The Foundation of LMH

'My own feeling is that almost any place would be more appropriate for a Ladies' College than Oxford and I should certainly not grudge Cambridge the privilege of carrying out that experiment' wrote Max Müller, Oxford's first Professor of Comparative Philology, upon learning of the plan to found a college for women at the university. The idea certainly threatened to shatter tradition; for almost eight centuries Oxford had exclusively educated men, producing such figures as the philosopher John Locke, the poet John Donne, and historian Edward Gibbon. The movement for female education at Oxford had already taken it's first tentative steps in the mid-nineteenth century, with the establishing of a series of lectures and classes - given in the Taylor Institution (the Taylorian) by Professor (later Bishop) Stubbs, Mrs Henry Fawcett (later a prominent Suffragist), and several other Oxford tutors and scholars - as well as examinations, all specifically for women. But in the later nineteenth century, the initiative of a handful of people brought change that went much further and which would allow Oxford to boast of alumna such as Benazir Bhutto, Gertrude Bell and Mary Warnock.

The leading pioneer in carving out a place for women at Oxford was Reverend Edward Stuart Talbot, the first Warden of Keble College. After his death in January 1934, his obituary in The Times said of Rev Talbot, 'He helped to create, as well as to maintain, a tradition essential both to religious and national life'. Throughout his life, Talbot endeavoured to forward the social concerns of the Church and, in 1878, after a visit to Girton College Cambridge - established in 1869 as a college for women - Edward is said to have asked his wife Lavinia, 'Why should the Church not be for once at the front instead of behind its development?'. Talbot welcomed the movement for the higher education of women, and saw in it an opportunity for the Church to take the initiative, ahead of the secular powers. In order to carry out his plans, Edward recognised he would need the support of prominent figures both in and out of Oxford. He seems to have written to a number of educational authorities in order to set out and garner support for his ideas. To say the least, the responses he received cannot have been encouraging.

Professor Müller was not alone in his disdain for Rev Talbot's plans; Lady Salisbury, the wife of the then University Chancellor, wrote, 'I fear I am too utterly unsympathetic, not to say disproving to offer any advice except Punch's celebrated word of counsel to those about to marry, 'Don't"; Professor of Fine Art John Ruskin exclaimed, 'I cannot let the bonnets in, on any conditions this term'; and the reply from Elizabeth Sewell (authoress of '*Amy Hope'*) warned, 'the competition with young men his highly undesirable'. However, by far the most damning condemnation came from Henry Liddon, Professor of Theology. After hearing the mistaken rumour that the women's college would be named after John Keble himself, Liddon wrote to Talbot scornfully, 'I venture to express a hope that you will not sanction what would appear to Dr Pusey [*the then Regius Professor of Hebrew at Christ Church*] and myself nothing short of a *desecration* of Mr Keble's name'. He went further, saying 'Nobody who knew Mr Keble can doubt what he would have thought of bringing young women to Oxford.' But it wasn't all bad news for Talbot. Despite the evident contempt of some, others were more encouraging. Professor Thomas Green (the then Whyte's Professor of Moral Philosophy) and the Bishop of Oxford, John Mackarness, both expressed their support, and Edward Benson, the Bishop of Truro, wrote, 'Your plan is indeed one to be rejoiced over'.

Talbot was not the sort to let the reluctance of the University community deter him from pushing forward with his plans. On the 4th June 1878, a meeting was held in the dining room of the Warden's Lodgings at Keble College. The seventeen people present at the meeting included a number of well-known Oxford residents, including the aforementioned Professor Green and Dr Mackarness, as well as Dr Mark Pattison, author and Rector of Lincoln College. Between them they discussed issues such as the religious alignment of the college, proposed names, and how

the new college would be funded. The final resolution of the meeting, recorded in the minutes, was to 'attempt the establishment of a small hall or hostel in connection with the Church of England, for the reception of women desirous of availing themselves of the special advantages which Oxford offers for higher education', with another committee of eight members chosen to 'discuss and formulate this plan'. The committee thought it would be possible to have the hall completed by Michaelmas term of the following year. Another meeting on the 22nd June created a new body - the 'Association for the Education of Women in Oxford' (AEW) - which would be tasked with overseeing the educational work of the women who resided in the hall, and so the prospect of a college for women was ever closer to becoming a reality.

It would be a mistake to assume that the initial 4th June meeting ran as smoothly as it seems. The subject of the religious observance of the hall cause intense disagreement among those present. Talbot's initial motive, the opportunity for the Church to take the lead in this enterprise, mean he and his supporters felt very strongly that the hall should be definitely Church of England. On the other hand, Dr John Percival - the President of Trinity College and later Bishop of Hereford - and his supporters were opposed to a dominant Anglican influence. Eventually, the disagreement which pushed Percival to break away and found another, non-denominational hall, which would later become Somerville College. After the meeting, the committee sent out a notice indicating the nature of Talbot's proposed hall as 'An Academical House on the principles of the Church of England…which will secure to the students the following advantages: a common life with the ways and tone of a Christian family; the protection of certain rules as to hours, society, Sec; general supervision of studies, definite religious instruction, and the advice and assistance of a lady of experience and other high qualifications, acting as Lady Principle'. On the 21st November 1878, this role of 'Lady Principal' was offered to Elizabeth Wordsworth, the daughter of the Bishop of Lincoln and great-niece of the great poet William Wordsworth.

When Elizabeth Wordsworth received the offer to be Principal of the new Hall, the story goes that her brother John, then a fellow at Brasenose College, remarked, 'Well, if I thought your not going would put an end to the whole thing, I should say 'Don't go', but as I don't think it will, I think you had better accept'. Miss Wordsworth was held in high regard due to her education and scholarly piety, and either socially or through the Oxford lectures she attended (as part of the early scheme for women) she met many of the pioneers determined to provide a university education for women at Oxford. To them, Miss Wordsworth was the perfect choice. Her father being a bishop, Christian faith had a profound impact on her upbringing, and living in the precincts of Westminster Abbey allowed access to clerical and academic society, galleries, and the theatre. The Wordsworth family also travelled extensively, Elizabeth especially so, and she became well-read in several languages. Evidently, she was exactly the 'lady of experience and other high qualifications' the committee were looking for. Yet, despite her new position at the forefront of women's education at Oxford, Miss Wordsworth was still very much a product of her time. She was still an ardent believer that this newfound higher education should not supersede the requirements of domestic life and described her aim for the Hall in when she said, 'We want to turn out girls so that they will be capable of making homes happy'. Whatever her views on the matter, the committee would later praise that it was 'almost entirely to [Elizabeth] that the Hall has been started in a way which bids fair to release the hopes they entertained when they undertook its formation'.

With all this settled, there still remained the decision as to the name of the new Hall. In her autobiographical memoir '*Glimpses of the Past*', Elizabeth Wordsworth credits herself with the suggestion of 'Lady Margaret' after seeing Margaret Beaufort's 'beautiful monument in Westminster Abbey'. Margaret Tudor was the mother of Henry VII, the Countess of Richmond, and the foundress of the Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity at both Oxford and Cambridge. It was taken that she might stand as an ideal for the educated English woman, with Wordsworth writing, 'She was a gentlewoman, a scholar, a saint, and after having been three times married

she took a vow of celibacy. What more could be expected of any woman?'. It was also in regard to Lady Margaret that the new Hall was to adopt the Beaufort motto, 'Souvent me souvient' - 'Often I remember'. Thus, the new Hall was from henceforth to be known as 'Lady Margaret Hall', and was from the outset fondly referred to as the familiar 'LMH'.

The other issue to be considered, now that the committee had a name, was the actual site of Lady Margaret Hall. One stipulation of the opposition to the plans was that the building must be inconspicuous, so when the preposterous idea of women's university education inevitably dwindled, it could be sold on for another purpose. And so the original home of Lady Margaret Hall was the last house on the south side of Norham Gardens - a small, pseudo-gothic, white brick 'family residence' settled between the University Parks and the river Cherwell. Whilst her husband took charge of the main committee, Lavinia Talbot worked on various sub-committees, including that tasked with finding the initial site, and then furnishing it. Because Lady Margaret Hall was modestly designed to provide for women who would want, or so it was supposed, to return to their domestic lives after their education at Oxford, the layout and furnishing of the building was concerned only with the residential needs of the women. Nevertheless, the total cost of furnishing the site is estimated to have come to £454 6s 5d, just over £30,000 in today's money. The situation of the College was fortunate in a way that contemporaries, including the pioneers, would never have expected. Almost immediately, the white brick house proved inadequate, but the open meadow to the east allowed significant potential for expansion. After the building of 'New Old Hall' in 1881, the original building was fondly referred to as 'Old Old Hall', and the name still sticks today.

On the 13th October 1879, the beginning of Michaelmas term that year, Lady Margaret Hall was officially opened, and the first nine women embarked on their Oxford education. But this was just the beginning of the fight for women's education at Oxford. For the next thirty years, the University ardently disclaimed its responsibility for the women within its precinct, and it would be more than forty years before women were allowed to take degrees. In fact, the story comes full circle in the case of Bertha Johnson - by then the President of St Hilda's - who was one of the first women to receive her degree and who had been at that historic meeting on the 4th June 1878. Today, Lady Margaret Hall has far outgrown the original, Victorian family home. It is set in around twelve acres of grounds, and is home to around four hundred undergraduates and just over two hundred postgraduates - a lot more than the initial nine women. In 2016, Lady Margaret Hall took the legacy of its pioneering history in a new direction with the introduction of a Foundation Year aimed at giving students from under-represented groups the opportunity to fulfil their academic potential - it is the first college at either Oxford or Cambridge to run such a scheme. Evidently, Lady Margaret Hall continues the progressive work of those seventeen individuals who sat around the dining table in June 1878. Initially founded for the residential needs of women wishing to study at Oxford, today LMH is a diverse and inclusive community, which truly has been changing lives since 1879.

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