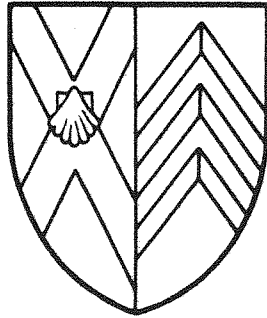


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POSTMASTER



1984

Most of the work I have undertaken on behalf of the JCR has to do with politics rather than Politics.

You may be forgiven for thinking that to a Mertonian Food (*Note: this subject is spelt with a capital letter!*), is of primary importance. This College is one of the very few remaining which provides no undergraduate cooking facilities. A request from the JCR for the College to rethink its position on this was turned down again in Michaelmas term. Most people were placated by the fact that every effort was made by Mr. Brothwood (our chef and envy of the University), to ensure that the food in Hall is interesting and of a consistently high quality - maybe too high for the sake of our figures - and pockets! Who hasn't heard (and groaned *again* at) the immortal line, "Oh! you come from *Merton* do you? Can I come to lunch next week?"!! Despite this, in 6th Week of Hilary term we held our first 'Brown Rice Week' and many Mertonians ate brown rice in Formal Hall along with millions of people in the Third World. We were exceedingly grateful to the chef for slipping in the odd bayleaf and onion! This effort raised about £320 for Save the Children Fund. Two other firsts come to mind. We had haggis on Burns Night, much to everyone's amusement and a few people's delight! We also had a guest night which was not confined to the gallery table, but included the whole Hall. It was a splendid occasion and a great success - even though *someone* forgot to provide coffee in the JCR afterwards. (No, no! - it *couldn't* have been the JCR President!!)

Undoubtedly, one of the most visible functions of the JCR Committee is to provide entertainment. The Bar, run by John Holland, continues to be the focal point of the College, despite the pull of the pool table in the JCR, and it has probably increased in popularity since the installation of the new jukebox. Intended to make one feel *inside* a Guinness glass, the Bar's original (if dark) decor is now famed throughout Oxford. From the end of Hilary Term, though, the Bar will never be the same again. Mr Ron Crawley has sadly retired as barman leaving a yard of ale as a permanent memento.

The most prestigious social event in College is the Christmas Ball. This year it had something of the flavour of a medieval fair, with clowns, fire-eaters, buskers, stiltwalkers, a magician, a Punch and Judy man and jugglers all wandering around the awning in Front Quad. Needless to say, it was a great success. Anna Stock, our Social Secretary, has been busy providing discos, bands in the Bar and other 'entz' since the beginning of the year, and despite the controversy over the Eights Week Dance, that will be going ahead on Saturday of 5th Week, Trinity Term, as usual.

The big 'Political' issue of Hilary Term has been student representation on Warden and Tutors' Committee. Merton is at the very opposite end of the representational scale to Colleges such as Corpus and Hertford who have direct junior member representation on most College committees, including Governing Body. Undoubtedly junior members have much to contribute. They can offer a different perspective on issues and because of some areas of specialist knowledge, they can help to avert wrong decisions. In addition, by involving undergraduates more in the running of the College it has been found that a more 'responsible' attitude is promoted. The move began with a motion proposed by David Cook, our OUSU rep., which asked the JCR Committee to look into ways of advancing the representation of the JCR. The Committee came up with a set of proposals asking for observer status on W & T for the

JCR President. There would have been a split agenda and reserved business dealing with individuals, for which the junior members would have been asked to leave. The existing rules of confidentiality would have been observed. We publicized these proposals widely and in the JCR motion approving them we achieved the largest JCR vote for at least 10 years, and probably more. David and I then took the proposals to Warden and Tutors'.

It is true that Committee members can ask to speak at W & T whenever they feel that an item is of particular relevance. Yet because it is an intimidating experience, and because junior members are never sure that they can make a useful contribution, they very rarely attend. This means that when they do they are unused to the procedure and may not actually help their case. However, our proposals were thrown out. The majority of the members of Warden and Tutors' took the attitude that if existing channels were used more fully, many of the specific complaints we made would be dealt with. In particular it was felt that there should be some means by which junior members could attend the Warden and Tutors' meetings for points of general interest, on which they may not want to speak, but on which they would like to hear the discussion and be available for questions. A committee comprising 5 senior members and 5 junior members met to discuss what could be done to improve the situation. Suggestions made by Dr. Phillips were approved and have now to be submitted to W & T next term. If approved and implemented in the spirit of most of those at the meeting, they will help to bring the JCR and MCR to a much more informed position. Naturally the Committee and many in the JCR are disappointed. The proposals we made initially were moderate and workable. Revamping the old system is a recognition that there are problems. I agree that 'revamping' can *almost* sort them out, and I hope it does. But why are people in Oxford so shy of change - even if the change is small and simply corrective?

Well, I'm sure I'll have put quite a number of people to sleep by now! Maybe I should finish on a note which may please many of the Old Mertonians. As you may know, 3 years ago it was agreed that Merton should have two approved scarves: the traditional magenta and white one, and a 'tasteful alternative' in which magenta and white became thin stripes in a predominantly navy wrap. Earlier this year the JCR decided to rule this innovation out of order - to Shepherd and Woodward's intense irritation. Henceforth Mertonians *in* their scarves will be as immediately identifiable as they always have been!

From the Suggestions Book

It seems a pity that in this intellectual institution candidates for office should find it necessary to resort to empty sensationalism to bolster up their claims to the votes of the JCR.

Women in Merton

This academic year has been in several ways something of a landmark in the history of women in Merton. Although it took 715 years from its foundation in 1264 to reach the decision to admit women in 1979, since then they have become increasingly numerous and prominent in College life. This year is the first year that there have been women in all four years, and the female population now numbers around 60. Although this is still a distinct minority it is one which is becoming greater with each year. It is true that as long as there is no full female Fellow there is nobody representing the women's interest on SCR Committees, but this will change after October 1984.

Women are represented in all academic disciplines in College, although in some more than others, but the traditionally male dominated sciences are becoming increasingly equal; this is especially true in the first year. We have made our mark in other spheres as well, for example rowing, where the women's first eight was the only one to sustain any semblance of College pride during Torpids. A women's dining society, "The Mermaids", has been formed, hoping to upstage the Myrmidons with their dress of 'strictly black fishnets'. But perhaps the most notable female achievement this year has been the election of the first woman JCR President, Ginny Mitchell.

Ginny, famous in College gossip columns as the 'Iron Maiden' and the 'Scarlet Woman', the latter on account of her passion for dazzlingly bright clothes, was elected at the end of Trinity Term 1983, after a closely fought contest. But it was not without some strong paternal opposition, at least at first. Ginny's father, a fellow Mertonian, was JCR President in 1957-8 and she admits that she has been asked if she is trying to follow in his footsteps. "If I am, it is subconscious on my part and completely against his will! First, he was shocked that women were being allowed into Merton. Second, he was horrified that his daughter was applying there. Third, he was stunned that she was let in! Imagine how appalled he was when he found that she was standing as JCR President, and how 'totally ill' he felt when she was elected! Fortunately, for the sake of family relations, he has now come to terms with it, and actually, I think he's secretly pleased!"

Ginny feels that her election was probably not the greatest landmark to date. That honour goes to Sue Paton, JCR

Treasurer, 1982-3, who was the first woman ever to sit on the JCR Committee. But in Trinity term of this year, 3 out of 7 of the Committee will be female, the President, the Social Secretary and the NUS Rep.

On her role as JCR President, Ginny believes that "in the majority of the tasks undertaken by the President, it makes very little difference whether you are a man or a woman. In the main it does not occur to me to treat problems from a woman's point of view. In common with the other female JCR Presidents of mixed colleges, in Jesus, Brasenose, St. Catherine's and University, I try not to show any preference to the 'better sex' unless the balance needs to be redressed". But despite being 'charmed' by anachronisms such as the fact that 'gentlemen are requested to return their books to the library' and acknowledging that the lack of a women's group in Merton reflects 'practically negligible' discrimination, Ginny does not feel that a female JCR President will have been important in clearing up some of the more irritating reminders of the College's previous single sex status. She has been responsible for the equipping of the women's toilet in St. Alban's, has pressed for the gentlemen's bathroom on Mob II staircase to be converted so that women can live there next year, and believes that few women were aware that Nurse Haddock was available in a counselling role before she sent round a circular informing them of this. Perhaps the issue on which Ginny has worked hardest is not specifically a women's issue at all, but one which affects all members of College, that of student representation on the College's governing bodies.

As JCR President, Ginny has made history in a few smaller ways. Early in October 1983, she was the first and only woman ever to be invited to a College Gaudy. "I sat in the centre of the hall in a gold sequined top surrounded by a sea of black ties and I felt very humble". In addition, next year, having been given the first choice of rooms in College, she will be living in Mob VI 3, the first woman to live there since it was built in the thirteenth century.

A strong believer in equal opportunities, regardless of social class, religion, colour or sex, Ginny feels that it was wrong that much of Oxford was barred to women for so long. "They have proved that they can achieve as much as the men and they have justified their existence here. Maybe proving that women can play an active role in the running of the College helps this".

Lisa Thomas.

Editorial

'Change and decay in all around I see' runs the hymn. Merton is certainly changing, as this edition of 'Postmaster' indicates. We have new departures in SCR/JCR relations with the moves towards student representation on Warden and Tutors Committee and we have the Dover Report on admissions providing for the abolition of the traditional 7th term entrance exam. Worst of all, we have women invading the domains of male privilege, and becoming JCR President, Social Secretary - even co-editor of 'Postmaster'! Change, certainly ... but decay? Increased student involvement in College government would prevent misunderstanding by either side of the other's case, and hence would lead to better informed SCR/JCR relations. The effect of the Dover Report would be to weaken the stranglehold of the independent schools on Oxford's places and make them more accessible to the comprehensives - thus making the College less élitist, and not involving any lowering of present academic standards. The introduction of women has been a change more dramatic than is usual in the steady progress of

Oxford life. Some regard this too as a bad thing; yet the advent of women is said to have made the College more civilised, and has done away with the anomaly of discrimination between equal human beings merely on the grounds of sex.

However, despite these many changes, there seems to be an unchanging undercurrent permeating life as it is described here. Merton has never been a large College, never quite in the mainstream of university life. While this has not and does not prevent individual members from taking a role in university activities too numerous to be mentioned, it means that Merton has retained some intimacy in contrast with the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of larger colleges; it remains a place to come home to.

Our position in the Norrington or Torpids tables may fluctuate wildly, but undergraduate life at Merton remains in its essentials unaltered, and its ability to absorb more superficial changes shows considerable resilience and durability.