

Finding Inspector Morse in the Archives

In my first morning in the New College archives I was talking with College Archivist, Jennifer Thorp, about the good old days of open stacks when you could stumble across something more interesting than the book you were looking for. It struck me that archives held out that long-lost promise of academic serendipity and so it turned out to be.

I was in the archives to research the College's leading role in coresidence—the admission of women to the formerly men's colleges. Although New College was the first Oxford College to formally raise the issue of admitting women it was not among the first to do so and I wondered why this was the case. I hoped to discover the answer in the archives. As I read the pamphlet 'Ten Years of Women at New College' I came across a quote from one of the first women to live in New College. Her first impression of the College was 'this would make a fantastic film set'. As a fan of *Inspector Morse*—and just about anything to do with crime fiction—I suspected that an episode or two of *Inspector Morse* had probably been filmed here and I tried, unsuccessfully, to recall which episodes they were based on my having by now been in College for a full week as a Visiting Fellow. And, of course, having memorized every nook and cranny of this marvellous place.

But I was not here to ponder whether Morse has ever strolled the quads of New College. It was time to leave Morse and the Ten-Year Anniversary of Women in New College and move on to the minutes of Governing Body meetings where I thought the answers to my questions about coresidence were to be found. But anyone who knows anything about Inspector Morse knows that he tends to crop up in the most unexpected places—usually with a pint of real ale in his hand. And so it was that this was my experience in the College archives. In the Governing Body Minutes of 13 June 1990, I came across a discussion of *Inspector Morse*. In that meeting a Fellow 'expressed misgivings about filming in college of a drama called "Inspector Morse", about an Oxford College in which a high Anglican chaplain is suspected of offering a poisoned chalice to a feminist communicant'. Dirty deeds in chapel but surely not in our chapel? Never. The proposal to ban the filming of *Morse* was put to a vote and was defeated by 12 votes to 8. So, Morse, and the accompanying location fee were welcome in New College. It is easy to see why some Fellows were so upset by the episode of *Morse*. The episode, 'Fat Chance', written by Alma Cullen and aired 27 February 1991, involved a women's group who were attempting to have one of their members, Hilary Dobson, a cigar-smoking feminist elected chaplain of 'St. Saviour's' in the face of strong opposition from a triumvirate of male chaplains. Speaking of the prospects of his male candidate for the chaplaincy, the retiring chaplain, Lance Mandrake, says 'only a fool would allow an obstacle to remain in his path'. Lewis is moved to say to Morse, 'There is a lot of hate in this one. Where does Christian feeling come in?' Death and dieting follow.

Was there a risk in trying to block *Morse*? Certainly, there may have been a financial one but not a spiritual one, for *Morse* was Mammon's not God's. After all, for the last 30 years, the Morse Tour has been one of the most popular and, one assumes, lucrative, tours in Oxford. Although the series ended in 2000 (Morse's fatal heart attack was filmed in a quad in Exeter College, thankfully not in any of the New College quads nor, thank God, in the Cloisters), in the mid-2000s the tour attracted 3,500 people annually.¹ And, it has been estimated that more than one billion people have seen one or more episodes of *Inspector Morse*.² I can see the Bursar rubbing his hands with glee contemplating the revenues from the new tour—'Morse in New College'.³

¹ Stijn Reijnders, 'Watching the Detectives', *European Journal of Communication* 24 (2009), 165–81.

² Guy Adams, 'Morse: The Number One Gentleman Detective', *The Independent*, 27 April 2007.

³ Indeed, when I checked with him he informed me that location fees had earned New College 'well over a million pounds'. So, indeed, a happy bursar.



New College Chapel, Oxford

Tourism scholar Stijn Reijnders has written that a ‘realistic setting is essential to the central theme of TV detective programmes. The moral questions concerning the dark side of interpersonal contact that arise come into their own in a believable and recognizable setting’.⁴ For Reijnders ‘the landscapes portrayed [in *Morse*] are “injected” with narrative meaning. They become [for the viewer] the focal point for processes of imagination and identification.’⁵ For James Cateridge *Morse* allows screen tourists in Oxford to ‘temporarily inhabit a fictional muse by entering their world’.⁶ By ‘following the character’s tracks meticulously, the story can be relived and at the same time supplemented with new sensory impressions’.⁷ Who knew that all of this was running through the mind of tourists?! They are not mild annoyances but wanna-be Morses!

One could ask why the producers wanted this particular episode to be filmed in New College chapel. Why should New College chapel provide more ‘narrative meaning’ than any other college chapel in Oxford for this particular story? Why, in particular, would we want to see Morse engage with the social issue of misogyny and exercise his well-known moral indignation in ‘our chapel’?⁸ Once again, the archives provided the answer. In his comments to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of women in New College (to be found in the archives), Penry Williams recalled the infamous sermon delivered in New College chapel in the 1880s by the Bishop of Chichester, J. W. Burgon. Burgon was horrified at the idea of women attending lectures at Oxford and being exposed to ‘the obscenities of Greek and Roman literature’ and the ‘irreligious system of philosophy taught at Oxford’. He reminded any woman brave enough to be in the congregation that ‘inferior to us God made you and inferior to the end of time you will remain’.⁹ Clearly he had faith in the incorruptibility of male undergraduates and knew little about the academic performance of women.

The views of Reverend Burgon did not die with him. In her reflections on being the first female Dean of Divinity at New College (2001–2010), Jane Shaw recalled the same episode of *Morse* that so perturbed the Fellows fourteen years before’.¹⁰ The Reverend Shaw noted that the episode ‘may also have unfairly extended the misogynist reputation of the chapel in the popular church mind’.¹¹ This was a poignant reminder of the involvement of one of her predecessors, Gareth Bennett, in what became known as the Crockford Affair. In a preface to *Crockford’s Clerical Directory* of 1987/88, Bennett penned a scathing attack on the liberal wing of the Church of England, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and a number of leading Bishops. Bennett was strongly opposed to the ordination of women which he believed they supported. The ‘Affair’ became front page news and tragically, Bennett took his life. The Reverend Professor Jane Shaw and her successor—the Reverend Dr Erica Longfellow appointed in 2011—have done much to expunge the taint of misogyny from the chapel. It is clear from ‘Fat Chance’ that Morse was an ally in this particular battle. But, sadly, Morse is dead. Long live *Morse*.

⁴ Reijnders, p. 172.

⁵ *ibid*, pp. 172–3.

⁶ James Cateridge, ‘Deep Mapping and Screen Tourism: The Oxford of Harry Potter and Inspector Morse’, *Television and New Media* 4 (2015), p. 322.

⁷ Reijnders, p. 174.

⁸ See Helen Davis, ‘Inspector Morse and the Business of Crime’, *Television and New Media* 2 (2001), 33–48, for a discussion of Morse and social issues in contemporary Britain.

⁹ Penry Williams, ‘Manners Makyth the Man—and Woman?’, in *Twenty Five Years of Women at New College 1979–2004* (Oxford: New College, 2004), pp. 7–11.

¹⁰ Jane Shaw, ‘The First Dean of Divinity: Debunking Some Myths’, in *Twenty Five Years of Women at New College 1979–2004* (Oxford: New College, 2004), pp. 14–15.

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 14.

EPISODES OF *MORSE* THAT FEATURE NEW COLLEGE

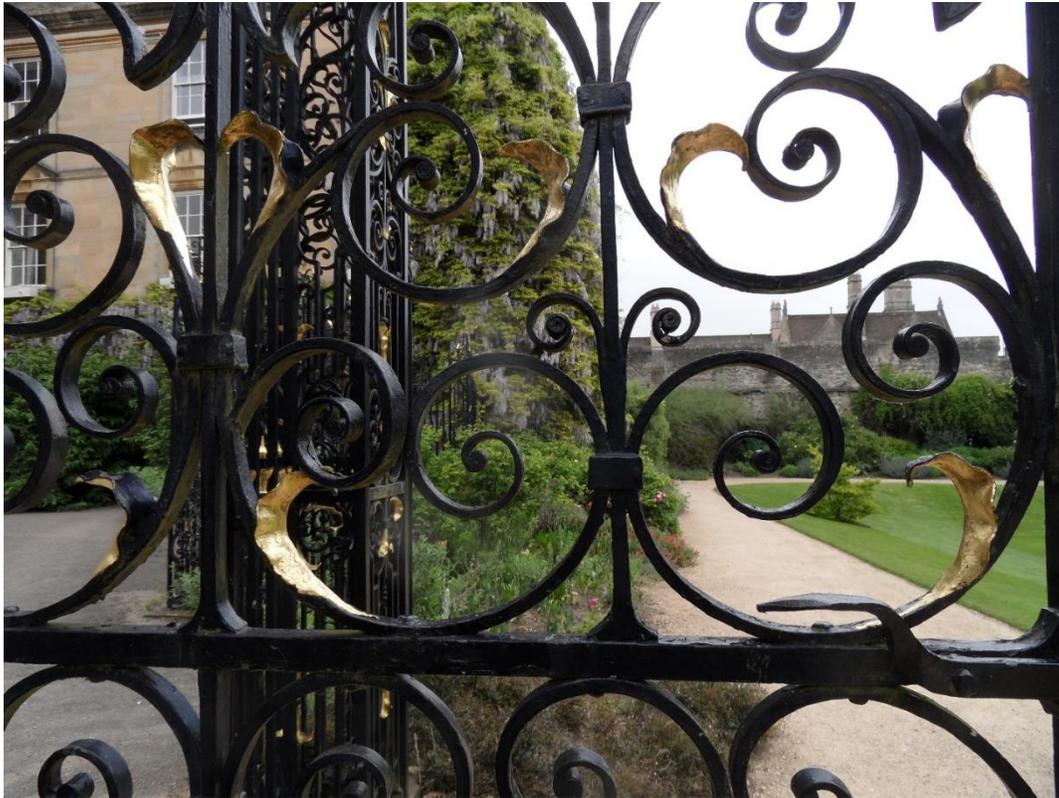
Source: Bill Leonard, *The Oxford of Inspector Morse and Lewis* (Stroud: Tempus, 2008)

‘Service of All the Dead’—the Bell Tower seen from the Turf Tavern (20 January 1987).

‘The Wolvercote Tongue’—the gardens (25 December 1988).

‘Happy Families’—the gardens and garden gate (11 March 1992).

But the episode in which the College has a starring role—the ante-chapel, the chapel, the front quad, the Old Bursary, and a Fellow’s room—is ‘Fat Chance’.



View through the garden gate to the gardens, New College, Oxford

New College Lane also features in ‘Fat Chance’ and in an early episode of *Lewis*. Leonard also informs us that New College Lane was where Harriet Vane accepted Lord Peter Wimsey’s proposal in *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy Sayers, and features in *Love in a Cold Climate* by Nancy Mitford, and Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*. And, to top it all off, James Bond took a Danish lesson in New College in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). The College has also featured in *Harry Potter*, *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, and *His Dark Materials*.

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