



Issue 36 | Trinity Term 2025

Brazen Notes



Principles Of A Principal

After a decade as **Principal of Brasenose, John Bowers** has decided to retire to travel, write and see more of his growing family. He leaves at the end of September 2026. In conversation with **Jane Johnson (English, 1987)**, he reflects on persuasive power, progress, and people at BNC – and what he will miss the most.

In his smart blue suit jacket and Nike trainers (from Sports Direct), John Bowers is the very embodiment of the traditional and the modern.

It's a visual metaphor for the way he has navigated his 10-year tenure as Principal of Brasenose, respecting the College's five centuries of history while embracing and encouraging positive change.

During one of a series of interviews he had for the role he crystallised his approach as a three-pronged mission: greater access, greater diversity and encouraging a friendly and open atmosphere. "I think they have remained," he says. These aims mean the College is a markedly different place to the one he joined on 1st October 2015.

Instead of just four female fellows out of 46, there are now 14 – just under a third of the teaching body. He admits there's room for improvement on that front – but as fellowships don't come up very frequently, it's an unavoidably slow process.

His tenure has seen the first female Vice Principal – English Fellow Sos Eltis – and more recently the current VP Anne Davies, a Law Fellow. There has also been the College's first female chaplain, Revd Julia Baldwin. And he is proud of the fact that the ratio of male/female research fellows is now 50:50. Asked what has driven this desire to be inclusive, he cites being Jewish, coming from an 'unfashionable' part of the North of England and his work as a discrimination and human rights lawyer.

"This is close to my heart as well as head. I was educated at a Grammar School in Cleethorpes (next to Grimsby) which became a comprehensive school when I was in the sixth form. Oxford certainly shaped my career and gave me access to facilities and opportunities I could only dream about when growing up."

– John Bowers, *Brazen Notes*, 2015

The role of Principal – or Head of House – is an unusual one. Despite what the title suggests, John describes it as being about influence rather than power because of the College's democratic structure. "Influencing is more powerful in any case," he says.

Instead, he oversees what he describes as a 'small but complex organisation', chairing a governing body who meet three times per term to make the decisions. What has been in his power has been to change the culture of the College, to make it more cohesive and collaborative.

Naturally sociable, John has clearly enjoyed strengthening the sense of community and fellowship, both inside and outside the College. "I wanted to make everyone feel a part of the Brasenose community and to ensure that lasts forever," he explains.

"I want Brasenose to remain the most rounded and open college in the University, and the friendliest. We must continue as a hospitable community to which all can contribute and where all are valued. That community crucially includes you as alumni."

– John Bowers, *Brazen Notes*, 2015

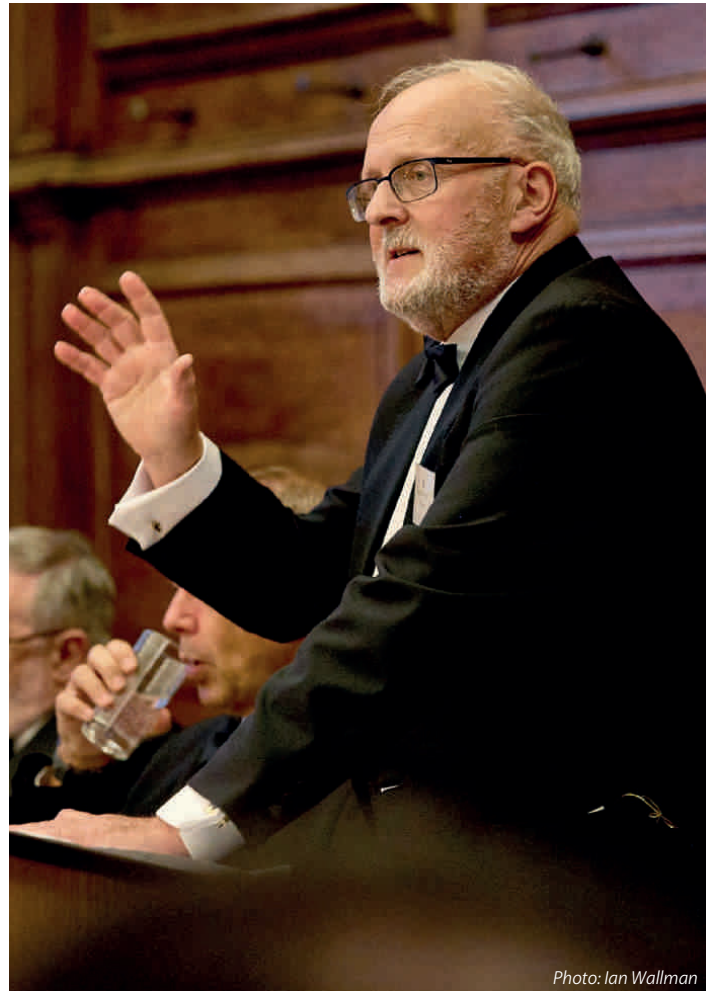


Photo: Ian Wallman

Asked how he has walked the tightrope between retaining traditions and modernising the College, he admits to "a constant tension" between the two.

But he is keen, he says, to preserve the 'good' traditions, then looks up smiling and jokes: "I just can't think of one immediately." However, despite John's reticence about them, many traditions were actively reinstated after the Covid lockdowns, and he has been known to appreciate the longstanding Brasenose traditions of Ale Verses (in which he has been mentioned on many occasions), Burns Night celebrations, and the annual excursion through the adjoining door into Lincoln College (his alma mater), for the traditional Ascension Day ivy beer event.

During his time there have been ambitious building projects that have also synthesised the ancient and the modern, transforming student accommodation – thanks to donations from generous alumni. There's a beautiful new library space, a state-of-the-art lecture room and a three-storey sustainably constructed accommodation block in the Frewin Annexe. There is also major work in progress to restore and revive the beautiful Frewin Hall building.

Quick Fire Q&A With John Bowers KC

A lounge in the library or a long walk in the meadows?

The walk. I like walking.

Formal dinner or College breakfast?

Formal dinner. I love the conversations, although there are good shorter ones at breakfast.

Grimsby Town or grilling a witness?

Oh Grimsby Town. I have been a fan since I was 10.

Making a speech or speaking to a student?

Definitely speaking to students. You find out their quite different perspective. There are not many jobs where in your 60s, you have connection with young people. I hope it keeps me in tune with the world.

Twelve Angry Men or Traitors?

Twelve Angry Men. I've seen it a lot.

Growing older gracefully or disgracefully?

I have to say gracefully.

Zoom or real life?

Definitely real life.

Netflix or Nietzsche?

Nietzsche, although I haven't read any recently.

Artificial Intelligence or the intelligence of an academic?

Definitely the second.

Morning coffee or night cap?

I like my morning coffee.

WhatsApp or the World Service?

The World Service.

Reading a book or writing a book?

Writing, because it gives you so much scope to be creative.

He describes meeting accomplished academics and alumni as one of the great pleasures of the job, and over the last decade he has hosted Michael Palin, Simon Schama, David Cameron, Tom Stoppard, Theresa May, Vernon Bogdanor and Rowan Williams as speakers and at High Table, among many other respected figures. In effect, he has presided over one of the most coveted dinner parties in the country most weekday nights.

I detect the hint of a misty eye as he explains: "I think the magical moments are actually when you have extraordinary discussions – I hear something on the Today programme and know that there'll be an expert in College who will know an awful lot more...for example, we have the world's top expert on the history of fraud, an expert on exoplanets [planets outside our Solar System] and a tutorial fellow who is working on giving robots a sense of touch. Amazing."

He has also enjoyed the relationship he has with other College principals. "There are very few subjects that come up where you don't have an expert. So on security issues, we've got the former head of GCHQ, and a former Assistant Chief Constable. We've got eight lawyers at the moment. That's probably too many! And we've

got a diplomat or two," he says, before adding, "although we are quite competitive to some extent, particularly over chefs. The good ones get snapped up."

There have, of course, been challenges and he singles out the Covid years as his toughest.

When Covid struck, College had to respond quickly to look after students who had no other option but to stay in College, and to mitigate the educational disruption – pivoting to remote teaching where practicable, and ensuring they had the tech to cope with remote studying. "We're still seeing the aftermath of it – we've got students who feel that the best years of their school lives were affected," he says.

During his time, the College has made great progress academically, climbing up the Norrington Table. It was at number 22 the year he arrived, but for four years Brasenose was an impressive fourth. He stresses he doesn't sit in on any admissions interviews, nor does he teach, so attributes this success to the dons and the students, explaining: "I've not done anything other than encourage."

He puts his own academic achievements down – in part – to his mother. Brought up in Cleethorpes near Grimsby, his father Alfred ran a 'wood shop', despite being 'far too clever for that', and his mother Irene (who left school at 14 to work in a lift in the Grimsby department store) motivated him to study. They believed that it was important he had a profession. Supported by teachers who put on extra lessons for him, he excelled at the local grammar school – which turned comprehensive by the time he was in the sixth form –

Vice Principal Anne Davies On John Bowers' Time As Principal

What have been John's greatest achievements as Principal in the last decade?

I think John's done a lot around building a community and connecting us better with the outside world – for example, the Principal's Conversations have brought in some very interesting outside speakers; the Frankland Visitor scheme, with film directors and authors in residence – we didn't have that before, and it's fantastic for the students and for the rest of us too. They bring in new ideas and can inspire students to potentially see themselves in those kinds of careers in the future. It also gives people another way to connect with each other that's not necessarily subject-related – we all have wider interests, and it allows people to explore those interests a bit further.

Do you have a memory of John in the many years you have been working with him?

My favourite memories are quite personal really – John has a great deal of care and concern for his colleagues, and pays attention to what's going on in their lives; he was incredibly kind and supportive to me when I was going through difficult times after a family bereavement.

Which three words best describe John's tenure as Principal?

Calm, efficient, good-humoured. That's four!



and won a scholarship to Lincoln College, Oxford, to study law. He was called to the bar in 1979 and took silk in 1998, and has acted in most of the major industrial disputes of recent times from the 1984 Miners Strike to the 1986 Wapping Strike, earning him the moniker 'an employment law rock star.' The author of 15 books, he has sat as a deputy high court judge and has been a Bencher of Middle Temple for the last 20 years.

So how did he make the decision to step down from such a fulfilling, if pressurised, role? At a healthy 69-years-old, and with his wife, Professor Suzanne Franks, considering retirement after many years as Head of Journalism at City University, he saw there was now an opportunity for them to travel the world together. On their list is the Far East, New Zealand and Canada. He is also writing a book about the ethics and politics of whistle-blowing and he will sit as a part-time judge in the Employment Appeal Tribunal.

So what will he miss when, in the late summer of 2026, he leaves one of the most fascinating and esoteric roles in the country? "The camaraderie," he says, with certainty. There is a tradition that the old Head of House doesn't attend many meetings or events in their first year after leaving – presumably to give the new principal space to make their own decisions.

But does he have any advice for his successor? "I'd say, watch and listen in the first 100 days, but keep addressing the issues, and also keep making the College outward looking."

And is there anyone in particular he'd like to see inhabit his lodgings?

"All I'd say is someone who is dedicated to taking the College further into the modern world."

The Next Brasenose Principal

To fill the vacancy created by John Bowers' departure, we would very much appreciate the support of the Brasenose community in helping us to identify individuals who might be suitable candidates for this important role.

The College is seeking to appoint an inspiring, energetic, approachable and down-to-earth Principal, who will be wholeheartedly committed to Brasenose and enthusiastic in promoting the interests of the College and all its students, staff and Fellows. We welcome applications from candidates with varied and diverse professional backgrounds, including academic and other careers. The role of Principal is a uniquely challenging and enjoyable one in which no two days are the same.

The advertisement and further particulars are available through our website at www.bnc.ox.ac.uk. The College has engaged Perrett Laver to support the recruitment process, and we welcome any suggestions which could lead to high-quality candidates putting themselves forward or to an approach to such candidates being made. Please contact our recruiters Perrett Laver at brasenose@perrettlaver.com.

Start The Change, Watch It Grow

How Your Support Powers Brasenose Students

Have you ever wondered what impact your gift makes? Without the contributions of our donors, the College wouldn't be able to provide the incredible Oxford education that students and alumni cherish. In a time when many UK universities are facing financial difficulties, your donations have never been more vital.

Every gift to Brasenose is more than just financial support – it's an investment in people. It supports the students who walk through our historic quads, immerse themselves in their studies, and form friendships and experiences that will stay with them for life. Your generosity ensures they have the resources, support, and space to succeed.

Your gift in action

The Student Support Fund plays a vital role in every aspect of student life at Brasenose. Each year, nearly **£1 million** is allocated to support students, much of it from your donations, ensuring that Brasenose can:

- **Fuel excellence** – Bursaries, scholarships, and hardship grants ensure that talent and hard work are recognised and supported. Students can claim up to twice a year.
- **Broader academic horizons** – Book grants for first-year students, research and travel funding, and subject-specific budgets open doors to discovery. Whether diving into new ideas or exploring the world to bring learning to life, students are supported in expanding their education beyond the classroom.
- **Create a home away from home** – Affordable accommodation at Brasenose offers security, support, and a welcoming community where students can truly belong.
- **Support daily student life** – Over **150,000 subsidised meals** are served each year, offering both nourishment and a space for conversation, collaboration, and community. Your donation doesn't just provide a meal – it fuels the next generation.
- **Encourage learning beyond the classroom** – From sports and music to clubs and societies, experiences outside academics shape well-rounded individuals and lifelong bonds.
- **Respond swiftly to unforeseen circumstances** – From pandemics and inflation spikes, to supporting a student in a family health crisis to reunite with loved ones quickly.

A meaningful connection

Our recent telethon brought students and alumni together – not just to seek support, but to express gratitude and give back. For the students who took part, it was more than an extracurricular activity; it was a way to strengthen the connection between alumni and the current College community, creating a philanthropic bridge that ensures future generations continue to thrive. Many shared how Brasenose has shaped their journeys and how they, too, are committed to paying it forward.

Lola (Experimental Psychology, 2021), student caller:

"It is the people of Brasenose that have made my life what it is, and I am looking forward to hearing the similar experiences of alumni and to get involved in fundraising to make sure that future generations can have the same memorable experience I've had!"

Erin (History, 2021), student caller: *"I'm really excited to connect with Brasenose alumni to learn about their experiences at BNC and beyond, and to raise money for the Annual Fund which has such an impact on the lives of students such as myself."*

A tradition that lives on

Your support creates real opportunities for students now and in the future. Every gift to Brasenose does more than keep the lights on – it keeps the minds bright, the doors open, the stories unfolding.

Thank you for being part of this ongoing tradition of generosity and connection. Because that's what Brasenose is: A living, breathing legacy. And thanks to you, it's only getting stronger.

If you're interested in supporting Brasenose, please get in touch with the Alumni and Development Office at donations@bnc.ox.ac.uk. We would love to hear from you!

Brasenose Telethon Team, April 2025 (Photo: Emily Reeve)



Frewin Hall

A Game-Changing Upgrade For Brasenose Undergraduates

Many Brasenose students call Frewin Annexe their home. Living there offers independence and tranquillity. With the redevelopment of Frewin Hall underway, current students and Annexe residents **Chess Nightingale**, **Sanika Pherwani**, and **Seb Steven** share their thoughts on the forthcoming improvements and how these changes fit in with the student community.

Brasenose holds a special place in the hearts of its students, defined by warmth, lasting friendships, and a vibrant sense of community. For many, the College's charm begins the moment they first set foot on its grounds.

"When I came for the open day I thought it was a really friendly college," Chess recalled. "I saw that it was really artsy, very central, and just seemed so nice – all the things that I would want from a college."

Sanika, who came to Brasenose through an open application, echoed that sentiment: "I'm really glad I ended up at Brasenose. Everyone's super nice, and the community feels so close-knit."

What sets Brasenose apart from many other colleges is this sense of belonging. Students build connections across year groups, with each new cohort maintaining the strong sense of community, forming bonds that extend through the generations. Seb described a College open day when Brasenose's Schools Officer, Dr Joe Organ, remembered his name and other details about him from a previous school visit and personalised the tour to make it directly relevant to his specific subject. Seb knew immediately that he was heading somewhere with a strong sense of community.

Sanika added "If we have an event with alumni, it's really nice to hear stories about their time at Brasenose and how it's not so different from what we're experiencing now."



Seb, Sanika and Chess on a visit to Frewin Hall to see the refurbishment work in progress

However, this powerful sense of community faces challenges – most notably, a lack of communal space. Brasenose's main site is beautiful but constrained. The Library is often bustling, and spaces for meeting or collaborative work are limited. Chess highlighted how students resort to booking the small Library 'collab room', studying in the Chapel, or squeezing into the JCR meeting room to work together. "It's quite hard to fit nine of you in there," she explained. "We'd love to have a more relaxed, sociable study space."

Living at the Frewin Annexe offers a convenient home close to College for students in their 2nd and 3rd years. But while there are plenty of perks, the current interior of the Frewin building leaves much to be desired. Outdated facilities, a confusing layout of doors and corridors, and a lack of communal space have left students feeling isolated, with little opportunity to connect.

This is where the redevelopment of Frewin Hall comes in: as well as restoring many of the building's original features and improving energy efficiency, the project will redefine and open up the interior spaces to enhance the communal areas, whilst preserving the (Grade II* listed) building's historic fabric. The facilities will be much improved, including the introduction of physical collections in new Library reading rooms, a new café area, and improved access to high-speed internet.

The expanded communal spaces will include a new café area, the undercroft, the foyer, the Drawing Room, and new Library reading rooms.



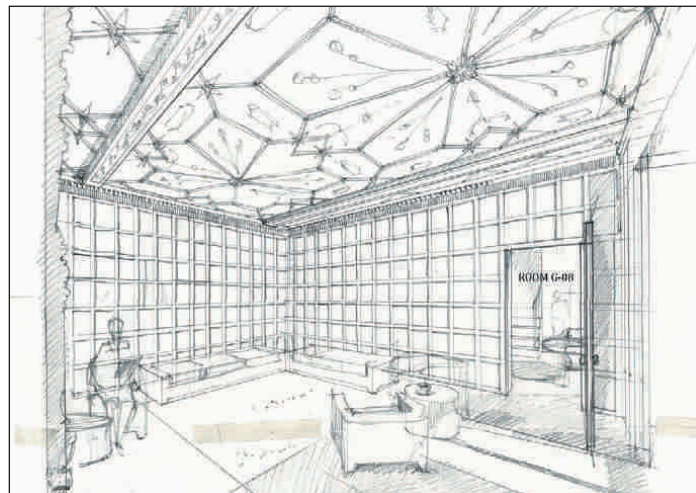
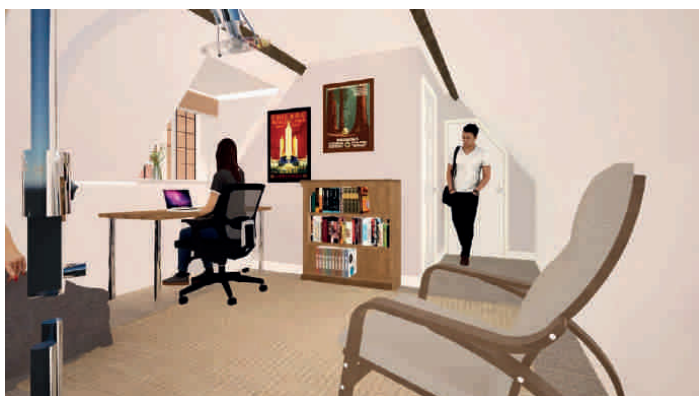
This expansion will result in a twelvefold growth in available communal spaces with seating.

These new shared 'hubs' are intended for the benefit of all Brasenose students; not just those living at Frewin Hall. The new study areas will create welcoming environments for both quiet reflection and collaboration. Expanded social spaces will enable casual gatherings and encourage greater participation in student societies, cultural activities and events – the very things that make Brasenose thrive.

"I think I'm very anti-doors," said Chess, who currently lives at Frewin. "The more doors a place has, the less social it is. You're just less physically connected to everyone." She described how staircases with more open layouts tend to foster greater interaction. "That's why staircases 4, 5, and 6 are more social," she explained, "because they're just a bit more connected." The Hall redevelopment will embrace this philosophy, with a reimagined open-plan layout that encourages students to flow easily between study, socialisation, and relaxation.

For Chess and other students, this sense of flow is essential for well-being. "When I was a first-year," she recalled, "It was almost like an extension of a boarding school. I was eating, sleeping, socialising, and working all in one space. It was hard to build proper boundaries." Moving to Frewin brought a helpful sense of separation, but she noted that the current layout is not ideal for connecting with others, due to the lack of communal spaces. "The kitchen was often really busy – not exactly the best space to socialise or work."

Seb, another Frewin resident, agreed. "If you cook, you often end up eating in your room, which is not very communal." The new design aims to fix this by providing well-equipped shared spaces where students can comfortably study, eat, and unwind together.



Artwork: Robert Eyles

A new café area and open social spaces will allow students more opportunities to gather informally and spontaneously. "I'm really excited for the downstairs area," Seb added. "I work in my room a lot right now, but I know I'll start using those spaces when they're there. It'll feel like a proper hub – like the JCR, but more modern and inviting. A place where you just bump into people."

For Chess, Sanika, and Seb, the redevelopment offers far more than just new furniture and improved kitchens – it represents a chance to redefine what life at Frewin means. The new spaces will allow students to experience a richer sense of community.

"It's about convenience too," Chess added. "Having things like printing facilities nearby would make such a difference – just having everything to hand makes student life easier."

The new spaces will also help students connect with the site's rich history. The Norman-era undercroft beneath Frewin Hall is the oldest domestic space in continuous use in the UK, dating back to the 11th century. After the refurbishment, the link between the ground floor and the undercroft will be restored, creating a new communal social and study area, spanning both levels.

"It's cool to know Frewin has its own layers of history," said Seb. For Sanika, this sense of legacy is important. "It's nice to know that even while we're adding new spaces, we're still preserving the roots of the College," she said. "It connects each new generation of Brasenose students to the ones that came before."

"I think it will make people's lives better," Chess said. "If you're happy where you live, everything else feels easier. Frewin Hall's redevelopment is about giving students the space they need to thrive – academically, socially, and personally."



Visuals: Lee/Fitzgerald Architects

Brasenose Blues

Students are keeping the tradition of sporting excellence alive and kicking at Brasenose today.



BNC Rugby Football Blue Otis Walker (right) in the OURFC Men's Blues vs Crawshays Rugby (Photo: Steve Karpa)



Oxford University Netball Team after winning the Varsity match against Cambridge - BNC Netball Blues Jess Connolly and Sierra Warnes, 4th & 5th from the left (Photo: Dik Ng)



BNC Rugby Football Blue Sophie Goodman in the OURFC Women's Blues vs Sciences Po, Paris (Photo: Steve Karpa)



BNC Rugby Football Blue Tom Mewes vs Oxford Brookes 1st XV "Battle for the City" (Photo: Steve Karpa)



BNC Hockey Blue Daniel Cox (Photo: Theo Weatherall)

BNC Boat Club – A Great Tradition Since 1815



BNC Boat Club (Photo: Hattie Altaparmakova)



BNC Boat Club (Photo: Hattie Altaparmakova)

Chapel

Brazen Notes: The New Chapel Organ

The installation of the new Brasenose Chapel organ was completed in November 2024, bringing to a close a remarkable project, and opening up an exciting new musical chapter.





Brasenose Chapel Organ, Hilary 2024
(Photo: Ian Wallman)

Brazen Notes: The New Chapel Organ

Director of Music **Polina Sosnina** explains how this fantastic new instrument fits in with the history of Brasenose Chapel organs.

The new organ has been built by the team at Orgues de Facto, Belgium, following the English romantic model of William Hill & Son, who built and installed the original organ back in 1892. The original casework by Sir Thomas Graham Jackson has been expertly restored and houses brand-new sound boards, mechanical actions, internal frames, wooden and metal pipework, and a new console. The west-facing façade pipes from the 1892 Hill organ, which had been retained as non-speaking (dummy) pipes in the organ provided by Peter Collins in 1972 and rebuilt by Richard Bower in 2001-2, have been re-lengthened and are now speaking pipes within the façade of the new organ. In order to best replicate the work carried out by

Hill, the Orgues de Facto team carried out composite analysis of the original pipework, paintwork and varnishes. The result is a beautiful, 15-stop instrument that emulates the organ installed by Hill at the end of the nineteenth century. This wonderful asset to the Brasenose community has been made possible thanks to the tremendous generosity of Honorary Fellow, **Gerald Smith (Philosophy, 1984)** and Margo Smith.

Brasenose organ scholar and chemistry student **Jaylen Cheng** shares his thoughts on the organ's long-awaited return to Chapel.

This year, the choir has finally returned to being accompanied by an organ every Sunday. The new English Romantic style organ, with shades of Belgian influence, makes a wonderful noise accompanying hymns, psalms and much of the English Choral Tradition (Stanford, Ireland, Howells...) that had to be shelved for two years.

The organ features prominently beyond the usual Chapel services too. Our Director of Music, Polina, gave a memorable concert to the College community in November 2024, followed by an inaugural concert by organist Katelyn Emerson in Trinity Term 2025. Handel and Widor can now be heard at weddings again (for both legal and College marriages); I hope the Fellows enjoyed the music before the recent Betty Morley Feast!

The instrument itself is versatile, rewarding to play, and suits the Chapel space and acoustic delightfully. Organists, singers, congregations and audiences at BNC will surely enjoy it for years to come.



BNC Organ Scholar, Jaylen Cheng
(Photo: JP Clough)

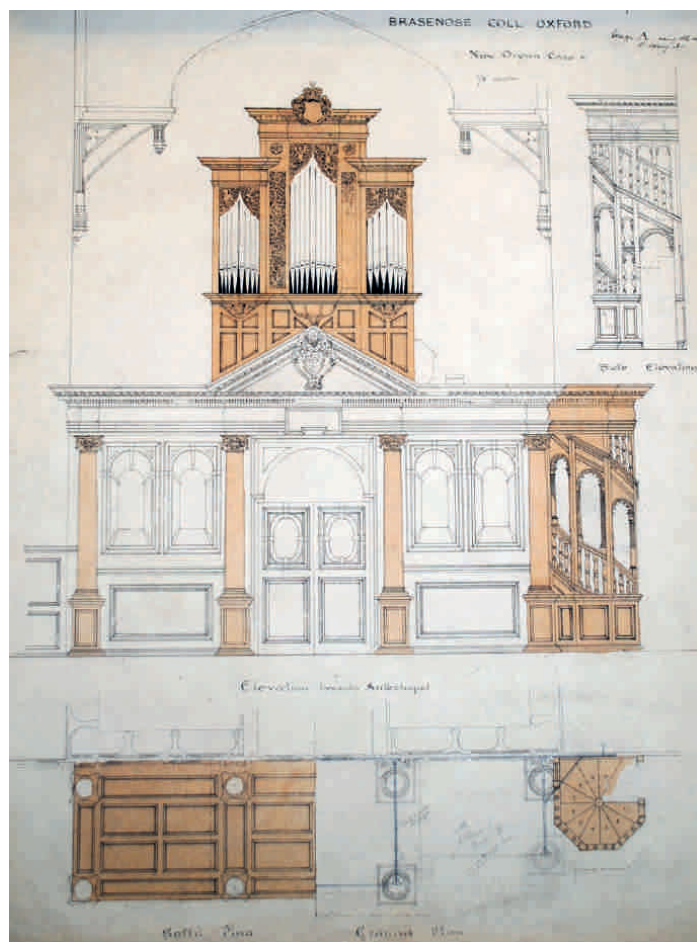


Image: Brasenose College Archives, Ref: B13.2

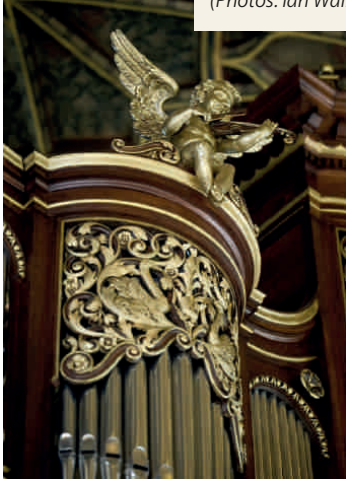
T G Jackson

Renowned Oxford architect Sir Thomas Graham Jackson originally designed the casework for the William Hill organ that was installed in Brasenose Chapel in 1892. Additionally, he is known for designing BNC's New Quad. He is also known for the University's Examination Schools, but is probably most famous for his involvement with the well-known Oxford landmark Hertford Bridge, often known as the 'Bridge of Sighs'.

The original organ case was dismantled in September 2022 and transported to organ specialists Orgues de Facto in Belgium, to enable the new instrument to be fitted directly into it to ensure the correct fit. The organ and case were then separated once again, transported back to Oxford, and carefully reassembled in Chapel.



Details from the new Chapel Organ
(Photos: Ian Wallman)



Margo Smith, Katelyn Emerson and Gerald Smith after the inaugural Organ Concert
(Photo: Rev David Sheen)



Biochemistry: Professor Faraz Mardakheh

In Michaelmas 2024, **Professor Faraz Mardakheh** was elected to the Tutorial Fellowship in Molecular and Cellular Biochemistry at Brasenose – a Fellowship endowed thanks to the generosity of donors. He joins us from Barts Cancer Institute, Queen Mary University of London, where he has been a Reader in RNA Biology. **Emily Reeve** poses some probing questions to find out more.

What motivated you to move your lab to Oxford, and become part of the Brasenose academic community?

Oxford has an incredible scientific community, and the strength of the Department of Biochemistry in areas like RNA biology, chromatin, and cancer biology was a major factor in my decision to move from a well-respected institute in London (Barts Cancer Institute) to Oxford. Initially, I didn't know much about the college system, so I didn't think too much of the fact that my post was linked to a strangely named college called Brasenose! But that changed the moment I visited the College as part of my interview. Dr Simon Smith, the senior tutor, gave me a wonderful tour and told me all about the College history, its students, and some of the exciting recent developments. I was particularly impressed by his passion for looking after the students. I also had the chance to meet a range of people, from the principal to our lovely porters, and I immediately got a strong sense of a warm and supportive community. That first impression has absolutely held true in my time here so far.

As a Tutorial Fellow, your time is split between teaching and research – what does a typical week look like for you?

My Mondays and Fridays are mostly spent with my lab – meeting the team members one-on-one, discussing their projects, any progress made, or any road-blocks, and in general solving any lab-related issues. Wednesdays are dedicated to tutorials with our students at the College. Tuesdays and Thursdays are a mix of research, admin, and teaching activities. I usually receive student essays on Tuesday afternoons, so spend the afternoon and evening reading and marking them, before sending them individual feedback ahead of the tutorials.

Then comes the weekend, which is mostly family time (primarily taken up by driving my son all across Oxford to his many weekend activities!), as well as some chance to get some writing done (grants, manuscripts, etc.).

With current statistics predicting that around half of us will develop cancer during our lifetime, it has never been so pressing to better understand the biology behind cancers – how would you paint the picture of our current understanding of this, and in which areas you think we still have the most to learn?

Thanks to powerful new technologies like next-generation DNA sequencing, our understanding of cancer has been transformed in recent years. For a long time, we believed that cancer was simply deterministically caused by specific genetic mutations (essentially permanent changes in a cell's DNA) in our body cells. But we have recently discovered that the story is far more complex. These same mutations can also be found very often in completely healthy tissues and cells, where they don't cause any observable problems! This suggests that other factors, like how genes are switched on or off, or how cells interact with each other and their surroundings, must be



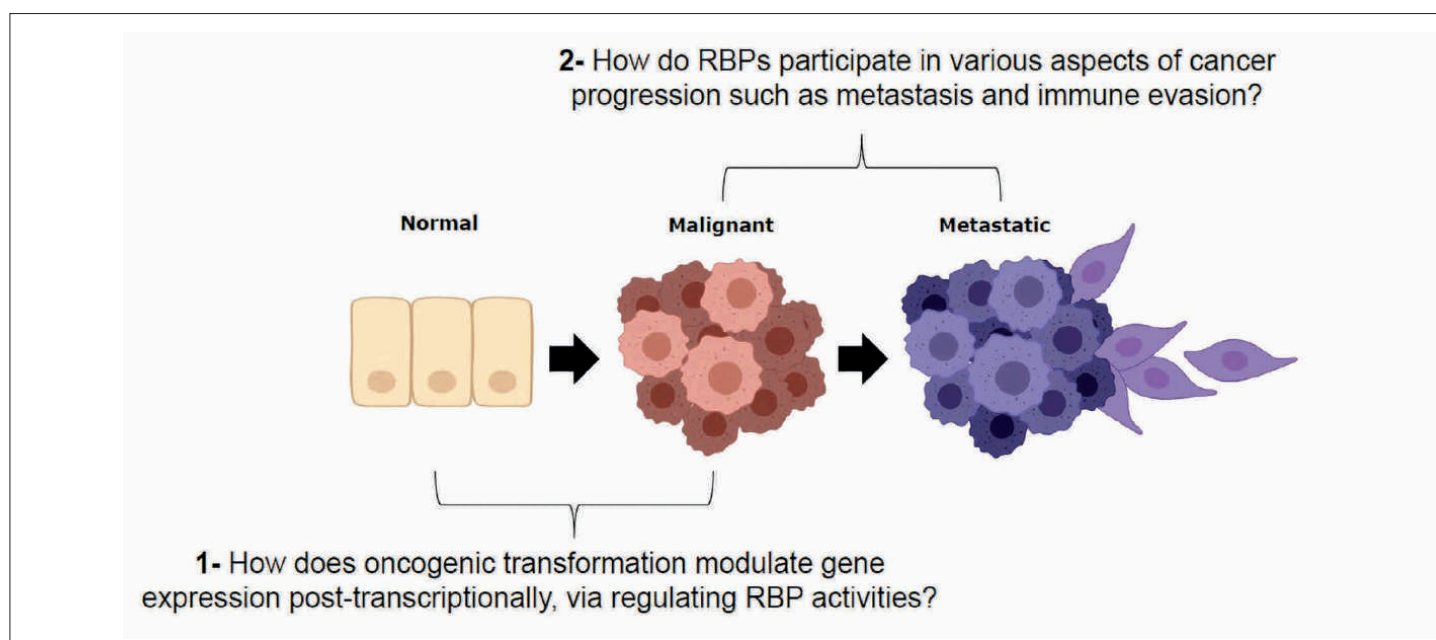
playing a crucial role in determining whether a mutation can lead to cancer or not. These non-genetic influences are an incredibly exciting, important, and complex area of cancer biology, and there's still so much we don't know about them.

What are the key approaches that your lab uses to investigate cancer progression?

We use a combination of laboratory-grown cells (i.e. cell-lines) and animal models to study how cancer progresses. A major focus of our work is pancreatic cancer, which is one of the most aggressive and difficult-to-treat cancers. These diverse models help us to recreate and study cancer in a completely controllable environment. Moreover, by doing research across multiple systems, we can be confident that the findings we make aren't just weird quirks of one specific experimental model, but reflect real biological processes happening in cancer.

Would you be able to give us a brief overview of how cancers develop, which part of this process your work focuses on, and why it is important to improve understanding in this area?

At its core, cancer is the breakdown of control. All living cells are driven by a fundamental urge to grow and divide, but over a billion year of evolution, multicellular organisms like us have evolved



Professor Mardakheh's lab examines the role that RNA Binding Proteins (RBPs) play in cancer development.

sophisticated ways to control this urge. In healthy tissues, cells only divide when needed – for example, to heal a wound or replace old and damaged cells. But in cancer, this control is lost and the cells revert back to a more primitive behaviour of dividing at all cost.

My lab focuses on understanding one of the key ways that allows cells to maintain this control – through regulating gene expression, which is the process of turning genes on and off at the right time and place. We're particularly interested in a group of proteins called RNA-binding proteins.

These proteins are essential in regulating many steps of gene expression, yet we still know surprisingly little about how they contribute to cancer. Excitingly, there are now new types of RNA-based therapies being developed that can target RNA-binding proteins, making them a really promising area of research for future cancer treatments.

Talking of RNA binding proteins – how did your research career lead you in this direction?

It all started with a surprising discovery during my postdoctoral research in the laboratory of the late Chris Marshall, a pioneering figure in the field of modern cancer biology. I was studying how cancer cells move around the body and colonise distant tissues and organs – a process known as metastasis, which accounts for the vast majority of cancer-related mortalities. To move, a cell has to polarise: it creates a leading front that pushes forward into the environment, and a retracting back that pulls the rest of the cell-body along. I developed a technique to figure out which proteins gather at the front and back of moving cancer cells. To my surprise, I found hundreds of RNA-binding proteins concentrated at the cell front. When I genetically removed these RNA-binding proteins, I found that they were mostly essential for cancer cells to move around and invade into their surroundings. This was totally unexpected, as cell movement is generally considered a process that is primarily driven by protein-related mechanisms rather than RNA! So it opened up a fascinating new question: what exactly were these RNA-binding proteins doing at the leading edges of the cancer cells? What RNAs were interacting with them? This discovery changed the direction

of my research. Ever since, I've been exploring the roles of RNA and RNA-binding proteins, not only in cancer cell movement, but also in many other aspects of cancer development and progression. And to date, the notion of RNA regulation as an unappreciated layer within well-established protein-driven cellular processes continues to fuel my curiosity!

The research output from your lab group is very varied! Can you give us an idea of the range of subjects your lab group's work covers at the moment?

That's absolutely true, and it reflects the incredible versatility of RNA-binding proteins! They're involved in so many different cellular processes. We typically start with broad, unbiased, and agnostic experiments to find RNA-binding proteins that are important for a specific aspect of cancer biology. Once the target is identified, the real fun begins: we dive deep to figure out exactly what that protein is doing, and how we can exploit the knowledge we gain to combat cancer.

Right now, my lab is working on RNA-binding proteins involved across a whole range of areas related to the biology of cancer – from how cancer cells build ribosomes (the cellular machines that make proteins), to how they survive and thrive in low-oxygen environments (a condition known as hypoxia, which is highly common in tumours due to poor blood supply). We've even discovered novel RNA-protein interactions that help cancer cells regulate their DNA architecture (recent unpublished results from my lab). It's a technically challenging, but very dynamic and exciting space to work in!

As someone at the start of their Brasenose journey, what are you most excited about for your time ahead at College?

I'm really excited to continue working with my fantastic Biochemistry students, and watch them go on and do amazing things after graduating; I'm also looking forward to welcoming new students, getting to know them, and observing how they grow and flourish during their time here. Hopefully, some of them might even be inspired to become researchers and academics.

Graduate Study At Brasenose

The Robert & Soulla Kyprianou Scholarship

Graduate student **Panagiota Yiallouri** tells us about her Oxford journey so far, and how the Robert & Soulla Kyprianou Scholarship enabled her to continue her studies with an MSt in History at Brasenose.

I am an MSt student in modern European history under the supervision of Dr Zbigniew Wojnowski. I chose to study at Oxford as an undergraduate after experiencing a glimpse of the tutorial system during a summer course in 2019. I was also impressed by the History Faculty's academics and research interests, which largely intersected with my research interests, including the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc.

During my undergraduate studies, I particularly enjoyed independent research, which encouraged me to pursue two dissertation projects. One of my dissertations examined the strategy of the Greek Communist Party in the period between the end of Nazi occupation and 1945. I felt particularly privileged to use my Greek language skills and to visit archives in Athens, enabling me to produce original historical work on a topic that I believe is significantly understudied. I also completed an additional dissertation on youth experience in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, for which I took a Russian fast-track course at beginner level. This allowed me to translate and analyse young people's diaries, which enriched the research process immeasurably.

My research interest was one of the main reasons why I decided to apply for a postgraduate course. My dissertation examines youth subcultures in Soviet cities during Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, a decade which is largely understudied in historical scholarship.

I heard about the Robert & Soulla Kyprianou Scholarship as a fresher from a Cypriot DPhil student and I was always keen to be considered. Thanks to the Kyprianou Scholarship, I am now pursuing a Master's degree in Modern European History and exploring a new decade (1985-1990) compared to my undergraduate research, which would not have been possible without the scholarship.

My time at Brasenose has been rewarding and I particularly enjoy working in the Brasenose Library, which I believe to be the prettiest college library in Oxford. My course has proven challenging because of the difficulties associated with reviewing material from the Bodleian Offsite Storage. Nevertheless, with consistency and hard work, I trust that the end product will be all the more rewarding.

After completing my studies, I aspire to become a commercial lawyer, by undertaking a law conversion course, and qualify as a solicitor in England.



The Oxford-Robert and Soulla Kyprianou Graduate Scholarship is available for applicants who are ordinarily resident in the Republic of Cyprus who are applying for a Master's course in a subject accepted by Brasenose. It is jointly funded by the University and Robert and Soulla Kyprianou; **Robert Kyprianou (PPE, 1973)** is thought to be one of the first students of Cypriot origin to study at Oxford.

Brazen News

Congratulations to **Richard Phillips MBE (Modern History, 1963)** who has received the 2024 award for Exceptional Service and Outstanding Contribution to Arts Festivals from the British Arts Festivals Association. Richard has created and directed 109 festivals since 1977, and we wish him well for his well-deserved retirement.

Drusilla Gabbott (English, 1982) reports the first ever Alumni Pub Quiz, organised by Year Rep **Graham Dransfield (Chemistry, 1974)** on 23rd April at the Pineapple, Kentish Town was much enjoyed by the 42 alums – and one dog – who attended. Eight wonderful teams competed, spanning matric years ranging from 1973 to 2019. Congratulations to the victors, led by Year Rep **Linus Gregoriadis (Classics, 1990)**, and here's to a re-match! Volunteer quiz authors for future events welcome.



Wolfson Foundation Award

We are delighted to announce that the Wolfson Foundation has awarded the College a generous grant of £100,000 to support the redevelopment of Frewin Hall. We extend our heartfelt thanks for their commitment to preserving and enhancing this uniquely historic space.

Congratulations to BNC Honorary Fellow **Alexandra Marks CBE (Jurisprudence, 1977)** on being appointed Chair of the Parole Board for a 5 year term from 18 July 2025.

Congratulations to **Marcia Hutchinson MBE (Jurisprudence, 1982)** who has been named as one of the *Guardian's* best new novelists for 2025, for her debut novel *The Mercy Step*.

William O'Chee (Jurisprudence, 1984) tells us about a project to rejuvenate the keeping of paper records at the Brasenose Boat Club. The prevalence of digital methods for record keeping was threatening the longstanding tradition of BNCBC's handwritten Minute

Professor Graham Richards CBE

Many will be aware of the sad news that Professor Graham Richards CBE died in his sleep on 11 February 2025. He was a towering figure in the College and University.

Graham won a scholarship to study Chemistry at Brasenose, matriculating in 1958 and graduating in 1961 with first class honours. He then went on to earn his DPhil in 1964 and, from 1966 was awarded the Official Fellowship in Physical Chemistry. Graham's impactful work on electronic spectroscopy and computational chemistry fuelled his



Photo: Duncan Hull CC BY-SA 4.0

promotion to Professor in 1996. He served as Head of the Department of Chemistry from 1997 until 2006, celebrating his formal retirement from the University of Oxford in May 2007. As Emeritus Fellow of Brasenose since 2008, Graham has been a regular and well-beloved visitor to the College.

We will pay tribute to Graham more fully in the next edition of the *Brazen Nose*, and we will be holding a Memorial Service for him

on 20 September 2025. Please refer to the 'Save The Date' section on p.19 for further details.

Books, prompting much discussion at the Club. Outgoing President, Matthew Campbell, was also convinced that the handwritten tradition should continue, and organised the production of a new Minute Book, bound in leather with embossed cover. William, after viewing a recent display of Brasenose's illuminated missals, was inspired that 'we need to create new masterpieces for the College, which will be pulled out in 200 or 300 years. We need to create

for the future instead of just thinking that beautiful things only existed in the past.' With this in mind, a coloured frontispiece artwork was commissioned; a talented hand gilder and rowing trophy maker, Lisa Harse was selected to create the design and create a beautiful artwork 'illuminated' with gold leaf. Read more about this fantastic project in William's original article here: www.heartheboatsing.com/2025/01/03/



Left: Dan Brocklebank (Chairman of the Bowman Fund), Luke Hayward (Co-President of BNCBC), Dagmara Nogal (Co-President of BNCBC), Peter Edmundson (President of the 1815 Club) with the new book in Hall; Right: The illuminated and gilded frontispiece of new Brasenose College Boat Club Minute Book (Photo: William O'Chee).





Principal's Blog Highlights

To read Principal John Bowers KC's blog in full, please visit www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/about-brasenose/princblog

Hilary 2025

Bloomberg Mithraeum

Alumna **Jemma Read (English, 1993)**, Global Head of Corporate Philanthropy at Bloomberg, generously hosted a Brasenose in Business networking event at the Bloomberg Mithraeum in the City of London on 13th February, providing a fantastic opportunity for BNC alumni to meet each other in the City. Jemma spoke about the importance of philanthropy in business, and provided fascinating tours of the Roman Temple which sits beneath the building. It has been lovingly restored by Bloomberg with great attention to detail.

Runcie Sermon

This year's Runcie Sermon was given by the Reverend Marcus Walker, Rector of Great St Barts in the City of London on 23rd February. Marcus spoke about the recent trials of the Church of England. He quoted some passages from Runcie. He took as his text, 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today' (Matthew 6 v 34). His sermon balanced wit and wisdom in good measure. Later in term we were also favoured by a visit from an old friend of mine the Right Revd June Osborne, the former Bishop of Llandaff, who spoke about the challenges of seeking a good Lent.

Malka Levine

Our speaker for the Holocaust Memorial Day service was Malka Levine, a Holocaust survivor who has written an excellent book called *A Mother's Courage* published by Pan which I would strongly recommend. She was three when German invaders forced her family into a ghetto in what is now part of Ukraine. Her father was murdered but the family found shelter with the Yakimchuk family, where the saintly wife took care of them. Malka spoke with verve about her experiences.



Bloomberg Mithraeum (Photo: Carole Raddato from Frankfurt, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)

The 50th Anniversary of Women at Brasenose

Our excellent series of events for the 50th anniversary of women at Brasenose continued with a large group of Fellows in Humanities and

Social Sciences, ably chaired by Sos Eltis. The Panel spoke about their experiences of academia. Discussing the progress made over the last thirty years and the work still to do, the panel found remarkable similarities in their experiences in Economics, Politics, Law, Modern Languages and English. Answering some excellent questions from the floor and online, they finally shared the advice they'd give their younger selves: learn to say 'no' and don't waste time feeling guilty.

On 5th March, I chaired a great session featuring Brasenose alumnae from the media, business and finance sectors. **Hermione Davies (Modern History, 1978)**, **Lucinda Riches (PPE, 1980)**, **Victoria Fea (English, 1989)** and **Jane Johnson (English, 1987)** dealt with how Brasenose had helped to shape their careers (and in the case of Lucinda how being the first female JCR President had done so). They also discussed challenges in their careers.

PPE Society

On 26th February Daniel Greenberg, the House of Commons Commissioner for Standards, spoke to our PPE Society about the challenges of being an ethical regulator in a political environment. It was a great interactive session. He was also able to deliver a heartening reminder that, contrary to the news headlines, MPs are better-behaved than we are led to believe from the scandals about which we hear. In fact, these scandals are proof that we live in an open, transparent society, something which is not to be taken for granted.

Lord Hague

I was privileged to attend the magnificent inauguration of Lord Hague as Chancellor of the University on 19th February. It was a morning of great pomp and circumstance, with wonderful music and a terrific address (in Latin of course) from our very own Jonathan Katz, the University's Public Orator.



Photo credit: University of Oxford Images / John Cairns Photography

Professor Daniela Bortoletto

The European Physical Society has announced that Professor Daniela Bortoletto has been awarded its EPS Emmy Noether Distinction 2024 (full career) "for revolutionising silicon detector technology, that enabled the discoveries of the top quark and Higgs boson, and pioneering key experimental methods now central to high-energy particle physics, as well as for her important engagement for female undergraduate students." Huge congratulations to Professor Bortoletto on this fantastic accolade.

Many of our Brasenose events are recorded and available to view on our website at www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/alumni/recordings

Save The Date

Forthcoming Events

Alumni Garden Party

A garden party hosted for alumni and their families.

Sun 3 August 2025 | In College

Graham Richards' Memorial Service

A memorial service in tribute to Professor Graham Richards CBE, a much missed Emeritus Fellow, and a towering figure in the College and University. The service will be held in the University Church at 10.30am, with tea, coffee and refreshments to follow in College afterwards.

Saturday 20 September 2025 | University Church | College

Alumni Society Annual Dinner

The Brasenose Alumni Society's AGM, followed by the Annual Dinner. A glamorous event which is ever-popular with Brasenose alumni across the generations, the Annual Dinner is one of

the highlights of the BNC calendar. Dress Code: Black Tie (no gowns).

Saturday 20 September 2025 | In College

Gaudy for 1998-1999

A chance for 1998 and 1999 matriculands to return to College and catch up with old friends. There will be an (optional) service in Chapel at 6pm, followed by a drinks reception at 6:30pm and dinner at 7:30pm in Hall. Dinner is complimentary; accommodation is available at a cost of £50 per person. Unfortunately, we cannot include guests. Dress Code will be Black Tie (no gowns). Bookings for this event will open at the end of July 2025.

Friday 26 September 2025 | In College

Bookings for these events will open a couple of months before the event dates.

Go to www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/alumni/events for an up-to-date list of our upcoming events, and to register.

Please note that any new alumni accounts will need to be verified (during normal College working hours) before making event bookings via the online service.

To update your contact details using our online alumni community, visit our alumni pages at: www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/alumni and follow the 'Update your information' link.

Classics Reunion

A reunion lunch for alumni who read Classics at Brasenose, including pre-lunch drinks and talks – further details to be confirmed.

Saturday 1 November 2025 | In College

Ellesmere Dinner

The Ellesmere Society present their annual dinner for alumni and students who read law at Brasenose – further details to be confirmed.

Saturday 15 November 2025

Recent Events



Gaudy 2008-09, March 2025
(Photo: Ian Wallman)



Golden Jubilee Lunch, April 2025
(Photo: Ian Wallman)



Golden Jubilee Lunch, April 2025
(Photo: Ian Wallman)



Gaudy 2008-09, March 2025
(Photo: Ian Wallman)

Call For College Memories!

Have you stumbled across any BNC gems recently that you'd like to donate to the Archives? We'd love to see! Please do get in touch to let us know what you've found at archives@bnc.ox.ac.uk.

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Front Cover Photo: New Organ in Brasenose Chapel (Photo by Ian Wallman).

Remember Brasenose in your Will

Over the centuries, philanthropic gifts have supported our students, endowed our scholars and provided our buildings. Legacies are an important part of Brasenose's history and you can make them an important part of its future.

If you would like to discuss including a gift to Brasenose in your Will, please get in touch

donations@bnc.ox.ac.uk

