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100 Years of The OUMC

A Brief and Personal History

I joined the Oxford University Mountaineering Club in my first week at Oxford in 2001. Back then I had no idea that it would be at the centre of my four years of life in Oxford, and continue to play a role during the years since. I think it was in 2003 that I first realised that the Centenary of the formation of the club was getting close, and it was Steve Broadbent who formed the Centenary Committee in 2005 to ensure that we would have a fitting celebration. I started researching the history of the club, producing an account for the Centenary Ball Programme, and it was this that led to me writing this article. I'll take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped me with the research over the last four years.



175. On the Heather Terrace, Tryfan. OUMC meet, January 1922.

The origins of the club lie back in the 19th century. Following the formation of the Alpine Club, in 1857, members of the AC resident in Oxford decided to form a club to consist of members of Oxford University interested in the objects of the Alpine Club. A meeting was called by Hereford George on 14 February 1876 and the Oxford Alpine Club was officially founded. The club had a limit of 30 members and consisted mainly of



176. OUMC training session at the Horspath Tunnel in the late 1950s. Alan Wedgewood and Colin Taylor on the *Horspath Horror*. (Richard Gilbert)

Dons, although there were some undergraduate members. Its main activity was a dinner each year, with occasional lectures. The limit of 30 was lifted in 1883; this helped matters, but when Arnold Lunn started at Balliol in 1907 he could see a need for an undergraduate mountaineering club. There was an unofficial club that met at irregular intervals on the roofs of Oxford and it is likely that this helped form the OUMC.

The exact date of formation is unclear; Lunn originally said it was in 1909 but later changed his mind based on that fact that he had been sent down from Oxford in Trinity Term 2009 for failing exams in the rudiments of Holy Scripture. From other sources I believe the club was formed in Hilary term 1909, and it was on this basis that we celebrated the Centenary in March 2009. H E G Tyndale was elected President at the first meeting, with Lunn taking on the role of Secretary. In those early years the club ran along similar lines to the OAC, with slide shows and dinners being the main activities. Whilst some members were active climbers they did not climb as a club, and only really managed to climb during the vacations. On one occasion in 1912 the club entertained four distinguished Cambridge mountaineers, Geoffrey Winthrop Young, H O Jones, Claude Elliott, and George Mallory. This was the beginning of a partnership that lasted through to the late twenties, and included the production of four joint journals.

OUMC took heavy losses in the First World War and by 1919 it had ceased to exist. In the autumn of 1920 H R C Carr was instrumental in re-

forming the club. Initially they knew nothing of the pre-war club, although Arnold Lunn attended a meeting a few months later, so they would have known by then. This new OUMC climbed more as a club and their calendar typically consisted of lecture meetings during the term, an annual dinner, and meets during the vacations. The Lake District and North Wales were popular for the Christmas and Easter vacations, while summer drew them to the Alps.

The Oxford University Women's Mountaineering Club was formed for the first time in 1924, and the Irvine Travel Fund founded in 1926 following the death of Sandy Irvine on Everest. In the early thirties it was Cambridge climbers who were leading developments in the UK while OUMC members were more active overseas. Hoyland and Wand made an ascent of the Grépon in 1934, an OUMC team made many first ascents in the Caucasus, and another nearly succeeded on Masherbrum.

The club nearly disintegrated during the Second World War but somehow managed to hold one or two meets each year, at Helyg or Brackenclose. With the return of the servicemen after the war membership increased rapidly. The club began a pattern of activities involving lecture meetings, the annual dinner, meets in the UK during Christmas and Easter vacations and a trip to the Alps in summer. Rationing affected the ability to go climbing at the weekend, and climbing standards were described as very low, and took some time to improve. Scott Russell arranged two joint meets with the Geneva University Club at Zinal in 1946 and Arolla in 1947, and these went some way to improving the Alpine experience of club members. A hard blow was dealt to the club the following year, with the death of three members in an accident on the Matterhorn.

The following years did start to see an increase in standards, particularly when Tom Bourdillon came up to Oxford in 1948, tackling climbs like *Hiatus* and *Gimmer Crack* in poor conditions given the equipment of the time. His approach to hard climbing made a tremendous impact in the Alps and rubbed off on other members. With Mike Ball he made the first British ascent for many years of the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon, and the following year with Dick Viney and John Saxby he did the Ryan-Lochmatter route on the Plan, and with Nicol the Roc-Grépon traverse and the north face of the Petit Dru.

It was in the early fifties that the President's invitation meet was formed. Held in the CIC Hut below Ben Nevis, it was the scene of many incidents. In 1951 Nicol and Rawlinson fell about 600ft down *Zero Gully* after, 'The pitons came out like studs from a dress shirt.' The following year whilst soloing *Gardylloo Gully* David Collis fell, knocking off Alan Blackshaw, but retaining his honour by turning and exclaiming 'Good Lord, I'm sorry!' after the fall.

The bridges at Horspath were a popular venue with the club at this time. They lie about 5 miles south-east of Oxford along a railway line. The steep walls were excellent stamina training and the tunnel faces provided technical climbing on small holds. The faces are still occasionally visited by

OUMC climbers, although many of the finishing holds have fallen and routes become overgrown.

Members of OUMC were active in the Himalaya during the fifties, with a number of University expeditions including to Gangotri, Haramosh and the Chitral. The story of Haramosh is one of the great epics of mountaineering, and is told in *The Last Blue Mountain* by Ralph Barker. The club also had two members on the Everest expedition in 1953 – Tom Bourdillon and Michael Westmacott. The fifties also saw Nicol taking part in the first British ascent of a route graded TD, and of an ED in the western Alps. With Bourdillon, Nicol made ascents of the Ratti-Vitalli on the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey, the north face of the Petit Dru and the first British ascent of the east face of the Grand Capucin.

In 1957 when Michael Binnie arrived at Oxford, it was Cambridge climbers who were filling the guidebooks and journals of the time. But not for long, as Michael explains:

‘Enter the new President, Colin Mortlock, a man for whom non-conformity was almost an art form and who personally raised university climbing to stellar heights. Together with Peter Hutchinson he put up a series of hard routes on Millstone Edge as well as climbing many of the harder classics in the Pass and on Cloggy. A notable first ascent was *Jubilee Climb* on Dinas Mot. In the company, variously of Hutchinson, Wilf Noyce and Rhodes Scholar, Jack Sadler, he climbed the east face of the Capucin, the *Brown/Whillans Route* on the Blaitière and made first British ascents of the *Welzenbach Route* on the Dent d’Hérens, a direct on the Furggen ridge and on the Signalkuppe. It was not so much what Colin climbed. His intense personality and presence, coupled with the fact that in the vacations he climbed with the Rock and Ice, gave Oxford mountaineering a certain frisson in the late fifties. Colin went down in 1959. The hard men that followed him were of a different order but continued to keep standards high. These were the triumvirate of Alan Wedgwood, Colin Taylor and Richard Gilbert who, as a job lot, were as eccentric as they come!’

The Oxford University Women’s Mountaineering Club had been reformed for a third time in 1953 and regular meets were held in Wales and the Lake District. Some of these were held in the same area as an OUMC meet so that the groups might benefit from the presence of each other. By 1955 the ladies were invited to attend OUMC meetings and bus meets, with the ladies extending the same offer to the men. By 1959 women were permitted limited membership of the OUMC, invited to all but the annual dinner, with the events on the term-cards being the same for the two clubs. In the AGM of 1961 a motion was passed to give ladies full membership rights, and Janet Wedgwood remembers the OUWMC was certainly disbanded by Michaelmas term that year. A new position on the Committee was created, the Ladies’ Representative, and for the first 15 years or so this was held by a female member of the club. Eventually the post was filled by a male member and it was only a few more years before the position was dropped entirely. The club first had a female president, Elizabeth Jolley, in

1983 and has had four since.

John Wilkinson has probably the best view of the club in the latter half of the 20th century, and provided me with most of the information for this section. He studied for a D.Phil in the late sixties, and was Senior Member from 1977 to 1997. In 1966 the OUMC, like the CUMC, was still one of the premier clubs. The President was invited to the Alpine Club dinners, the journal was widely distributed, and the club even received books for review.

An important element in building club spirit was that back in the 1960s there was very little private transport and the main meets went by coach. Later in the 1970s this was replaced by minibuses, of which one belonged to the Clubs' Committee. Climbing was never recognised as a sport by the University, and so did not receive the kind of funds that the 'real' sports could get. John did manage to get some money for equipment and Brian Smith along with some dons from St Catherine's College managed to get a small climbing wall built at the Iffley Road sports centre at the start of the '80s. The holds were made by DR walls and the wall built by the University bricklayer, at a total cost of £3000. It was popular with club members up until the wall at Brookes was built, and then underwent a revival in 2000, when the holds were numbered and a bouldering competition held.

The wall now boasts hundreds of problems, and has its own guidebook.

The year typically started with a Freshers' meet to gritstone and another to Wales. Those that survived (by choice rather than physical elimination) were more or less left to fend for themselves. Coach meet venues included Wales, Derbyshire and Swanage, with destinations further afield being saved for the vacation. The Avon Gorge was immensely popular with the club, and it was there in November 1973 that Stephen Venables almost killed a novice French member called Pierre. Stephen was belayed to a single knife-blade piton at the top of *Suspension Bridge Arête* when Pierre got into difficulties, climbed above a runner and then fell off. This created a



177. OUMC at Stanage, 1975. Andy Brazier tries an unconventional approach to *Goliath's Groove*. (Geoffrey Grimmer)



178. OUMC in Snell's Field, Chamonix, on a summer vacation meet; left to right Mike Harrop, Nick Barrett, Nevil Hewitt and Chris Harris. (*Simon Richardson*)

huge jerk and pulled Stephen off too. They both fell about 80ft and ended up see-sawing from the one runner the rope was clipped into – an old peg halfway up the chimney. Stephen suffered a dislocated shoulder, smashed knee and rope burns almost through to the bone. He appeared on the national news that night, telling a cameraman where to put his camera, and, unfortunately, generated all the usual nonsense about putting the public rescue services at risk. Pierre, thank God, was merely shaken, but was never seen again at an OUMC meet.

The best mountaineers of the club tended to do their own thing in the summer, but most years a group would head to Chamonix, with Snell's Field popular in the eighties. An increase in the number of graduates and people spending up to seven years in Oxford meant there were some very experienced mountaineers in the club. Rock-climbing standards were also high. In the seventies, Phil Bartlett and Andy Brazier climbed *Quiver* on Clogwyn Du'r Arddu, which was Britain's first E6. Don Ballance wrote in the 1987 journal that Sean Myles and Mike Dawes were regularly climbing E5, with half a dozen members climbing E3. Many members were climbing HVS or E1 by the time they left Oxford.

In the mid nineties novice climbers weren't much of a priority for OUMC. The club remained relatively obscure within the University, but there were a number of very competent climbers around at that time. Simon Milward's outing on the Central Pillar of Frêney and Anthony Spate's ascent of the Walker Spur set the bar for OUMC climbers. In 1998 this began to change, with the new President, Mark Naylor, making changes in priorities and

embracing the changes to University sport in general. Sessions took place at Brookes wall every Tuesday, and the first few meets each year were very much geared to novice climbers.

A significant event occurred around 2001 when the University introduced rules requiring all 'coaches' to be registered with the Sports Federation. This included any leaders climbing with less-experienced climbers on club meets, and would require a formal assessment of their ability. This kind of regulation clearly did not fit with a sport like climbing, and Steve and Katja Broadbent, being the more senior club members, got deeply involved. The club made plans for disaffiliation if that became necessary, and the debates ended with an EGM in the spring. The back room of the Gardener's Arms was full to bursting, with almost the entire club, along with representatives from the University and Sports Federation. Fortunately the outcome was in the club's favour and the club has enjoyed a good relationship with the University since then.

That was my first year at Oxford. The pattern of the club had not changed much. There were four meets a term, a Christmas dinner and an annual dinner. Each vacation, members would go on various unofficial trips. For some reason Skye became a popular New Year destination, and we put up around 40 new rock climbs, both in the Cuillin and on the sea-cliffs of Flodigarry. Most summers people would head to the Alps, with Saas Fee being quite a popular destination along with Chamonix.

I served as OUMC President in 2003-2004. By the time I left Oxford in 2005 the club was beginning a particularly successful period. Lydia Press was President in 2006 and she managed to broaden the horizons of club members, and bring together a wide variety of climbers. It came as a huge blow to the club when she was tragically killed in the Alps in 2008.

Rock-climbing standards reached new heights thanks to Eddie Barbour who was in a league of his own, making ascents of *End of the Affair* (E8), *Simba's Pride* (E8) and *Tolerance* (E8) as well as his Fairhead project, *The Rockafella* (E7). Around six other members have made ascents above E5 in recent years. In the mountains things have been quieter, with few notable ascents. Alpine ascents have been limited to mid-grade routes, but a number of us have been further afield, including my trips to South America. More recently India has received some attention with two trips in the last two years to the Miyar Nala.

We have recently held our Centenary Ball, attended by 150 past and present members, including members from the early fifties. Steve Broadbent produced a video of the club history based on my research, and Elie Dekoninck put together an excellent gallery. For me, the number of people who chose to attend goes to show how important the club has been in their lives. It's fair to say that for many, OUMC was more important to their University lives than their college, or friends from their course.

I'll end with a quote by Felix Ng from the club logbook.

'It's 12:16am and I can just write. Keep this club going. It's not just a good laugh. I love it.'