1 We begin our tour just inside the main entrance to the College in an area known as the Cloisters. Looking out over the Main Quad you can see a view which has hardly changed in the past 300 years or so. At just over 300 years old, Worcester is a relatively new Oxford college but it was founded on the site of a much earlier institution. Gloucester College was established in 1283 to house monks from Bury St Edmunds who wished to study at Oxford. Known as the cottages, the medieval ‘camerae’ on the left-hand side were built for Gloucester College in the fifteenth century, and there once was a medieval baking oven on the right-hand side. As a monastic foundation, Gloucester College was forced to close under Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 but it survived as a beautiful buildings, as well as in the name of Oxford’s bus station – Gloucester Green – situated just across the road.

The Worcester College we know today was founded in 1714 with a benefaction of £50,000 from the Worcestershire baronet Sir Thomas Cookes (bap.1648-1701) and is Oxford’s only surviving eighteenth-century foundation.

2 To assert its new status, the College set about replacing the medieval buildings of Gloucester College with the grander, neo-classical accommodation seen on the right-hand side of the Main Quad. Known as the Territorial Building, it ends with the Provost’s Lodgings which were completed 1776.

In the eighteenth century, any newly-founded college would have urgently needed a Library, Chapel and Dining Hall. The building you are standing under houses all three: the Library above, and the Chapel and Dining Hall. The two projecting wings either side. It was constructed to the designs of architect Dr George Clarke (1661-1736) who also worked at other colleges in Oxford including All Saints, Christ Church, Magdalen and Queen’s. Clarke bequeathed his collection of books, prints and architectural drawings to Worcester and today this forms the core of our significant special collections which run to over 70,000 items.

Clarke’s building is best viewed from the bottom of the Main Quad, but before we leave the Cloisters, this time past the Second World War memorial, to the corresponding door on the other side. Here you can see the Dining Hall, although it is not open to visitors during meal times. It has exactly the same dimensions as the Chapel but feels very different thanks to its airy eighteenth-century interior designed by James Wyatt. Having been similarly redecorated by Burges in the 1870s, the earlier scheme was recreated in 1966 (and restored in 2018) from the original drawings held in the College Library. The only remainder of Burges’ nineteenth-century scheme is the central stained-glass window depicting literary banqueting scenes from Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare and Milton.

3 Turning your back on the Dining Hall, leave the Cloisters by heading down the steps on your left. Looking at the bottom, you can see Pump Quad and the oldest buildings in the College, which are used by student accommodation today as they have been for seven centuries. The name comes from the water pump that used to stand in the far corner, though today you are more likely to see the drinking fountain at the Cellar Bar housed in the undercroft below the Dining Hall. You are now passing in front of the Victorian kitchens across this quad to the Dining Hall.

4 Now turn right and follow the gravel path west alongside the herbaceous borders. If you visit in the summer, this will be a riot of colour with bright blooms and tropical foliage; in the winter there is a wonderful display of snowdrops. Rounding the corner, you will catch your first glimpse of the College lake. The lake is man-made, created c.1878 to improve the waterlogged gardens and drainage system from the Oxford Canal which runs adjacent to the boundary wall. Today, the lake provides a lovely walk across the College site and the Mildred Allen Bridge, installed in 2005, offers beautiful views back towards the Provost’s Garden (closed to visitors) and the Palladian façade of the Provost’s Lodgings.

5 Continue following the path around the lake and through the old stone gateway, which marks the boundary of the nineteenth-century College garden. Before 1900 the area beyond this gate was a walled pasture for the Provost’s cows but, following a student-led fundraising campaign, the ground level was raised to create sports pitches and the cricket pavilion at the end of the nineteenth century.

6 Just before the pavilion, the path splits in two and you have the option of following the right-hand path across the playing fields straight ahead, or turning right and walking a shorter route beside the lake.

The paths reunite at the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre, opened in 2017. This award-winning building was designed by Niall McLaughlin (b.1962) and houses a modern lecture theatre, seminar rooms and a dance studio. Cross the small bridge where you will see how the lake was extended to meet the full-length windows of the studio. To your right is the Reclining Figure, a bronze sculpture made by the internationally acclaimed artist in 1982 and installed in the gardens in 2023.

7 Walking through the grass you will see a group of large trees between the Provost’s servants (on the right). The stables are once a year to support biodiversity – in the spring, paths are cut through the wildflowers creating pleasant walks, so feel free to linger on a bench and perhaps enjoy your refreshments from the Cafe.

8 From the bottom of the steps, turn right and walk in front of the medieval cottages. The painted shields above the doors denote the different Benedictine abbeys which once sent monks to Gloucester College. Facing you at the end of the path to your right, you can see Pump Quad and the oldest buildings in the College, which are used by student accommodation today as they have been for seven centuries. The name comes from the water pump that used to stand in the far corner, though today you are more likely to see the drinking fountain at the Cellar Bar housed in the undercroft below the Dining Hall. You are now passing in front of the Victorian kitchens across this quad to the Dining Hall.

9 Following the path to the right of the driveway to enter Nash Quad. This quad was created in 2008 with the construction of the Nash Building to your right – if the cafe is open, feel free to take a break. The low, brick-built building to your left as you first enter, now the student’s common room, was once the 19th century war memorial to local men who died in Jericho: this area of Oxford rapidly expanded around the University Press, Oxford Canal and Eagle Ironworks in the nineteenth century.

10 Walk through the small archway to the right of the driveway to enter Nash Quad. This quad was created in 2008 with the construction of the Nash Building to your right – if the cafe is open, feel free to take a break. The low, brick-built building to your left as you first enter, now the student’s common room, was once the 19th century war memorial to local men who died in Jericho: this area of Oxford rapidly expanded around the University Press, Oxford Canal and Eagle Ironworks in the nineteenth century.

11 Path to the right of the Nash Café, with the award-winning Sainsbury Building (1983) to your right. After crossing over another footbridge at the head of the lake and through an archway you will arrive in the Orchard. This area was the passion of Provost Lys (1863-1947) who planted many of the trees which today produce around 75% of the food consumed in the College. The orchard is still managed by the Provost’s servants (on the right). The stables are once a year to support biodiversity – in the spring, paths are cut through the wildflowers creating pleasant walks, so feel free to linger on a bench and perhaps enjoy your refreshments from the Cafe.

12 Following the tarmac path through the centre of the Orchard, pass under the archway of the Besse Building (1955) into the Provost’s Yard. This area originally consisted of stables on the site of the present kitchen, broughouse and accommodation for the Provost’s servants (on the right). The stables are now administrative offices, while the kitchens on the other side combine the Provost’s Memorial Room in 1949 which is used for seminars and student concerts. Behind you, in a square planter in the corner, is a Wollemi Pine – this species was thought to be extinct for two million years until 1994 in the Blue Mountains of Australia.

13 Through the screen of wooden columns straight ahead is the bottom of Staircase 6, which will take you back up to the Main Quad. On your right at the top of the stairs is a separate entrance to the Provost’s Lodgings, designed by Henry Keene (1726-1776) who died just before the building was completed. Once you are ready, walk along the Terrace to exit through the main entrance. As you leave, look down at the stone pavement just inside the front gates. Here you can see a stone commemorating the first women to join Worcester College as students in 1979, installed to mark 40 years of co-education. Depending on the season you can spot the dodo, pangolin and unicorn. The Chapel continues to offer Church of England services, though there is also a separate prayer room open for students of other faiths. In the tradition of choir evensong, the College Choir sings here four times a week during term – you are welcome to attend any of the services advertised outside.

14 Leaving the Chapel, turn left and walk back down to the Cloisters, this time past the Second World War memorial, to the corresponding door on the other side. Here you can see the Dining Hall, although it is not open to visitors during meal times. It has exactly the same dimensions as the Chapel but feels very different thanks to its airy eighteenth-century interior designed by James Wyatt. Having been similarly redecorated by Burges in the 1870s, the earlier scheme was recreated in 1966 (and restored in 2018) from the original drawings held in the College Library. The only remainder of Burges’ nineteenth-century scheme is the central stained-glass window depicting literary banqueting scenes from Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare and Milton.