

The Wartime Use of the Founder's Library 1939–1946

Warden Alic Smith's impressive and still invaluable overview of the development of New College's built estate has much to say about the more historic aspects of the Founder's Library.¹ The provision of such a substantial first floor space as part of his initial grand plan for the college, carefully located away from distracting street noises, and kitchen and other smells, was, as with so much of the founder's scheme, an innovation. Its extent was generous, though even within a century or so, an extension was required in the form of the Law Library, as the founder's munificent initial provision of books was followed by further generous benefactions, not least in terms of law texts. The space was also generously illuminated with a line of nine windows on each side allowing for the maximum benefit to be gained from natural light from early in the morning to sunset. Indeed, the space's varied subsequent developments have meant that pretty well the whole history of the college's fenestration is to be found in this one space. Smith in fact goes on to explain and justify in a lengthy appendix to his volume the history of these windows and his proposal to re-gothicise all of the college's windows, which has the legacy in 2025 of his sample gothic window remaining in the north-west corner of the space. He also goes on to provide fascinating detail on the extensive repair and restoration that was necessary to this space to make it repurposed and serviceable as the SCR dining room, first ceremonially used for a lunch for Hailie Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, on 20 October 1953 before he collected an honorary DCL from the university.² However, what Smith does not record, frustratingly perhaps as he was a major player in this period as sub-warden and acting warden after Warden Fisher's unfortunate demise in 1940, and then warden from 1944, is the history of this space during the period of considerable disturbance and disruption that for New College, as for many colleges, marked its existence, and survival even, during the Second World War.

This is a time that has much to tell us obviously about how New College coped during this extraordinary period, and how it accommodated new roles, and worked in new ways with very different organisations. Aspects of the college in the Second World War have been considered already in the 2010 volume on the college's history.³ It is not proposed to rehearse those aspects here, but rather to embellish that story and to focus on the particular role that at that time the space known as the Founder's Library played in the national cause, the life of the college more generally, and the provision of library services for the members of New College itself and—which might especially be the intrigue—of its neighbour Mansfield College.

The space known in 2025 as The Founder's Library was by the 1930s but the hub of quite a complex of library spaces. The college's collection of books—initially manuscript and then of course printed—grew considerably and consistently from the college's inception.⁴ Some of the subsequent library extensions were purpose-built—the Law Library in 1480/1, and the Macgregor-Matthews Room in 1674/5—and others were the takeover of extant spaces such as the rooms to the south and then south-east of the Founder's Library. All this meant that in the 1930s, the college library comprised the Founder's Library with above it what was then known as the Wyatt Library, known more prosaically as the Lower and Upper Libraries respectively, and entered through a grand doorway (in 2025 surmounted by a royal coat of arms⁵ retrieved from the Hall in 2012) in the south wall of the Founder's Library, and conjoined by a staircase at the north end.

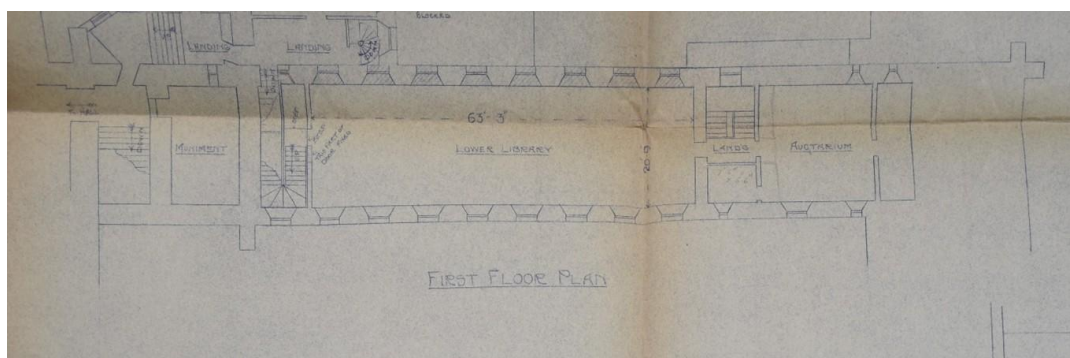
¹ A. H. Smith, *New College, Oxford, and its Buildings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), especially pp.159–178.

² *New College Record 1953–4*, p. 6.

³ Jennifer Thorp, 'The College at War', in *New College*, ed. Christopher Tyerman (London: Third Millennium, 2010), pp. 114–25; the 1979 college history averred from considering World War Two, and beyond, considering that 'formal treatment of a period within living memory would have provoked dispute', John Buxton and Penry Williams (eds.), *New College Oxford 1379–1979* (Oxford: The Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, 1979), p. ix.

⁴ For the development of these collections, see R. W. Hunt, 'The Medieval Library', in *New College Oxford 1379–1979*, ed. John Buxton and Penry Williams (Oxford: The Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, 1979), pp. 317–45, and William Poole, *New College Library Through Time* (Oxford: New College Library, 2018).

⁵ As used by Stuart monarchs from James I to James II.

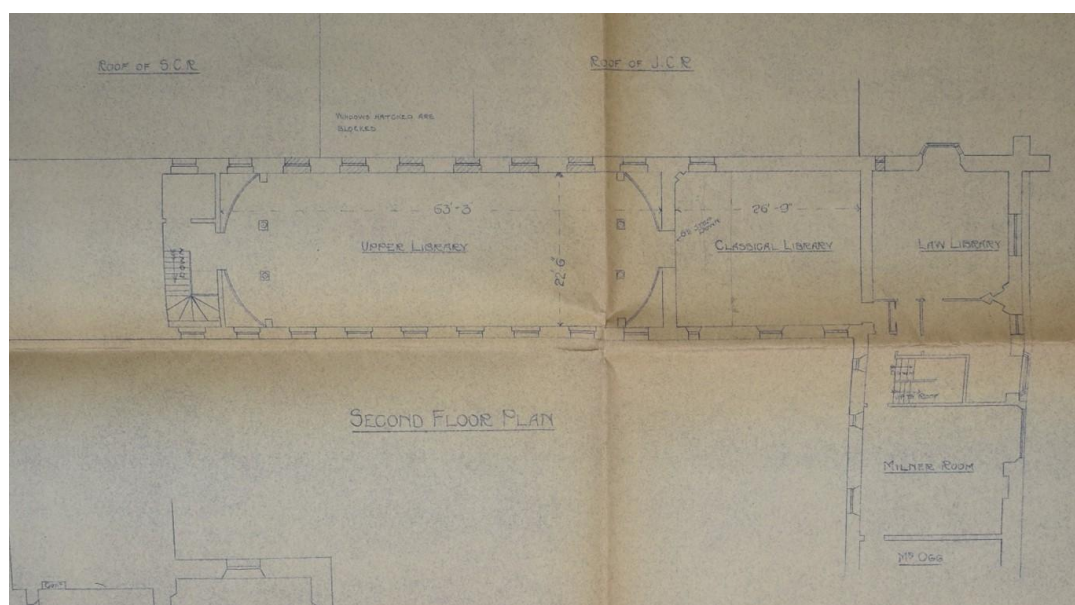


New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/SMA/10/2

Lower Library and Auctarium plan, c. 1939

This and following image © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

On the first floor, the library had expanded south into the Auctarium, largely storing the rare books, with further spaces at both its south end, for manuscripts, and in its north-west corner. The main space of the Auctarium had been provided with mobile racking, whose runners were still in place in 2025, but it was still a congested area with the books not easily accessed.⁶ Upstairs, a lobby faced those ascending the stairs from the Founder's Library. Then the Wyatt or Upper Library led south into the Classical Library (uninterrupted then by the staircase and landing installed in 1951), with access then to the Law Library in the south-east corner of the Front Quad, and then the Milner Room to house his collection in the south arm of the Front Quad, and finally the librarian's office. There was also a store of older Theology books in the Robinson Tower.⁷ As well as its purpose-built accommodation, the library had thus taken over what were originally four separate sets for fellows. Furthermore, the need for shelf space had seen all the nine windows on the east side of both the Founder's Library and the Wyatt Library blocked up, meaning that the main library rooms only looked west into the Front Quad.



New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/SMA/10/2

Upper Library, Classical and Law Libraries etc, c. 1939

⁶ Smith, *New College*, p. 146.

⁷ All outlined in New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/SMA/10/2; also NCA MIN/REP3 item 31. An idea of the arrangement of the books can be gleaned from the catalogues in New College Library, Oxford, LC/94-121 and 134.

By the 1930s, the idea of a completely fresh library building was clearly pressing, and was nothing new. Basil Champneys had projected a library 80 feet by 40 feet at the east end of one of his schemes for completing the Holywell Buildings in 1902. He also came up with two alternatives of a library building at the other (west) end of the Holywell Buildings next to the Bell Tower facing down the Slipe in 1908. Sir Herbert Baker produced a similar plan for a possible library in keeping with and again conjoining at right angles the west end of the Holywell Buildings in 1926.⁸ This location was becoming the preferred option, and the current discrete building by Hubert Worthington began to appear in 1938 as a memorial to the college's dead of the First World War.⁹ It was completed soon after the start of Second World War, but the books were then not moved in immediately 'as a measure of economy'. All was however ready to effect the move as necessary, alongside all the other preparations going on to prepare the college for this new global conflict. These preparations included securing an emergency statute in July 1940 allowing a college officer to be re-elected beyond the age of 70 because of the 'desirability of retaining our librarian in office in order to complete the transfer from the Old to the New Library'.¹⁰

The need for that transfer became imperative, when, after something of a 'Phoney War' for the library, and even the whole college, on 20 January 1941 the Old Library was formally requisitioned by the Director of Naval Intelligence for the Admiralty. The sub-warden, librarian, and senior bursar had been authorised to negotiate with the Director (expressly rather than the Ministry of Works) on 11 December 1940, with the New Library being an alternative option for requisition. There had been some previous proposals for the use of the New Library. On 22 July 1940, it had been offered to Richard Onslow, 5th earl of Onslow (New College 1895–8) to store his library if the family home of Clandon Park House might have been requisitioned, at a time when many such collections were being frantically relocated.¹¹ The National Radium Commission, bombed out of its London office, had also been a possible candidate for a home in one of the library spaces as the college's Finance Committee reported on 9 October 1940. Nothing more is recorded of this proposal and they may have baulked at the suggested annual rent of £250.¹² Bursar Geoffrey Radcliffe was naturally concerned about such terms, being keen with the Admiralty proposal that the college's rates' liability would not be thereby increased, and that the government would pay fire and war damage insurance, a proportion of the lighting and heating costs, any damages, and an annual rent of £100 for either location. With these terms agreed for the takeover of the Old Library, the effectiveness of the librarian J. L. Myres's preparations was tested, and not found wanting: the 36,200 books of the main spaces were transferred to the New Library in 13 days early in 1941 by Messrs Archer, Cowley and Co. The librarian was proud to report that the library had not had to close and books had been consulted or borrowed on almost every day of the move. The 3,400 law books following at the end of Hilary Term. As the New Library became operational, smoking was not allowed in it, to protect its 'fine woodwork'. Those students still around clearly took to the new space with alacrity as borrowings in the first half of 1941 were 50% up on the first half of 1940.¹³

What of the replacement for the books in the Old Library? Well, it was perhaps apposite that the Old Library became the base for book production, namely handbooks providing information about countries or parts of the world where the navy, and even all the British armed forces, might be operating during the war. Mindful of the threat of bombing, on the capital in

⁸ NCA 9387/1C, 2B, 2C; NCA EST/R46.

⁹ Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'Restoration and Expansion: The Buildings since 1750', in *New College Oxford*, ed. Buxton and Williams, pp. 233–64, at pp. 257–8.

¹⁰ *New College Record 1939–1940*, p. 11; Smith, *New College*, p. 159; Thorp, 'The College at War', p. 118; Oxford University Archives, UR6/NC/1 file 1. The college also wanted to pause to ascertain its rates liability on the new building: NCA MIN/REP3 item 5.

¹¹ NCA MIN/W&F8; Caroline Shenton, *National Treasures: Saving the Nation's Art in World War II* (London: John Murray, 2021).

¹² NCA MIN/REP3 item 8.

¹³ NCA MIN/W&F8, MIN/REP3 items 21 & 31 (librarian's reports); *New College Record 1940–1941*, pp. 5–6.

particular, government policy at the start of the war had been to disperse people and institutions from London. So, a number of university and college buildings in Oxford were subject to requisition and conversion.¹⁴ New College was one of the five colleges designated as reception colleges, taking overflow students from elsewhere, so it largely escaped the major disruption of those other colleges requisitioned at the start of the war, or even beforehand: Mansfield was mostly requisitioned on 25 August 1939, of which more anon.¹⁵

One of the many military and government activities that expanded rapidly at the start of the war was naval intelligence, and particularly the provision of information or intelligence about areas where the navy might be engaged. The 'able highly strung' Captain John Godfrey coordinated this, becoming Director of Naval Intelligence in January 1939. In February 1940 he decided that the extant Admiralty Geographical Handbook Series was incomplete and not up-to-date, so Professor Kenneth Mason of Oxford University's School of Geography was recruited to do something about it. In March a small topographical research section was established (NID6) to produce updated geographical handbooks for service personnel. The unit in Oxford was complemented by one in Cambridge under James Wordie. Together they produced some 58 volumes during the course of the war, covering every theatre in 'probably the largest programme of geographical writing ever attempted'. The handbooks were designed for naval commanders, but were also used by army, RAF and other government departments, and were of such enduring value that, for instance, the 1944 handbook produced on Iraq was regarded by the British forces in 2003 as still the best guide for operations there. The handbooks were meant to be 500–600 pages each, to be produced at the rate of around three volumes a month, and published by Oxford University Press. They would comprise regional volumes (such as Europe) and particular country ones (France, Germany, Spain, etc). They were meant to detail geography, climate, race, religion, movements of peoples, communications, economics, contacts, and conflicts and would be printed by Oxford University Press. Godfrey's whole command numbered some 50 staff in 1939 but it grew to over 1,000 in 1942, so clearly more space was needed.¹⁶

The initial proposal of 12 December 1940 was to move a section of a professor, four or five temporary civilian officers, and two draughtsmen into two rooms in the New Library, the college having offered either the New or the Old Library as potential locations for the work. Professor Mason would be based at the School of Geography in Mansfield Road. Two days later, the Old Library was settled on instead, with the Founder's and Wyatt Libraries, and Classical Reading Room, to be utilised. Staffing rapidly grew from the initial estimate with 16 persons in place in New College on 26 August 1941; the section then had a further 50 in the School of Geography itself, 19 in the New Bodleian, and 21 in the Ashmolean Extension. The college resisted a subsequent proposal from the Admiralty to take over the Law Library and Milner Room (13 February 1942).¹⁷ The new tenants made the administrative life of the college somewhat more complex, as when one of the naval staff broke a washbasin in the cloakroom when washing out his ink bottle in August 1942. His superior administrative officer, based in Manchester College, had to inspect the damage before any repair could be effected as the Ministry of Works would be funding it, somewhat to the frustration of the college bursar who had to chase this counterpart at Manchester. A perhaps larger issue that these new tenants provided for the college was that a number of their civilian workers were female. Indeed, of the 14 drawing staff at New College on

¹⁴ Paul Addison, 'Oxford and the Second World War', in *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume VIII: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Brian Harrison (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 167–88, at p. 170.

¹⁵ Elaine Kaye, *Mansfield College, Oxford: Its Origin, History, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 211; Oxford University Archives, UR6/CQ/11/Man file 1; Ashley Jackson, *Oxford's War, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2024), pp. 82–5.

¹⁶ Andrew Boyd, *British Naval Intelligence Through the Twentieth Century* (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2020), pp. 386–7, 636, with a chart of the various Naval Intelligence sections in 1943 at p. 476; The National Archives, ADM 116/4527; Jackson, *Oxford's War*, pp. 98, 230–43.

¹⁷ The National Archives, ADM 116/4527; New College Archives, Oxford, NCA MIN/W&F8; Oxford University Archives, UR6/CQ/11/NC file 1.

2 March 1942, 12 were female, with a further three new women being anticipated. This in itself does not seem to have raised recorded comment in the college, but the question of lavatory provision for them did, with the university registrar intervening on behalf of the college asking if more men could be used instead; none were to be had, and the registrar suggested that the Ministry of Works assist with lavatory provision. Similarly, the Director of Naval Intelligence was asked in June 1942 if his women staff could use the Cloisters rather than the garden for their morning recreation.¹⁸

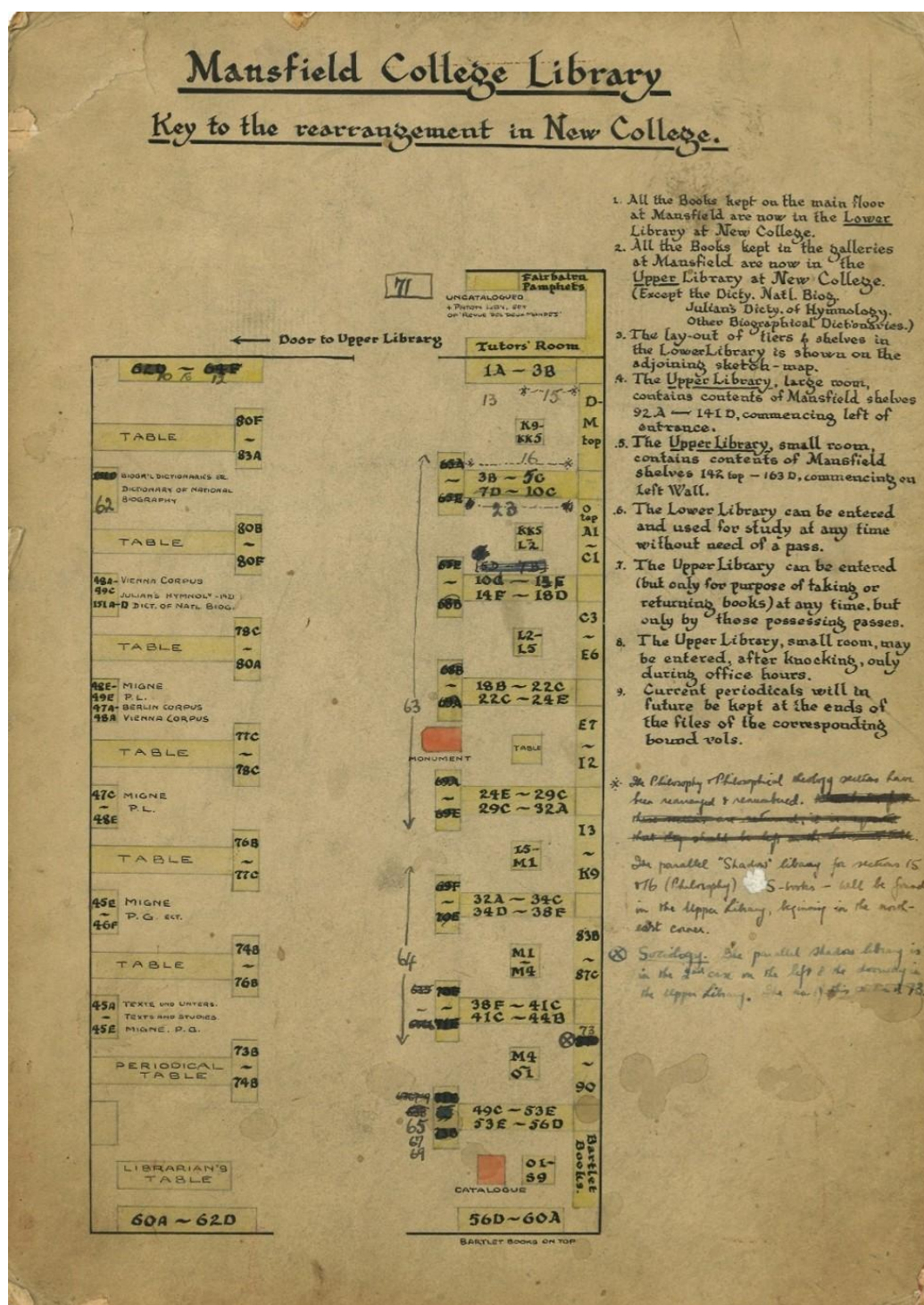
Meantime, as already mentioned, Mansfield College's principal, Nathaniel Micklem, had been informed on 24 August 1939, before war had even been declared, that his college, with some exceptions, would be requisitioned. This was to be immediate. The tenants, the government's Foreign Office Code and Cypher School, an adjunct to the Bletchley Park operation, moved in next day, though the formal date for requisitioning was set as 11 September 1939. Hospitality was offered to Mansfield staff and students by Regent's Park, which had just moved into its new premises in Pusey Street, having been themselves tenants of Mansfield for some years beforehand. Mansfield lost further space to the Foreign Office on 3 December 1940 when the bursar reported that the bursary and small library had been taken over. Albeit that the college had been originally assured that the Big Library would not be taken over, this too was earmarked for occupancy by the Foreign Office on 30 September 1941. Alternative accommodation would thereby be needed for, in the principal's view, 'the finest theological library in Oxford, if not in England'. It numbered some 30–40,000 books and periodicals. Mansfield was none too happy at this development, and the University registrar agreed that it was 'an outrage'. Commander Hok, in charge of the work at Mansfield, was unyielding in the need for the extra space for his 'vitally important work', and the impossibility of sharing access to the library space on security grounds. If the college wanted access to the books, the books would have to move. Options of the Ashmolean and huts in Mansfield's front quad were considered and quickly rejected in favour of New College.¹⁹

There ensued some frantic discussions in December 1941 as the Admiralty was none too impressed at the proposal that they might vacate New College. There seems to have been some breakdown in communication as the Foreign Office seemingly thought that the Admiralty had already vacated New College. Admiral Godfrey, Director of Naval Intelligence, had to intervene and reassure the University Registrar that Commander Hok, despite his naval status, did not represent the Admiralty in these discussions but rather the Foreign Office. New College seems to have been something of a bystander in all this, but Acting Warden Smith did opine that the college 'would prefer to house Mansfield books rather than Admiralty typists as they were less trouble'. Whatever, heads of agreement were drawn up in January 1942 for Mansfield College Library to become in effect the sub-tenant of the Admiralty in New College. The Admiralty would vacate the Lower (Founder's) Library which, with additional shelving supplied by the Ministry of Works, would become the main reading room and base for Mansfield College's Library. Their books would also be stored in the Upper Library, which would be accessible at all reasonable times, and Mansfield would also be able to access books in 'the smaller room' being used by the Admiralty (probably the Classics Room) but during office hours only (c. 9:30–18:30). Mansfield would provide library users with passes acceptable to the Admiralty staff. The move was to be funded by the Ministry of Works and supervised by the Bodleian. It was in progress by 26 January 1942 when Mansfield's librarian, C. J. Cadoux, also reported that New College's librarian had allowed students of Mansfield and Regent's Park access to New College's library for studying and borrowing during this interregnum of the inaccessibility of their own library. Guidance on their access would be provided by the Assistant Librarian, Mr R. L. Rickard, whose instructions, the students were enjoined, were to be carried out to the letter.²⁰

¹⁸ New College Archive, BUR/BCF93; Oxford University Archives, UR6/CQ/11/NC file 1.

¹⁹ Kaye, *Mansfield College*, p. 211; Oxford University Archives, UR6/CQ/11/Man file 1.

²⁰ Oxford University Archive, UR6 CQ/11/Man file 1; Mansfield College Archives, Oxford: librarian's memo 26 January; SCR minutes SCR1/B1/1; *Mansfield College Calendar 1942–43*, p. 22; The National Archives, ADM 116/4527.



personnel on cadet courses which ran at different times and extended into vacations. There were many different people about, and in many parts of colleges, carrying out fire-watching or ARP duties, where they would not perhaps ordinarily have gone. As a designated reception college, New College had perhaps less disruption than some, though it still had such as St Hugh's students occupying Savile House. So, one more instance of students of one college's students accessing another college was not so remarkable then as it perhaps might have been at another time.²²

With the end of the war in 1945, the Admiralty personnel vacated fairly rapidly, moving out 19–22 September. In other parts of New College, St Hugh's personnel moved out of Savile House back to their own buildings ready for Michaelmas Term on 26 September 1945. This meant that New College did not need possible rooms at St Peter's for its students for the new term. The pavilion did not prove so easy to reclaim; Bursar Radcliffe was soliciting Registrar Veale's assistance with this on 15 October 1945. The NAAFI did not yield the pavilion until February 1946 and two huts on the sports ground there being used by the Army Kinema Section were not vacated until June. The pavilion was formally derequisitioned on 12 June 1946.²³ Mansfield College Library stayed on a full year after the end of the war. Discussions about their move back started in October 1945, with New College being then assured that Mansfield College would be cleared of its own tenants by June 1946. Almost as soon as it had moved into New College, Principal Micklem had been anticipating the library's return to Mansfield, albeit he seemed to grow less optimistic about its prospect over time.²⁴ There was also some concern about Mansfield taking this opportunity to reorganise its library, work that was only partially completed when the logjam that was all the necessary moves to see everyone back to where they started pre-war began to clear in the Summer of 1946. There was also the imperative of the upcoming new term with the Founder's Library possibly being needed as student accommodation. Mansfield's books were moved back to their original home in August 1946; 'for many nights thereafter', the College magazine reported, 'Zuntz, our librarian, dreamed of folios endowed with powers of locomotion'.

With both the Admiralty and Mansfield now out of the Founder's Library, it was formally derequisitioned and returned to New College use on 28 October 1946. The tenants do not seem to have been unduly disrespectful to their temporary home: damages claimed by New College comprised only some doors used as notice boards.²⁵ There had been some discussion in 1944 with the architect of the New Library, Sir Hubert Worthington, about planning a new Senior Common Room in the Old Library, and Charles Peers, Adviser on the Upkeep of the Ancient Buildings, had similarly suggested then that 'a new orientation for the old rooms is worth thinking over', but Warden Smith was mindful of the possible large numbers of returning students and wanted to retain the space as a potential dormitory if the numbers were too large for the available provision. Which brings us back to Smith's own analysis of the Founder's Library that this piece started with. It is hoped that this has filled out the brief summary that he provides of this significant corner of the college and its history.²⁶

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²² Jackson, *Oxford's War*, *passim* but especially pp. 84–5.

²³ NCA BUR/BCF113; Oxford University Archives, UR6/CQ/11/NC file 1.

²⁴ Mansfield College Archives, Oxford: *Mansfield College Calendar 1943–44*, pp. 22–3 ('we shall very soon, as we hope, be presented with another heavy & difficult task when the books are brought back from New College'); *Mansfield College Calendar 1944–45*, p. 22 ('one day, we hope, we shall be taking our books back to the College Library'); *Mansfield College Calendar 1945–46*, p. 23 ('of our return to our old home I see no immediate prospect'); Jackson, *Oxford's War*, pp. 268, 270.

²⁵ Mansfield College Archives, Oxford, *Mansfield College Magazine* 130 (January 1947), 224; NCA BUR/BCF113; Oxford University Archives, UR6/CQ/11/NC file 1.

²⁶ NCA BUR/BCF93; Smith, *New College*, p. 159.