

THE BEDFORD/ ROYAL HOLLOWAY HISTORY TRADITION(S):

By Penelope J. Corfield

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It's important not to romanticise but equally important not to forget. As a former Bedfordian who made the transition happily to Royal Holloway, these are the highlights that I remember.

Bedford History in the 1970s had a positive atmosphere, looking outward to London History and life in the midst of London rather than inwards into College politics or even into the rest of College life. That outwards viewpoint was complemented by our own corporate confidence, accentuated by the fact that the History staff and students (with Classics) were housed separately, until shortly before the merger in the mid-1980s, in our own Regency villa, St John's Lodge, plumb in the middle of Regent's Park. Working together in this somewhat ramshackle but utterly grand venue heightened History's *esprit de corps*.



One sign of that togetherness was seen in the collective fun and games that regularly punctuated the academic year. In the summer, there was a staff-student cricket match on a nearby pitch in Regent's Park. Much to the students' chagrin, the staff won this match for a series of years in succession. (This was in the mid-1970s). Profs Conrad Russell and Mike Thompson were devoted cricketers and played with great seriousness, which helped the staff cause. John Gillingham from the LSE was also roped in, as he had done some teaching for us. He is a genuine cricketer, who nonchalantly transformed our team. As the players included both men and women, of very variegated abilities, the scores were rather random. For my own part, I remember holding one brilliant slip-field catch – the only time in my life – and, for years afterwards, being encouraged by Conrad Russell to repeat the trick but never

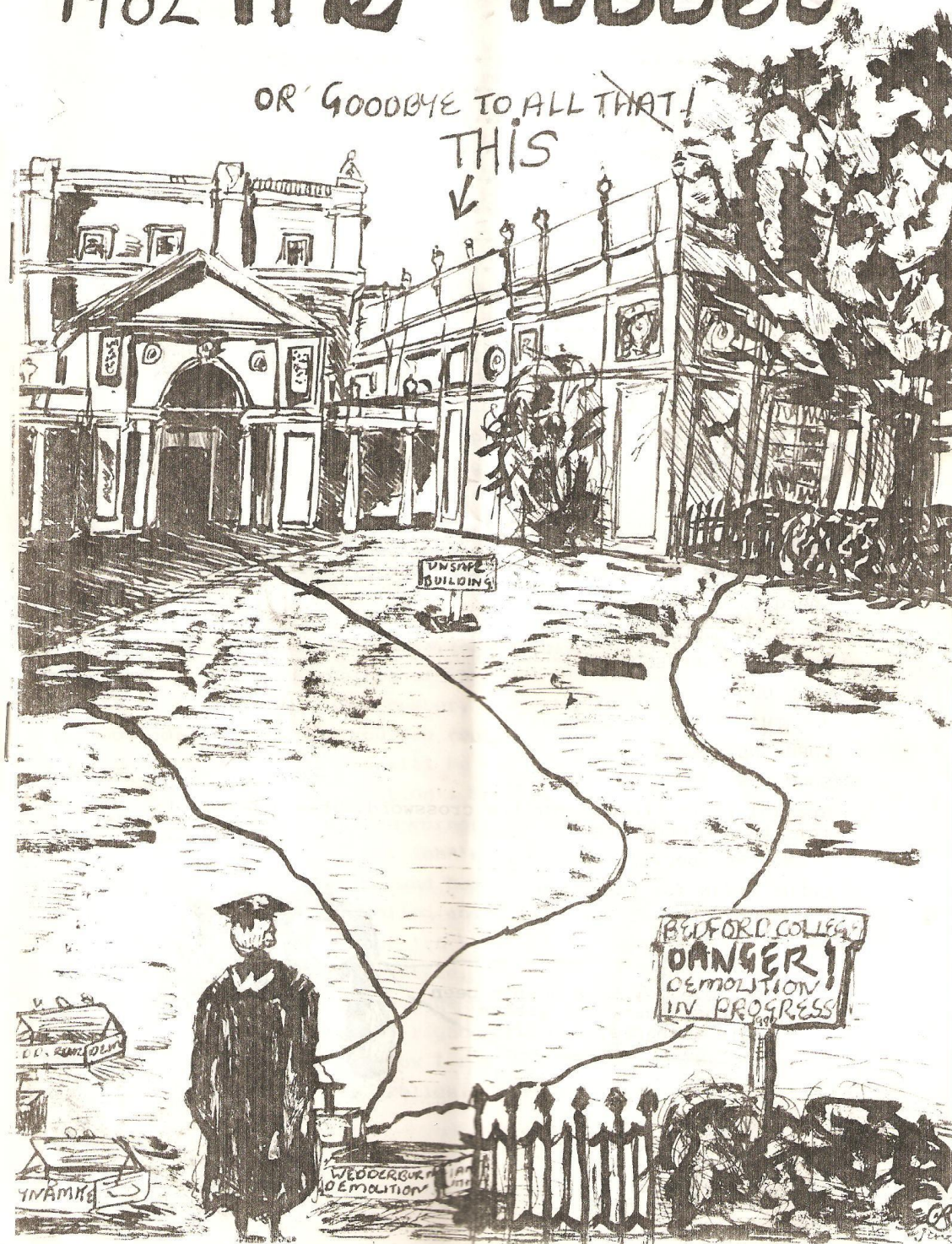
managing it. The matches were accompanied by a picnic tea with strawberries; the sun always shone ... It was that sort of event.

At Christmas, the end of term was always marked by a large and well-attended party in the great open hall of the Lodge. During the 1970s the staff and students alternated in providing some form of home-made entertainment. On at least one occasion, the staff provided a series of playlets, in which we all took part. The different scenes included a mock-interview based upon misunderstandings all round; plus a well-received skit of disastrous tutorial; and a monologue by Conrad Russell. He enjoyed this so much that his colleagues had to shout from the wings to get him to leave the stage. Strange to relate, the staff had time not only to write but also to *rehearse* these dramatic offerings – which seems almost unbelievable in today's pressurised times.

The students at another Christmas party put on a skit in return, to satirise members of staff individually for their physical appearance and foibles. These well-intended impersonations were almost too much. Prof Michael Thompson was teased for having a small tuft of hair, standing bolt upright on the very top of his head, which he was wont to pat reflectively. But lo! After viewing this satire, he ceased to pat his head and, even more decisively, the tuft of hair was no longer to be seen. For my own part, I was 'done' by a very charming young man with long curling hair. For several days before the party, he followed me around, gazing intently. I was rather flattered. Then he appeared on stage, wearing a very short and bright red dress. He twirled around rapidly to inaugurate the 'red revolution' (if only it was so easy); and then pouted and ran his fingers suggestively through his curls. He also brandished a pair of scissors, which I apparently did in tutorials when emphasising a point. That was it. After that demonstration, I still fidget. But I don't brandish scissors and I try not to pout.

Another tradition, invented in the early 1980s, saw the students producing a termly magazine, entitled *The Gobbet*. I still have some tattered copies. They were printed on A4 and stapled together, for a small print-run. They show me that my colleague Prof Caroline Barron and I both contributed short articles to this production. Among the many items in the magazine were a number of somewhat veiled allusions to Departmental gossip. A rather sparky extract from a reported conversation at a staff-student party has one academic historian, identified only as PJC, asking a student during an energetic bop: '*Andrew, don't you think that dancing together is rather like making love?*' To which the said Andrew replied, doggedly: '*Err ... err ... no*'. Whether the exchange actually took place as reported is now lost in the mists of time. It did demonstrate, however, an atmosphere of bonhomie and the determination of *The Gobbet* to cheer its readers, despite the looming merger blues.

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The togetherness fostered by such jollities was heightened by the fact that Bedford History Department was then very small, so it was possible to know everyone by sight, and most people by name. The first-year intake was then no more than 30 students. And we taught intensively in tutorials of one or (generally) two students. Lectures were scheduled in

the grand Ballroom (great for dancing but poor acoustics for lecturing) but such events were relatively disregarded by the students, despite exhortations by the staff. Being as objective as I can, I would say that the delivery of undergraduate teaching was generally better then, because of the intimacy of the small tutorial system, which put all students directly under the spotlight. Outside Oxbridge, we were one of the very few places which maintained small tutorials into the mid-1980s.

On the other hand, the delivery of supervision for postgraduates was much less organised and professional than it has now become. As a result, the drop-out rates and statistics of non-completion were then far too high. This state of affairs was common across British Universities into the 1980s, before being gradually reformed by the advent of preparatory MAs (proliferating from the 1990s onwards) and improved supervisory practices. At Royal Holloway, we led the way with the path-breaking Women's History MA and (in 1992) the new Modern History MA: Power, Culture, Society.

Needless to say, life at Bedford College was not immune from problems in the pre-merger years. On one occasion, I recollect a dispute within the students' own History Society, which was usually run by a lively group who organised lectures, trips, parties and so forth. I cannot remember the details of the argument. But it divided the clever public-school students (recruited to Bedford in some numbers), with their assumed carapace of either hearty jollity or disdainful command, from the clever grammar-school students (many from the north of England), with their assumed carapace of either social truculence or nervous intellectualism. One angry southern toff flew out of a crunch meeting of the Society, exclaiming, white to the gills: *'This is class war!'* But it wasn't. As already noted, I cannot remember the substance of the dispute, which quickly simmered down. The episode gives a clue, however, to the hothouse intensity of life in St John's Lodge – and to the social composition of Bedford College, which did not recruit many (if any) working-class Londoners.

Meanwhile, another lurking problem, of which most of us were completely unaware, was the precarious position of Bedford College within London's federal University. Prof Michael Thompson did circulate in 1972 a very prescient paper on the financial weakness of the institution, proposing a merger with Westfield College as the solution. But his warning was not taken seriously at the highest levels, or at the lower levels either, it must be confessed. A decade later, however, in the 1980s financial crisis in higher education the policies of the academically-hostile Thatcher government forced first Bedford and then Westfield to close as independent institutions.

After a tense period of uncertainty, during which many rival mergers were proposed and rejected, Bedford College finally moved to Egham to merge with Royal Holloway. The conjunction was rendered easier for the academic staff in History by the warm welcome extended by the Royal Holloway historians. But the Bedford students were not overwhelmingly happy. It was good, from one point of view, that the Bedford students were devoted to the College and passionate to save it. But, once the fight to retain our independence was lost, we had to make the merger work. The first year at Egham seemed to be devoted to lots of extra jollity to reconcile the transported Bedford students, and

simultaneously to reassure the Royal Holloway students, who got cross if any sulky Bedfordians denigrated the amenities of Egham. Luckily, good cheer eventually won through. The move from Regency classicism to Victorian Gothic (cum-Renaissance) worked. And, happily, the students' degree results, on all sides, were exceptionally good.



Before too long, our traditional togethernesses were merged into one new togetherness. The teaching audit in 1994 gave a clear sign of that, when the History Department got very high marks. It fell to the students to conduct the visiting auditors around the campus, as they were required to attend an array of lectures and classes. As they promenaded together, the auditors had a tactic of asking apparently artless questions. In one or two Universities, they succeeded in getting the students to spill the beans, indicating internal discontent on a range of issues. In Royal Holloway's case, however, the farsighted leaders of the History Society, who organised the rota of student guides, had primed all their helpers to answer all questions, no matter what the subject, with fervent declarations of enthusiasm for the Department.

It worked. The eventual auditors' report gave a special compliment to the students for their 'tigerish loyalty'. It is a tribute that finely captures the merged Bedford/Royal Holloway History traditions. Of course, it was not all sunshine and strawberry teas. We worked as well as partied to generate a living history, which continues finely today.