

New College MCR: The 60th Anniversary

On Tuesday, 7 March 2023, New College's Middle Common Room (MCR) celebrated the 60th anniversary of its establishment with an exhibition of significant items from the archives in the Conduit Room, a reception in the Founder's Library, the distribution of appropriate stash (including some rather natty appropriately branded scarves), speeches from the Warden and the President Emily Jin, and dinner in Hall. The anniversary was worth celebrating because, as in so many areas, New College had rather led the way in recognising and providing for what is now a major and vital part of its community whose genesis is perhaps worth exploring a little.¹

Research students, usually holding degrees from other universities in the UK and overseas, were first accepted at New College in Hilary 1896. Gustav Mann, from Edinburgh University, matriculated then to do research in physiological histology. He was joined by Henry Newton Dickson, also an Edinburgh graduate, researching the oceanography of the North Atlantic, and a term later by James Ritchie, again from Edinburgh, researching the nature of some bacterial toxins, and their antitoxins. The first overseas graduate, Henry Percival Biggar, arrived in Michaelmas 1896, from Toronto University, to research the early constitutional history of Canada. The stimulus for this development was the introduction by the university of BLitt and BSc research degrees in 1895. The graduates' details were recorded in a separate register for research students.² This included the declaration to be made by them, and the regulations they were to abide by, which were actually pretty much the same as those for undergraduates. The register appears not to have been kept after 1923, but graduates had also featured consistently as separate lists of research students, detailing their topic and previous degree(s), printed at the back of the annual list of college tutors and undergraduates since 1896.³ One of the earliest surviving college group photographs of 1898 should include four research students, but unfortunately individuals are not identified.⁴

Numbers of research students did not take off immediately, with the college having in fact only one such student in each of the years 1901–1904. Then numbers did begin to pick up, going into double figures in 1910, and growing again after the introduction by the university of the DPhil degree in 1917 and the growth in postgraduate diplomas and certificates as professions looked for more formal entry qualifications. So, by World War II there were around 30 such students at New College. This was out of a figure of some 536 graduate students then in the university overall, or 11% of all students.⁵

The university then was still essentially an undergraduate community even in the 1950s with its structures and procedures providing principally for that constituency. Postgraduates, around all the time, were little provided for specifically. Scientists had the network of their laboratory for support, but arts postgraduates could feel somewhat isolated without any particular provision within colleges or the university. Postgraduates were generally perhaps not fully integrated in the commensality of collegiate life.⁶

New College was one of the earliest colleges to recognise the deficiency in provision for its burgeoning graduate community. Lincoln College may have been the first to establish an MCR for its graduates in 1958 which New College followed in 1963 with the provision of a reading room with refreshments and newspapers, special guest nights in hall, and a representative body to organise social events and represent the cause of graduates to the college. But New College, mindful perhaps of a university figure of only 22% of postgraduates being in college

¹ Much of what follows is drawn from that exhibition for which the support and advice of Emily Jin and Ufuk Altunbüken were instrumental.

² New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 3521.

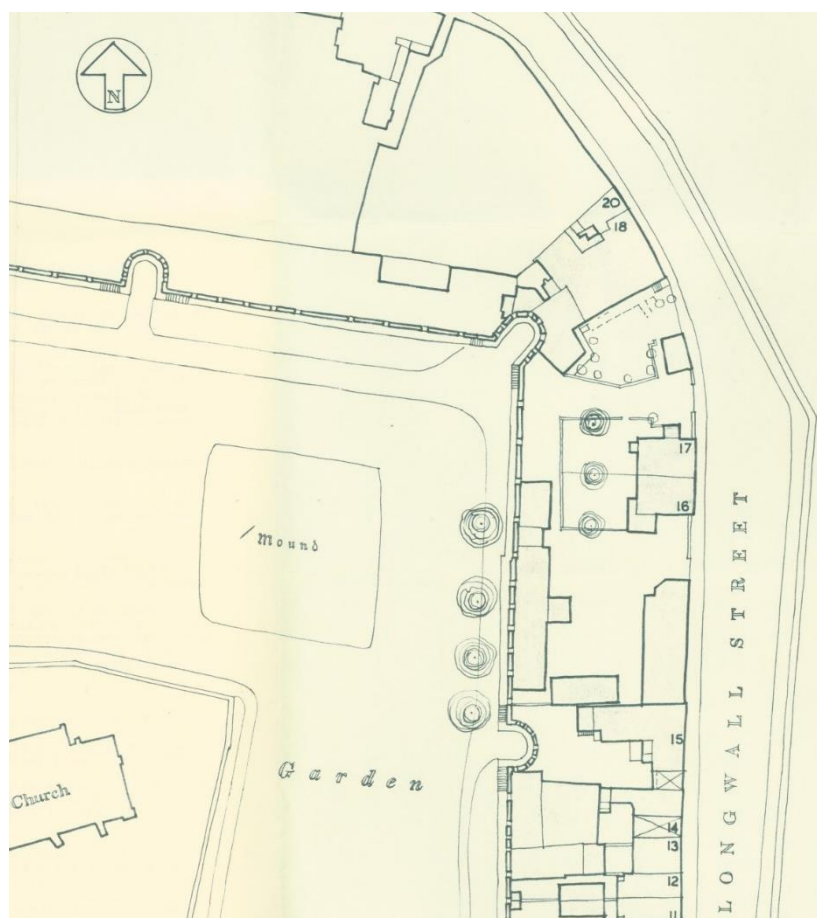
³ NCA TUI/S1/2. A separate category of 'advanced students' was added in 1919.

⁴ In NCA JCR/L2/2.

⁵ *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume VIII: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 47, 210.

⁶ Ted Tapper and David Palfreyman, *Oxford, the Collegiate University: Conflict, Consensus and Continuity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 61–74, with figures on recent numbers of postgraduates at pp. 5–6.

accommodation, went very much further, and also developed purpose-built graduate accommodation for 40 students in its new Sacher Building. This also included provision of flats for a usually particular aspect of the community of graduates, namely married students. By 1963 the college had some 82 graduate members out of a total student population of 396.



Plan of the site between Longwall Street and the city wall that became the Sacher Building [detail]
 New College Archives, Oxford, NCA BUR/BCF/205
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For this specific graduate accommodation, the Sacher Building was developed on a somewhat unloved corner of the college between the city wall and Longwall Street known as Morley's Yard. This had previously been occupied by 15–17 Longwall, some garages, and an old bindery which had been badly damaged by fire in 1958. The college had had the foresight to acquire much of Longwall Street in 1921 in exchange with the City for property near Carfax. It now looked to redevelop this part of the site to provide for its graduate community. The project was generously funded by the alumnus Harry Sacher and his wife Miriam, and was given their name in December 1959. Access to the site was something of an issue and necessitated an opening in the city wall behind the Mound, agreed in February 1960. Initial plans by Mr Shepherd were rejected in May 1960, and David Roberts from Cambridge was appointed architect to the project in June. He soon produced plans which were being discussed by the end of the month. Opinions on his design were perhaps predictably varied, ranging from 'a distinguished piece of modern architecture' to 'some of my worst fears are realised'.⁷ Whatever, the development proceeded. Benfield and Loxley were appointed as the builders, and the foundation plaque was inserted in a wall near its entrance by Mrs Sacher on 4 July 1961.

⁷ NCA MIN/W&F9.

Speech by Mrs Sacher at the Luncheon on the 4th July, 1961 on the occasion of the stone laying to mark the start of the work on the building given to the College by Mr. and Mrs H. Sacher.

"I would like to say just a few words and to tell you that this is a very happy day for me - and a very proud day. To play any part in the building up of this ancient College is a great privilege. In the past half century a few members of my family have spent some happy years here, (especially on looking back after they had passed their finals.) And it was natural when the Warden issued his appeal that my husband and I should feel that we would like to help as much as we could. We therefore decided to undertake the building of the graduates' hostel and thus enable New College to carry out its desire to expand graduate advanced education and thus provide more university teachers. We need industrialists to provide the cash - we need teachers to provide civilisation. We hope that this new and modern building will weld in comfortably with the old and will not disturb the tranquillity that surrounds this College. May the Architects and the Builders go forward without delay, so that the new house can be put into use at the earliest possible date.

I thank you Mr. Warden for giving me the honour of laying the foundation stone this morning, and may we look forward to meeting once again, informally, when the house is completed. Thank you."

Address given by Miriam Sacher at the laying of the foundation stone, 4 July 1961
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA BUR/BCF/206

A further plaque was affixed to a similar wall when the building was formally opened by the nation's then prime minister, and university chancellor, Harold Macmillan, on 25 June 1963. Warden Hayter's briefing notes for Macmillan's speech emphasised the use of the building as graduate accommodation.

29 May 1963

You remember that I said I would write and suggest to you one or two points which the Chancellor might care to consider when he is opening the Sacher Building here on June 25th.

The main point we would like him to make, if he will, is about graduate studies. The building is the first one put up by any of the Colleges here specifically to house graduates. It contains forty sets or bed-sitting rooms for graduates (in addition to three Fellows' Flats) and a Middle Common Room. As the building was brought into use last January in the middle of the academic year, it was not possible to confine its inhabitants at present to graduates, and we have fitted in any member of the College who wished to move in. But from next October it will be exclusively occupied by graduate members of the College.

The general position of graduates in relation to existing colleges is set out in some paragraphs included in an appeal for money we sent out a year or two ago to old members of the College. I enclose a copy of these. I think they explain what we are trying to do, and we believe it is an example which other colleges will in fact be following; Somerville already has a building going up for the same purpose, and we have heard that one or two men's colleges are thinking of doing the same thing.

Out of a total junior membership of the College of three hundred and ninety-six we now have eighty-two who are in one sense or another counted as graduates. Of course these will not all be able to be accommodated in the building, but not all will wish to move in there, especially since many of them are married.

If the Chancellor does not intend to allude to the graduate question, I should be very grateful if you could let me know, as then I shall have to deal with it myself in my introductory remarks. But if he is going to cover this, I should merely confine myself to thanking everyone involved, the donors, the architects, the builders etc., and of course the Chancellor himself for coming.

/The

Warden Hayter's briefing notes for the prime minister's speech opening the Sacher Building
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA BUR/BCF 206

The finished building was commended by the City of Oxford for a Civic Trust Award in 1963: 'It is carefully integrated with its surroundings, largely devoid of superfluous detail and skilfully related to problems posed by the proximity of heavy traffic and the ancient city wall. By its shape, scale and position, it makes a valuable contribution to the environment of the College, and forms a stimulating terminal point in Longwall'.⁸ Largely funded by the Sachers,⁹ there was also a sizeable contribution to the project from the Joseph Benefaction which was acknowledged on 7 June 1961 when it was agreed that the common room in the building would be known as the Joseph Room. Events proceeded fairly rapidly in Hilary term 1963 to the formation of the MCR as an institution, led by Basil Smith and an ad hoc committee of graduates. Graduates were already in occupation in January 1963 when, as this was part-way through the academic year, any spare rooms were to be allocated to undergraduates. On the 24th of that month the JCR approved the proposed formation of an MCR for graduates in the Sacher Building, though it did also note 'that a wary eye should be kept on the movement of Art Fund Treasures to the Sacher Building'. On 31 January, Basil Smith (the first MCR president) moved in the JCR 'that the JCR is in favour of the formation of a MCR'. This was carried *nem con*. On 8 February, the interrelation of the finances of the two common rooms was discussed, and it was agreed that the JCR and MCR presidents could each attend the other's committees, if they wished. On 13 February, the college (the Warden and Fellows) 'agreed in principle to the establishment of a MCR; such a MCR to be open to all resident members of the college who were qualified for a first degree at any university'.

There seems to have been some confusion or discussion over the name of this new body, with the warden's note to Basil Smith reporting the decision of the Warden and Fellows, terming it as 'a Middle or Graduate Common Room'. The 6 March Warden and Fellows meeting agreed to the suggested constitution for the *Graduates* Common Room. Indeed, the warden reported on 11 March to Basil Smith the 'College's' preference for the title Graduate Common Room 'since they think it expresses more accurately what it is meant to do'.¹⁰ That however seems to be the last time that the title Graduate Common Room is mentioned as all subsequent paperwork talks about rather an MCR!¹¹ The head of this new common room was to be a president, albeit the JCR continued with a steward as its principal officer for some years yet. The constitution also established the election timetable, which remains to this day, and single transferrable voting for elections. A key principle was also established of the MCR having sole use of its common room, i.e. the room could not be used for other college functions such as conferences, and it was to be accessible 24/7 unless the whole college was closed. An estimate of the annual MCR expenditure was also drawn up with provision amongst the social functions for an annual freshers' sherry party. The termly subscription for members was to be £2 2s. 6d. with a further £1 being contributed from the JCR.

The Warden and Fellows also 'agreed to furnish the GCR, the college to provide up to £1000 for the purpose'. However, on 19 March the Graduates Common Room became the Middle Common Room which appellation was more commonly used for the Joseph Room in the Sacher Building. The actual room in the Sacher Building also became more colloquially known as Rooner Spoom or just Spoom in honour of the former warden William Spooner.

The college further recognised that it was time for some senior oversight of this increasingly significant sector of the college, and it determined that a tutor for graduates would be appointed. The duties were to 'be the moral tutor of all those graduates who do not already possess a moral tutor within the College' and also to 'conduct the correspondence in respect of graduate

⁸ NCA BUR/BCF 205, 206.

⁹ That this was not their only benefaction to the college is reflected by their arms appearing on the 1938 library building (north side, central shield, (Patric Dickinson, '[Some Benefactors and their Heraldry](#)', *New College Notes* 19 (2023), no.7) and the restored north front of the JCR (easternmost shield).

¹⁰ NCA BUR/BCF 594.

¹¹ Most Oxford colleges have followed the Lincoln/New College model in having an MCR, but Christ Church has a GCR, as does the graduate college St Antony's, or graduate colleges might just have one Common Room for all senior and junior members such as Linacre and Wolfson.

candidates for admission'. The physicist Arthur Cooke was appointed on 8 May 1963 as the first Tutor for Graduates and their Admissions.

The first women graduate students arrived in the MCR in Michaelmas 1979. Totalling 15 students, they embarked on PGCEs (3), a pharmacy DPhil, clinical medicine (2), MLitt in English, a diploma in social anthropology, a BCL, BAs in law (2) and philosophy & modern languages, and MPhils in European archaeology, English, and literature. They had previously been at university in Sussex, Aberdeen, Bryn Mawr, Cambridge (Clare), London King's (2), Warwick, Victoria (New Zealand), Yale, McGill, Sorbonne, Wellesley, Bath, and Cambridge (Newnham).¹² The women soon made an impact with the first female MCR president (Ruth Mazo) being elected just six months later.

Generations of graduates came and went in the Sacher Building before an incident in 1999 had a major impact on the MCR. A fire, probably caused by an electrical malfunction, broke out in the Sacher Building on 28 October. A bathroom was burnt out and 5 other rooms were rendered uninhabitable. Eventually it was decided that the whole building would need refurbishment. The graduates were evacuated to Bodicote House and the new Weston Building on the Sports Ground. Phase two of the Weston had just come on stream, being the buildings nearer the road with the porter's lodge then completed. The new sports pavilion had previously been opened in 1997, named after the cricket commentator Brian Johnston (1912–1994, New College 1931–4). The first phase of the Weston Building had already been opened before then. The previous pavilion had had its day and other buildings on the site providing staff accommodation had been removed.

As a result of the Sacher fire, the actual MCR common room was evacuated to the Sir Christopher Cox room over the JCR. This perhaps neat juxtaposing of MCR and JCR, with the SCR opposite, was not to last, and the MCR and the graduates returned to the refurbished Sacher Building in October 2001. Mooted in 2008, it was not to be until 2009 that the graduates finally moved into the Weston Building, and the MCR became established in the previously somewhat underused pavilion in the Rew Nooner Spoom. Even then some negotiations were necessary to clarify the details such as whether some of the Sacher Spoom could be retained, and whether the MCR would have to share their new home with such as Boat Club ergs.

The recording of MCR activities becomes more consistent from 1998 with the appearance in the *New College Record* of an annual report. These reports record thence such as the annual Tingewick Christmas pantomime, starring university medics including a strong New College contingent, the MCR being 'the undeniable seat of tennis power in Oxford' in 1998, a strong social calendar, the formation of an MCR band in 1998 (1001 Moos), an MCR wedding, enhanced facilities such as a dartboard, providing such as karate and yoga classes, and a graduate seminar. Also mentioned are some of the realities of postgraduate life such as out-of-term provision of facilities, negotiations over rising rents and graduate finances generally, and the enlightenment of philosophical debates in the MCR kitchen. Overall, New College's MCR may perhaps justifiably claim to be 'the most socially active and dynamic of Oxford's MCRs' as well as 'one of the most academically and culturally diverse'.¹³

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¹² NCA TUI/S3/30.

¹³ *New College Record* 2009 (Oxford: New College, 2010), p. 49.