

**Alice Blackford Millea, *Oxford University: Stories from the Archives*. Bodleian Library Publishing, 2022, 200pp, £30.**

The Oxford University archive was established in 1634. Housed in the Bodleian Library, it is the repository for copious records documenting many of the University's key decisions, stretching back over 800 years. In this well produced and generously illustrated volume, Alice Blackford Miller (Assistant Keeper of the Archives) has selected 52 documents – plus a handful of objects – and arranged them in chronological order to tell a wide range of stories about the University.

The first item to be featured, the so-called Award of the Papal Legate, constitutes the earliest known University charter; it was sealed on 20 June 1214, almost exactly a year before Magna Carta. Under its terms, the town of Oxford was required to pay 52 shillings a year to support the poorest scholars – an initiative designed to secure the future of the University as a centre of learning. The document also contains the first reference to a 'Chancellor', thereby implying the existence of a unitary entity over which a single officer might preside. The final item to be featured is the Order of Proceedings for the admission of the first ever female Vice-Chancellor, Professor Louise Richardson, on 12 January 2016, a mere 802 years later.

Thus are established some of the recurrent themes of the book: the development of Oxford as a home to scholarship; the institution of the University as embodied in the person of its officials; the long, slow, and at times glacial, path to social change and equality; the importance of documents as record, institutional memory, and source of practical information; the awkward and often tense relationship between Town and Gown, vying with each other for primacy within and beyond the confines of Oxford's medieval walls. Tensions came to a head following the St Scholastica Day riots of 1355 – three days of mayhem, burnings, pillage and death (no figure for the dead is registered here though legend puts it at 63 students and 30 townspeople.) The result (which *does* feature) was a new charter of privileges for the University and a new litany of penances for the Town.

We see a copy of Thomas Bodley's letter to the Vice-Chancellor proposing a library to be 'a singular ornament in the University' and bequeathing properties in London and Berkshire to fund it. The library which took his name was formally opened on 8 November 1602 and shortly afterwards granted special status as a repository for every new title published in the kingdom, making it one of the most important libraries not just in Oxford but throughout the entire world. The simultaneous burgeoning of a book-making business is evidenced in a copy of the deeds of a house in Catte Street, the witnesses to which are a book-binder, a leather-worker, several illuminators, parchment-makers and a scribe. Another document features the original plan for a new Oxford University Press building on Walton Street, together with a handsome engraving of the resultant edifice when it moved there in the 1820s.

The University's first major attempt to reform itself is captured in the so-called Laudian Statutes of 1636. William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury as well as Chancellor of Oxford, declared the University to be 'extremely sunk from all discipline and fallen into licentiousness'. Copies of the statutes he authorised are still used to this day at the installation of the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors, who were charged with enforcing good behaviour and discipline within the University. A glorious document is reproduced here in a double-page spread. It depicts the elaborate cycle by which Proctors were appointed to that important post, one from each college, in a sequence spanning 23 years.

Laud eventually lost his head on the scaffold, as of course did his patron, King Charles I. This was an extraordinary period for Town and Gown alike, when for a few dramatic years (1642-46) Oxford became the royalist capital and seat of the national government. It is sharply evocative to see the covering page from the Articles agreeing to the eventual surrender of Oxford following its third siege in 1646. Enshrined in the full document was a guarantee of good conduct authorized by Sir Thomas Fairfax, commander of the victorious parliamentary troops. It vouched safe passage for some two thousand royalists (including the King's second son) and an undertaking that University buildings 'shall be preserved from defacing and spoyle'. We have Fairfax to thank for the remarkable fact that the key buildings of Oxford (including its many lavish college chapels) remained almost completely intact while the rest of the country was decimated and desecrated. In the turbulent years which followed, none other than Oliver Cromwell became the University's Chancellor (it would be interesting to know what kind of documents survive from this contentious period) before the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II and the building of some of the fine buildings which have come to characterize the historic heart of the University (see another splendid, recent Bodleian Library publication by Geoffrey Tyack).

Mention of Oxford's remarkable deliverance from the hands of the vandals reminds us that it also escaped the bombs of the Luftwaffe three centuries later. The book features pages from fireguards' attendance records for the Ruskin and (evacuated) Slade art schools, as well as a letter of gratitude from the President of the Czech government in exile, Edvard Beneš, thanking the Vice-Chancellor for the support the University had given to students from his country. More on the two world wars would perhaps have been welcome (it may be that the requirements of secrecy neutered the record), especially since Town and Gown presumably co-operated in the face of such an existential threat?

Talking of collaboration, there are documents urging both authorities to work together to control dumping of 'the carcasses of dead Horses, Hogges, Dogges and the like', together with important licenses governing trade privileges and regulating crucial industries like baking and, of course, brewing. Concern about undergraduate excess, drunkenness and prostitution, is a constant backdrop. (Apparently, the power of the VC to imprison prostitutes ceased only as recently as 1968.) Royal visits also feature. Queen Anne's day trip in 1702 prompted a fracas in the town and there was much heated debate about the ceremonial order of precedence before it was eventually decided that the Lord Mayor and Chancellor should parade shoulder to shoulder. Finally, in 1955, six centuries after the infamous events of St Scholastica's Day, a ceremony was held at which an honorary degree was awarded to the Mayor, and the freedom of the city was conferred upon the Chancellor, as part of an agreement to put aside 'the murderous quarrel of our ancestors ... an episode that is best forgotten'. It is a simple and rather beautiful document, clearly set out and of considerable significance.

Meanwhile the University tried to drag itself into the modern world, efforts well catalogued in the latter pages of the book. The Test Acts were introduced in 1871 (meaning that it was possible to graduate without having to be a member of the Church of England). Meaningful examinations were introduced in 1850. Science, not just Classics and Divinity, began to be taught in a systematic way, and a Natural History museum was built (1860). There were attempts at educational outreach to working-class people. The first black student, Christian Frederick Cole from Sierra Leone, was admitted on 19 April 1873. Even women were

allowed to study in Oxford – though not formally to matriculate until 1920. All of these stories emerge from the archive.

There are also documents relating to the new universities of the 1960s, to student protests and sit-ins, and to innovative building projects (including the spectacular but unrealized plan for a vast, domed recreation of the Pitt Rivers museum.) And it is fitting to include the model for the excellent New Bodleian conversion and the creation of the Weston Library in whose handsome shop this book can be purchased for £30 (hardback).

Historians of Oxford will find much to peruse here; historians of *Oxfordshire* perhaps less so. For me, the most interesting part of the book is the articulate and thought-provoking introduction by Alice Millea in which she sets out the scope and limitations of an archive, the role of the archivist, questions to do with the paucity or otherwise of the information available, the nature of the records, their safekeeping, organization, deployment, and display. Although she doesn't touch on it directly, those who understand the arcane workings of the University will appreciate that in many ways the University as a confederation of self-governing parts is less meaningful than the individual colleges which make it up. First and foremost it is an administrative entity. For scholars and dons alike the prime focus of allegiance, drama, interest and attachment has always been and still remains their college. To understand this particular story you can do no better than to consult a little book mentioned in the bibliography: W.A. Pantin, *Oxford Life in Oxford Archives* (1972) It is brilliant – but unillustrated.

That's perhaps why I come back to the pictures – so well reproduced in this volume. One of my favourites is a photograph of the spiral staircase leading up to the top room of The Tower of the Five Orders. That, we are informed, is where the University archives are located, the epicentre for all these stories. I didn't know that until now, and the imaginative possibilities of such a discovery, like some of the fascinating nuggets in this book, will stay with me for some time to come.

***Tony Morris, Oxford, 2023***