days, into their sojourn here beneath crumpled bedlinen and assorted detritus.

Unfortunately, vital as they may be to the smooth running of the college, these invaluable souls rarely leave much of a footprint in the archival records, save for a limited collection of notes and correspondence (principally, New College Archives BCF102: College servants 1932-1947) and an even more limited collection of photographs. There may be an occasional mention in New College Record [NCR] on an exceptional service record or eventual retirement, but this is only in relatively recent memory – save for a few exceptions, staff records in NCR only really appear from the 1950s onwards. As a result, any information recorded and located about these members of staff may be seen as valuable from a historical viewpoint. More importantly, of course, such material can strip away the anonymity that has surrounded these people for so many years, restoring to us names, occupations and more information once lost in time—restoring, indeed, their very *identities*.

New College Archives DB/H3 is an alphabetically arranged collection of 733 individual pink staff record cards. They were rediscovered in 2016 by the Home Bursar and her assistant, gathering dust in a neglected filing cabinet. The cards record names, addresses, dates of birth and brief employment details of individual New College staff members—the date their employment began, the department to which they were attached, their progress to other posts within college, a record of their pension details (if applicable) and, finally, the date on which their ‘services terminated’. The cards span as much as a century in time, the earliest recorded employment start date being 1865, the latest 1978, with the majority being from the 1920s to the 1970s. Presumably, after this, the card system was abandoned.

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SURNAME. Stone

Christian Names. Albert

Address. 22. Chester Street.

Date of Birth. May 28th 1850

Employment Commenced. 1865 or 1870

Progress. Nedmaker Oct 1874.

Pension Scheme. 14. Week Oct 1st 1910. 15/- Jan 10 1919.

Pension Commenced. Oct 1910.

Services Terminated.

Died. Feb 18th 1936

NCA DB/H3/620

Albert Stone's start date of '1865 or 1870' is the earliest in the collection

It is a rich and diverse collection. Here are the people who worked in the kitchen, the gardens, the buttery, the beer cellar, the stores, the staircases, the SCR, the Estate Office. There are Clerks of Works, groundsmen, woodmen, porters, garden staff, messengers, ‘scullery staff’, several ‘sewing women’, ‘charwomen’, a ‘boatman’, a ‘waterman’, someone who looked after the boilers, ‘scouts’ (a generic term seemingly not widely used, on the cards at least, until the late 1950s/early 1960s) and many, many ‘bedmakers’. Certain administrative staff are also recorded: Library staff, Bursar’s secretaries, Fellows’ secretaries, a Tutor’s secretary, a Domestic (Home) Bursar’s secretary, and an accountant.

A notable aspect of the cards is that an individual’s length of service can be ascertained, and this can highlight some remarkable stories. A perhaps surprising number of staff achieved, and passed, at least twenty years’ service, with a good number exceeding thirty.

- Eunice Herron, for example, began in the kitchen in June 1948, moved to become a bedmaker in 1965, retiring after thirty years' service in 1978.
- Jesse Carter started work (recorded only as 'Boots') on 4 April 1919 at the age of thirty-four, retiring over thirty-three years later on 10 October 1952, a figure matched by charwoman Mabel Carter (not obviously related) between 1935 and 1968.
- Edwin Hill retired after thirty-eight years on 31 July 1940, having been made Chef in 1932.
- Albert Coleman started in September 1924, progressed to being a bedmaker in 1925, retiring after thirty-nine years at Christmas 1963.
- Frederick William Bayliss began on New Year's Day in 1882 aged twenty-three, and worked until he retired in 1924/25, forty-two years later.
- Kenneth Jarman was a storesman and bedmaker in his forty-eight years between 1929 and 1977/78, beginning his New College career at almost sixteen years of age and ending it working in OB12 (as the NCR relates).
- Charles Dickens (genuinely, though not the famous one!) joined College at the age of fourteen in 1921 and progressed from the JCR to the SCR to also being a bedmaker in the subsequent forty-seven-plus years.
- Cyril Cooper, a bedmaker and 'Hallman', clocked up forty-nine years between 1913 and 1962.
- William Howse started work in April 1889 and became a Porter a mere forty-nine years later in 1938.

A number of staff photographs survive in the Archives. One photo, from about 1957/58 in which several of those named above are present, is included with this article.

Conversely, there are many people who did not last quite so long in their respective posts. While a significant number of those who spent no more than a couple of months, maybe five or six maximum, at New College were undoubtedly on short term, seasonal or temporary work only (and some are noted as such, examples of which include kitchen, garden or grounds staff), others appear to have had a less than happy experience.

- The kitchen porter who left after just four days in November 1966.
- A gentleman of the maintenance department, who left after six weeks in February 1960 whose progress is noted as 'not satisfactory'.
- The man who only managed ten days in the Buttery in September 1968.
- A lady who, despite staying over a year in an undisclosed department, was deemed 'not satisfactory' as she was 'not very interested'.
- The nineteen-year-old junior clerk/typist who lasted two months in the Bursary from September 1973.
- A porter in the Buttery in 1965 and a porter in the kitchens in 1968, both of whom 'failed to return from Xmas holiday'.
- A breakfast and vegetable cook, who clearly couldn't stand the heat and got out after twelve days in September 1966.
- A 'Joseph' (Christian name not noted) who survived just five days in the Buttery in February 1963.
- A worker who joined the kitchen on 5 July 1965 and is noted as having 'last worked Fri. 16th July 1965'. Rather generously, College paid him until 22 July.

- A gentleman of no noted department, who 'left without giving notice' on 27 January 1956 after thirteen days.
- The scout who lasted just two days in September 1962.
- The man who started on 30 June 1965 in the Buttery, progressed to be a 'General Porter', but who was then 'absent from 21-10-65' with 'no explanation'.
- The twenty-eight-year-old lady from the Appeal Office who left 'suddenly!!' on 29/30 November 1978 after two months.
- But undoubtedly the shortest lived member of staff: a member of the Gardens team whose employment was supposed to have started on 21 October 1968 but who 'failed to attend'!

There are, too, those people who clearly were gluttons for punishment, returning to New College for further employment having left at least once already.

- Henry Hughes, born in 1855, had three stints at College spanning much of his life: 1871-75, 1878-80 and ultimately 1886-1923.
- Dorothy Maud, bed-maker, left on 8 January 1965 after six weeks only to return ten days later, and then stayed for over nine years.
- Arthur Day spent over three years in the Buttery from 1958 to 1962, then returned an impressive nine years later in 1971.
- Henry Musto was at College as a scout three times: 1959-62, 1962-66 and 1968-c.1975.
- Winnifred Phipps worked in the kitchen 1959-64, returning part-time from 1965-69.
- Ronald Smith was an apprentice in the kitchen from the age of fifteen in 1932-36, and came back no less than twenty-two years later in 1958 as 1st Chef, staying until at least 1976.

Some of the cards amuse, often due to the somewhat pithy comments left by the compiler.

- The porter who left at 'a minute's notice' in June 1959.
- One chap spent two years as a groundsman between 1963 and 1965, but his services were terminated on 9 September 1965 after he 'failed to report for work'.
- A Scullery man clearly had had enough as he 'walked out' on 15 February 1946.
- One lady clearly got a much better offer in January 1945 as it was deemed worthy to note on the card that she 'left to go to Marks & Spencers'.
- A junior clerk in the Bursary left on 20 December 1974, noted as being 'not satisfactory', to the point of being 'asked to find another job'!

Naturally, there is another side to such levity. Other cards in the set record more sober events, principally the death of college employees.

- Alfred Brown, Head Porter from September 1942, 'died suddenly' in August 1947.
- Percy Buckett, a store-man, died suddenly at work on 14 June 1943.
- Harold Cutbush sadly died of a tropical disease in August 1943 while a Japanese prisoner-of-war.
- William Hancock, Head Gardener, who 'passed away suddenly' in October 1948.

Recent members of College may remember with some affection David Haynes, who was variously assistant JCR Butler, caretaker and yardman, and who died in 2014. His staff card is present in this set, recording that he started as a scout at the age of 23 in March 1969.

In some cases, it is possible to see how multiple members of the same families found employment at New College, a practice which continues to this day amongst the scouts and domestic staff.

- Charles and Alec Merry, of Stanton St. John, who were both employed as woodmen, Alec from 1928 and Charles from 1943.
- George, John and Peter Perry, presumably three brothers, of Bullington Road, employed in the 1930s and all of whom clearly joined the forces in World War II as their cards note that they did not return afterwards.



New College Servants, c. 1957/58
NCA DB/J11

One pleasing aspect of the cards is that they can be used in conjunction with other sources of information in the Archives and College to further our knowledge of these members of staff. Take William Henry Parker, for example. The NCR of 1957-58 records the retirement of W.H. Parker in July 1957, but nothing else. From his original staff card, it can be seen that he was born on 2 April 1887, joined New College in April 1923 as a bedmaker and progressed to the JCR as Butler in October 1935, an appointment confirmed by the 1934-35 issue of NCR. He then held this position until his retirement.

A letter exists in BCF102 addressed to 'Mr Slay' and dated 24 October 1941. It refers to a conversation the writer (E. C. Yorke, Junior Bursar) had that morning with Slay, 'Farnell' and 'Trafford' where Slay said he believed the three of them could cover 'Paisley's' work when he leaves to join the Forces. To cover these extra duties, they will be paid an additional ten shillings a week overtime, which would cease if a new cook is appointed.

Using the cards, along with entries in the NCR, it is possible to identify and add details to these kitchen workers. 'Slay' was Frederick William Slay, born in April 1893, who joined College in 1908. He became 2nd Cook in October 1932, then Chef in 1941, a post he held until his death in July 1958 (another letter in the file confirms his appointment from 31 March 1941 at a salary of £1.1s.8d. per month). Reginald Thomas Farnell was born in February 1889 and began work for New College in October 1932. From 4th Cook he eventually became 2nd Chef before retiring in December 1958; he died in July 1963. Anthony Trafford was born on 6 August 1924 and came to College in September 1938 as a kitchen apprentice. It is noted on his card that he left to go to Magdalen College as a cook, though not when. John Alexander Paisley was born in June 1909, starting at New College in April 1924 and becoming a cook in April 1929. It is not recorded on his card when he left to join the Forces; it only records that his pension commenced in 1968. As a point of interest, slips present in BCF102 indicate Paisley and Farnell were on a wage of £2 16s 0d from October 1940. Slay and Farnell can be seen in the photo from 1957/58 accompanying this article, sixth from the left in the second row and third from the right in the third row respectively.

The card for Mr B.F. Day of Green Street, Oxford is a little sparse on detail. He was born on 15 May 1897 and joined College on 20 April 1939, leaving on 26 July 1940. His position was left unrecorded. A reference letter written for him, dated 16 August 1940 and preserved in BCF102, reveals that he was a vegetable cook in the kitchens and during his employment 'he gave complete satisfaction. He is a trustworthy, punctual and good-mannered and is a First Class Vegetable Cook.' Praise indeed! Day wrote to the Junior Bursar after he left, a letter which also survives. He explained that his reason for leaving was to help his sister and her five children with garden and household chores, as his brother-in-law was shortly to join the Forces. Even though he was anxious to do some 'war work', only voluntary work was available and he could not afford to do this. He asked if College may consider his return after the war, but this does not appear to have happened.

Miss Irene Pimm's card, conversely, contains much information. Born on 2 October 1901, she came to New College on 24 June 1940 as a Bursary Clerk. The card includes details of her pension and its value, and records that she retired on 29 September 1961, an event also logged in the NCR for 1960-61. BCF102, however, rather charmingly preserves her original application letter dated 14 June 1940, in which she states 'Salary required 50/- a week'. The copy of a brief note from the Chief Clerk, dated 18 June and asking her if she would call in to the office that Thursday at 12.30, is followed by a further letter dated 20 June offering her the position, subject to a 3 month probationary period, at a suggested salary of £2 5s per week. The letter closes 'It is of course understood that the appointment will not extend beyond the duration of the war.' Evidently she more than proved her worth! Miss Pimm can be seen in the 1957/58 staff photo, fifth from the right in the second row.

With sufficient information, it is also possible to use external databases and websites, to further add to our knowledge of these individuals.

Frederick William Bayliss, for example, noted earlier as having commenced employment for New College in January 1882, was born on 20 December 1858 to his father Frederic, a labourer, and his mother Elizabeth. His birth was registered in Oxford soon after and he was baptized, in a private service in St. Ebbe's, on 1 January 1859. In the 1891 census he is recorded as living at 228 Cowley Road with wife 'Lizzie' and children Ethel age nine, Gertrude age seven, Horace age six and Hubert age two, along with Harriet age twenty-three, who is noted as his wife's sister. By the 1901 census, the family were living at 26 Boulter Street, St. Clements and Frederick, aged forty-one, is described as a 'college servant'. Ethel and Gertrude appear to have left home as the eldest child recorded is Hubert, now aged twelve. However, two more children are noted, Clarissa age five and Charlotte age two. Ten years later, in 1911, the family home is recorded as 25 Boulter Street—either they had moved or it is simply a mistake in the record. Still noted as a college servant, Frederick is fifty-two and both Clarissa and Charlotte are still at home—Clarissa now sixteen and a dressmaker's apprentice.



New College bedmakers and students, c. 1900
Frederick Bayliss is in the centre of the back row
NCA DB/J9/2—photograph donated by Bayliss' great grandson

According to the employment summary kept by H.W.B. Joseph between 1913 and 1920 (NC Archives DB/H1), Frederick had become a bedmaker in 1886, four years into his employment at New College (it is possible the card is wrong in its date of 1882 and he actually *started* in 1886). He was an active member of the servants' committees and cricket club into the 1920s and, indeed, he is to be found mentioned in various minutes books for these from 1904 onwards. It is also lucky that College possesses a couple of photographs of Frederick from around 1900, presented by his great great grandson (DB/J9). According to the notes which accompany the photos, Frederick retired from College on 1 October 1924, by which time he had risen to be the most senior scout and was earning the princely sum of £3 a week!. His staff card additionally records that his pension commenced in September 1925. The street address noted on the card, 45 Jeune Street, is at odds with that recorded in the various censuses (Boulter Street) but it should be noted that the two roads are directly opposite each other—a case of a very short move, so perhaps Frederick was at Jeune Street when he retired from work. Frederick died in 1938 at the age of seventy-nine and was buried on 12 May that year at Rose Hill Cemetery. From his burial record, it can be seen that Lizzie had sadly died some years before, in September 1922. From having limited information on Frederick Bayliss it has been possible therefore, using the staff card in conjunction with other sources, to build up a much more detailed picture of him, his family and his life at New College.

<u>Wages for the week</u>		
Shelton	18 10	J. Shelton
Stone	15	Albert Stone
Burrows	10	S. Beck for 1. Burrows
Goddard	15	Robert Goddard
Hughes. S.	15	S. Hughes
Baughman	15	R. Baughman
Hart	15	7 inch for Hart
Bayliss £1.5. extra 50p £1	25	F. M. Bayliss
Hughes. H. J.	15	H. J. Hughes
Ellis	15	J. Ellis

Page from Servants' weekly wage receipt book, 1907-1909, NCA DB/D1
(Frederick Bayliss's signature can be seen towards the bottom)

A number of the cards, principally from the 1960s and 1970s, interestingly include wage information on the back. This usually consists of the weekly wage that person was being paid on commencement of employment, followed by a list of increases year by year for the duration of their service. (As a very rough guide to the following figures, according to the Office for National Statistics the average gross weekly wage for a man in the UK was *approximately*: £14 in 1960, £19 in 1965, £30 in 1970, and £60 in 1975).

- A cleaner, on the 'Dons staircase', was paid £4 10s in February 1960. This had risen to £7 18s by July 1970 and (with decimal currency!) £16.02 by 1975.
- A scout started on £9 10s in 1963.
- By 1969 the starting pay for a scout had risen to £14; this person was on £32.20 by 1975.
- A bedmaker who started in November 1965 began on £7 15s. By November 1970 she was on £10 11s and by 1975 this had increased to £21.60.
- A worker in the Buttery began on £18 in October 1971, reaching £40.80 by 1976 (via a 'reorganization' in 1975).
- A porter commenced in October 1966 at £13 10s.
- A commis cook began at £16 10s in September 1970, reaching £36.64 in 1976.
- A caretaker at the Sacher Building began on £21.50 in September 1973.

So the wages could be seen to be well below average, but then that probably holds true for any era. The quoted average annual UK salary for 2016/17 is around £27,000—but in reality *many* people will not be earning anything like that figure. So it would be unwise to judge harshly from this distance in time.

It is again possible, using material elsewhere in the archives, to look further back in time regarding staff wages. According to his card, a gentleman was employed as a porter in October 1940. A note in BCF102 is more specific, offering him the post of under-porter, to start on 23 September 1940, at a wage of £3 per week, increasing to £3 5s after one month. Similarly, the staff card does not record how much the library cleaner who commenced work on 1 January 1941 at the age of almost fifty-three, was paid when he started. However, a letter to him dated 27 January 1941, that also survives, informs us that at the end of his probationary month his salary would be increased by 2s 6d

to £2 17s 6d per week, on the condition that he contributed 1s a week towards his pension (which, it is noted, would not be large due to his age). All this was, of course, dependent on whether ‘satisfaction is still being given’! College was clearly happy with his work as he was still here until 30 January 1953 when, a note on his card tells us, he sadly ‘passed away suddenly’.

As a footnote to this look at servants’ wages, a short note also exists in BCF102. Dated 28 October 1940, it states that College have considered any applications received for wage increases and have implemented those that were ‘warranted by special circumstances’. These increases would be reviewed after the end of the war. Tellingly, it makes it clear that ‘Servants who have received a rise in respect of ‘present family expenses’ (i.e. children of or under school age) must inform the Bursary when the children go out to work.’ Little or no prospect of further education in those days.

These staff cards are an important find. The archives hold few comparable sources of information about New College members of staff, particularly those on the domestic side, and certainly not for the era these cards represent (mid-late Victorian times to the 1970s). As has been seen, they contain a surprising amount of information about these essentially unknown people, when they worked for New College and in what department, even how much some of them earned for their labours. There is humour and there is sadness and, in the details about the duration of service, perhaps an indication of the degree of loyalty some felt to their place of work – or not, as the case may be! Most importantly, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, the cards give these people names and an identity once more – returning, as they have, from the mists of time, the cloak of obscurity now removed.



New College Staff group photo, c. 1900
NCA DB/J1

For this author, however, two cards in particular stand out, for completely different reasons. The first is that of a young lady who worked as a clerk in the Bursary for three months in 1977-78. Her services were terminated on Thursday 12 January 1978 because, as the marvellously deadpan note informs us, she ‘did not return after lunch’!

The second? Stanley Colbert joined College on 12 January 1938 at the age of sixteen. We are not told in which department he worked, only that he was killed in action during World War II in March 1943 at the age of twenty-one. He must have been well thought of as, not only was his name included on the college War Memorial, but also his death was mentioned in the NCR – unusual for a ‘College servant’, as he is described there. There is no other note on his staff card, save for one word on the progress line – it simply says:

‘Wonderful’.

Jason Morgan
Assistant Librarian