



# Father and Son

At the end of the '70s, I enjoyed my own three happy years as an undergraduate. I still look back fondly on my Oxford years and, like many alumni, reminisce about an experience which seems somehow timeless. And now, I'm thrilled that my own Son has gone up. I hope he'll have the same rewarding time at Oxford; but I'm beginning to realise that, behind the same buildings and around the same roads, while much about my Oxford remains, many things have changed. Sometimes for better, sometimes for worse it's clear, as I share my Son's experiences, that Oxford Today is not quite my Oxford of Yesterday ...

by  
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Today and Yesterday

01 October 2010

It was a strange first day of term. There I was, back in Oxford, only at the other end of town. There was my surname on a staircase - only with a different initial. And there was a College Porter, handing over a set of keys - but to my son, and not to me.

For this was his first day at Oxford. So much has changed in the 30-odd years since I went up. But so much remains the same ...

The basics of a room, for instance, have hardly altered. That old quartet of bed, desk, wardrobe and sink in the corner ('And you'll be using that for more than washing...'). But the location of an internet socket now dictates whether you can move the desk.

Times have moved on. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that everything from college access to battels now seem to be run on magnetic swipe cards. To be honest, the plastic coins used as college 'money' in my day were ugly and cumbersome. But at least you could use them as poker chips ...

Son takes the central heating for granted. Shame; I brought a pocket full of paperclips, to show him how to make toast on the grill of a three-bar electric fire.

And - there's a fridge. A fridge in your room! The windowsill was my rather inefficient fridge, with dozens of milk cartons perched on college sills around Oxford, and entire carrier bags of dairy produce hanging precariously outside windows. Generations of graduates still drink black coffee to this day, not out of continental sophistication, but because poor refrigeration forced us to develop the taste. Son, leave a power socket empty for that kettle; you'll use it more than you can imagine. But forget about that thick, grey book with some sort of University rules and regulations ...

We shook hands clumsily, and said our farewells. And instead of heading back down the staircase, I just wished it could have been me once again, turning round to that empty room, with little idea of the life ahead ...

The end of books?

01 November 2010

There's a bookshelf in the corner of Son's room. It houses a selection of mugs, glasses, and paraphernalia the whereabouts of which may be of interest to some Oxford drinking establishments. The thing it has very few of is ... books. His laptop seems able to provide all the reading and research he requires. And his textbooks were purchased online from Amazon. (Who now, by combining my own purchases with those for Son, have a bizarre notion of my reading habits ...)

In my day, Oxford probably had more bookshops than Hay-on-Wye. Of course Blackwell's was the bibliophilic focus, with its easily-obtainable personal accounts the ruin of many student grants. But I remember on the Broad a paperback bookshop on one corner of the Turl - imagine that, Son, an entire bookshop devoted solely to paperbacks - and Parkers bookshop on the other.

Even more impressive were the secondhand bookshops. I remember the lovely Thornton's bookshop opposite Balliol, a warren of irregular floors and rooms, musty with the smell of old paper. Its entrance featured those Greek texts in dark-green dustjackets; only in Oxford could that have been considered an enticing front-of-house display.

This was recycling at its best, the texts required for Schools going back year after year, sold by graduates who would never read them again, to undergraduates who wanted to buy them as cheaply as they could.

Visiting Son for lunch, I thought I'd spend an afternoon browsing for secondhand books. But sadly, the last of the proper secondhand bookshops - Waterfield's, at the Magdalen end of the High - went earlier this year. Only the ghost of Thornton's still exists, in the tiled entrance to The Buttery café. And when I searched for secondhand books, I ended up being directed to the back room of a gift shop in St Michael's Street.

While the Bodleian heads the Broad, I suppose books will always remain at the heart of Oxford (even if much of the stacks is being moved out to their new storage in Swindon). Son didn't have to swear that wonderful fusty oath I remember taking - all about not kindling therein any fire or flame - but join he did. Not primarily, however, for the books; but just because his 'Bod card' is used to prove student identity, much in the way I used to use my NUS card.

A bookless Oxford is unimaginable. Even in this paper-free world, where Son does his research on the internet, he still has to lug those four colossal textbooks back and forth 'twixt home and College. But clearly, at Oxford as in the publishing industry itself, traditional books and bookshops don't play the same roles today. In my day, books did furnish a room. Books were the first thing you used to assess the character of somebody, when you went back for coffee. Many were simply carried around, perhaps in the belief that knowledge could be gained by osmosis. Does any of that work with a Kindle?

## Phone

01 December 2010

Son's staircase is pretty traditional. Little seems to have changed from my day, except for a greater effort to exclude draughts by sealing open stone doorways with glass doors. A list of residents is still up on the wall, and the use of initials means that the switch to co-res is not immediately obvious. Only one difference really strikes me - there is no staircase payphone. In a mobile culture, it's clearly redundant. The staircase payphone was more of a curse than a convenience. Incoming calls were inevitably for someone whose room was as far as possible from the phone. For about the first fortnight of a year, the nearest resident to the phone would dutifully answer it, trudge up two floors to find the recipient out, trudge back to the phone to take a message, then trudge back up to the room again to pin the inevitable note on their door - 'Your mother rang'.

Of course it was your mum. Friends, tutors, your 'social network', everyone else used your pigeonhole. And how sorry we felt for the guy we passed on our way upstairs, hearing him telling his parents for the nth time that he was fine, work was fine, everything was fine. They clearly wouldn't be told about that Cuppers party, then ...

After a fortnight, the phone went largely unanswered; partly because the nearest resident refused to do so any more, and partly because everyone realised that calls were nearly always from parents, and could therefore be safely ignored.

Outgoing calls were few. It was widely believed that the success of many who worked at Isis, Cherwell or the Union was down to the simple fact that they had office telephones. How was anyone else supposed to talk to a politician, or set up a vac job, while standing on a staircase, passed by raucous colleagues, and shoving in fistfuls of change to forestall the inevitable, giveaway pips?

Today, the mobile presents its own dilemmas. Potentially, I can reach Son directly, at any time of my choosing, day or night. But I think back to the very few occasions between 0th and 9th week, on which I would actually have wanted my parents to reach me directly. And my parents were blissfully ignorant; I know what I might be interrupting.

On the other side of the coin, it is perfectly obvious when Son is not answering my call. No longer is a phone ringing in a lonely corner of a staircase. It is ringing in his pocket. Nor can he blame someone for not taking a message; voicemail is ruthlessly efficient. He just doesn't want to talk to his Dad.

As an alumnus, I imagine how my student life might have been improved given a phone. As a parent, it seems no better now that my Son has one of his own.

A formal invitation

03 January 2011

In my day as an undergrad, Formal Hall was, frankly, a bit of a pain. It was later than first Hall, and after what seemed like a long and hungry day, the last thing I wanted was to wait longer than I had to for supper. It usually involved queuing outside Hall, while the tables were relaid, which was a pretty cold affair because no-one wanted to be taking a coat into Hall with them.

And then, of course, there was the whole business of gowns. If you had rooms in, or close to college, then you were almost certain to have your essay crisis interrupted by someone asking to borrow a gown. All that dressing up - and that ridiculous Latin Grace...

Formal Hall seemed so long and slow. It was awkward when other undergrads had invited their parents or their dates; you didn't know whether you were supposed to acknowledge them, or not. Parents sat awkwardly on the benches, talked blandly about family members you would never know, and meant you really couldn't have that discussion about what happened in the bar last night. All sentiments which Son appears now to share.

Nevertheless, I virtually invite myself to come up for Formal Hall with Son as soon as possible. It's a piece of College life and ritual which you can still share as an outsider. And suddenly, everything about it seems to have changed.

The first thing I notice as a Father is how early Formal Hall now seems. 7pm? I've hardly had a pre-prandial whisky at that hour! But I'm standing there in the queue, bursting with pride at Son in his gown, clutching the bottle of good wine that I have brought, and feeling as if I've come back home.

As a Father, Formal Hall has suddenly become a beautiful thing. The candles, casting golden light against the panelling - not something I appreciated aged 19. The Latin grace, a lovely remnant of the past. The figures at High Table - isn't that the chap who was on Newsnight last week? (Son, of course, like most undergrads, does not watch Newsnight...)

I know all the rules, when to stand, when to hush, especially what not to say. Whether or not my old sconcing rules still hold, I know better than to talk about politics or religion. But given that Son, like me, is understandably unwilling to talk about himself on a table of strangers, that leaves relatively little to say. No wonder guest parents retreat into conversational banalities.

The Formal Hall which once seemed an impossibly protracted affair now seems to be conducted with unseemly haste. The undergrads almost race away from the tables at the end, heels hammering on the wooden floor. Son has some work to do, Father has a train to catch. For Son, it's probably as tedious as it was for me at the time; but as Father, bliss was it in that Hall.

Gourmet Oxford  
01 February 2011

When the Guardian reviewed the restaurant in the newly redesigned Ashmolean, John Lanchester described Oxford as 'one of those prosperous cities that is mysteriously short on good places to eat.' Well, all I can say is, he should have tried it 30-odd years ago.

Taking Son out for lunch, I feel spoilt for choice. George Street alone now has around 20 eating places. In my day, there was one, yes one restaurant on George Street, and that was a Golden Egg (for those who remember such things). It was on the site of what's now the Gourmet Burger Kitchen - although believe me, there was nothing gourmet about a Golden Egg!

The one truly sophisticated restaurant in my day was called the Restaurant Elizabeth, situated on a first floor opposite Christ Church. To me, it was just a place of legend, believed to serve very grand, Cordon Bleu cooking and supposedly horrifyingly expensive. It's now a Chinese restaurant, although its name seems to survive online, presumably to lure unwary tourists.

I remember when Browns opened, and was literally half the size; 50% of the current frontage, towards Little Clarendon Street, was a hardware shop, the contents of whose windows became well known to students who queued along the street to get in. Their menu in those days revolved around three key items, all priced for students' pockets - pasta, pies, and rather posh hot sandwiches (I remember the Reuben, with pastrami and sauerkraut on rye bread). Oh, and I remember The Old Bank when, under the auspices of Barclays, it was indeed just an old bank...

Given limited finances, eating out as students usually only fell into one of two categories. The first was the dinner date; a long-gone bistro on Little Clarendon Street was one of the most romantic and affordable venues then. It's comforting to see some of the places which opened in my day still popular with today's students. Maxwell's, for instance; when it opened, good, proper burgers were rare, and Maxwell's was a cut above the Wimpy on the Cornmarket. Maxwell's seems as popular with Son and friends as it was in Dad's day.

The second was the club or team dinner, but this seems to have suffered because of some notorious student behavior. According to Son, whether it's badminton or Bullingdon, there are now extraordinary subterfuges which have to be gone through in order to book a large restaurant table for a 'club'. In my day, those large dinners were the financial bedrock for many of the ethnic restaurants up the Cowley Road. And the only penalty for those a bit too noisy was that they received a curry several notches hotter than the one they had ordered...

But the grand traditions survive. There is still lunch at The Randolph, for those really special occasions. It used to be the most formal of venues; it is still a five-star hotel, although with the rather cheesy tourist addition of a Morse Bar. As a student, it was frighteningly expensive. Now, as Father, it seems... frighteningly expensive.

Party time

01 March 2011

In one of my Son's increasingly infrequent communications, I discovered that he was going to a birthday party. Good lad, I thought. Was this perhaps one of those occasions when a room had been rented in College, with an adjoining kitchen area for the drinks and nibbles? Or perhaps it was a staircase party with scarves over the bedside lamps for a bit of atmosphere, all doors open along the corridor, and someone's home stereo drowned out by animated conversation...

No. It seems that today's student birthday party takes place in... a nightclub.

I'm not sure nightclubs even existed in Oxford in my day. There certainly seemed no reason to find one. A college room, some friends bringing drink, a lashed-up hi-fi...what more could you want?

Son explains that, at the right time on the right days, drinks are now actually cheaper in Oxford nightclubs than buying them elsewhere. You can get cocktails, and decent chilled beers. The sound systems are superior, and the DJs professional and skilled. There are doormen and security in case of any trouble. And nobody gets their living quarters trashed.

Well, it's a far cry from the Oxford parties I remember. Of course every party was Bring A Bottle, (PBAB in the corner of the invitation), which made them relatively cheap. The only bottle not to bring was Chilean wine, resolutely brought to parties as a political gesture by OUCA members, and resolutely boycotted as a political gesture by everyone else. Given the alcoholic desperation of party-going students, this boycott was even more impressive than the other two student boycotts of the day: Barclays Bank accounts and South African fruit, both of which were relatively easy to avoid. To see an untouched bottle at the end of a party was a remarkable thing.

There were certainly very few cocktails available (although vodka and lime juice seemed to be popular with the women); and as far as beer was concerned, there was something called a Party Seven, basically a gigantic 7-pint can. It was impossible to chill, and had to be opened with a can-opener, thereby guaranteeing a spray akin to a Formula One champagne celebration. This enormous can had then to be hoisted and poured from, ensuring further spillage, and a resulting polystyrene cup full of a warm froth distantly related to beer.

All of which did, it's true, damage ones living quarters. Wet carpets, cigarette burns (yes, we smoked indoors in those days, children...), shredded polystyrene cups (why did we pick them to bits?) and damage to ceiling tiles caused by a dance called pogoing. Someone was usually sick. Of course, if you were in someone else's college, you could simply leave the devastation behind you, but I do wonder now whether the pleasure of an Oxford social life really outweighed someone waking up to a room like a wheelie bin.

Thinking about it, perhaps Son and his friends have got it right after all...

Gaudy

01 April 2011

I recently went back up for my first ever Gaudy - 30, actually 35, years on and all that. I was revisiting my own College for the first time in an official capacity, instead of merely visiting Son's as a bit of an outsider, or walking around mine feeling a bit like a tourist.

Part of me felt way, way back in my yesterdays again, but part felt an acknowledged member of Oxford today, properly entitled to breeze around the quads. To confirm this, I was given an electronic swipecard to get in and out of College. Not just a tourist, then; even if a swipecard seems a poor contemporary replacement for the threatening glare I remember from a last-century porter.

It certainly felt nostalgic staying in basic student accommodation again, just outside the College itself. Son has been rather fortunate when it comes to rooms - this year, he has even managed a set - but this was closer to what I remembered. Worryingly, it had changed little; by which I mean elements like decoration and furnishings seemed not to have changed at all. The floor was so uneven it felt as if I was drunk even before the evening began. And you could tell it was normally a student room because, when I opened the window to get some fresh air, I found a pint glass on the ledge.

A Gaudy is a strange thing. The names on the seating plan echo half-remembered down the years from old staircases, JCR committees and College noticeboards. The faces are something else; I could recognise a face, virtually unchanged, and still not know their name or their subject, but like the paintings on the walls, it just seemed fundamentally right to see that face in Hall once again.

What was really quite shocking, however, and emphasised by our homogenous black tie, was how similar we all were. Here was an entire hall full of identically aged people; some with less hair, some with more girth, but fundamentally the same. And it really struck me; how many big events does one attend where everyone is exactly the same age?

And then it went deeper. Where everyone is male? (Mine was the last year at my College to admit only men.) And where everyone is white?

Of course this may be more of a comment upon those who choose to attend reunions, rather than upon my Oxford of yesterday. Foreign students are probably less likely to return. And when a speech began with "Ladies and gentlemen...", my old tutor interjected with "What ladies?", which took the sting out of that one. But no-one could deny that we were all the same age. In no other circumstances do I find myself today part of such a large group of identically aged, white, men - and it felt very strange indeed.

The next morning, I recovered with a coffee in the corner of a quad, beside a group of undergrads chatting in the sun. Three guys, one of them black, and a girl. It looked like an image from the cover of a prospectus, although the conversation - about drinking so much someone had been sick in the Lodge - was definitely not a promotional set-up. This is the Oxford which Son is now experiencing, a generation on from the chaps I ate with the night

before. Whether they will all return in 35 years' time to share notes on their lives only time will tell. But if Son's generation do continue the tradition of the Gaudy, their reflection of Oxford could - and perhaps should - be very different to mine.

May morning  
02 May 2011

Ah, May morning in Oxford. The traditional celebrations when rosy-fingered dawn appeared, the choir in Magdalen tower, the dancing, the festivities, the champagne. I remember them well. Well, I remember people talking about them ...

There used to be wonderful stories about the traditions of May morning. Supposedly, the girls in the women's colleges went to sleep with strings tied around their toes and hanging out of their windows, so that their boyfriends could tug them to wake them up on their way to the celebrations.

And we had the added prospect of a celebration on the river itself. We were able to book punts, and float around beneath Magdalen Bridge swilling champagne, a ritual which was eventually halted when the logjam of punts led to damage.

(Ironically, of course, it was the banning of punts on May morning which left the water clear for idiots to jump off Magdalen Bridge, and cause a great deal more damage to themselves, something I can assure you no-one was stupid enough to do in my day.)

But I have to confess; I never actually woke up for a May morning myself. I mean, Morris dancers or another four hours' sleep - it's no contest really, is it? I wouldn't cross the road to watch Morris dancers - even a very narrow road like, say, Logic Lane. So for three years, I'm afraid sleep won out. And listening to the stories later that day ("Wow, Morris dancers actually in the High...?") I can't say that I felt I had really missed anything.

However, it seems that now, students like Son don't have to worry about waking up, because they don't go to bed in the first place. It just goes to show; in my day, an "all-nighter" referred to an essay crisis, and not to a clubbing event...

According to Son, what happens now is that on the evening of 30 April, everyone goes off to a club. I have explained in previous posts that, in my day, there were no such things as clubs, except for ones like the Piers Gaveston, which don't count. Anyway, "clubs" in Oxford usually charge about £5 for admission, but on 30 April, this goes up to £15 or so. In addition, some clubs insist on black tie, which may begin to sound more like the Piers Gaveston, but in fact is just a gimmick to justify charging £15 and making it seem more like a special event, rather than the same sweaty disco in the same sweaty venue.

The clubs supposedly offer an "all-nighter", ie the opportunity to party until dawn. In fact, Son says, things usually start to peter out around 3am, at which point people drift back to someone's room (ideally, obviously, in Magdalen), where they will attempt to reconcile the contradictory ambitions of staying awake and continuing to drink.

Finally, the dawn arrives. Those who have followed the above pattern find themselves within Magdalen, but therefore behind the choir, whose loudspeakers point out towards the bridge. The choir is therefore inaudible.

Exhausted by their all-nighter, teetering between drunkenness and hangover, and now unable to leave Magdalen because of the crowds and police control outside, they simply... go to bed. It is, says Son, “a ritual of disappointment”.

For Father, attendance at May morning relied upon making the effort to get up. For Son, attendance relies upon the effort to stay awake. Apart from that fundamental difference, as with any tradition, the morning remains pretty much the same. And that goes, it seems, for the rewards as much as the activities.

Coffee

24 June 2011

“Do you want to come back for a coffee?” It used to be said that coffee oiled the social life in Oxford more than any other single drink.

The modern coffee culture has definitely arrived in Oxford. There’s the usual metropolitan clutch of Costas and Starbucks; a strange AMT wagon-type thing at the bottom of the Cornmarket; and an extraordinary place called The Missing Bean on the Turl, an “independently owned and run coffee specialist”, where I had one of the best coffees I have ever had anywhere. It’s a far cry from my undergraduate youth, when all that cafés offered was a glass jug of elderly Kenco gently stewing over a flame.

Amongst students in my day, there was no coffee that I can remember other than instant. Obviously there were gradations; powdered instant for the crass and/or poverty-stricken; granulated for the more sophisticated. It generally tasted dreadful, although none quite as vile as that of the chap opposite me, after an ill-fated attempt to heat up tinned ravioli in his kettle.

My tutor, clearly a connoisseur, favoured something called Blend 37, a supposedly “continental” blend of instant coffee. This immediately gained a sycophantic following among his students, because we believed there was something sophisticated about coffee - and we certainly couldn’t find it in a jar of Bird’s, or the dreaded Vendona.

Incredible to me, Son now has a cafetiere in his room, an item we had not even heard of. One of his friends has a percolator, and his own grinder. They buy beans and exotic varieties of fresh coffee from the Covered Market. He believes the only instant coffee that he’s seen is Gold Blend, but that’s seen as demonstrating a lack of imagination; in my day, it was seen as a sign of affluence, and of a palate rising above the commonplace of Maxwell House.

And *his* tutor has a Nespresso machine, which is raising the bar rather high for any students seeking to emulate him.

Only two aspects of the coffee culture seem to remain the same. College coffee is appalling. At breakfast, he gets large canteens of a coffee he describes with a lavatorial phrase; my own came out of large aluminium pots, seemed to contain considerable amounts of (cheaper) chicory, and were equally lavatorial. So no change there, then.

And black coffee is still popular. In my day, all coffee was black, because we had no fridges (see earlier posts). The only ways of whitening coffee were Marvel powdered milk (disgusting), or something called Coffeemate, another powder which left gloopy lumps in your drink. Son has a fridge in his room, but his friends still favour coffee black. At least today the choice is one driven by taste rather than pragmatism.

## Exams

12 July 2011

Another year comes to an end, marked by the usual clutch of Mods and Finals. The retention of sub fusc in a student vote a few years ago means that examinations certainly look the same as ever. But there do seem to be a few tweaks to the exam regulations between my day and Son's.

I notice, for example, that "good luck charms and items" are now specifically disallowed. Many was the Finals candidate in my time who had some small, fluffy toy sitting on their desk, which had accompanied them through preceding O-levels, A-levels, Oxbridge Entrance exams (yes, we had such things) and then Mods.

And we were allowed to celebrate outside Schools, with sprays of champagne like a Formula One victory raining on those who had finished. These have now been banned, because of the disruption they caused on the High. Son is not only restricted from gathering in a public thoroughfare within a mile of an exam, but is forbidden to carry any thing or substance which he might "throw, pour, spray or apply". According to Son, a supermarket bag being carried along the High at the crucial times of day is very likely to be searched (obviously this applies to those who look like students and not to elderly ladies returning from Tesco, but...) And even if your intention is to drink your champagne (rather than throw, pour, spray or apply it), it still won't be allowed outside Schools.

Yet ironically, given the contemporary control of liquids, these are the first Schools in which Son is allowed to take in a bottle of water. Now that you come to think about it, three hours in a hot room without a drink doesn't really sound like a system designed to reveal the best in students, more a form of medieval torture (although there are those who would say "medieval torture" is a good definition of Schools...) We used to hydrate ourselves with chewing gum, perhaps not ideal, and if the chewing might be an aid to concentration, the fragrance of 'Wrigley's Juicy Fruit' probably was not. Although one does have to ask whether bottles of water and three hours of confinement are a recipe for increased escorted lavatory visits?

The regulations specify "non-carbonated water in a clear spill-proof bottle". A spill-proof bottle means a sports cap, and is meant to stop accidental spillage spoiling a paper. However, according to Son, it is meant to stop "accidental" spillage spoiling a paper. What a difference parentheses can make...

Up and down  
11 August 2011

This time of year sees the usual flotilla of parents helping their offspring return home for the long vac, and then bringing them back up again a couple of months later. I was never on the receiving end of such assistance - I had to make my own way between home and Oxford, weighed down with bags - and perhaps that's why I am flabbergasted by the amount of stuff today's students seem to convey back and forth between College and home.

Theoretically, things have got smaller in the last 30 years or so. For instance, in my day, if you wanted a decent sound system in your room, that alone required a 12" square turntable, an amplifier, two loudspeakers the size of loaves, and about a cubic foot of vinyl LPs. Frankly, it challenged the College accommodation space, never mind the average car boot.

Today, Son can play his entire music collection from his breast pocket. At a stretch, he needs two speakers the size of chequebooks to plug into his laptop.

So I simply don't understand all this stuff. We were weighed down with books; his are stored electronically. We had to lug reams of paper; Son's work is on his laptop. If we wanted to sleep under a duvet, a radically modern idea, we had to bring our own to replace the College's sheets and blankets; he's now supplied with a duvet.

And when I was up, a lot of parents (including my own) didn't even have cars. Students struggled from the train station, laden with two holdalls and a backpack. Set of wheels? We didn't have wheels on our suitcases. It was one of the few times each year when I envied those at Worcester...

Fair enough, technology has brought in its own demands. Son needs a computer printer, for example. I didn't; when I needed to submit my thoughts on paper, I tended to use a pen.

And I now know all of those things which I never accepted from my own parents. Like the fact that folded clothes take up less space than those stuffed into a ball. Honestly, it's true...

But I can't help feeling that today's parents are more accommodating, more willing to make the journey up and down each term, more willing to risk death on the M40 by blocking the rear view with a back seat piled with stuff.

Or is that just because I'm now the driver, and not the driven?