

New College Archery Club 1820s–1880s

Pierce Egan (1772–1849) was a writer on popular culture and an early sports journalist who produced a weekly newspaper (1824–7) *Pierce Egan's Life in London and Sporting Guide*. This focused on reporting crime and sport. In the pages of its 29 April 1827 edition, there is a contribution attributed to the apocryphal Sir John Barleycorn titled *More Majorum: or, May-Day with Our Ancestors*, lamenting the perceived decline, and encouraging the pursuit, of sports such as hawking, fencing, 'pitching the bar', and archery. The last is the particular subject of the piece, extolling 'the hero of bonny Sherwood, hight the bold Archer Robin' arrayed

With coat of Lincoln green, and mantle too,
And horn of ivory mouth, and buckle bright,
And arrows winged with peacock-fathers light,
And trusty bow, well gathered of the yew.



The ideal attire for archery
H. A Ford, *Archery: Its Theory and Practice* (1859),
frontispiece

The piece then goes on to cite, to laud even, attempts lately being made 'to rally back the popular feeling to these standards of primitive spirit', including 'among the students at Oxford, New-College . . . in particular'.¹ It is the intention here to elaborate something of the history of this enthusiasm and sport at New College. Archery has perhaps been unduly overlooked given that it has some claim to be the college's earliest, beginning in 1825, team sporting endeavour at a time when New College is only first recorded as having a rowing crew in Eights in 1840, and the college's cricketing prowess is first reported in 1857.² It also provides the earliest instances of competitive occasions or matches by New College against other colleges in Oxford—principally St John's College—and the earliest establishment of college colours or standard identifiable sporting outfits. The caveat is that much of the information about this has to be sought away from the college as what may well have been once an Archery Club archive has not so far been identified at the college, nor elsewhere.³

¹ *Pierce Egan's Life in London, and Sporting Guide* (29 April 1827), 939. I am grateful to my library colleague, and archer, Dr Antje G. Frotscher, for her comments on what follows.

² 'New College Crews' <<https://eodg.atm.ox.ac.uk/user/dudhia/rowing/bumps/newc/index.html>> (Accessed: 7 March 2026); *Oxford Journal* (23 May 1857), 5, with 'cricket dinners' extant by at least 1862, New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 9638 (Warden and Fellows' minutes), p. 384; H. S. Jones, 'University and College Sport', in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. VII, Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 517–44 only really starts to consider sport in Oxford in 1850; archery features not at all, nor in William Henry Grenfell, *Fifty Years of Sport at Oxford, Cambridge and the Great Public Schools*, ed. A. C. M. Croome, 3 vols. (London: W. Southwood, 1913–1922).

³ Apart from newspapers of the period, much of the information is derived from the archive of the Archery Club of St John's College which, apart from the loss of one minute book for 1844–58, has minutes and some accounts covering 1835–1883, St John's College Archive, Oxford (hence SJCA) UGS.II.B.1a–c and UGS.II.A.1–4.

New College was indeed in 1827 very much part of a then reviving enthusiasm for archery. The sport had begun at the college two years previously under the auspices especially of John Scott, Viscount Encombe, 2nd Earl Eldon (1805–1854, New College 1824–8). Pierce Egan goes on to provide something of a template for what, in answer to his call outlined above, was becoming a growth in the practice of the sport. His 1832 book *Pierce Egan's Book of Sports*—described by his *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* biographer as ‘a comprehensive if somewhat chaotic collection of material’—rehearses something of the historic background of archery, before providing details of contemporary ‘Archery Meetings, or Bow Meetings’. There is, perhaps self-evidently, a requirement for a suitable space to practise archery, with targets at a hundred yards being generally reckoned as the ideal. This might be why archery developed in Oxford particularly at such as New College and St John’s College with their more extensive grounds, with Worcester and Trinity, similarly well-endowed with gardens, also developing the sport at various periods. Perhaps more curious though is that there is record of a challenge for an archery match being received by St John’s College from the less lavishly gardened Oriel College in 1838. Egan acknowledges the cost of archery: a bow (of yew) might be £1 5s or even up to double that, a dozen arrows (a yard long) £1, and a target upwards of £2 10s (all perhaps supplied by such as T. Randall of 22 High St, Oxford).⁴ A uniform was also a requirement: New College archers had to wear theirs to be allowed to shoot for prizes, unless they were clergy, or in mourning, and St John’s College archers had to wear the club waistcoat whenever they shot, or they were to be fined. Such uniform was generally green. New College archers wore a dark green coat, with the large club button, a light buff waistcoat with the small club button, a black hat and black neckcloth, white trousers, straps, and boots, and a white or black leather belt. The buttons featured a W representing the founder, made up of six arrows, encircled by a garter containing the founder’s motto.⁵

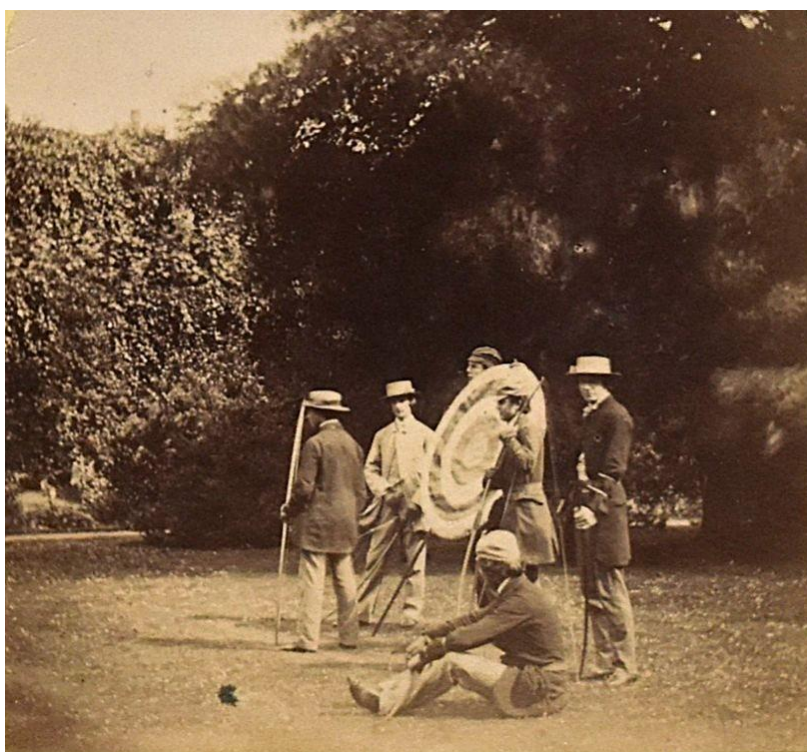


Archery Club buttons, as stipulated in the rules, and Lord Egerton’s silver quiver trophy, NCI 5008 and 3985
This and following image © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

⁴ *Oxford Journal* (7 August 1847), Randall advertised as a supplier of bows, arrows, and Ghent strings; also *Morning Post* (14 April 1827).

⁵ The consistency and elegance of such attire was clearly a feature of the sport as there were complaints about the ‘variety of inelegant dress now so often seen’, and the coats in particular might be ‘a cross between a railway wrapper and a dressing-gown’, in Horace A. Ford, *Archery: Its Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Buchanan, 1859), pp. 137–8.

Ideally, the distance shot at was 100 yards, but New College's matches were generally with the targets at a combination of 60 and 80 yards. Matches might well take some time, necessitating an interval or half time when such as ices might be provided.⁶ A. O. Prickard recalled in 1931 his youthful archery exploits when cider-cup and egg sandwiches were provided in the old 'Temple' which marked the St Edmund Hall end of the New College garden, confirming the former bowling green end of the garden as the location for the targets. 'The Mild Havannah' was also reported as part of the refreshment at New College in 1866.⁷ Indeed, the social element of archery matches became a growing and increasingly important aspect of such occasions. Lunch might well have been provided beforehand, and dinner afterwards, with the bigger events being graced by a ball in the evening.⁸



New College archers in the gardens of New College, Oxford, c. 1860, photographed by S. Thompson
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA LIB/J55/1

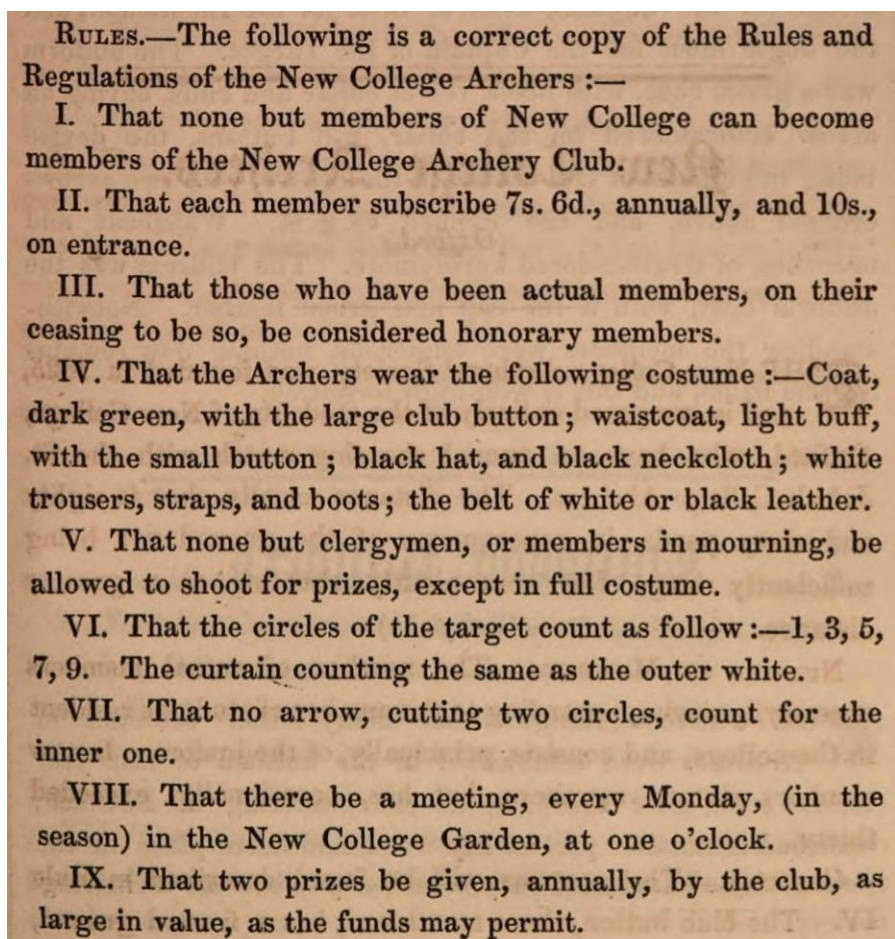
Archery was very much a Trinity Term sport, though there might have been initial meetings of the club later in Hilary Term when members would be elected and challenges might be issued, if the records of St John's College reflect general trends. There was the regular annual challenge with St John's College, but New College might have been involved in challenging other colleges, as St John's College was on occasion. However, the regular inter-collegiate contest in Oxford was between New College and St John's. Matches with other colleges (Worcester 1837, 1838, and 1840; Oriel 1838–40; with Trinity being challenged in 1867) do not feature extensively in the St John's minutes, so New College may well similarly not have shot much if at all against other colleges, nor

⁶ Ely Hargrove, *Anecdotes of Archery, from the Earliest Ages to the Year 1791 . . . The Whole Carefully Revised, Brought Down to the Present Time by Alfred E. Hargrove* (York: Hargrove's Library, 1845), p. 181; Dennis Brailsford, 'Egan, Peirce (1772–1849)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/8577>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026); Pierce Egan, *Pierce Egan's Book of Sports, and Mirror of Life* (London: T. T. and J. Tegg, 1832), pp. 41, 243; SJAC UGS.II.A.4; SJAC UGS.II.B.1a.

⁷ SJCA UGS.II.A.4; NCA CP18/5008. The cider cup featured in at least 1855: *Oxford Chronicle and Berks and Bucks Gazette* (23 June 1855), 3.

⁸ NCA JCR/B1 is a volume of JCR accounts including payments for waiters, cigars, and more generally for Archery dinners in such as 1855, 1859, and 1865–8.

do any other inter-collegiate matches appear in any newspaper reports.⁹ The newspapers do record a lament in October 1874 that there was not an archery club at the university level. This initiative came from New College, with the published letter having been penned by John Hamerton Crump (c. 1854–1887, New College 1872–6). He shot in the matches against St John's in 1872 and 1874, and in his letter he affirms the point about the lack of a hundred yard range limiting the university's ability to produce good archers.¹⁰



New College Archery Club rules
Ely Hargrove, *Anecdotes of Archery* (1845), p. 181 [detail]

Archery club meetings at New College would have comprised several different aspects. Firstly, there would have been practice sessions, with New College's regular weekly day for this being a Monday. Secondly, there were a number of internal club contests which members of the college could shoot for. New College's rules stated that there were to be two financial prizes, of as much as funds might permit each year, and also a silver star, given by Lord Stuart, a silver quiver, given by Lord Egerton,¹¹ and a gold star, given by Earl Eldon when still Viscount Encombe. Besides these internal prizes, there was thirdly the external matches, principally the annual one with St John's College. This was initiated by a challenge from the previously losing college to the other. As a result, a date would be fixed. Such a challenge is first recorded in 1838 when St John's sent one to New College; this challenge was spurned. It was not until 1840 that a challenge, sent

⁹ SJAC UGS.II.B.1a-b; UGS.A.II.4; a drawing at Worcester of what is now the Nuffield Lawn includes an archery target in place (*ex info* the archivist Emma Goodrum).

¹⁰ *The Field* (17 October 1874), 415.

¹¹ Lord Stuart's silver star was reported as being shot for on 18 and 20 May 1874, and Lord Egerton's silver quiver on 13 May 1873 and 11 May 1874: *The Field* (13 June 1874), 575; *ibid.* (17 May 1873), 470; *ibid.* (16 May 1874), 488.

from New College to St John's, was accepted. At this date this was essentially for a two leg or two match event with a contest taking place at each college each year from 1840 to 1844. Initially, St John's College was in the ascendancy, defeating pretty well all comers, including New College, in the late 1830s and the early 1840s. New College won for the first time at New College on 24 May 1842 by 140 points. Honours were more evenly shared thereafter. St John's reported that they were 'devilishly well licked' at New College on 16 June 1843, but neither college dominated for any period. The matches were generally for six archers on each side, with targets being shot at 80 yards and 60 yards, with five dozen arrows at each. After the gap in the St John's records from 1845, the matches are just one a year from 1855 when records survive again; so the venue now alternated each year. No challenge was issued by St John's in 1860 as they felt they had not enough members, though the minutes noted that it was not their intention to discontinue these matches altogether and that they hoped to contend again the following year. However, it is not until 1865 that there is a record of a match between the two colleges again. Thence matches continued annually until 1874. In 1875 a date could not be agreed between the two colleges, which happened again in 1876. In fact, 1874 was the last recorded annual match between the two colleges, though the minutes of St John's record the intention to arrange a match with New College in 1879 and 1880. No match occurred then, albeit a date was fixed in 1880 of 13 May but it was 'put off New College being unable to collect a team'. That seems to have been the denouement of the New College Archery Club as no more challenges, or even the intention to challenge New College, are recorded by St John's, though the St John's club continued to prosper.¹²

St John's prospered because the college archery clubs, as well as practising, holding internal events, and engaging in matches against other colleges, also participated in matches against other archery clubs outside the university. Albeit not a frequent occurrence, this had always been the case, with St John's having received a challenge from the Cherwell Archery Club in 1838, though no vacant day could then be found for a match. These external matches became more prevalent at St John's from 1875 when the North Berkshire (also known as the Abingdon) Archery Club was first competed against. Meantime, New College had also ventured outside the university. As reported in *The Field* of 7 June 1873: 'At last, after an interval of forty years, New College has had the audacity to challenge a non-Varsity archery society'. It was noted then that New College had competed against the Bowmen of the Isis in 1833. In 1873 the opposition was the Deddington Archery Society.¹³ The match was shot on Merton College's Cricket Ground (subsequently New College's from 1891) at 80 and 60 yards, with eight archers a side. New College was well beaten, by 1,630 points to 1,188. Perhaps most interestingly, half the Deddington team was female.¹⁴

In fact archery at this time, apart from in such as the Oxford colleges, was very much a sport for both men and women, as enunciated in Pierce Egan's 1832 discourse. Women's bows may not have had the same draw-weight (generally 24–34 pounds as opposed to at least 54 pounds for men), and they may not have shot at the same distance (often 50 and 60 yards as opposed to 60 and 80 yards for men), but they otherwise shot in the same contests in the same teams on the same grounds, and some of the best archers in the land were female.¹⁵ The young Queen Victoria is even featured in archer's attire as the frontispiece to George Agar Hansard's *The Book of Archery* (1840). Part of the demise of the New College Archery Club after 1874 may even be down to their trouncing by 'the fair Deddingtonians' in both 1873 and 1874. St John's also suffered a 'crushing defeat' more than once at the hands of the largely female teams from Abingdon, Cheltenham, Wychwood Forest, and Wimbledon Archery Clubs.¹⁶

¹² SJCA UGS.II.B.1a–c and UGS.II.A.1–4; *Oxford Chronicle and Bucks and Berks Gazette* (23 June 1855), 3.

¹³ *Bell's Life in London* (24 May 1873), 5 which noted that this upcoming match featured New College's archers 'of whose toxophilite doings not much had been heard of late years'.

¹⁴ SJCA UGS.II.B.1b.

¹⁵ Nationally, Miss Lawton had to be handicapped in 1855 as she was otherwise winning all the prizes: *The Field* (12 May 1855), 308.

¹⁶ Egan, *Pierce Egan's Book of Sports*, p. 41; George Agar Hansard, *The Book of Archery* (London: Longman, 1840), frontispiece; *The Field* (7 June 1873), 560, and (13 June 1874), 575; SJCA UGS.II.A.2,5.



Queen Victoria dressed as an archer
George Agar Hansard, *The Book of Archery* (1840), frontispiece

Membership of the New College Archery Club was restricted to members of the college, and it does seem to have been generally junior members of the college who participated. However, certainly at the early meetings, 'one may see a grave Doctor in Divinity trying his skill against the Bachelor of Arts, or the College Tutor putting off his solemnity, and contending in sport, with the commoner or the scholar'. The records are not always very helpful on who was actually representing New College in this sport, and one has to rely on the assiduousness of the St John's College minute takers in providing the names of the participants in the annual matches with New College, albeit this trait is only established from 1858. This does however mean that we know of over 50 individuals who represented New College at archery. Several participated three times in the annual match between the two colleges (F. R. S. Bowen 1867–9, A. J. C. Dowding and J. F. Gibson both 1869–71, and G. B. Wickham 1870–72). Hereford Brooke George perhaps surprisingly makes no mention in his semi-memoir *New College 1856–1906* (1906) of archery as an undergraduate activity. Instead he cites 'only the river or the cricket-field' as providing opportunities where one might form acquaintances outside New College. He seems to have forgotten his own experiences of participating in the archery matches against St John's in 1858 and 1859.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Morning Post* (14 April 1827); Hereford B. George, *New College 1856–1906* (London: Henry Frowde, 1906), p. 95; SJAC UGS.II.A.4.

He also seems to have forgotten another aspect of his representation of the college at archery, as there was another level for the practising of archery, which New College was very much represented at, and that was the national stage. This representation was principally by one who is not recorded as featuring in these inter-college or inter-club matches at all, yet who was very much involved on this wider, national archery stage: this was William Wetherell. Born in 1815, he became a fellow in 1837 and remained so until he was beneficed to Upper Heyford church in 1859 where he died in 1864. Meantime, he had represented New College at seemingly most of the Grand National Archery Meetings that occurred during his time at the college. These were large gatherings of archers from around the kingdom in often a different location each year. The first one had been held at York on the Knavesmire in 1844, for gentlemen only. This exclusion of the already major constituency of lady archers was regarded as a mistake which was rectified the next year in 1845 when ladies were invited as well, again to York; they were to be ever-present subsequently. Wetherell is recorded as attending the national meetings at Derby (1849), Leamington Spa (1851 and 1853), Shrewsbury (1855), Cheltenham (1856 and 1857), and Exeter (1859). He won no prizes but, where scores survive, he did not disgrace himself at all. He seems to have come from quite a family of archers as, at the 1857 Cheltenham meeting, he was joined by T. M. Wetherell of the Forest of Dean Archers, N. Wetherell of the Royal Toxophilite Society, and, in the Ladies section, by Mrs T. M. Wetherell, also of the Forest of Dean. Nor was Wetherell always the sole New College representative even, with E. F. Trotman and J. L. Randall being at the 1851 Leamington Spa meeting, and P. R. Egerton at the 1857 Cheltenham one with him. By the 1860 Bath meeting, Wetherell had left New College, which was there represented by H. Rumsey, and also Hereford B. George.¹⁸ Attendance seems to have been by invitation rather than by any selection or qualification process, but there seems to have been no other Oxford, or even Oxbridge, representation at these meetings. St John's College, Oxford was invited more than once but did not attend, so New College was very much flying the flag for university archery on this national stage.¹⁹

This may well also chime with another point in Crump's 1874 letter, cited above, that the lack of a university archery society at Oxford was restricting the wider youthful development of the sport as there was so little university representation at these national meetings. Crump also notes that the sport was then only flourishing at New College, St John's, and Trinity, with Magdalen the only other college possessing any sort of facility for the sport. Although he does not own it, flourishing seems to have been too optimistic a term for the state of the sport at New College. Crump's letter is almost the last indication of the sport being active at all at New College, to the extent that a one-time afficianado, A. O. Prickard, cites in his 1906 college history: 'Archery, now a lost art, which was in great vogue here until the seventies'.²⁰

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¹⁸ As an idea of the scale of these national meetings, at the Bath one, Rumsey and George were amongst 112 gentlemen archers and 99 lady archers; the gentlemen shot at 100, then 80, then 60 yards, and the ladies at 60, then 50 yards: *The Bath Express* (7 July 1860).

¹⁹ NCA ADM/Z1 (Sewell's Register), p. 289. A summary of the first nine years of these national meetings was printed in *The Field* (7 May 1853), 19–20. New College was the only Oxbridge archery society mentioned in the potential lineup for the 1853 National Meeting at Leamington Spa: *The Field* (21 May 1853), 17.

²⁰ The Oxford University Company of Archers was finally to be established in the 1940s: Oxford University Company of Archers, 'Archery at Oxford: A Brief History': <www.oucofa.com/a-brief-history-of-archery-in-oxford> (Accessed: 31 January 2026); *The Field* (17 October 1874), 415; A. O. Prickard, *New College Oxford* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), p. 42.

APPENDIX 1:

NEW COLLEGE ARCHERS, RECORDED IN INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL CONTESTS OR OTHERWISE ACTIVE

Addie, A.	St John's match 1872; Deddington match 1873, 1874 ('Oddie' in 1874)
Allen, J. B.	St John's match 1867, 1868
Awdry, H.	Deddington match 1873, 1874; St John's match 1873, 1874
	New College Mr Egerton's Challenge Silver Quiver winner 1874
Babington, J. A.	St John's match 1866, 1867
Bowen, F. R. S.	St John's match 1867, 1868, 1869; New College Grand Archer 1869
Brackenbury, M. J. F.	St John's match 1869, 1870
Buckley, E. F.	St John's match 1872; Deddington match 1873, 1874
Bullock, T. L.	St John's match 1868; elected New College president 1868
Carslake, J. B.	St John's match 1866, 1867
Cripps, H. L.	St John's match 1866, 1867
Crump, J. H.	St John's match 1872, 1873, 1874; Deddington match 1873, 1874;
	New College Lord Stuart Silver Challenge Star winner 1872, 1873
Dickens, P. D.	St John's match 1858, 1859
Dowding, A. J. C.	St John's match 1869, 1870, 1871
Egerton, P. R.	St John's match 1857; National Meeting 1857
Fletcher, K. R.	St John's match 1872; Deddington match 1873
George, H. B.	St John's match 1858, 1859; National Meeting 1860
Gibson, J. F.	St John's match 1869, 1870, 1871
Gilbertson, R. D.	St John's match 1873
Godby, C. V.	St John's match 1868
Green, F. T.	Deddington match 1873, 1874; St John's match 1873, 1874
Guillemard, W. G.	St John's match 1869, 1870
Guinness, C. H. C.	St John's match 1872, 1873
Harrison, J.B.	St John's match 1858
Hearn, T. J.	Hargrove archery anecdotes correspondent 1845
Hill, A. D.	St John's match 1869, 1871
Hoare, H. S.	St John's match 1871, 1872
Hughes, T. B.	Deddington match 1873; St John's match 1873, 1874
Humphrys, W.	St John's match 1870
Irvine, A. C. Q. H.	St John's match 1873
Lawford, L. E.	St John's match 1873, 1874; Deddington match 1874
Mayo, C.	St John's match 1859
Micholls, E. M.	Deddington match 1873, 1874; St John's match 1874;
	New College Lord Stuart Silver Challenge Star winner 1874
Moberly, J. C.	St John's match 1868
Morris, M. C. F.	St John's match 1866, 1867
Morshead, F.	St John's match 1859
Moseley, H. J.	St John's match 1868
Pilkington, C. H.	St John's match 1858
Randall, J. L.	National Meeting 1851
Robin, A. H.	St John's match 1872
Rumsey, H. L.	St John's match 1858, 1859; National Meeting 1860
Scrimgeour, W.	St John's match 1874; Deddington match 1874
Seymour, H. H. C.	St John's match 1866
Tremenheere, S. G.	St John's match 1871
Trotman, E. F.	National Meeting 1851
Tylecote, H. G.	St John's match 1874
Wade, A. F. S.	St John's match 1859
Wetherell, W.	National Meeting 1849, 1851, 1853, 1855, 1856, 1857, 1859
Wickham, G. B.	St John's match 1870, 1871, 1872
White, J. E.	owned archery buttons 1850–54
Worthy, E. A.	St John's match 1866; elected New College president 1866
Young, Sir C. L.	St John's match 1858

APPENDIX 2: NEW COLLEGE ARCHERY CLUB MATCHES 1833–1874

Date	Location	Opponents	Won By	Scores	Per team	Source
1833	?	Bowmen of Isis	?	?		<i>The Field</i>
1840 Jun 27	NC	SJCAC	SJC	By 10 & 15		SJC Archive
1840 Jun 30	SJC	SJCAC	SJC	By 94		SJC Archive
1841 Jun 8	SJC	SJCAC	SJC	802–868		SJC Archive
1841 Jun 14	NC	SJCAC	SJC	By 103	6	SJC Archive
1842 May 24	NC	SJCAC	NC	By 140		SJC Archive
1842 May 30	SJC	SJCAC	SJC	492–632		SJC Archive
1843 Jun 16	NC	SJCAC	NC	By 44	8	SJC Archive
1843 Jun 20	SJC	SJCAC	NC	By 6		SJC Archive
1844 Jun 14	NC	SJCAC	SJC	278–528	6	SJC Archive
1844 Jun 17	SJC	SJCAC	SJC	640–1100	6	SJC Archive
1855 Jun 16	NC	SJCAC	NC	close		<i>Oxford Chronicle</i>
1857 Jun 18	[NC]	SJCAC	NC	By 250	6	<i>The Field</i>
1858 Jun 8	SJC	SJCAC	SJC	By 139	6	SJC Archive
1859 Jun 27	NC	SJCAC	NC	?		SJC Archive
1865 Jun 14	SJC	SJCAC	NC	631–535	6	SJC Archive
1866 Jun 1	NC	SJCAC	SJC	430–552	6	SJC Archive
1867 Jun 15	SJC	SJCAC	NC	1048–768	6	SJC Archive
1868 Jun 10	NC	SJCAC	SJC	770–818	6	SJC Archive
1869 May 29	SJC	SJCAC	NC	1460–1400	6	SJC Archive
1870 Jun 8	NC	SJCAC	NC	1229–1016	6	SJC Archive
1871 Jun 7	SJC	SJCAC	SJC	899–964	6	SJC Archive
1872 Jun 6	SJC	SJCAC	NC	1606–1540	8	SJC Archive
1873 Jun	Merton	Deddington AC	DAC	1630–1188	8	<i>The Field</i>
1873 Jun 5	SJC	SJCAC	NC	By 364	8	<i>The Field</i>
1874 May	?	Deddington AC	DAC	?	8	<i>The Field</i>
1874 Jun 6	?	SJCAC	NC	2178–1504	8	SJC Archive