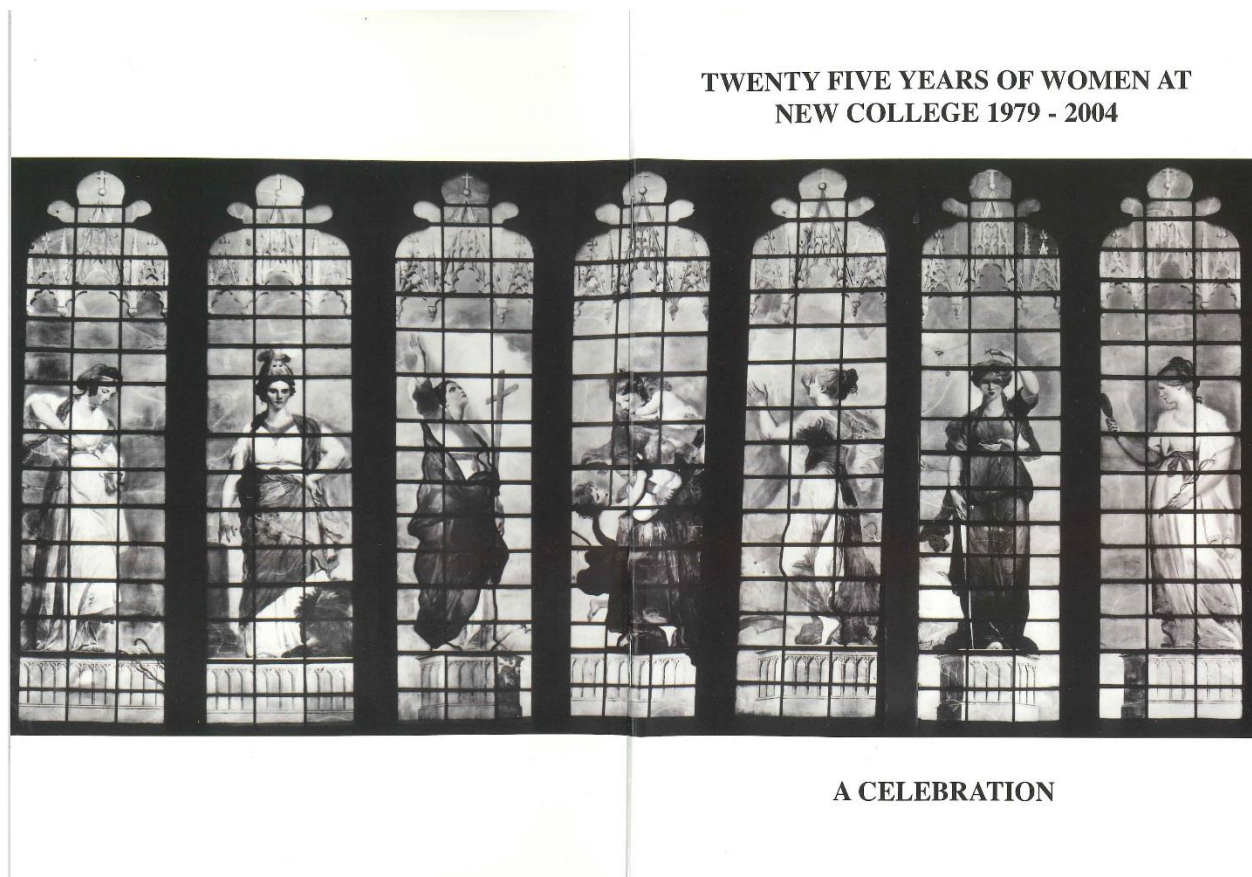


Forty Years of Women at New College: How Did They Get Here?

As New College this academic year celebrated 40 years of women undergraduates it is appropriate to look back and see how this came to be. The original proposal to admit women to the men's colleges of Oxford came from New College even though it was not among the first five men's colleges to admit women. The college archives reveal the very interesting story of the 'battle for the admission of women' and, for those involved, it must have felt like a battle. The story involves: votes won, then lost; accusations of self-interest; the most unlikely people championing women; strong opposition from the women's colleges but support from individual women within the University; vacillating JCRs; stalling by the University; and bucks being passed. In fact, it has all of the ingredients of a good Oxford murder mystery by Michael Innes or Colin Dexter . . . without the murder.



Twenty Five Years of Women at New College 1979–2004: A Celebration (Oxford: New College, 2004), back and front covers

THE INITIAL PROPOSAL

The initial proposal to admit women to New College came from Harry Bell, just about the last person you would expect to propose such a radical idea. Bell was a very conservative, traditionally minded history Fellow. A December 1963 Governing Body meeting was considering a request from the Vice-Chancellor on how to increase the number of undergraduates at Oxford (prompted by a recommendation by the Robbins Commission) when Bell suggested that the best way to do so would be to admit more women. After a stunned silence, followed by laughter, the meeting moved on as if

Bell had not spoken.¹ But Bell must have been persistent as well as conservative because he approached the Warden two days after the meeting to ask when his proposal would be formally considered. Opinions differ as to why Bell made the proposal. The Warden, William Hayter, reported that Bell had been impressed by the education his daughter was receiving at Trinity College Dublin and thought that women undergraduates at Oxford would be better served if taught by male Fellows rather than by female Fellows.² Bell was, after all, a traditionalist. Ann Barton, the first female Fellow, elected in 1974, has a different recollection of Bell's motivation. She recalled that Bell introduced the motion purely to annoy the Warden.³ Former Warden, Alan Ryan, suggested that Bell may have had another motivation. Bell saw the University as primarily an undergraduate institution. Ryan believes that Bell thought that one way to ensure that more graduate students would not be added to the College was to admit more undergraduates.⁴ Whatever his motivation, Bell seems to have been the unexpected 'father of coresidence'.⁵

The College formed a Committee on Women which met for the first time on 18 March 1964. At least some of its members wanted radical change. They considered the admission of women Fellows and graduate students to be insufficiently innovative because other colleges—Nuffield and St. Antony's—already had them. 'What would be entirely new would be the association of men and women undergraduates in a college of the Oxford type'.⁶ Opposition arose before the Committee could hold a second meeting. An Old Member threatened to remove the College from his will at the loss of 'a considerable sum' if it should admit women. This threat would become common over the next decade but the Committee urged that it should be ignored because the Old Members, as letters in the archive show, were not of one mind on the issue. A member of the Committee pointed out that over the last few years Old Members had donated £400,000 of which £120,000 had been donated by an Old Member who favoured the admission of women. As its work progressed, the Committee welcomed input from Fellows from New College and other colleges, in particular from the women's colleges.

It has been claimed that coresidence at Oxford was purely a pragmatic decision whereas at Cambridge it was motivated by the principle of equity.⁷ However, this claim can be rejected based on material contained in the College archives, including the report written by the Committee that set out the case for coresidence.⁸ This document is important because it outlines most of the arguments for

¹ William Hayter, 'How it all Began', *Ten Years of Women at New College: A Commemorative Programme* (Oxford: New College, 1990), pp.15–16. New College Archives, Oxford.

² *ibid.*

³ Ann Barton, 'The First Female Fellow', *Ten Years of Women at New College: A Commemorative Programme* (Oxford: New College, 1990), pp.17–20. New College Archives, Oxford.

⁴ Interview with Alan Ryan, 23 January 2020, New College, Oxford SCR.

⁵ Margaret and Derek Davies in their history of St. Catherine's claim that although Catz voted overwhelmingly for coresidence in 1972, John Simopoulos, a Fellow of the College, had advocated for the college being mixed as early as 1959. However, Simopoulos's proposal did not lead to action whereas Bell's did. Margaret and Derek Davies, *Creating St. Catherine's College*, (Oxford, 1997), p. 135. Even earlier, in 1909, the Chancellor, Lord Curzon, called for the admission of women to degrees because, in part, 'it would attract the best women who may go elsewhere'. This did not occur until 1920. Lord Curzon, *Principles and Methods of University Reform* (Oxford, 1910), p. 196.

⁶ This quote and others in this section are from an undated document (but likely June 1964) prepared by the Committee on Women. New College Archives, Oxford file 'Women'.

⁷ L. G. Mitchell, 'The Arrival of Women at Univ.', *The Record*, 13 (2004), p. 75.

⁸ Also see Penryn Williams, Fellow 1966–92, 'Manners Makyth Man—and Woman', *Twenty Five Years of Women at New College 1979–2004: A Celebration* (Oxford: New College, 2004), pp. 7–11, who stated that the key motivation for the change was distributive justice, that is, the equitable allocation of privilege which included admission to Oxford. Like the Warden, Williams was booed at Gaude for his support for women. Alan Ryan, in the same document, wrote that New College decided to admit women for two good reasons: 'we thought well enough of New College to want to share what we did

the admission of women which were debated over the following decade. It is worth citing at length. The case for the admission of women was based on the following:

- 1) In principle women have an equal *right* (emphasis in the original here and below) with men to an education (including university education).
- 2) It is as *socially desirable* to educate them, even though the greater majority of them will spend a good part of their middle years in bringing up families rather than 'earning a living'.
- 3) It is probably true that in our society as it is at present a smaller proportion of women than men *want* to go to a university (certainly a much higher proportion of women than of men go to teachers' training colleges, but how far this is by their free choice is doubtful).
- 4) Undoubtedly parents give much less *encouragement* to their daughters than to their sons in seeking education.
- 5) The main principle used in guiding admission elsewhere is that the sex of the applicant is immaterial: the main consideration is ability to profit from a university education.
- 6) Data from the University of London suggested that the great majority of women students prefer to go to mixed colleges. By not offering this choice Oxford loses many bright women to other universities.

The report was a remarkable document for its time and place. The report concluded that there were far too few women at Oxford and that the proportion should be greatly increased. Many able women were being denied an Oxford education because of the relatively few places available in the women's colleges. It was unlikely that the women's colleges would expand or that a new mixed college would be founded. The only realistic way of increasing the number of women was to admit them to existing men's colleges, and, in particular, to New College. The Committee was critical of 'the 'separate but equal' system of education at Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham [it] resembled the 'separate but equal' education for negroes desired by many whites in the American south'. Not all members of the committee agreed with all of these arguments and some voted against the admission of women when the final vote was taken.

As comments were received, the Committee formalised a proposal to outline the details of what the admission of women to New College actually meant. The major elements were:

- 1) Before admitting any women undergraduates or graduates the College would elect at least one or more women as Official Fellows, Supernumerary Fellows, or Research Fellows but it would not poach them from the women's colleges.
- 2) The College would consult the women's colleges about such an appointment and not compete with them if they were contemplating an appointment in the same academic area.
- 3) Pay the same compensation to women as to men.
- 4) Allow women and men to compete for all Official or Research Fellowships as they become vacant.
- 5) If the College decides to admit women undergraduates, it also will take female graduates.
- 6) For the first three or four years the College would admit about 30 women undergraduates annually.
- 7) Once the percentage of female undergraduates reached 30 percent, the College would decide to admit either a fixed number of women or a number determined by merit.

with half the human race who had been excluded for no good reason' and, perhaps more important, 'we didn't think so well of what we did that we couldn't see room for improvement'. Alan Ryan, 'Foreword', p. 2.

- 8) The College wished to make its admissions in conjunction with the women's colleges and in the closest possible co-operation with them. [This and other 'self-denying ordinances' were not popular with some members because they thought it would stop them from admitting the brightest women. At that time men's colleges and women's colleges operated different admissions tests at different times. The women's colleges at Cambridge and Oxford coordinated admission tests and women could apply to colleges at both universities but men could only put one Oxbridge college as a first-preference. The Oxford women's colleges were loath to change this system.]
- 9) The College would attempt to recruit women from schools that did not regularly send students to the women's colleges.
- 10) If New College attracted a very large number of female applicants it would give serious consideration to choosing only a portion of them by lot or otherwise.

Much of the proposal was designed to blunt the opposition that was expected from the women's colleges. It was not successful in doing so. The Principals of Lady Margaret Hall (LMH) and St Anne's were strongly opposed, Somerville was not opposed 'in principle' but was so in practice, St Hugh's supported the election of female Fellows but was more doubtful on the admission of female undergraduates, and St Hilda's was also in favour 'in principle' but its Governing Body was equally divided on whether coresidence would be beneficial to the education of women in Oxford. All of the women's colleges thought they would be harmed by coresidence and all thought coresidence was an issue for the Franks Commission rather than a single college. The Franks Commission was established in 1963 to report on the structure and functioning of the University.⁹ In her evidence to the Franks Commission, Dame Janet Vaughan, Principal of Somerville, stated that the women's colleges did not place 'a great deal of importance to the value of shared residence in a collegiate society in a small city like Oxford'.¹⁰

The main arguments expressed against the men's college's admitting women were:

- 1) Because they are older and richer the men's colleges will 'skim the cream' of the brightest women from the women's colleges.
- 2) There were insufficient young women of 'Oxford standard' available to satisfy both the women's colleges and any mixed colleges and to admit more would necessitate lowering standards.
- 3) Because they are older and richer the men's colleges will attract the best Fellows by paying higher compensation.
- 4) Women's colleges would be forced to admit male undergraduates to make up the numbers and they would demand to be taught by male Fellows and soon each college would have only one token female Fellow.¹¹

The women's colleges were adamant that coresidence would damage them, and their Fellows were divided over whether the proposal to admit women to the men's colleges would benefit women's education.¹² While accepting that the objections of the women's colleges might have some merit, the

⁹ For the detailed terms of reference, see University of Oxford, *Report of Commission of Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1966), Preamble.

¹⁰ Quoted in A.H. Halsey, 'The Franks Commission', in Brian Harrison, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, Vol. VIII, (Oxford, 1994), p. 726.

¹¹ Mary Warnock, 'Coresidence', *Oxford Magazine* 23 (1972), 6.

¹² The archive contains letters from the Principals of the women's colleges as well as reports on meetings between the Committee and the women's colleges.

Committee concluded that the benefits to women's education ought to prevail over the purely selfish interests of a group of colleges'.¹³ It is important to keep in mind that although the women's colleges were opposed to coresidence not all of their Fellows agreed with this position nor did some of the women elsewhere in the University. In 1964, 16 female Fellows wrote to the *Observer* in support of coresidence and four years later 33 wrote to the *Oxford Magazine* to express support for coresidence.¹⁴ The College archive contains several letters from women expressing support for the New College plan. One letter expressed support and 'only hope[d] the women's colleges do not put a spoke in the wheel—what possible motive they could have I cannot think—unless it could be to try and put the clock back'. But, I think one must have sympathy for the women's colleges. The women's colleges faced strong opposition to their very existence. It had taken them 80 years of struggle to establish themselves within Oxford and now they saw their very existence under threat. They have been described as 'in Oxford, but not of Oxford' and even in the 1960s there was still considerable truth in that statement.¹⁵

Opposition to the New College proposal came from inside the College, not just from the outside. F. J. M. Buxton wrote a Memorandum opposing the admission of women.¹⁶ Buxton wrote that 'Oxford's pre-eminence as a place for training public servants largely depends' on its being a predominantly male university'. He disputed that existence of any widely held desire to found a mixed college otherwise the recently founded St. Catherine's would have been so founded as would have been the two new colleges at Cambridge. He agreed with the Principal of St. Anne's that what 'an Oxford college stands for is cementing of friendships between people of the same sex and with common interests'. Sex and jealousy were bound to be a distraction from this real purpose.

Although the New College Committee had tried to anticipate and address the concerns of the women's colleges it was forced to reply to these concerns in part because it was aware that several of the men's colleges, the University, and the Franks Commission shared the reservations expressed by the women's colleges. Of the twenty responses received from other men's colleges held in the archives, five supported New College, five opposed, five did not want to express an opinion, and five reported that their Fellows were evenly split over the issue. Two of those in support stated that their support was contingent upon no opposition from the women's colleges. Almost all stated that the number of female undergraduates should be increased and supported New College's right to change its Statutes even though they might not support it actually doing so. So, New College did not have overwhelming support in the battle. Is it any wonder that several Fellows changed their vote from support to opposition?

Undeterred, the Committee rejected the claim that there were insufficient women of 'Oxford standard' available to admit. They claimed that each year the women's colleges rejected 60 applicants of acceptable standard because there was not room for them.¹⁷ Brian McCall, University of Michigan,

¹³ Graham Richards who led the fight for the admission of women to Brasenose College recalled that Kathleen Kenyon, Principal of St. Hugh's, was more sympathetic to coresidence than the other principals but that Dame Lucy Sutherland, Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, thought 'that the whole point of women's colleges was to provide jobs for women academics. The needs of undergraduate women were very much secondary'. Graham Richards, *50 Years at Oxford* (Bloomington, IN., 2008), p. 13.

¹⁴ Carol Dyhouse, 'Apostates and Uncle Toms: Accusations of Betrayal in the History of Mixed Colleges in the 1960s', *History of Education* 31 (2002), 281–97.

¹⁵ Dacre Balsdon, *Oxford Now and Then* (London, 1957).

¹⁶ New College Archives, Oxford file 'Women', undated but most likely March or April 1964.

¹⁷ Geoffrey de. Ste. Croix wrote in a letter dated 1 June 1965 that he had seen data from one of the women's colleges (and believed that all others, with one possible exception were similar) that showed 'a sufficient surplus of good candidates to provide New College *with very many more than its 30 women, in subjects spread over the whole field of admissions*'. He pointed out that the data being used by the women's colleges was from 1963 a low point in admissions and he was using data from 1964 which were 40% higher. No agreement was reached on whether there were an adequate number of women of the 'Oxford

and I analysed UCAS data from 1973–4 and found a very large number of women who met the ‘Oxford standard’ but were not admitted to the University.¹⁸ Therefore, more women could be admitted without lowering standards if they could be encouraged to apply. The Committee countered that rather than ‘skimming the cream’ of the brightest women as claimed by the women’s colleges, coresidence was likely to have little effect on the quality of women admitted to the women’s colleges because coresidence would increase the number of women applying to Oxford and thus the women’s colleges would have a larger pool to choose from with no reduction in quality. Brian McCall and I showed that the women’s colleges were correct in that the mixed colleges were able to recruit brighter women (as measured by final examination results) than were the women’s colleges. After coresidence, the women’s colleges also saw their number of applicants fall.¹⁹ We also found that after coresidence the first five men’s colleges to admit women rose in the Norrington Table ranking of final examination results while the women’s colleges fell in the ranking.²⁰ The Committee also rejected the claim that the women’s colleges would get the ‘dregs’ of male Fellows because there were ‘even greater disparities between the salary scales of the richest and poorest men’s colleges than exist between the poorest men’s colleges and the women’s colleges and these men’s colleges are able to secure a reasonably fair share of the available talent’.

The prediction of coresidence resulting in one female Fellow per college was wildly inaccurate. Brian McCall and I showed that the election of females to academic posts after coresidence increased markedly (between 1970 and 2015 the colleges added 424 positions which were held by women) but all of the increase occurred in the former men’s colleges. However, women hold no more than half as many such positions as men and in many colleges only one-quarter or one-third.²¹

One topic that came up in the ongoing debate and in a number of irate letters to the College was sex. This was a sensitive topic within the University. London may have been swinging in the 1960s but the University officials had no wish for Oxford to do so. In 1962, the Proctors censured the student magazine, *Isis*, because it had discussed sexual relations.²² One Old Member of the College noted that ‘the mating instinct, which should be particularly potent, is surely a distraction to say the least of it’. He went on to point out that ‘Oxford is already more of a marriage market than a seat of learning’. Another Old Member helpfully calculated the number of annual pregnancies the College could expect if ‘vigorous adolescents . . . are held in each other’s company unremittingly’. However, the writer’s prediction was too high because he applied the average probability of an out-of-wedlock birth rather than the correct (and lower) probability for women from the least deprived economic areas from which the vast majority of women admitted to Oxford came. A Committee member was dispatched to London to find out whether what these Old Members (and others) said was true. The

standard’ available either in the debates of 1964 or again in the early 1970s when the issue of coresidence was gain considered.

¹⁸ Dennis A. Ahlburg and Brian P. McCall, ‘A Very English Revolution: The Admission of Women to the University of Oxford’, *History of Education* (forthcoming)

¹⁹ Robin Darwall-Smith, *University College Oxford*, (Oxford 2008), p. 517. Data contained in a letter from 8 Fellows from St. Hilda’s to Exeter College show a 20% increase in applications to Oxford colleges in the three years after coresidence but a 7% fall in the applications to the women’s colleges. ‘Note on the Admission of Women to Mixed Colleges 1973–75’, Exeter College Archives, Oxford, W3.

²⁰ Dennis A. Ahlburg and Brian P. McCall, ‘The Norrington Table: What Can it Tell US, If Anything’, Working Paper, June 11 2018.

²¹ Dennis A. Ahlburg and Brian P. McCall, ‘A Very English Revolution’.

²² Thomas Charles-Edwards and Julian Reid, *Corpus Christi College Oxford: A History* (Oxford, 2017), p. 394. Apparently, morals of undergraduates had long been a concern of the University. The University opposed a plan to bring the railways to Oxford in 1837 because of a wish to protect the morals of its undergraduates. See Antony James, *Dead Man’s Walk*, (Sawston, Cambridgeshire, 2017), p. 23. The issue of undergraduate ‘fornication’ features among the issues troubling the Fellows of the fictitious Porterhouse College in Tom Sharpe’s satire *Porterhouse Blues* (London, 1974).

Committee member was surprised to find that the mixed colleges of the University of London lacked rules concerning ‘cohabitation, fornication, or nocturnal heterosexual visiting’. If the Wardens or Deans became aware of such behaviour, the student would be ejected from Hall into lodgings. However, such behaviour was considered to be ‘rare’ and was treated on a case by case basis. Similar comforting reports came from the mixed graduate colleges in Oxford so the issue of morals was set aside.

The volume of correspondence received by the Warden was substantial and each letter received a reply. The Warden could have had little time to do much other than reply to the largely negative letters, although there were enough supportive letters to keep his spirits up. Some Old Members requested a vote on the proposal and a veto over future College decisions. Such requests were rebuffed and in one letter the Warden wrote ‘I expect all the Old Members were furious when the College was thrown open to non-Wykehamists, an appalling breach of a centuries old tradition’. He concluded that ‘most would now agree that this was a good thing’. As I noted, not all letters were negative. Two stand out. One was from an eminent scientist who stated ‘courage has seemed to be a virtue preferable to prudence. Courage may land you in the grave, but at least you get somewhere’. Another was from a Fellow of a college that did not support the New College proposal. He wrote ‘I am sure posterity will look back to your decision as a great historical turning point’.

THE TIMELINE FOR VOTES

The College knew that changing the College Statutes would be a difficult and time-consuming business but it is doubtful that the proponents of change realised just how difficult and time consuming it would be. Below are the dates of the Stated General Meetings of the Governing Body and other meetings at which the most significant issues were discussed and votes taken regarding the admission of women. This gives some idea of just how involved the process became.

16 January 1963. The introduction of women into the college began modestly when it was decided that two flats in Sacher building could be occupied by married graduate students and their wives.

19 November 1963. The University had requested that the colleges provide ideas on how the University should respond to the recommendation from the Robbins Committee that the number of University students should be significantly increased. In its response the College indicated that it had already increased numbers based on decisions made in 1960 but if requested would revisit the issue. Graduate numbers could likely be increased but the constraint on increasing undergraduate numbers was the number of Fellows rather than accommodation. After further deliberation, the College responded that they could increase undergraduate numbers by 50 students for a short time.

December 1963. Harry Bell drops a bombshell by suggesting that the College admit women as undergraduates.

18 March 1964 a committee was set up to ‘investigate the feasibility and implications to the College and to the University at large of the admission of women as members of the College.’ The Committee was required to consult the other colleges, including the women’s colleges. The Warden was to inform the Vice Chancellor and Principals of the women’s colleges of New College’s decision to admit women.

March, April, and May 1964 several meetings of the Committee are held and at the meeting of 19 May meeting a decision was made to ask the Governing Body to consider adopting coresidence at its meeting of 22 June 1964.

5 May 1964. The Committee met with the Principals of the women’s colleges and asked for their views on New College’s proposal to admit women.

17 June 1964. A detailed document presenting the case for coresidence was prepared (discussed above).

June 6, 8, 11, 18, and 24 New College received written responses from the Women's Colleges.

25 June 1964. The following resolution was carried 22 votes to 7 with 2 abstentions: 'New College declares its wish to amend its Statutes to permit the admission of women to the College and accordingly proposes to consult with the University concerning the possibility and implications of fitting a mixed college or colleges into the University framework.' Existing limitations on the admission of women guests to meals were also removed. What is important to realise in following the debate about coresidence is some votes taken are votes on the principle of admitting women and some are votes in practice, that is, votes to actually admit them. A vote may be taken to admit women 'in principle' but it is then followed sometime later by a vote to actually do it which is lost.

7 October 1964. The College's letter informing the University of its intention to admit women was read and approved.

28 October 1964. The Governing Body was informed that the University approached the Franks Committee which 'declined to take cognizance of the matter [coresidence]'. The University proposed, after consultation with Council, to ask all colleges if they objected to New College's proposal and whether they approved in principle of mixed colleges. Although the Franks Commission declined to pronounce on coresidence, it did include questions on the admission of women undergraduates in one of its questionnaires to colleges. It asked whether the number should be substantially increased and, if so, how? There is evidence to suggest that the Commission was heavily influenced by the views of the women's colleges.²³ It did not, however, instruct New College to abandon its proposal. The decision of Franks not to pronounce on coresidence was odd because it had asked questions related to coresidence and it was common knowledge that many colleges were expecting Franks to do so. As noted above, in its report, Franks was very worried that a wholesale move to coresidence would severely damage the women's colleges and it concluded that the issue of coresidence was best left to the colleges to work out cooperatively.

18 November 1964. The College was informed that Council had declined to act on sending New College's proposal to other colleges to get their reactions. The basis for the decision was that the Franks Commission was requesting this information from the colleges.

25 November 1964. The University indicated that it had not suggested to New College that Council would act on its proposal after the Franks Commission had reported. Council expressed no view on New College contacting other colleges directly and it was free to do so.

13 January 1965. The amended document outlining the case for coresidence (presented above) was to be sent, with a covering letter, to all colleges with enough copies for all members of their governing bodies. The meeting was again informed that Council was unwilling to act on New College's proposal because the Franks Commission had already asked for the colleges' views on increasing the admission of women. However, the meeting was also informed 'there is at present no indication that the Franks Commission intends to pronounce on the desirability of mixed colleges...or upon whether New College should take the initiative in becoming one.' The view of the College's Committee on Women was that the most effective way of moving forward was, therefore, to pass a resolution to change its Statutes thus forcing the issue to be considered by Congregation.

15 March 1965. The College was informed by the Franks Commission that 'action in Oxford should not be held up until the Commission report[s]. We do not consider that the proposal of New College to admit women is an exception.' However, the Franks Commission made it clear that they thought that if New College was joined by other male colleges 'great damage' would be inflicted upon

²³ A.H. Halsey, 'The Franks Commission' in B. Harrison, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, Vol. VIII (Oxford, 1964), pp. 721–36.

the women's colleges. The Commission stated that they would not attempt to guess what the long-term structure of the colleges might be but whatever change came, it should come slowly.²⁴ Although Council had taken no action on the issue because it was before Franks, in this letter Franks made it clear that the issue of if and when undergraduate women should be admitted to men's colleges should be decided by the colleges 'under the aegis of the Council'. It seems that Franks was passing the buck that had been passed to it back to the Council and the colleges.

12 May 1965. In light of the position of the Franks Commission, it was now possible to 'proceed to set in motion the procedure for altering the Statutes'. The Committee presented a procedure which could be used to proceed if a two-thirds majority vote was received to change the Statutes. The first step was to write to Council to obtain its consent to change the Statutes under the 1923 Act. The role of Council was to approve or reject proposed changes to Statutes. In discussion it was made clear that the Fellows did not want to increase the size of the College nor change the balance of subjects taught in the College. These conditions meant that the admission of women was a 'zero sum game' - bright women in, less-bright men out. It also meant that the College would not limit its choice to women in Arts subjects which the women's colleges judged to be in excess supply.

24 June 1965. A special meeting of the Governing Body was called to consider altering the Statutes by deleting 'The college shall be a College for men only and no woman shall be admitted as a member thereof' and inserting 'Both men and women may be members of the College. In the Statutes and By-Laws of the College any words importing a reference to males shall be deemed to refer also to females unless the contrary be stated'.

First, a straw vote was taken with 20 votes for the motion and 15 against. Then the formal vote was taken with 17 for the motion and 14 against. The motion failed to get a two-thirds majority and so was lost.

Why was the vote won, then lost? Warden Hayter recalled the latter stages of the debate over coresidence at New College.²⁵ The objections of the women's colleges had weighed heavily on some of the Fellows as had the realization that the change they were contemplating was no longer a matter of principle but quite real. During the process there were votes on admitting women *in principle* and votes on admitting them *in practice*. There was more support for the former than the latter. However, the women's colleges, although still 'nervous' about coresidence, were 'now reluctantly quiescent'. So, the views of the women's colleges should have weighed less on the consciences of the Fellows. However, Hayter observed 'an odd thing happened. Various Fellows began to get cold feet. They were of course, they said, in principle in favour of admitting women, but at this particular juncture . . . and under this particular scheme . . . In fact the majority was becoming eroded'. Perhaps it was a realization that a step into the unknown was a step too far. Perhaps conservatism reasserted itself and it was best to leave such a radical step to another college. Hayter also noted another important factor in the rejection of coresidence: it was believed that the 'proposal failed largely because of doubts about the apparent incompatibility between the College's existing pattern of teaching and the different pattern of subjects normally preferred by women candidates for admission'.²⁶ Although Hayter did not believe the claim was necessarily true, it was highly likely that at least some of the Fellows were guilty of a charge often levelled at the women's colleges: protecting their jobs. However, the situation was not quite so simple. The perception was women were much more likely to prefer Arts over sciences, thus it might be expected that positions in the sciences were at risk relative to those in Arts (the total number of students was not expected to increase). Thus, one might expect scientists to be more likely

²⁴ New College Report Book MIN/REP 5 Number 276, New College Archives, Oxford. Franks's letter was also published in the *Gazette*.

²⁵ William Hayter, 'How it All Began'.

²⁶ Warden Hayter 25 February 1972. New College Archives, Oxford, file 'Women'.

to oppose the admission of women and Arts Fellows to support it. But, scientists were also thought to favour the change because they had wider experience of mixed environments while Fellows in the Arts had less experience of women and were thus more reluctant to admit them. In the final vote two-thirds of the scientists who voted voted for the change while only half of the Arts Fellows did so.

The charge for admitting women was headed by a Fellow who was considered a ‘maverick’ so perhaps the vote was in part a vote to put him in his place. As had happened at Magdalen, some Fellows who supported change and assumed the vote would be won were on leave and didn’t participate in the vote. Whatever the reasons for the reversal in the vote, Warden Hayter observed, ‘Once again New College had led the field round the course, and fallen at the last fence’.

THE BATTLE BEGINS ANEW

In 1970 interest in coresidence began again and a group of 16 men’s colleges began meeting. The motivation may have been actions being taken at Cambridge. In 1966 Churchill College, Cambridge changed its Statutes to allow the admission of women at some time in the future. In addition, Clare College, and King’s indicated a similar intent.²⁷ The path forward for Cambridge colleges was easier because the University and the women’s colleges were not opposed to coresidence. Alan Ryan pointed out another motivation: market forces. The creation of new universities that were more attuned to the demands of the labour market and admitted men and women on merit could attract bright students away from Oxbridge. It was felt that the new universities would do something new and would better equip students for a role in the world—they could be the British version of Berkeley. Ryan felt that ‘the fear [in Oxford] was quite genuine’. He said there was a feeling in Oxford that ‘we did not set the standard’.²⁸ But Oxford did pride itself on attracting the brightest students and it did not want to lose them to the new universities or Cambridge.

The men’s colleges requested that Council form a group to discuss coresidence. However, on 23 November 1971 the Vice Chancellor reported that Council was unwilling to do so and urged the men’s colleges to continue discussions with the women’s colleges. New College was involved in these discussions. On June 24 1971 the JCR voted 154:43 in favour of the College admitting women. The Governing Body was informed of this vote. On 6 October 1971, the proposed change in the Statutes that had been voted down at the 24 June 1965 meeting was reintroduced and passed on a vote of 29 in favour and 12 against. The Statutes and By-Laws Committee proceeded to work on the language of the proposed change in the by-laws and hit a snag over how listed Professorships should be handled and whether this was a question for the College or the Council. A tortured amendment was added and the motion put at the meeting of 6 October 1971 was rescinded.

16 March 1972. Finally, the amended change to the Statutes was voted on and passed 29 votes to one.

28 June 1972. The change in Statutes was submitted to Her Majesty in Council and notice of its having been so was published in the London Gazette and laid before both Houses of Parliament.

19 January 1973. Her Majesty ‘is pleased, by and with the advice of Her Privy Council, to declare, and doth declare, Her approval of the same [the new Statutes]’.

So, after a battle that had lasted for a decade, the victory was won and the College was now free to admit women. But it wasn’t. While it had been refining the language of its amendment to Statutes and arranging meetings to vote on the various versions of the proposal, the University had allowed five male colleges (Brasenose, St. Catherine’s, Hertford, Jesus, and Wadham) to admit women

²⁷See R. H. Tizard, ‘Co-residence for Churchill College’, *Oxford Magazine* (23 May 1969), 307–9, and Nancy Weiss Malkiel, *“Keep the Damned Women Out”: The Struggle for Coeducation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp.491–539.

²⁸ Interview with Alan Ryan, New College, Oxford SCR, January 23 2020.

and placed a five-year moratorium on any other men's colleges doing so. The initial experiment was successful and by 1977 many of the remaining men's colleges wanted to admit women and two of the women's colleges wanted to admit men. However, the University wanted to move slowly and cautiously. The University announced a ballot to allocate the next five slots for men's colleges to admit women. However, University College and Pembroke strenuously opposed the ballot and informed the University that they had already voted to admit women in October 1979 and intended to do so.²⁹ Threats and counter-threats were issued. Realising that the majority of men's colleges were against its scheme of 'gradualism' and the opposition of at least some of the women's colleges was fading, the University decided to allow men's colleges who wanted to do so to admit women. In 1979, thirteen men's colleges, including New College, admitted women and LMH and St. Anne's, the two women's colleges who had most strenuously opposed coresidence, admitted men.

WE FOUGHT A WAR FOR THIS?

Former Warden Alan Ryan told me that after coresidence 'New College became a great deal nicer and more civilized. Although the women could be quite as badly behaved as the men if they put their minds to it.' He thought that 'things were much as they had been. Once the dust settled, it just settled.' Discussions in Governing Body settled back into the old concerns: how much the College would be taxed by the University to help the poorer colleges. Little had changed and none of the fears of those who opposed admitting women came to pass. He mused 'We fought a war for this?' As time passed the two colleges that held out from coresidence, Oriel and St. Hilda's, 'were perceived as odd'.³⁰ And in 1985 and 2008, respectively, they bowed to the inevitable and became mixed.³¹ One might have expected students to have been upset that the College having finally voted to admit women they were not allowed to do so. However, current Warden, Miles Young, who was Steward (President) of the JCR in 1974-75, told me that the students at that time were not concerned about the admission of women.³² Their concerns were with student rebellion (the Clarendon Building and the India Institute were occupied), getting a Student Union, human rights, and privacy, and the increase of rents being charged. This is understandable because the battle for the admission of women had been won by other men so what was the use of continuing to fight?

But what did the women who were part of the coresidence experiment think of it? The College sent a questionnaire to members of the first eight cohorts of women admitted seeking their views.³³ Unfortunately, only 14% responded and these responses 'ranged across the spectrum, from a roar of rage, to nostalgic gratitude'. Those who were critical found the environment to be 'unsupportive', lacking in female role models', and, 'above all still clubbily geared to the male public school image'. On the positive side, respondents mentioned friendships, plentiful extra-curricular interests, opportunities for personal development, and supportive male tutors.

The election of women to the Governing Body proceeded much more slowly than the admission of women students in all of the formerly male colleges. This had been predicted by the University Working Party on Coresidence chaired by Warden Hayter and including the Principals of

²⁹ Robin Darwall-Smith, *University College Oxford* (Oxford, 2008), p. 515.

³⁰ Interview with Alan Ryan, New College, Oxford SCR, 23 January 2020.

³¹ Although it seems that Oriel was the last of the men's colleges to admit women, Penry Williams wrote that he was told that Oriel elected a woman in the 14th century to the equivalent of an honorary fellowship, Queen Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I. 'But she had two great advantages: to begin with she was royal and secondly she was dead'. Penry Williams, 'Manners Makyth Man—and Woman', p.7.

³² Interview with Miles Young, New College, Oxford Warden's Lodgings, 20 February 2020.

³³ Caroline Dalton, 'The History of Women at New College', in *Ten Years of Women at New College: A Commemorative Programme* (Oxford: New College, 1990), pp. 5-8.

three women's colleges and two female Fellows. The reasons given for an expected slow pace of hiring were Fellowships do not become vacant very often and there was likely to be a shortage of women applicants in many subjects—particularly in the sciences and classics. This being the case, the Working Party recommended that there should be bias in favour of female candidates for all open academic positions, at least initially. Progress was, indeed, initially slow at New College. Ann Barton was the first female Fellow, elected in 1974. No other female Fellow was elected until 1984 when Nicola Lacey was elected, joining one female JRF and one female lecturer. Penry Williams credits Nicola Lacey with the rapid increase in the number of women elected to New College, 15 by 1989 and 24 by 2004. She accomplished this by 'persuading able women that it was worth their while applying to this male society and that this was a good place to come to, and in whose affairs they could have a serious voice'.³⁴ In 2020 there are 17 women with the title Fellow (other than JFR), 7 JFRs, and 15 lecturers, respectively 28%, 37%, and 48% of people in these positions.

Perhaps it is fitting that the College's Committee on Women should have the last word in this retelling of the story of the 'battle for the admission of women'. The conclusion of the Committee on Women still resonates today—'We believe that only in a community in which the ratio between the sexes is not too far from 1:1 can benefits of a mixed society be fully achieved'.



The Seven Cardinal Virtues, stained glass in the Antechapel of New College, Oxford
Designed by Sir Joshua Reynolds and painted by Thomas Jervais (1779–85)
© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

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³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10.