The Stones of the University of Oxford  
Danny Dorling

The stones that make up Oxford University are dense, much denser than any normal stone. These stones are more than their base material; they are not just the Corallian Limestone first cut in Oxfordshire quarries in the 1300s and then transported to the city in Ox carts. They have long since metamorphosed into something far more potent, a mineral that can apparently endlessly suck in money and sweat, labour and blood, while not seeming to undergo any significant change to its outward appearance. The same stone from those same quarries was used to build Eton College, Blenheim Palace¹ and Windsor Castle²; flourishing there too with later rises in those intuitions’ riches, but not quite to the extent that the stones of the University of Oxford have changed over time from within. For a start, there were far more of them in Oxford. By 1756 the University was enormous, but what happened within was largely hidden from sight behind high walls.

¹ https://cotswoldjourneys.com/cotswolds-guide/cotswolds-stone
The University of Oxford was not built as the giant mainland European medieval cathedrals were – designed to tower over the surrounding countryside and inspire awe, wonder, and subservience. The university was built to be hidden away in a valley, a secret hollow between the hills, a gravel bank at the confluence of two small rivers. It was built to be defended, a place in which to hide away from the material world – the world outside which existed to serve it and its higher purposes; its motto: *Dominus illuminatio mea* (the Lord is my light).

The stones grew denser over time as the financial surplus grew greater. The local quarries were emptied out. Huge volumes of rock had to be taken for a much smaller reserve of cut stone to be layered up on the gravel bed over the centuries. Far away, in Wales, coal and slate mines were slowly emptied by children and adults working in the dark. Farms were bequeathed to colleges with names such as Jesus. For centuries the farm labourers’ efforts filled the colleges’ coffers and slowly further saturated the wealth within its walls:

“After twelve years as Principal [of Jesus], Jenkins left the country as a diplomat, and was later created a Secretary of State. On his death in 1685 he bequeathed the College a large complex of estates, acquired on his behalf by lawyer friends from members of the distressed, over-mortgaged landowning classes of the Restoration period. These comprised groups of farms in Northamptonshire, Gloucestershire, the Vale of Glamorgan and the Taff Valley mining area, and ten acres of the London estate of the Earls of Arundel across the Thames from their town house in the Strand.”

The culture of getting something for nothing, continuously and in perpetuity, became well established. The plantations of Ireland and then of the empire were brought into the levy of many of the colleges and became part of a global flood of tribute. The stones grew heavier, the towers rose higher and spread across the gravel bank.

---

3 [https://www.jesus.ox.ac.uk/about-jesus-college/history/benefactors](https://www.jesus.ox.ac.uk/about-jesus-college/history/benefactors)
In ‘Brideshead Revisited’, Waugh describes 1920s Oxford as ‘a city of aquatint’. Aquatint is a printing technique that produces areas of tone, rather than lines, so that colours blend more easily. When the British Empire was at its zenith, the university was populated by students whose wealth was often derived from their family’s investments in that empire. However, Oxford’s intake changed as the power of the empire waned, triggering the subsequent increase in income equality that saw a rising proportion of state school admissions to the university. Oxford, both the city and university, began to change.

By the 1980s the tide had turned again, away from growing equality, away from a rising state school intake, and away from a diminishing Oxford influence on the nations of the UK – back to the building up of unequal wealth, eugenic thinking that only a few had greater potential, and the growing defence and adoration of snobbery. However, we are now possibly seeing the end of that. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of British undergraduate offer-holders rose from 60.5% to 69%, with the expectation that the 2020 figure will translate to 67% of places. Although this is a promising figure, we must account for the fact that very few of these state school students come from normal homes when measured by

---

income. The median child in the UK grows up in a household that survives on a total household income of £21,840 a year after tax, and before paying for their housing, food, travel, clothes and all other essentials.\(^5\)

![Graph showing Undergraduates admitted to the University of Oxford from state schools 1927-2018 (UK resident, %)](image)


In Britain today a child’s A level results are mainly determined not by any inherent ability that child might have, or by how hard they have worked, but instead by the techniques the schools that they attend use to ensure that a few with very affluent parents receive very high A levels. A child of below average ability (quartile 2 at age 8 to be precise) is **three times** more likely to receive AAA+ at A level if they are sent to a private school than a child of above average ability sent to a state school. That child of privilege is **six times** more likely to receive AAA+ than a child of similar ability who is not wealthy. As a result, our ‘top universities’ in England that require such A level results are more likely to offer places to the less able children of the rich.\(^6\)

---

5 http://www.dannydorling.org/?p=6732  
6 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21582041.2016.1138502
As a boy in 1970s I would play on Shotover hill. The trees had grown high by then and there were no clear views of the University. The city had grown up around it. More people now worked in the car factory at the foot of the hill than served at college tables; but the university continued to accumulate wealth and became progressively more cloistered. In the 1980s the Bursar of Magdalen College built a moat around his college lands to keep teenagers like me out. He wrote about those locals he saw as miscreants in his memoirs, and of his predecessor when visiting a local school in Temple Cowley pointing out the ideal boy with the correct servile demeanour, to work in that college and later become its head porter. In contrast, when I was growing up in the city, Oxford in the 1980s gave succour to teenagers who, their egos further expanded and their confidence greatly boosted, would later become prime minister after Prime Minster after Prime Minster. The stones infected their minds, but I later learnt that what I saw was not new; but part of an unbroken chain that goes back centuries. A few months ago, I heard the word ‘miscreants’ used again by a college fellow to describe Oxford residents.

As a teenager in the city Johnson looked up to Thatcher, the then Prime Minster. She, from the older stones, was a large part of his teenage inspiration. In turn when she was studying in Oxford as Margaret Roberts in the 1940s, she looked up at Churchill’s portrait and saw her destiny. Churchill, when he was in Sandhurst in the 1880s, looked to the Oxford educated prime minister of his teenage years, Robert Gascoyne-Cecil 3rd Marquess of Salisbury. In 1847 Cecil, then a teenager studying at Christ Church (Oxford), looked upwards to Robert Peel for inspiration. According to AJP Taylor, Peel was the first modern Conservative. Peel in turn in 1805, when also teenager at Christ Church, had as a role model Pitt the Younger. Today a teenager amid the stones of Oxford University will be looking up at Johnson and feeling the weight of destiny on their shoulders to continue the unbroken line where just a tiny few continue to rule over the many.

Those who taught the generation now in power in Britain were, at the very same time, building up the endowments and laying down the wine for their successors; the wine often still being drunk today. They were defending and deepening their

---

7 http://www.threshold-press.co.uk/memoir/r_w_j_laughter.php
8 https://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/research/transformations/gis/papers/dannydorling_publication_id0769.pdf
justification for a place apart. It was a time when things could have changed for
the better but, instead, Britain became progressively more cloistered, more
divided. The colleges took in more women, and more children from state schools,
but the aim was to co-opt and cultivate, not to diversify. The progressives of the
past were now few and far between. The stones of Oxford became the Petri dish
for a new more brutal, more callous, future. Today that could change again, and
possibly change for the better, but to change requires facing up to what you are;
what you produce; and knowing what lies deep within the stones. The stones
were mainly shaped by local people, to build palaces for incomers to live and be
educated in, for the good of those few.

As inequalities in income and wealth began to rise again, Oxford University would
take many more millions in donations – in return for putting the name of a man
on a building. In 2017 Bo Rothstein, the then professor of government and public
policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, resigned from the university citing
as one reason Blavatnik’s donation to Trump’s inauguration, which he called
“incomprehensible and irresponsible”. In 2019 the University accepted a £150
million donation from Stephen Schwarzman, current CEO of the Blackstone
Group and former head of mergers and acquisitions at Lehman Brothers. Questioning the legitimacy of the ways in which Blavatnik and Schwarzman made
and continue to make their money as they party into their 60s and 70s results in
threats that to do so is slanderous, most recently from the latter billionaire’s
spokesman. And so the old men’s money, and more from men like them, is used
to renew the old stones.

There have been many times in the past when Oxford city and its people would
rally against the desires of the university, however today Oxford City Council has
produced a leaflet for residents informing them of cheaper places to live outside
of the city centre while colleges build accommodation in central Oxford for staff
and new students. But who will come to live beneath the new stones and what
will they be taught? The slogan on the leaflet is ‘Building a world class city for
everyone’. But the city of Oxford increasingly again is for the select few.

---

10 https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2019/10/01/schwarzman-donation-to-oxford-draws-criticism/
The future of Oxford could be so different to what the university has planned for the city. Oxford could be the greenest city in Europe, but because of the 40,000 people who drive over its greenbelt daily, it is one of the least green. Today when its University supports the building of a motorway to Cambridge it serves the purpose of exemplifying just how stupid money can make people in power. But the motorway and all the car-dependent settlements planned along its many junctions need never be built. The reason why it is so important to unearth Oxford University’s past, to show how much it has contributed to and profited from exploitation and how it is currently in danger of becoming the pet project of Donald Trump’s partying billionaires, is that if we do not do this, we will not see a better future in our lifetimes.

Nowadays occasionally a plaque appears on a college wall in acknowledgement of the fact that a building of that college was very directly financed through slavery; but that is about as far as change goes. The stone statue of Rhodes has not fallen, it remains the highest statue on the public high street. It has not been quietly moved indoors to at least be at the same height as the viewer, rather than set as it is – to be looked up to. Oxford University will not be able to make any really significant strides in access and diversity until those who rule it are able to acknowledge the problem of putting Rhodes on a pedestal. Warm words are said about increasing the diversity of the undergraduate intake, and both the state school and ethnicity minority proportions are rising. However, news of the recent changes in elite Scottish Universities, which today all admit students from a normal background with ABB while requiring those with privilege to gain AAA+, tend to be viewed as an impossibility not worthy of serious consideration in Oxford.


Today Oxford’s wealth and influence further attracts people who possess the same. The University of Oxford is so opaque it actually absorbs and sucks in light that would otherwise illuminate its workings. Like a black hole, it has not
attempted to expand its reach – the university remains much the same physical size despite its massive accumulation of resources. The wealth of the university is hidden through the front of colleges being established as separate legal entities. A few buildings pop up here and there; but mostly the endowments just grow larger. When Oxford expanded after the Second World War it expanded to become a city that was more than its university. There is a danger that could be what it is returning to now.

Oxford is built on a swamp. On the land between and around the rivers. The settlement has been here long before the university appropriated its name, and the settlement will be here long after the collection of buildings in its centre are no longer the apex of so much money and power. Our world is at peak inequality. Never before have so few people held so much, while so many billions of others
have lived in or on the edge of destitution. The most common way to die young in Oxford today is when homeless. Most homeless people who died in Oxford recently went to school here. They were local. Many as adults now live in hiding, including in tents in the undergrowth. Oxford University is changing. It is waking up to its past and slowly some within it are writing a better version of its history. Many of the portraits on its walls are being taken down, partly to try to hide the culpability, partly in the hope of creating something better than what we have today. The people of this city could begin to imagine what a world class home for everyone who lives and works in it would actually entail. One in which people who worked in the city could also live again in the city, as almost all of the car workers did when I was a child. And the University could decide that there is more to having a soul than simply having something for sale if the price is right.

It’s time to begin to lighten the stones, to let the light in, and work out how to be good without believing that it is not possible to be good without being rich. Take down the statue of Rhodes and move him indoors, where he can be looked down on rather than up to. Begin to question the stories you have been told, so many are untrue. Work out how to finance the university of Oxford from sources that do not include the most disreputable of donors, or investments in the most unethical of funds, or that come from some of the highest university fees in Europe. If another source of finance is needed to preserve the old buildings, then look to the tourists – they will come to see the stones for many decades to come. Plan for a city that is green and open, not grey and exclusive. Allow in students from normal backgrounds again, from medium income households and average state schools, and ask how reparations can be made for all that has been done that was wrong. There is no need to hide behind the stone anymore, unless you are ashamed of what is within.
The Stones of the University of Oxford
Professor Danny Dorling

The stones that make up the University of Oxford are enormous, but what happened within them was largely hidden from sight. The University was built to be hidden away in a valley, a secret hiding place in the middle of Oxford, with other secrets and symbols hidden within its walls.

The University of Oxford was not built in the grand medieval cathedrals in mainland Europe were designed to tower over the surrounding countryside and inspire awe and wonder, but rather to be concealed and hidden from view.

The stones that make up the University of Oxford are enormous, but what happened within them was largely hidden from sight. The University was built to be hidden away in a valley, a secret hiding place in the middle of Oxford, with other secrets and symbols hidden within its walls.

The University of Oxford was not built in the grand medieval cathedrals in mainland Europe were designed to tower over the surrounding countryside and inspire awe and wonder, but rather to be concealed and hidden from view.

The stones that make up the University of Oxford are enormous, but what happened within them was largely hidden from sight. The University was built to be hidden away in a valley, a secret hiding place in the middle of Oxford, with other secrets and symbols hidden within its walls.

The University of Oxford was not built in the grand medieval cathedrals in mainland Europe were designed to tower over the surrounding countryside and inspire awe and wonder, but rather to be concealed and hidden from view. The stones that make up the University are enormous, but what happened within them was largely hidden from sight. The University was built to be hidden away in a valley, a secret hiding place in the middle of Oxford, with other secrets and symbols hidden within its walls.

The University of Oxford was not built in the grand medieval cathedrals in mainland Europe were designed to tower over the surrounding countryside and inspire awe and wonder, but rather to be concealed and hidden from view. The stones that make up the University are enormous, but what happened within them was largely hidden from sight. The University was built to be hidden away in a valley, a secret hiding place in the middle of Oxford, with other secrets and symbols hidden within its walls.
By the 1980s the tide had turned again, away from growing inequality, away from a rising state of school inequality, and away from a diminishing Oxford influence on the nation of the UK. Oxford returned to the belief that education could lead to wealth, of difference and snobbery and think that only a few had great potential.

Recently, its become apparent that we are close to seeing the end of this trend. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of black undergraduates offer holders rose from 60.5% to 66% with the 2021 figure expected to translate into 70% of places. However, although these figures look promising, we must account for the fact that very large of the state school students come from normal homes, as measured by income. The median child in the UK grows up in a household that survives on a total household income of £21,840 per annum and before paying for housing. The median child in the UK grows up in a household that survives on a total household income of £21,840 per annum and after paying for housing, food, travel, clothing and at other essentials.

In Britain today, a child's level results are mainly determined by the school they attend – not by inherent ability or parents they have been born. A child of average ability in the second quarter at age eight, to be predicted is three times more likely to receive AAA at A-level if they are sent to a private school than a child of above average ability who is


if another source of finance is needed to preserve the old buildings, then look for blank spaces so they will come to see the streets for many decades to come. Plan for a city that is green and open, not grey and exclusive.

Oxford University is changing. It is waking up to its past and, slowly, some within are writing a better version of its history. Many of the portraits on its walls are being taken down, partly to try to hide the culpability partly in the hope of creating something better. The people of this city are beginning to imagine what a world-class home for everyone who lives and works in it would actually look like. One in which people who worked in the city could also live in the city, as almost all of their car-workers did when it was a child.

The University could decide that there is more to having a soul than simply selling something when the price is right.

It’s time to begin to lighten the streets. It’s time to create good houses to be good without believing that it is mutually exclusive to being rich. Dear Oxford University, take down the statue of Rhodes and move him indoors, where he can be locked down on rather than up. Begin to question the stories you have been told, because far too many are untrue. Work out how to finance the University from sources that do not include the most disruptive of donors, investments in the most unethical of funds, or some of the highest university fees in Europe.

that people are educated on microaggressions and how they have a hugely adverse effect on the day to day life of a black student at Oxford. They need to ensure that there are people who understand our experiences of disciplinary boards so that microaggressions are not dismissed and trivialised as merely “banter.” There needs to be more done in terms of providing targeted welfare for black students.

The University does not understand us and has not made an effort to do so. I was so disappointed and embarrassed as an Oxford student to read about how the University condemned the decision to discontinue Abher Fluid but made no attempt to understand why so many black particularly Caribbean students had an issue with the invitation in the first place. I was so embarrassed to read the Vice Chancellor’s recent comments surrounding the Rhodes Must Fall movement. The University proves more and more everyday how out of touch it is. I would like to see it do more to understand the issues that we face.