

Bells and Books: Not What You Might Expect in Oxford's Dreaming Spires

With over one hundred libraries, Oxford is an excellent place to be if you are a librarian. In addition to the seventeenth-century Bodleian Library are faculty and departmental libraries and each of the colleges, of which there are over thirty, has its own library catering for its college's members. Oxford is also a superb place to be if you are a bell ringer with a high concentration of towers throughout the city. Oxford is, after all, described as the 'city of dreaming spires' in Matthew Arnold's poem 'Thyrsis'.¹ There are thirteen towers in the city centre so opportunities for ringing are plentiful. Of these thirteen towers, five are based in colleges (Christ Church, Merton, Lincoln, New College, and Magdalen). I have had the pleasure of working as a librarian at Magdalen College and New College (the latter of which is my current home) as well as Nuffield College whose tower houses books rather than bells, and so I have been able to easily satisfy the bibliophile and bell ringer in me. This article will explore these three towers, looking at their distinctive features as well as their libraries and bells.



Nuffield College Library²

My first college of employment was Nuffield. Founded in 1937, the college specialises in the social sciences and is a graduate college. Nuffield has an eleven storey tower, which is 160 feet tall and contains the college's library, although it was never supposed to.³ A building on the site we know today as Worcester Street car park was originally going to house the library but this was never realised and so the library was put in the college's tower.⁴ Before Oxford had the

¹ Matthew Arnold, 'Thyrsis', in *The Oxford Poems of Matthew Arnold: 'The Scholar Gipsy' and 'Thyrsis', with Rambles in the Country around Oxford to which the Poems Refer* (Oxford, 1929), p. 15.

² *Oxford. Nuffield College: New Rd*, by Ian Campbell Islip (2008). CC BY 2.0. Available from: <<https://flic.kr/p/5dx6sr>>.

³ Richard Mayou, 'The Tower Room Restored', *Nuffield Newsletter* 7 (2010), p. 8. Available from: <https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/media/1634/2010_summer-nuffield_newsletter.pdf>.

⁴ Nuffield College Library, *From the Archives—Nuffield College's Architecture*. Available from: <<https://nuffieldcollegelibrary.wordpress.com/2014/11/28/from-the-archives-nuffield-colleges-architecture/>>.

Social Science Library, Nuffield College Library served the University's social science students and academics, allowing people external to the college to use and borrow material, which it still does. The college has an excellent social sciences collection stored in its tower, with books and journals accompanied by extensive trade union and political party collections, as well as archives. A rare view of the city can be seen from the top of the tower, which has been converted into a common room. The college's founder, Lord Nuffield (William Morris), was insistent that the college have a tower similarly as impressive as Magdalen's, which is why those entering the city from the west are greeted by this prominent structure.⁵



Magdalen College (author's own photograph)

After leaving Nuffield I moved to Magdalen College who made the more traditional decision to house bells in its tower. The college is considerably older than Nuffield, founded in 1458 by William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester. He inherited the buildings of the Hospital of St. John which stood on the site of the college and in 1492, construction of the bell tower began. The tower is 144 feet high, 16 feet shorter than Nuffield's, and was ready to use by 1505.⁶ A ring

⁵ Mayou, 'Tower Room Restored', p. 8.

⁶ Magdalen College, *The College Buildings*. Available from: <<http://www.magd.ox.ac.uk/discover-magdalen/history-of-college/history-of-the-college-buildings/>>.

of six bells was originally recorded as being in the tower in 1643. This was increased to eight bells in 1712 and then to ten in 1739–1740. The oldest bell in the tower is dated *c.* 1410 and is the only remaining bell cast for the Hospital of St John, predating the college by forty years.⁷ In 2012 the bells were rehung by Whites of Appleton bellhangers and they were retuned before going back into the tower too.⁸ Heading into the centre of the city from the east across the Plain, you are rewarded by the sight of Magdalen’s magnificent tower. Once a year at 6am on 1 May, huge crowds congregate at the base of the tower to listen to the college’s choir sing for May Morning, after which the bells ring in celebration of spring.

I was fortunate enough to start working at Magdalen College one month after its newly refurbished library opened in early 2016. The library was in a building once used as Magdalen College School before the school moved across the Plain to its new accommodation. This school building was refurbished and turned into a library in 1932 by architect Giles Gilbert Scott. Then, the college had two hundred students. Now, it has over six hundred students and the library desperately needed updating with additional seating. Shortly after I started work at Magdalen, the Duke of Cambridge opened the newly refurbished library, now called the Longwall Library, after a two year project to improve and expand the building.⁹ Magdalen College also has the wonderful Old Library, the college’s original library dating from the fifteenth century, where its manuscripts and pre-1800 books are kept. It was a privilege to invigilate readers in this beautiful, historic room, massively different from the modern lending library on the other side of college.

New College, my next place of employment, was radical in housing both books and bells in its fifteenth-century tower. The college was founded in 1379 by William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, and the bell tower built in 1403 on one of the bastions of the city wall.¹⁰ William of Wykeham gave five bells which were put in the tower and these were later recast into a ring of eight in 1655, ‘the first of this number in the county, and the first *complete* octave known to campanologists to be cast by one bellfounder [Michael Darbie]’.¹¹ It is rumoured that there was some rivalry between Magdalen and New College with regards to the number of bells in their towers: ‘[i]n 1712 Abraham Rudhall I added two bells to increase the number at Magdalen to eight, whereupon New College employed him to increase the number in their tower to ten.’¹² Perhaps New College has forgotten this rivalry. Whilst Magdalen had its bells rehung and retuned in 2012, the most recent major alteration at New College was in 1723 when the ninth bell was recast.¹³ New College’s original library, the Founder’s Library, sat in the east of the Front Quad. The Founder gave just short of 250 manuscripts to the library, which was a huge number for the time. The library added to its collection over the centuries, through generous donations and purchasing printed books. Within its collection is a first edition of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a copy of the Shakespeare Second Folio and Newton’s *Principia*.¹⁴ As the library expanded, more space needed to be found and the collection moved into the library that students still use today. The library opened in 1941 and was designed by Hubert Worthington who carried out numerous other projects in Oxford including refurbishment of the Radcliffe Camera in 1939 and the Bodleian Library in 1955.¹⁵

⁷ The Oxford Society of Change Ringers, *Magdalen College*. Available from: <<http://www.oxfordsociety.org.uk/towers/magdalen-college/>>.

⁸ *Dove’s Guide for Church Bell Ringers*. Available from: <<http://dove.cccbr.org.uk/detail.php?DoveID=OXFORD+CMA>>.

⁹ Magdalen College, *Longwall Library Opened by Prince William* (2016). Available from: <<http://www.magd.ox.ac.uk/news/longwall-library-opened-by-prince-william/>>.

¹⁰ Michael Burden, ‘A Walk through William of Wykeham’s Foundation’, in Christopher Tyerman, ed., *New College* (London, 2010), p. 17.

¹¹ Frederick Sharpe, *The Church Bells of Oxfordshire* (Oxford, 1951), vol. 3, p. 348.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 348.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 348.

¹⁴ William Poole, ‘Books’, in *New College*, p. 103.

¹⁵ John H. G. Archer, *Worthington Family*. Available from: <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/65161>>.



New College (author's own photograph)

Growth space in the library continued to be an issue though and in 1996, New College formally opened its creatively refurbished bell tower after a three-storey store for books and archives was constructed within it.¹⁶ This book store sits below the ringing chamber and includes 'trap doors through which bells could be lowered from the ringing chamber for repairs'.¹⁷ 10,000 books and 3,740 archives were moved into the tower and in 2006, manuscripts that had been in storage at the Bodleian Library were brought back and reunited with the library's other collections in the tower. In his speech at the official opening of the refurbished tower, the college's Warden at the time, Alan Ryan, told how the space in the tower once occupied an 'heretical fellow', John Quinby, after he was locked up by the Warden John London in 1528.¹⁸ The Royalists and Parliamentarians supposedly used it as a powder magazine and also as a prison between 1642 and 1652.¹⁹ Despite being an odd location for rare books and manuscripts, this innovative solution makes the best of unused space for a large and distinctive collection. Magdalen College may have invested in rehanging its bells but New College invested in creating a home in its tower for the college's valuable rare books and manuscript collection, some of which are older than the tower itself.

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¹⁶ Caroline Dalton, 'How Half the Bell Tower Became a Stack', *New College Record* (1996), p. 45.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 46.