

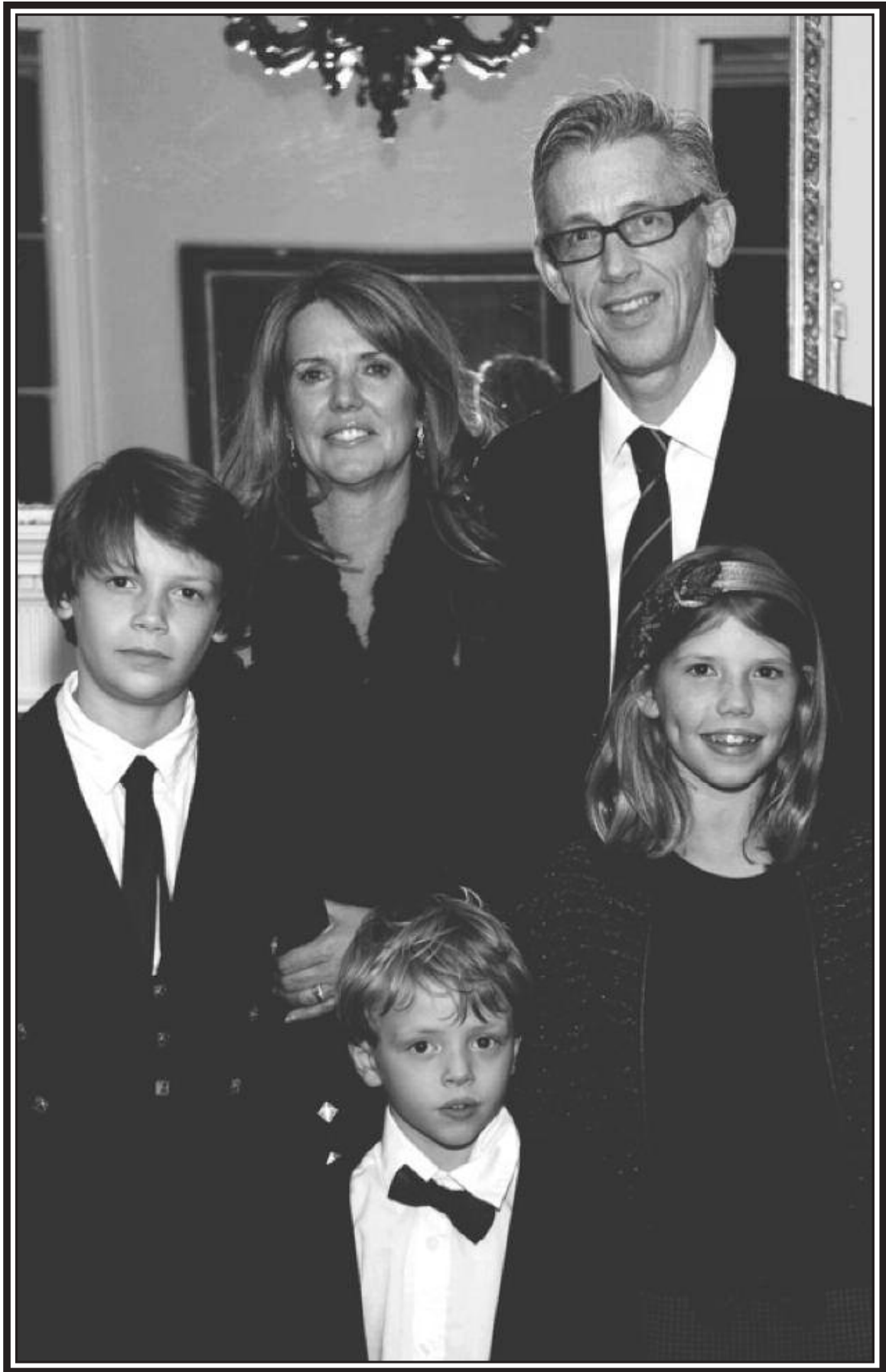
OPENING THE BLACK DOOR

What is a college? A collection of buildings arranged in quadrangles? Yes, but buildings come and go. No Oxford college demonstrates this more vividly than Worcester, with our main quad that holds together the medieval era, the eighteenth century and the unbuilt – the fortuitous absence of a west range opening up our unique pastoral view. But a college is far more than a collection of buildings, it is above all a community.

Most people open their front door into a street or a driveway that leads to a road. I open mine into the quad. When I walk six-year-old Harry to school in the morning, we say hello to a scout, a gardener, a group of students before we reach the street. We see the lights in the Old Library where generations have sweated over essay crises and we pass the memorial outside the Chapel to those members of the College who gave their lives in the two world wars.

It is a unique privilege to live in such a place, to be part of such a community. When the children first saw their black front door in the corner of the quad, they said ‘It looks just like 10 Downing Street’ (with a porter instead of a policeman to tell you that you can’t ride your bike). And in its little way, the life of a Provost’s family does resemble that of a Prime Minister: you are living over the shop, so you never really stop working; your house is always full of people, so the children come in from school to find a group of (mostly male) strangers sitting around a large table arguing about some point of policy; or they come down to say goodnight and find another group in evening dress being served an impeccably presented dinner by highly professional staff. And you have to be on best behaviour all the time. It can be tiring, but it is immensely rewarding because everybody is so loyal to, and so passionate about, the College.

‘So what have you done in your first year?’ people have asked me. The answer is that I’ve tried to make sure that the black front door is always open. Open for students to come in: not only for the ordeal of Provost’s Collections but also for the sociability of Provost’s Sunday Brunches (in the course of the year, every one of our six hundred students, graduate and undergraduate, had an invitation). Open to senior Fellows and junior; to the parents of undergraduates; and of course to Old Members on the occasion of Gaudies and reunions.



Open, too, for me to go out: to go across the quad to Chapel and Formal Hall; to visit our hardworking staff in their offices; to head for the touchline or the towpath; to watch University Challenge on the big screen television in the JCR.

And what a year it has been, quite apart from that magnificent run of victories under the beady eye of Mr Paxman (who, I hope, can, like me, be forgiven for having studied at the other place, since at least we had the decency to go to Worcester's sister college, St Catharine's). At the end of Trinity Term, we threw a Pimm's Party in the gardens of the Lodgings for the 'Worcester Wonders' – those members of College with special extra-curricular achievements in the course of the year. Such have been the triumphs that almost half the student body were there, and one suspects that if we had broadened the criteria just a little, the other half would have been too.

We had six crews representing the College in Torpids and Summer VIII's, with one crew winning blades and all performing to their utmost. The men's hockey team was promoted and the men's football first eleven won Cuppers for the second successive season. The cup is thought to be the oldest football trophy still in circulation. In honour of its retention, there are plans to add a special plaque to it, engraved for the first time with a college emblem. Our women footballers also triumphed.

My vision of spending my first Trinity Term listening to the gentle thud of leather on willow, then hearing the dulcet tones of student thespians rehearsing Shakespeare by the lake were dashed by the truly awful weather. Cricket Cuppers was reduced to a bowl-out and the Buskins' summer show was moved into the Chapel. But drama and music remain a key part of College life. And the weather failed to deter our green-fingered Edible Garden Team, who have carved out a vegetable patch behind the tennis court and now provide both the College and a local restaurant, the Turl Street Kitchen (run by the Oxford Hub charity group), with garden produce on a regular basis.

Looking beyond our crumbling walls and glorious grounds, many students have been involved in charitable activities, ranging from a fund-raising climb of Mount Kilimanjaro to a mentoring scheme for schoolchildren from less privileged backgrounds attending inner-city London schools.

And then of course there was the small matter of examinations: this year we came a lucky thirteenth in the Norrington table. We were a full percentage point above the next college down – a place called Merton – and only another percentage point behind Balliol, the seventh-placed college. It is perhaps the most extraordinary of the many extraordinary things about Worcester today that we can match the academic achievements of the older, grander and much wealthier colleges, whilst also retaining our sense of family, of friendliness, and of proportion in the balance between work and play. We are famous in Oxford for the good relations between junior and senior members and I have felt especially privileged in my first year to have had an exemplary JCR President in Sam Barker. With his permission, I would like to quote some words that he spoke at the Trinity Term dinner for the parents of current students:

Worcester's greatest success of all, however, is not a particular novelty, but is gradually cementing itself into the fabric of the College. With a new Provost could have come an unwelcome shift in direction and ethos, but in actual fact, Professor Bate, and his family, have been champions for all the best features of Worcester life and I am excited to see where he will lead the College into the future. The JCR enjoys an unrivalled level of involvement in key decisions in College. I was honoured to be the first JCR President ever to sit on Governing Body at the end of Hilary Term, and enjoyed very much watching some of the University's greatest minds arguing violently over whether or not we should repeal the College by-law that all dogs are cats, and whether or not a Flag Committee needed to be constituted to work out whether or not it was appropriate to raise certain flags on certain days, before seamlessly moving into discussion about the College's finances and new academic appointments. Rent negotiations this year were conducted in a spirit of real co-operation, and good humour was maintained at all times. Whilst other Colleges were at loggerheads with their JCRs, and relations broke down to the level that forced resignations and motions of no confidence, Worcester, in its much admired way, just got on with dealing with the matter at hand in a friendly, sensible and helpful way.

What has been cemented most of all is that Worcester is becoming, for so many of its population, a real home. Freshers, within a few weeks,

are already referring to College as ‘home’. Those finalists who are leaving us for good in a few short weeks will testify to the fact that this feeling of homeliness is not a novelty that goes away – if anything it gets stronger. One American student called her parents in New York whilst travelling in Europe over Easter to say that she was a bit tired of travelling around and just wanted to get home. Delighted by this apparent willingness to return to New York, her parents suggested that they book her a flight back to JFK; instead she was referring to heading back to Worcester, and to term recommencing.

The sentiments are completely true to the College, if over-generous to me. And, yes, it was a particular pleasure to persuade colleagues to break centuries of tradition and allow the MCR and JCR Presidents to attend Governing Body meetings.

The rain did stop for one day at the very end of Trinity. And it was the right day: Worcester had been chosen to host the Encaenia Garden Party, the climax of the most special day in the University’s calendar, when Honorary Degrees are awarded in the Sheldonian. Simon Bagnall and his team of gardeners, having battled the elements for weeks, miraculously produced perfection in everything from the herbaceous border to the Rose Garden to the lawn of the front quad, which was mown in circles, not stripes, to the amazement and delight of the Vice-Chancellor and all the University’s top brass. On this occasion, the black front door – well, actually the black garden gate – was opened to two thousand guests, including such honorands as John Le Carré and the former head of MI5 (a typically witty Oxford conjunction). Most honoured of all was Aung San Suu Kyi, able at last to pick up in person the honorary doctorate awarded so many years ago. The Chancellor, Lord Patten, who knows everybody, said to me that she seemed to him a combination of Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa. Her serenity was such that I knew what he meant.

I had the pleasure of welcoming many of Worcester’s own distinguished Old Members through the black front door. I instituted an annual dinner for our Honorary Fellows in the newly redecorated Lodgings dining room and in July we had a delightful lunch to celebrate the most recent addition to their number, the distinguished theatre producer Michael Codron, who was joined by fellow

undergraduates John Sainsbury and Godfrey Smith. It was as much a delight to hear them reminiscing about the Worcester of sixty years ago as it had been, back in September for my very first Provostorial engagement, to hear the memories of Old Members returning for their fiftieth anniversary reunion. By flickering candlelight in the SCR they recalled the Cuban missile crisis, the frozen lake and iced-up taps in the bitter winter of 1962-3, and the effect on American Rhodes scholars of the news of JFK's assassination.

It was through the extraordinary generosity of Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover that we were able to announce the endowment of an Asa Briggs Fellowship in the Humanities. This was an act of profound philanthropy that honoured a former tutor, a distinguished Provost and a friend; it was also Lord Sainsbury's way of giving support to the Humanities at a time when their funding is under great strain. I was able to visit Asa in Sussex, and hear of his delight at the prospect of his name living in perpetuity in the academic life of the College.

Our former Tutorial Fellow in French, Keith Gore, died this year, and we hope to raise funds to honour his name and secure the future of Modern Languages teaching in the College. The endowing of Fellowships, to allow us to maintain the unique Oxford tutorial tradition, is going to be the bedrock of my strategy for the College's development, a key area of my work where I am lucky to have the experience, and the unparalleled links with Old Members, provided by Coleen Day.

The one less positive aspect of the year has been the opening not of the black front door but of the black box of the College's finances at a time when public funds for education are diminishing. The price of our investment in extensive building work in recent years – which has made our student accommodation the envy of Oxford and the wonder of returning Old Members who were used to damp digs in Worcester Place – was a large development loan and the shrinking of a historically very small endowment. Confronted also by higher operational costs, we face some tough decisions. And yet by addressing the less palatable aspects of the balance sheet we have, I think, only deepened the sense of collective endeavour and responsibility. When the JCR were shown the numbers, they readily accepted that we cannot go on charging lower

rents than pretty well every other college when we have less money in the coffers than pretty well every other college. Even though a substantial rent rise is especially unwelcome at a time when student debt is about to treble, the JCR Committee took the long-term view, knowing by instinct and experience that Worcester is bigger than any one generation.

The proper balance of continuity and change has been my mantra in many a speech this inaugural year: ‘In what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete.’ What is a college? It is a society, and society, as Edmund Burke wrote, is a contract between those who are dead, those who are living, and those who are to be born. By respecting our traditions and engaging all our members, we will prepare Worcester for its next three hundred years.

Jonathan Bate

Provost