

Forty Years of Women at New College: How Did They Get Here?

As New College this academic year celebrated 40 years of women undergraduates it is appropriate to look back and see how this came to be. The original proposal to admit women to New College was made by Harry Bell, a history Fellow, in a letter to the Governing Body in December 1963. The original proposal was to admit women to New College in 1969. The original proposal was to admit women to New College in 1969. The original proposal was to admit women to New College in 1969.

vacillating JCRs; stalling by the University; and bucks being passed. In fact, it has all of the ingredients of a good Oxford murder mystery by Michael Innes or Colin Dexter . . . without the murder.



Twenty Five Years of Women at New College 1979-2004: A Celebration (Oxford: New College, 2004), back and front covers

THE INITIAL PROPOSAL

The initial proposal to admit women to New College came from Harry Bell, just about the last person you would expect to propose such a radical idea. Bell was a very conservative, traditionally minded history Fellow. A December 1963 Governing Body meeting was considering a request from the Vice-Chancellor on how to increase the number of undergraduates at Oxford (prompted by a recommendation by the Robbins Commission) when Bell suggested that the best way to do so would be to admit more women. After a stunned silence, followed by laughter, the meeting moved on as if

the admission of women which were debated over the following decade. It is worth citing at length. The case for the admission of women was based on the following:

- 1) In principle women have an equal *right* (emphasis in the original here and below) with men to an education (including university education).
- 2) It is as *socially desirable* to educate them, even though the greater majority of them will spend a good part of their middle years in bringing up families **UDWKHU WKDQ ¶HD OLYLQJ·**
- 3) It is probably true that in our society as it is at present a smaller proportion of women than men *want* to go to a university (

- 8) The College wished to make its admissions in conjunct **L R Q Z L W K W K H Z R P H Q · V F**
in the closest possible co-

&RPPLWWHH FRQFOXGHG WKDW WKH EHQHILWV WRshZRPHQ.V
 LQWHUHVWV RI D It is important to keep in mind
 were opposed to coresidence not all of their Fellows agreed with this position nor did some of the
 women elsewhere in the University. In 1964, 16 female Fellows wrote to the *Observer* in support of
 coresidence and four years later 33 wrote to the *Oxford Magazine* to express support for coresidence.¹⁴
 The College archive contains several letters from women expressing support for the New College
 p003-2-0-00404-10V 1204802(H) (756) (H) (V) (W) (G) (a) (w) (X) (S) (R) (L) (U) (4) (5) (7) (G) (1) (R) (8) (2) (1) (7) (6) (6) (5) (H) (W) (6) (4) (2)
 wheel³ what possible motive they could have I cannot think³ unless it could be to try and put the
 clock back .

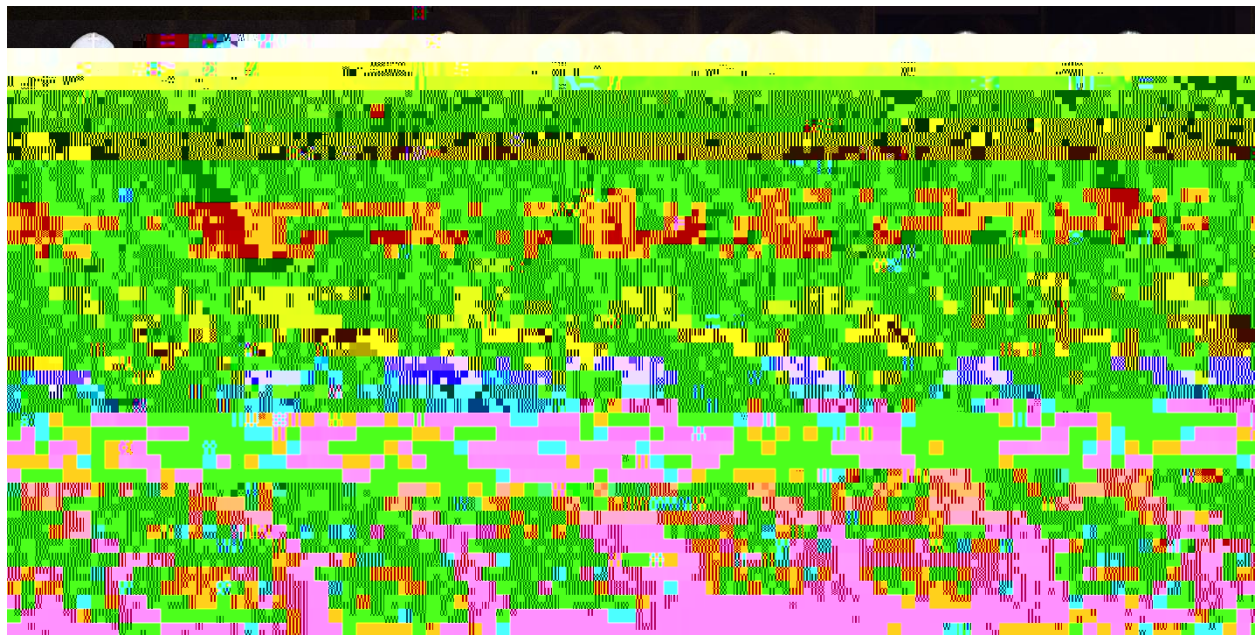
W K H Z R P H Q T M F R O O H S H W The Commission stated that they would not attempt to guess what the long-term structure of the colleges might be but whatever change came, it should come slowly.²⁴ Although Council had taken no action on the issue because it was before Franks, in this letter Franks made it **F O H D U W K D W W K H L V V X H R I L I D Q G Z K H Q X Q G H U J U D G X D W H**

to oppose the admission of women an5(s)5(i)9(o)-9(n)-k()]r()]SSN

and placed a five- \H DU PRUDWRULXP RQ DQg s R W K H L R H O V F R O O H J H

three were Fellowships do not become vacant very often and there was likely to be a shortage of women applicants in many subjects³ particularly in the sciences and classics. This being the case, the Working Party recommended that there should be bias in favour of female candidates for all open academic positions, at least initially. Progress was, indeed, initially slow at New College. Ann Barton was the first female Fellow, elected in 1974. No other female Fellow was elected until 1984 when Nicola Lacey was elected, joining one female JRF and one female lecturer. Penry Williams credits Nicola Lacey with the rapid increase in the number of women elected to New College, 15 by 1989 and 24 by 2004. She and that this was a good place to come to, in 2020 there are 17 women with the title Fellow (other than JFR), 7 JFRs, and 15 lecturers, respectively 28%, 37%, and 48% of people in these positions.

Perhaps it is fitting that the Commission on Women should have the last word in this retelling of the story of the Commission of the Committee on Women still resonates today³



The Seven Cardinal Virtues, stained glass in the Antechapel of New College, Oxford
 Designed by Sir Joshua Reynolds and painted by Thomas Jervas (1739)
 © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

Dennis A. Ahlburg
 Visiting Fellow
 New College, Oxford

Distinguished Professor of Economics
 Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 10.