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Student Life at Oxford

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Oxford is a city of sixty thousand inhabitants located on the banks of the Cherwell and the Isis (the upper Thames) sixty-three miles from London in a generally westerly and slightly northerly direction. It is surrounded by a natural amphitheater of gentle hills which contribute, along with sluggish streams, flooded meadows, and overcast skies, to provide it with a damp and somber climate from October to May of each year.

The origin of the town is lost in the antiquities of Anglo-Saxon times. Even the origin of the University is shrouded in uncertainty. It appears that the first gathering of masters and scholars, not attached to monastic establishments, took place in the twelfth century and that by the beginning of the thirteenth, Oxford ranked with the first universities of Europe and had as many as three thousand students in attendance.

Not until the establishment of the first collegiate

foundations, Merton, Balliol, and University, in the latter half of the thirteenth century, does the authentic history of the University begin. Of the twenty colleges in the University, three were established between the years 1260 and 1285. Five were established in the fourteenth century and eight in the fifteenth. Half of the colleges were established before 1516 and all but four were established before 1600. Thus both the appearance and traditions of the place justify it in being called "the last enchantment of the Middle Ages."

The collegiate foundation is the most distinctive physical feature of Oxford. The casual visitor, unfamiliar with the Oxford system, sees only a number of such foundations scattered at irregular intervals through the town. Eventually he is prompted to inquire: Where is the University? Then he learns that the University, as a physical institution is practically nonexistent. It has no campus. Its buildings—the Examination Schools, the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum, the laboratories—are few. The University is really an intangible affair, a governing body, a loose confederation of colleges establishing rules for the government of the University community and giving direction and uniformity to the instruction provided in the "Schools." These Schools, such as the School of Jurisprudence, the School of Modern History, the School of Modern Languages, and the School of Theology, provide the

nearest Oxford equivalent for our Colleges of Law, of Arts and Sciences, of Medicine, and of Commerce, but they are by no means identical.

The Oxford college, on the other hand, bears no resemblance to the American college. It is in no sense an educational subdivision of the University. With its own buildings and grounds, its own administrative organization, its own fellows and scholars and commoners, interested perhaps in every branch of human learning, it constitutes a separate, semi-autonomous community. Its quadrangular buildings of gray stone are usually built in some variation of the Gothic style. These college buildings contain a chapel, a library, a Master's lodge, a Senior and a Junior Common Room, a few small lecture rooms, a great dining hall, a kitchen, a buttery, and not least — in the opinion of many — a cellar, where the college's favorite vintages and brews are kept. By far the greater part of the college buildings is given over to undergraduate living quarters.

Barred windows and high walls, the latter surmounted with iron spikes or broken glass set in cement, protect the college enclosure, recalling the days when it was less important to keep undergraduates in than it was to keep thieves and marauders out. Usually there is a garden within the walled enclosure. Frequently it is landscaped and always it is set with flowers and shrubbery. Within the enclosure or at a distance, the college

has a playing ground for its various teams, and it keeps a barge on the river for its crews, since rowing is the principal sport.

In the congestion immediately following World War I, the undergraduate was fortunate who obtained a separate living room and bedroom for himself in college. More often two men were allowed three rooms, each having a bedroom and sharing a common living room. Not infrequently the college would be full and it would be necessary to take lodgings in the town.

The undergraduate's living room serves as living room, dining room, and study. Breakfast, lunch, and tea are served there at his order by the "scout" or college servant, and every item received from the kitchen, even to a piece of butter, is separately charged on his "battels" or account. The undergraduate supplies his own linens, dishes, and silver. Central heating is unknown, and the living room fireplace provides the only heat. Baths and toilets are often inconveniently distant, while bedrooms are furnished with pitcher and bowl and other assorted pieces of crockery which the modern generation of Americans has either never seen or has long since forgotten.

It may be helpful to an understanding of the Oxford mode of life to describe an undergraduate's typical day. He is awakened between seven and seven-thirty by the scout. He bathes and shaves—the latter is never omitted—and dresses

for the day. His clothes may not be pressed, and it is better form not to have them pressed too neatly, but his shoes are always shined. At eight o'clock on three days a week he attends the college chapel, or, if he has been excused from chapel, he signs the college register. About eight-thirty breakfast is served. This is usually a large and leisurely meal and there is much entertaining. Afterwards there is the daily paper or study until lectures begin.

Most lectures are given between ten and one, though in rare instances they begin at nine. A vacant hour may give an opportunity for morning coffee at eleven. Lectures are optional, but the attendance is surprisingly large. However, poor lecturers get short shrift and usually see their audiences completely disappear by the third day.

From one to two lunch is served. This is a light meal since it is to be followed by games from two to four. Because of the damp, enervating climate, most undergraduates participate in some form of exercise every day. At four there is a bath and the business of dressing again, and at four-thirty comes tea. Like breakfast this provides a social hour, and tea is seldom taken alone. After a light lunch and strenuous exercise, tea is needed, for dinner is still more than two hours away.

Tea over, the time until the dinner hour may be spent either in conversation, bridge, or study. At seven o'clock comes dinner in the Great Hall. As

the dinner gong is sounded, the undergraduates in academical gowns assemble outside the hall door. With almost clocklike precision the Provost and the fellows, also in their academical gowns, appear from the Senior Common Room and march into the hall to the high table at the farther end. They are followed by the undergraduates, who move to the respective tables to which they have been assigned and remain standing while a Latin prayer is read by one of the scholars of the college. Immediately after, all are seated and dinner is served.

The Englishman attacks his food with a great gusto and accordingly dinner is customarily a short feast. After dinner there may be coffee or liqueurs in someone's room, followed by conversation or bridge or perhaps study.

At nine-five the bell in Tom Tower at Christ Church sounds one hundred and one strokes and the gate of the college is closed. No undergraduate member of the college is permitted to go out after that hour. If he is already out, he need not return until midnight but he is automatically fined for the privilege. If he returns before ten o'clock the fine is a penny, between ten and eleven two pence, between eleven and twelve six pence. Failure to return to the college by midnight is a most serious offense. Two such offenses mean expulsion from the University. However, the secret is that Oxford is such a dull place after eleven

o'clock that no one would care to be out of college, and the rule works no hardship. Most of the undergraduates keep fairly regular hours, and by eleven o'clock the majority of them have retired to bleak bedrooms which have not been warm since the days of Henry the Eighth.

This is a typical day, and it will appear that serious work has scarcely been considered. That is not the fact, however. There is opportunity for study either after breakfast or after tea or after dinner, and except on rare occasions there will be a creditable number of hours of study every day. The effort will be carefully concealed. The Oxford undergraduate is essentially a serious creature, but he often keeps it disguised behind a frivolous exterior. Whatever the opportunities for study may be during the term, it should be remembered that the terms are short, not exceeding eight weeks, and that there are three terms a year, a total of twenty-four weeks in residence. Normally the vacations, six weeks at Christmas, six weeks at Easter, and four months in summer, offer considerable opportunity for such study as has been neglected during term time. Vacations may be, and often are, periods of uninterrupted study, while term time affords a combination of study and social life.

As already stated, attendance at lectures is entirely optional. No record of attendance is ever taken and some undergraduates never attend.

Certainly no one attends unless he is convinced that he is obtaining information more readily and more easily than in any other way. Economy of effort is the ultimate consideration. The lectures are purely formal. No preparation or participation is required of the student. The Socratic method of instruction is not in vogue. The lectures are carefully prepared, many times they are delivered from manuscript, and it is possible in most cases to take very full notes. Often they are the fruit of years of research. For example, W. S. Holdsworth's lectures on Legal History were so concise and so accurate that the equivalent information could not have been obtained in any other way without an extraordinary expenditure of time and effort. Needless to say, his lecture hall was always crowded.

Tutors, of course, endeavor to get their men to attend the better lectures, and the average student probably attends a total of ten or twelve hours per week.

The relation between tutor and undergraduate is the second feature of the Oxford method of education. The tutorial period consists of one or more hours each week spent at the home of the tutor either in the college to which he belongs or at his residence in the town. Many times two undergraduates share the same tutorial hour. The relation between tutor and undergraduate is quite informal. Usually they will be seated comfortably

before a cheerful grate fire during the tutorial hour, and the tutor's tobacco jar will be close to his elbow.

The relation of tutor and undergraduates seems to be the one feature of Oxford life which, more than any other, has attracted attention in this country. Like all other relations, its success depends upon the abilities of the parties to adapt themselves to it. It is not a panacea for all educational ills and it is successful only to the extent that it attracts men of unusual scholastic ability, who possess in addition an understanding of and sympathy for the problems of students.

In the main the Oxford tutors are men of that type. My experience at Oxford of course was limited to one tutor, but I was familiar with the reputations of most of the others. In rare cases they neglected their men, and some were quite frankly intolerant of those who showed little promise. While it appeared that their greatest interest and greatest helpfulness were reserved for the brilliant student, nevertheless anyone who showed a willingness to apply his ability to the best advantage received faithful cooperation. In addition they were thoroughly familiar with most of the students' problems and often anticipated them. And almost always they listened sympathetically to any individual scholastic problem and helped, if they could, in its solution.

Notwithstanding the undoubted merits of the

tutorial system, it has always seemed to me that the most distinctive feature, and at the same time the most dangerous and desirable feature, of the Oxford method of education is the almost unlimited opportunity for independent work and study given each undergraduate. Of course all reading is, in a sense, done under the general supervision of the tutor, but that supervision is always general and oftentimes very remote. Certainly it is not in any sense a restraint upon the way in which the undergraduate shall spend his time.

To an American who is accustomed to definite class periods, to definite assignments from day to day, and sometimes to definite periods for preparation of current assignments, with no thought of the ultimate goal to be attained, the Oxford system is chaos indeed. Often it takes him at least a full term to become accustomed to this new-found freedom. Then it suddenly dawns upon him that no one cares whether he works or not, that whether he succeeds or fails is his own business and no particular concern of the University. When this realization has had time to sink in, he suddenly puts his house in order, makes definite plans, and begins some conscientious work.

The merit of the system is that there is sufficient supervision, through the tutor, so that no student of ordinary ability need fail for want of it, while the able student may adapt the system exactly to his needs. No time need be wasted on subjects

with which he is familiar, and time may be apportioned between those subjects which are difficult and those which are easy. He may move as rapidly or as slowly as his needs require. There is no general average to which he is weighted down. He has it within his control to see that every hour of study is put to the best advantage. Above all, no one else has the power to waste his time.

This complete control which the undergraduate has over his time has the added advantage of giving him, if he is so inclined, ample opportunity for serious thought. It is an often uttered complaint of intelligent students in this country that they are so occupied with routine assignments from day to day that there is little opportunity to do any thinking not immediately related to the task at hand. No such complaint can be made at Oxford. There is practically no pressure from current assignments and there is very little of the stress and furor which seems so much a part of our university life. The opportunity for discussion and reflection is always at hand. The only limitation lies in the innate capacity of the undergraduate to take advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him.

Of course there are grave dangers in such a system. There are those who, without restraint or coercion, will fail. But isn't it better for them to fail, and know they have failed, than to get their little learning under watch and guard and imagine,

as they sometimes do, that they are educated men?

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that in the opinion of those who have studied there, Oxford is both a pleasant and a profitable place to study. My readers must readily admit the charm of Oxford, and will understand, I hope, how the recollections of this "last enchantment of the Middle Ages" linger on in the memories of those whom she has once gathered within her fold.

VIRGIL M. HANCHER