Lancashire and Cheshire. But over the centuries College has always been proud of its links with both. They came from the North West of England, and the University to the wider world of politics. Using archives, letters and diaries, it aims to re-create something of the variety and texture of academic life over a period of five centuries: the learning, the conversation, the sport; the intellectual milieu and financial context; the architecture inside and out; the food and drink; the quirks of personality. The little dramas and absurdities that make up the small change of corporate living.

Brasenose was the first Oxford college to admit undergraduates on a statutory basis, and the first of the men’s colleges to decide to admit women. Its story is rich in personalities. From Walter Pater to William Golding; from Earl Haig to Archbishop Runcie; from Prince Obolenski to Colin Cowdrey; from Elias Ashmole and John Buchan to Michael Palin and David Cameron: Brasenose has never been short of characters. The originator of rugby football (William Webb Ellis), the inventor of bottled beer (William Weatherley), the father of political economy (Sir William Petty), the physicist who discovered the fuel cell (Sir William Grove), and the inventor of garden gnomes (Sir Charles Isham): all these were Brasenose people. Here Vincent’s Club was founded. Here Brideshead Revisited was born: Sebastian was a Brasenose man. Here C.S. Lewis looked into a chapel wardrobe and emerged in the kingdom of Narnia.

For the first time, all these people, and hundreds more, are brought back to life, placed in the context of college history, and set against the wider world of university politics. This new history is very far from being a dull, institutional tale. It bubbles with anecdote and incident. It all adds up to collective biography on a formidable scale. Hence its title: Brasenose – or ‘BNC’ as it is usually known – has expanded its reputation world-wide.

This new publication from OUP will be the first full-scale history of the College, and it is timed to coincide with our Quincentenary. The scale of the book is impressive: nearly 600 pages long, with more than 100 plates and over 1,000 footnotes. Its production is handsome. And its scope is certainly ambitious: it relates the College to the University, and the University to the wider world of politics.
Nose! Nose! Nose!

Harry Ford, author of this year’s winning Ale Verse, reports on the evening:

About three times a day I make it my custom to arrange all the chairs in my room in a semicircle, lock the door and draw the curtains across my well-mullioned windows. Then I bow, cough twice, and reel off some inspired dirgy for the enraptured audience of my imagination. So as soon as that waggish old lady, Shrovevetide, came along, and as soon as the Dean allowed the possibility of propitiation with satirical verse-offerings, “Ho! Ho!” I said to myself, “that’s for me.”

What a wonderful evening it is, and every year it gets better. After calves sugar-beetrow and citric, a hush fell over the hall. Our floppy-haired Chaplain, Graeme, stepped up to be master of ceremonies. And under the approving gaze of Sir Richard and Good Bishop Smyth in their respective portraits, we proceeded to re-enact the time-honoured rituals.

This year the programme was superb. It began with a nod to Lord Windlesham (sitting in the portrait behind my head) and his fondness for whisky, but it built up into a rousing celebration of our present Principal’s appetite for wine and walking. “He walks and walks for Brasenose! He circles more and more; He’s flexing calves and muscles—it’s what his legs are for!” (to the tune of Stand up, stand up for Jesus). One of Andrew Sillier’s entries, “Happy Brasenose to you,” didn’t make it into the booklet because the Dean held that it was not only inane but also one year too early.

Now, from the earliest days the verses were presented by the Butler, often with a ‘spice-bowle’ of ale or a plumb cake,’ and it is fitting that the glory of the evening went to our head Butler, William. The Spanish quatrains he teaches me at breakfast inspired my verse, so I dedicated a stanza and raised a toast to Señor Guillermo, the brilliant butler of Brasenose College and a number one if ever there was one. Cheers.

Re-launch of the Brasenose Society Mentoring Scheme

For Junior Members, leaving College to embark on a career can be a daunting prospect. The Brasenose Society Mentoring Scheme, established in 1999, and about to be re-launched, aims to provide these departing students with an opportunity to talk with alumni about their work (current or past), how they became involved in it, and the highs and lows of their choice of career.

Early impressions of the Scheme were that alumni had much useful experience to share with those just embarking on their careers. The list of alumni willing to share their experience in this way now includes about a hundred people, covering a wide span of ages and careers. In the hands of Mike Gill (Classics, 1968), the scheme is taking on a new lease of life and is about to be re-publicised to members of the JCR and HCR.

New volunteers for the scheme are always welcome. The level of commitment required from mentors can be as low – or high – as they wish. It may well consist of only an occasional telephone call, but could extend to personal meetings or visits to College. If you would like to be added to the list of mentors, please contact Mike Gill at mgilm1@gmail.com.

More information about the Scheme will appear on the BNC website in due course, and we will be keeping a close eye on how the relaunched Scheme works. We look forward to reporting back to you in a future edition of the Brasenote.
Boris has left us

As his close friends from Oxford times, it is our desire to write about Boris Rotenberg, our great companion who suddenly left us following a tragic ski accident on 23 December 2007.

The 31 years of Boris’s life were full of movement. On the professional side, Boris gradually moved from pure academia towards policy-oriented research. Lately, he was a scientific research fellow at the Seville-based Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS), connected to the European Commission. With much passion, Boris co-edited the International Journal of Communications Law & Policy. Prior to Seville, Boris was a visiting fellow with the Yale IEI, a post-doctoral Global Emile Noël fellow at NYU Law, and a doctoral visiting scholar at Columbia Law. Boris was always fond of his Oxford times; he joined Brasenose College to earn a Magister Juris (LLM) degree (2005), just after obtaining a law degree from the University of Leuven in his home country of Belgium (1999). His Oxford studies were followed by a Ph.D. in law from the European University Institute in Florence (2005).

It is impossible to forget Boris. Boris would instantly ignore any of his own plans, including those of the academic type, if a friend needed him, especially if this involved an adventure or a long discussion about some tangential extremely interesting subject, bordering on the mythical. What we will all miss the most is the incredible and contagious energy of Boris, who always believed that everything was possible. At Brasenose, Boris was the captain of the so-called second novice team in 1999, which he led with enormous vigour and passion. His recipe for coming first in his class for his Magister Juris (LLM) degree was to read everything that was not on the reading list, to integrate ideas from everywhere, and to spend nights walking in the streets of Oxford thinking.

Who knows what would have come next in Boris’s life. Boris was fond of the South of Europe, having absorbed the Mediterranean culture during his times in Florence, Rome and Seville. But his interest in peoples and cultures also took him to several other places. Boris’s definition of holidays was not to rest but to travel, alone or in company, for as long as possible, and to places such as Mongolia or South America. Not much planning and baggage are needed to disappear for weeks and surprise friends with post cards from exotic places. When he came back from Mongolia, he declared that these months had been productive because he had written his doctoral thesis in his mind while walking. It was hard to believe. And of course, music was important to Boris, who loved the brightness of a violin, or its nostalgia. Among his favourite composers were Vivaldi, Bach, and Brahms, but Boris also had a passion for some Tango music.

The day before his accident, his twin brother talked to him and found that “he was very bubbly, happy and was looking forward to skiing. We had a nice walk and we discussed about his future plans. He had been so happy at that time”.

Perhaps this story about Boris is best ended with a quote from Witgenstein: “Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.”

Alexandra & Martin Nel, Franz Dietrich, Mailys Gauffriau

J. G. Farrell, BNC 1956

On coming up to Brasenose in 1956, the author James Gordon Farrell almost immediately contracted polio, necessitating treatment in an iron lung, an experience which is generally reckoned to have led to his becoming a writer. Taking a degree in Modern Languages in 1960, he later won the Faber Prize with Troubles and the Booker Prize with The Siege of Krishanpur. In 1978 he published The Singapore Grip, completing his widely-praised Empire Trilogy, but his career was cut short by his early death in 1979. New editions of all three were recently published by the New York Review of Books.

In 2009, the 30th anniversary of his death, Cork University Press will publish The Selected Letters of J.G. Farrell, edited by Lavinia Greacen, who also wrote a biography of Farrell, J.G. Farrell, the Making of a Writer, published by Bloomsbury in 2000. Lavinia tells us that she has so far traced about 350 of Farrell’s letters – but very few of these are from his time at BNC, a most important part of his life and his development as a writer.

Lavina would be thrilled to receive news of any of Farrell’s letters which are in the possession of his BNC contemporaries. Although original letters would be very welcome, and would in due course find themselves with his papers at Trinity College, Dublin, copies are just as acceptable and would be a great aid in ensuring that the book contains as thorough a reflection of Farrell’s life and letters as possible. If you are able to help, please contact the Alumni Relations Office at development@bnc.ox.ac.uk or 01865 287275.

Update on the Archives

In the Autumn 2007 issue, we reported that, following a most generous donation from Sir David Akers-Jones (1949), we were looking forward to beginning work to preserve and restore BNC’s archives. Sir David’s gift will act as a most welcome kick-start to the project, enabling the collections to be cleaned and reboxed, and put into storage while the structural work to the archive store is carried out. We, like Sir David, are very excited about the project as it will ensure the preservation of BNC’s important archives collection for future generations.

The College Archivist, Elizabeth Boardman, writes:

The current situation is that we are laying down the parameters of the work needed and seeking estimates. We will then have to establish a careful timetable for removing the material (which will be cleaned and boxed off-site), doing the remedial work to the store, and then returning the material. We are trying to create a controlled environment in a cellar which was dug out in 1664 underneath a building originally constructed in the early sixteenth century. This will be a very lengthy and expensive process and there are many difficulties to overcome. However, mould-free, clean, and dry archives will be worth the wait!
Meet the new BNC Website
www.bnc.ox.ac.uk

The new website has a modern design and includes a section devoted to alumni. Here you can find details of future College and Brasenose Society events, including the BNC500 celebrations. There are also pages about how to keep in touch with College, how to obtain a Brasenose e-mail address, and how you can help us to recontact with lost alumni.

Over the next few months we will be working on Phase Two of the website, adding more information, facilities, and photographs to make the site even more valuable to users. There will be news feeds, podcasts, calendars and on-line groups, and we are looking forward to launching a secure alumni portal where you will be able to reconnect with your fellow Nose Men and Women from around the globe.

We encourage you to visit the website when you are next surfing the web. Why not include it as a ‘favourite’ in your browser?

Alumni Dining

Alumni are invited to dine in Hall up to three times a year on Tuesdays and Sundays in full term. Sadly this invitation cannot be extended to guests.

Many alumni have already taken up their dining rights and it has been a great pleasure to us to welcome them back. We recommend that alumni book early as space is limited on each occasion and alumni dining’s popularity is increasing!

If you wish to dine, please write to, telephone or email the Alumni Relations Office (01865 287275 or development.office@bnc.ox.ac.uk) to enquire about dates. We look forward to seeing you.

Mentioned in Despatches

Dr Simon Palfrey, Fellow and Tutor in English, has co-written and published Shakespeare in Paris (Oxford University Press, 2007) with Dr Tiffany Stern of University College.

Paula Carter (1978) has been appointed Channel 4’s first Viewers’ Editor.

Michael O’Sullivan (1978) was awarded the C.M.G. for services to the British Council in the Queen’s New Year’s Honours List 2008.

The Right Hon Lord Robin Janvrin (1966) was awarded the Queen’s Service Order for services to New Zealand as Private Secretary to the Queen in the New Year’s Honours List of New Zealand 2008.

Hugo Judd (1960) was awarded the Queen’s Service Order for public services in the New Year’s Honours List of New Zealand 2008.

Dr Douglas Vernimmen, associate member of the HCR, has been enrolled as a Licentiate of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain.

Platnauer Concert

Nick Prozillo, Graduate Director of Music, reports on the Platnauer Concert series which has brought many talented musicians and eager listeners through the doors of the BNC Chapel:

Formed in 2001 at the Royal College of Music, the Sacconi Quartet is rapidly gaining an enviable reputation as one of the outstanding quartets of their generation. Their Platnauer Concert in Brasenose on Sunday 24 January gave testimony to their ability to decode the musical notation with invincible perspicacity and sophistication, and engage in great musical rhetoric. What a great ensemble! Following a dramatic performance of Haydn’s String Quartet in C (opus 54 no. 2), the Sacconi performed Ravel’s much loved String Quintet in C. The Sacconi’s style is highly discursive: attention to the details of works, without ever sacrificing direction or clarity (aptly demonstrated in the ‘development’ section of Ravel’s Sonata where the composer intensifies the rhythmic activity forcing the instruments into an accelerating frenzy of repeated patterns). Filled to maximum seating capacity, Brasenose’s Ante Chapel witnessed a great evening of music making. Several students also benefited from instrumental coaching with the Sacconi players earlier on in the day.

The next Platnauer Concert (11 May) will be given by pianist Emmanuel Despax and will celebrate the restoration of the chapel piano, a project carried out last summer thanks to donations from Robin Sharp (1953, Classics) and the Broadley Charitable Trust, and a grant from the Royal College of Music.

Contacts

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