

Beyond the Bullingdon: A closer look into Oxford's Secret Societies

Cherwell dives deep into Oxford's clandestine world: Tutors, Tories, bankrolling alumni, and dinosaurs are only the beginning of the world behind doors.

By Anonymous - 12th March 2020



A group of hand-picked male undergraduate Oxford students in smoking jackets and matching bow ties sit in a candlelit dark wood-panelled room. Dinner has been served and port glasses clink as the guests raise a toast to their patron. Sitting alongside them are some of the college's most distinguished fellows. Conspicuous by their absence to this invite-only dinner are women and anyone who didn't attend public school. It sounds like a scene straight out of *Brideshead Revisited*. Except it wasn't last century. It was last year at Oriel College, Oxford.

Although you may think that exclusive drinking societies are an outdated, out-of-fashion relic of the past, the reality is very different. *Cherwell* takes an exclusive look into the culture of Oxford's elite. Drinking societies are not independent, disconnected, harmless bodies of posh-boy fun. They are not just student societies – college staff support and maintain their existence. Women may still be a novelty, but tutors are not. The clandestine world still thrives behind closed doors at Oxford. Drinking societies are intrinsically woven into the fabric of Oxford life.

Of course, when you think of drinking societies in Oxford, one name springs to mind: the Bullingdon is perhaps the most infamous secret society in Britain.

Its name conjures up images of raucous public schoolboys smashing up restaurants and throwing money at the owners to pay their way out of trouble. At a minimum of £3,500 for the bespoke tailcoats alone, the Bullingdon has become a byword for the elitist privilege that taints Oxford's reputation.

Despite its notoriety, it has provided no obstacle to the success of the most high-profile British politicians of the past decade. Its influence permeates British political life. David Cameron may have admitted that he was “deeply embarrassed” by his involvement, but he did manage to appoint three of his Bullingdon pals as ministers. While George Osborne and Jeremy Hunt held two of the highest positions in government, Jo Johnson was in charge of the Number 10 Policy Unit and reported directly to his old Bully mate. Boris Johnson confessed that he may still greet former members with an affectionate ‘**Buller Buller Buller**’ – of course, only “satirically”.

The Bullingdon – far from abolished – thrives in heightened secrecy. Details of its membership are fiercely guarded from even those closest to the alleged members. But reports of its exploits do occasionally surface in public, most recently when two Bullingdon members were **caught on camera** after Oxford University Conservative Association's ‘Port and Policy’ chanting “I've got a better castle than you” and that they would “buy the families” of the people who refused to serve them more drinks. Bullingdon members were also **marched out of Christ Church by porters** while trying to take their annual photo in 2017. Rumoured initiation rites in recent years have included branding a *B* with hot wax onto new members' arms. Two years ago, one alleged member spent a week in hospital receiving a skin graft after a branding went spectacularly wrong.

The Bullingdon is only the beginning of the desire for exclusive elitism that prevails at Oxford. Public school Oxford undergraduates nowadays prefer the more sophisticated environs of Oxford's foremost private members' club, the

Gridiron. The Grid was founded in 1884 and also boasts a hallowed political past, with David Cameron serving as President in 1988. Grid members consistently vetoed the acceptance of women until they were eventually allowed to join in 2016.

Cherwell can now reveal at least three other current politicians were members. We discovered the existence of annual Gridiron photos, and British politics' big players don't shy away from the camera. An unsmiling Jacob Rees-Mogg is captured in a double-breasted suit in 1990 (second row from the bottom, far left). Two years later, George Osborne can be found grinning in the bottom left corner in the 1992 photo. London Mayoral candidate Rory Stewart stands out in the 1995 photo amongst a sea of men in blazers (bottom right corner) in front of Christ Church's library.

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Nowadays, you'll find Grid members safely ensconced upstairs at St Aldate's Tavern in a privately hired room. Affectionately termed 'Christ Church Second Hall', members pay £15 a month for the privilege of not having to mix with the hoi polloi, with extra charges for termly dinners. Dinners often end with members indulging in snuff for some light after-dinner entertainment reminiscent of the 18th century. Grid members enjoy reciprocal access to the Pitt Club and Hawks' Club in Cambridge as well as two private members' clubs in London, extending their network far beyond Oxford.

If this sounds enticing, the membership application process is simple. Provided you are installed in an appropriate social group, an existing Grid member must write your name in the nomination book. Other members can sign their name next to yours – get enough signatures, and you'll be invited to be a member (after the committee have discussed your credentials, of course).

Woe betide the prospective members who receive a black dot, marking you as effectively blackballed from the society.

The more adventurous are drawn to the other prominent face of contemporary drinking societies: the Piers Gaveston. Named after the alleged lover of King Edward II, this former dining society is perhaps best known for Hugh Grant's attendance and an infamous incident with David Cameron and a dead pig's head.

We do know that Piers Gav has transformed in the last few years into something resembling the 21st century, with a twelve-person committee that includes women and LGBTQ+ students. Last year, the committee even started selling reduced-price access tickets. There truly is no excuse for anyone else: Oxford's commitment to outreach has now reached even secret societies.

But, Piers Gav is still an invite-only club. The identities of individual committee members are not widely known. Infamous Summer Gav parties features at least one sex tent, a members-only tent, a live sex performance to start the night and several shady looking men selling hard drugs to Oxford's finest young minds. Not everyone engages in sex; many people are just looking for a liberated night out in a field with unlimited vodka at just £90 a ticket.

The Bullingdon may have taken a backseat in the contemporary world of Oxford's drinking societies – but the age old Public-School-Boys-Club traditions are still rife, and growing, within college drinking societies. Their names do not elicit the same recognition as the Bullingdon and Piers Gav, but they can be just as controversial.

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Some college societies have met their demise in recent years, as reports from those state. Hertford's former all-male drinking society The Penguins were **banned in 2010 amidst reports** that they invited a tutor's daughter to a crew date. In 2015, the all-male Corpus Christi dining society, The Abbots, disbanded after **an incident** when members removed a LGBTQ+ pride flag from the JCR. Most notoriously, St Hugh's banned the Black Cygnets in 2013 after national coverage of a **'fox hunt' social** which encouraged selected female freshers to 'evade a mauling' by male members as 'huntsmen in pursuit'.

Outside of the university-wide clubs, Oxford today has over 20 active college drinking societies. These are not an abstract group of old Etonians with too much money to spend – their presence seeps into everyday college life.

The existence of New College's all-male dining society, The Dinos, is an open secret amongst New students. The club, named after a nineteenth-century German noblewoman, the Duchess of Dino, has its hand-picked members convene for regular invite-only black tie dinners. The president, conferred the title of Triceratops, leads toasts to the Duchess during dinners, accompanied by readings of selected extracts from her memoirs. The memoirs evoke a real sense of occasion: the Duchess relates a story of one dinner; 'when the ladies had gone, the grossness of [King William IV's] conversation was beyond belief'.

The Dinos' influence used to extend far beyond its dinners. Upon arrival at New College's 2016 Commemoration Ball, guests were greeted by several life-sized animatronic dinosaurs. Until just two years ago, The Dinos were automatically elected as the ball committee at New. Elaborate jokes in the form of dinosaur-themed decoration don't come cheap; just one animatronic dinosaur costs at least £2,000 to rent for the night.

Acceptance into a college drinking society normally requires surviving brutal initiations. The all-male L'Ancien Régime, made up of students at Merton

tapes its new recruits' hands to a two litre bottle of cider that is followed by lethal amounts of vodka – to top it off, a pack of Ryvita is a mandatory dessert. As one Mertonian tells us, college rooms are inevitably left “swimming in sick”. At F&F, made up of Christ Church female students, one student testified to being challenged to turn up in just underwear in a room of a selected male student and told to offer to strip for him. Not all initiations are created equal. After consuming large quantities of wine, The Dinos simply task each new member with the requirement of coming up with a suitable dinosaur name for themselves.

College drinking societies create issues for many reasons. But the most problematic feature involvement or some degree of endorsement from staff or fellows.

Oriel College is one such case. It boasts at least three active drinking societies including The Ran Dan Club, The Millers and The Musketeers. Oriel College JCR has been vocally opposed to the all-male Ran Dan dining society for several years. In 2018, the JCR passed a motion banning male-only clubs and societies from using college facilities. But the college later decided that this policy did not apply to Ran Dan and granted the group an exemption from the ban.

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The Ran Dan continues to hold events in college. It is difficult to imagine this would be the case without the tutors who are active members. The College Treasurer was widely alleged to be involved and in attendance at Ran Dan events. The importance of tutors in pastoral life at college sits uneasily with their involvement in secretive and exclusive drinking societies.

Such stories are more than just a one-off. Christ Church's exclusive dining society, The P Club, was recently banned from holding any activities on

college premises. The Christ Church Senior Censor (who sits on the Governing Body and oversees all college academic affairs) at the time, Brian Young, was one of a number of tutors who actively participated in P Club dinners. Professor Young has stepped down Senior Censor – but as the recent Times investigation shows, Senior Censors retain significant influence on college affairs after they step down.

The P Club operated under the facade of a debating society. But its opaque selection criteria seemed to yield a suspiciously exclusive and privileged cohort of members. Unregistered clubs are not allowed to book rooms at Christ Church. The P Club was always unregistered, but tutors would regularly use their room booking privileges to book college rooms to hold the termly dinner. In this way, The P Club could bypass the Junior Censor and the need to adhere to college policy. During dinners, members toast the queen and enjoy post-dinner entertainment of charades in Ancient Greek. Christ Church commented: “Christ Church has a zero-tolerance approach to drinking societies. It requires any club or society that wishes to use the College name or hold events on College premises to be registered in advance and to adhere to all College policies, including those related to behaviour and Equality legislation.”

“The College actively encourages the responsible use of alcohol amongst its students. It also promotes non-drinking options, for instance by requiring all events held in College to provide non-alcoholic beverages and by offering free, non-alcoholic drinks every evening during Freshers’ Week in the JCR”

“Christ Church is unable to police students who may decide to join extra-collegiate societies. Because such societies are not registered with the College, Christ Church is unable to provide any comments or information about such groups.”

In 2014, where student journalists reported that the **Trinity College Estates bursar (and former aide to the royal household), Kevin Knott, was the Senior Member of the Claret Club drinking society**. Knott was accused of affording The Claret Club preferential access to the Trinity lawns for invite-only parties.

Perhaps the best example is at St John's: the all-male drinking society *King Charles* was **bankrolled by its Honorary President**, night-club mogul Peter Stringfellow, until his death in 2018. Stringfellow boasted about hosting students for lavish dinners with unlimited champagne; he believed in the very real possibility "that one of these boys is a future Prime Minister".

There is a clear pattern of college staff involvement in some of the most elitist societies. Tutors enable exclusive groups of undergraduates to benefit from privileges not afforded to other college members. These tutors continue to have an important role in college life, with some even being selected for positions with significant pastoral responsibility.

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Knowledge of the existence of such drinking societies is normally an open secret. JCRs are typically united in protest against exclusive and secretive societies. Multiple colleges have passed motions to ban JCR committee members from also being members of a college drinking society. Christ Church JCR decried the P Club as 'intrinsically elitist'. Invite-only all-male groups contravene University and college-wide commitments to equality and diversity. So why do colleges continue to tolerate tutors and students participating in all-male drinking societies?

One factor may be that colleges are reluctant to alienate alumni and their donations. Any student who has endured college telethons can tell you that alumni reminisce about their fond memories of membership of a college

drinking society. This harks back to a time when drinking societies were widely accepted – and even celebrated – in college life. Christ Church Development Office only stopped selling drinking society merchandise **last year**. A senior fellow at Lincoln College wrote a glowing report on the centenary celebration of the all-male Goblins drinking society in the **college's annual report in 2002**, highlighting its 'loyal' association with college. The fellow still teaches at Lincoln today. In 2013, the Oriel Society (Oriel's alumni network) helped to organise a dinner for former members of the Ran Dan Club.

But times have changed. Women are now accepted at all Oxford colleges. The university has committed itself to improving access efforts and attracting students from a diverse range of backgrounds.

The continued existence of college drinking societies tells us something important about endemic institutional elitism at Oxford. This is not just a story about a few groups of high-spirited students. Fellows who sit on Governing Bodies and oversee admissions are members of all-male drinking societies. It seems difficult to disentangle such sexism and elitism from the glacial progress Oxford makes in improving access and diversity.

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College complicity and drinking society culture are not separate issues. The two worlds collided in spectacular fashion at Merton College just last year. Colleges typically reject applications for social events in Trinity to avoid disturbing students sitting exams. Yet, one day in Trinity Term, first-year students revising in their rooms in Rose Lane looked out to see a large group of students in blazers and matching ties enjoying themselves in Rose Lane Quad.

How did anyone manage to organise a drinks party at Merton smack bang in the middle of Prelims?

At this point, you may be able to guess. A senior fellow at Merton is also the Senior Member of the exclusive Gridiron Club. By exercising his room-booking privileges to circumvent college policy, the fellow afforded the Grid a privilege that no normal Merton student could enjoy. Grid members enjoyed a brief afternoon of Prosecco and canapés amidst complaints from enraged first-year Merton students. When contacted for comment, Merton said: “The Fellow facilitated hosting of the Gridiron Club at Merton last Trinity term in Fellow’s Garden. To be clear this was not against College policy. Due to the weather being suspect it was moved to another venue within the College. As it turned out the weather was fine and staff allowed members to move outside onto the adjacent lawn. This caused some unanticipated noise and the College and staff have noted the issue and apologised to the affected students in the area.”

Drinking societies do not exist in isolation – they are not simply the product of a few rich boys who come to Oxford with more money than sense. They are part of a murky web of favouritism and privilege which reflects the institutional elitism that still seems rife in Oxford today.

All persons mentioned in this article have been contacted for comment.

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