

A Women's Walk through Oxford

This walk highlights the careers and contributions of some of Oxford's most notable female graduates. It will also introduce you to parts of the city which you may not have encountered yet. Necessarily it will focus on what were until recently women-only colleges. Until 1920 women were allowed to attend lectures (from 1866) and take degree exams (from 1873) but were not awarded degrees. (The same situation lasted at Cambridge until 1948.) It's quite a long walk but obviously you don't have to do it all in one go.

Honours

Twice a year, at New Year and on the Queen's birthday, an 'Honours List' is proclaimed, detailing awards of titles bestowed on people for outstanding contributions to public life. 'Dame' is the equivalent of a knighthood - being called 'Sir' instead of Mr.

Many people dislike the idea of becoming Sir or Dame or Baron/ Baroness but are happy to accept a public distinction which does not convey the notion of superior social rank.

The Order of Merit is one of the most prestigious of all awards, being limited to just 24 persons at any one time. Members of the Order can put O.M. after their name. It is usually awarded to brilliant scholars, scientists, poets, surgeons etc. Slightly less highly ranked is to be made a Companion of Honour (C.H.). This Order has up to 65 members and is usually awarded in recognition of cultural or social contributions by novelists, composers, charity workers etc.

The Walk

Leave Pembroke via St. Aldate's and walk up through Cornmarket Street and Magdalen Street to reach St. Giles and keep left until you reach Woodstock Road.

On the left is Somerville College, (1879) named for self-taught Scottish science writer Mary Somerville (1780-1872), who was 51 before she published her first book but went on to win a European reputation for her lucid exposition of complex scientific ideas. Founded in the form of a not-for-profit joint stock company, with an initial intake of just twelve students (aged from 17 to 36!); since 1882 Somerville pioneered the employment of female tutors. In 1892 it was the first institution for women to style itself a college "to raise it above the level of a Hall of Residence" and in 1903 the first to introduce the possibility of research. The following are just some of the outstanding graduates of Somerville:-

Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954), the first woman to study law at Oxford and a pioneer of women's rights in India.

Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946), the first female British politician to achieve Cabinet rank, responsible for introducing child-related welfare benefits payable to mothers.

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) bestselling writer of classic detective stories. Her first class degree in languages enabled her to pursue a parallel career as a translator of Dante.

Vera Brittain (1893–1970) was ambitious to succeed as a novelist but made her reputation with *Testament of Youth*, the first account of the First World War to be written from a female perspective, based on her experiences as a volunteer nurse. Both her brother and her fiancé were killed in the war. Vera later became a campaigning pacifist. Her daughter Shirley Williams (1890–) also attended Somerville and went on to found the Social Democratic Party.

Dorothy Hodgkin (1910–1994) won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry and became a member of the Order of Merit, of which there can only be 24 members at any one time.

Indira Gandhi (1917–84) graduated in history to become India's only female Prime Minister. Her controversial rule was brutally ended when she was assassinated by her own bodyguard.

Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) Britain's first female Prime Minister, initially worked as a research chemist and also qualified as a barrister. Among many other honours she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Other distinguished Somerville graduates include Dame Janet Vaughan (1899–1993) a research physiologist who returned to Somerville to become its Principal; Dame Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) heavyweight novelist and philosopher; and soprano Dame Emma Kirkby (1949–). Nowadays almost half the students at Somerville are male.

Notice that Somerville has buildings named for Dame Emily Penrose, Agnes Maitland, Margery Fry, Helen Darbishire, Daphne Park and Dame Janet Vaughan (all former Principals). Holtby is named for novelist Winifred Holtby (1898–1935) who was also an English tutor here and lifelong friend of Vera Brittain. Her romantic novel *South Riding* (1936) was published posthumously and two years later became a film; it is still in print and the royalties have gone to fund college scholarships. Other buildings honour Dorothy Hodgkin and Margaret Thatcher.

Return to the Woodstock Road and continue north to reach St. Anne's College on the other side of the road. Dating from 1879, St. Anne's did not become a full college of the university until 1952. Novelist Iris Murdoch taught philosophy here. Ivy Williams (1877–1966) graduated to become the first woman to teach law at a British university.

Dame Cicely Saunders (1918–2005) founded the hospice movement to care for the dying and was awarded the Order of Merit. Helen Fielding (1958–) found fame and fortune with her comic *Bridget Jones* novels which have sold more than fifteen million copies and have inspired three films.

Exit St. Anne's back onto the Woodstock Road to pass St. Antony's College and reach St. Hugh's (1886) which began as rented accommodation for female students too poor to attend Lady Margaret Hall. It began with an intake of just four. Notable alumni include :-

Emily Wilding Davison (1872–1913) who achieved a First in English Literature but devoted her life to the cause of Votes for Women and died for the cause (probably not on purpose) when she flung herself at the horse owned by King George V at the Epsom Derby.

Mary Renault (1905–1983) gave up nursing to write splendid historical novels about Alexander the Great. Brigid Brophy (1929–1995) was expelled but went on to a career as a successful novelist and controversialist credited with starting the animal rights movement.

Barbara Castle (1910–2002) read Politics, Philosophy and Economics to good effect, becoming a front-rank Labour minister. As Minister of Transport she was responsible for the introduction of breathalysers and seat belts and the Equal Pay Act, strengthening women's right to fair pay.

Aung San Suu Kyi (1945–) was to endure years of house arrest in her native Myanmar (Burma) before regaining her liberty and being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Theresa May (1956–) also proved unconvincing as Britain's second female Prime Minister.

Exit St. Hugh's onto the Banbury Road and head south to turn into Norham Road to reach Lady Margaret Hall.

Lady Margaret Hall (1879) is named for the formidable Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509) who founded two colleges at Cambridge – Christ's and St. John's – and gave birth to the future King Henry VII (when she was just thirteen!). The first intake of nine students were escorted to lectures as a group with a chaperone to deter unwanted male attention. The first purpose-built accommodation (1881 & 1884) was designed by Basil Champneys, architect of Newnham College, Cambridge, which still remains all female in its intake. They were designed to be convertible into private houses if the college failed. The illustrious graduates of 'L.M.H.' certainly match those of Somerville:

The indefatigable Gertrude Bell (1868–1926) was the first woman to achieve a First in History – in just two years. She went on to become a fluent Arabic speaker, archaeologist, spy and political adviser on the Middle East, who virtually defined the frontiers of modern Iraq and created its national museum.

The splendidly named Eglantyne Jebb (1876–1928) founded the charity Save the Children to organise famine relief in devastated countries after World War One.

Philosopher Mary Warnock (1924–2019) chaired major enquiries which led to the reform of education for children with special needs and regulated fertility treatments.

Margaret Turner-Warwick (1924–2017) became the first woman President of the Royal College of Physicians.

Dame Veronica Wedgwood (1910–1997) wrote major works on seventeenth century history which were both scholarly and popular. Lady Antonia Fraser (1932–) is a prolific author of histories, biographies and novels who also managed to raise nine children.

Dame Barbara Mills (1940–2011) became Director of Public Prosecutions, while Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller (1948–) became Head of MI5, Britain's state security service (i.e. James Bond's boss).

Nigella Lawson (1960-) built on her languages degree by living in Italy and becoming a celebrated TV cookery presenter and author.

Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007) had already graduated from Harvard cum laude when she came to Oxford to read Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) She became the first Asian woman to serve as President of the prestigious Oxford Union debating society. Her turbulent political career involved imprisonment, exile, two terms as Prime Minister of Pakistan and finally assassination.

Exit L. M. H. via Norham Gardens and cut through short Parks Road to rejoin the Banbury Road and reach St. Giles. Pass St. John's College to reach Balliol College, alma mater of Dame Cressida Dick (1960-) currently London's 'top cop' i.e. head of the Metropolitan Police, Britain's largest police force.

Pass down Broad Street and turn left onto Parks Road to glance at handsome Wadham College. Monica Ali (1967-) read PPE here but bypassed a political career to write a best seller, Brick Lane, set amongst the Bangladeshi community of London's East End.

Turn round and go south to enter Catte Street to reach Hertford College where Fiona Bruce (1964-) read modern languages. A high-profile TV personality, she chairs the weekly political show Question Time and presents The Antiques Road Show.

Return to Broad Street and enter its continuation, Holywell Street. At St. Cross Road you may wish to divert up it to see St. Catherine's College, designed by famous Danish architect Arne Jacobsen - right down to the chairs and cutlery in the dining hall. Alumna Jeanette Winterson (1959-) who read English here, made her name with *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, a semi-autobiographical account of teenage tensions in a strictly religious, repressive, philistine household culminating in outing herself as a lesbian at sixteen. Actress Dame Diana Rigg (1938-2020) after a brilliant career on stage, TV and film, found a new host of young fans as the ruthless Lady Olenna Tyrell in *Game of Thrones*. St. Catherine's was one of the first men's colleges to admit women.

Return via St. Cross Road to join Longwall Street and follow it right to the end at Magdalen College. Martha Lane Fox (1973-) read History here but made millions out of the dotcom boom of the late 1990s and is now the youngest female member of the House of Lords.

Follow the High Street to cross picturesque Magdalen Bridge. At the big roundabout take the right hand exit into Cowley Place to reach our last stop - St. Hilda's College. Noteworthy 'Hildebeests' include Cecil Woodham-Smith (1913-1977), biographer of Florence Nightingale, distinguished novelist Barbara Pym (1913-1980), feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham (1943-), newsreader Zeinab Badawi (1959) poet Wendy Cope (1945-), TV classicist Bettany Hughes (1967-) and Val McDermid (1955-), author of blood-soaked murder mysteries set in her native Scotland.

Return to the roundabout, cross back over Magdalen Bridge and follow the High Street all the way back to Carfax, then turn left into St. Aldates to reach Pembroke.