

Campus life and halls

Our alumni share their memories of campus life and halls. To add yours, please email alumnicommunications@contacts.bham.ac.uk (<mailto:alumnicommunications@contacts.bham.ac.uk>).

1930s

Marjorie Woods (BA English, 1935)

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Listening to Prof Ernest de Selincourt reading Wordsworth. Cycling regularly from University house to the Edmund Street buildings in the centre of Birmingham. Many stone steps in the building and hard wooden seats in the lecture rooms.

Lunch allowance from House if lectures necessitated staying in Edmund Street was 9 pence. This bought a 2 course meal in the refectory. The luxury of sitting in large comfortable armchairs in the Union on Saturday mornings drinking coffee.

Regular evening dinner in House, all very formal, and cocoa parties at 9.45 pm in our rooms and very informal!

Above all making happy friendships.

1950s

Peter Collins (BA History, 1951)

I joined the University of Birmingham from the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe, in October 1948. In those days only a very small proportion of school-leavers went on to university. In any case, so shortly after the end of the Second World War, university places were at a premium. Precedence was understandably given to ex-servicemen whose education had been interrupted by military service. All fit 18-year-old males were required to do National Service for two years unless they were exempted by occupation or had been granted an immediate place at university. So I counted myself fortunate to have been offered a place at Birmingham to read History straight from school.

At that time the Arts Faculty was located in the centre of Birmingham in the old Josiah Mason College buildings in Edmund Street. No vestige of it survives today. The area around City Hall where it stood was bull-dozed and built over with the development of the city centre in the late 20th century. It was a veritable warren filled with lecture halls, tutorial rooms and offices connected by innumerable passageways which posed significant navigation problems for the uninitiated. At the rear of the building was the Guild Club, the Edmund Street version of the much more splendid Students' Union at Edgbaston. This contained the Founder's Room, where most social functions took place, the refectory, various games rooms and, of course, the bar. This was presided over by the barmaid, Daisy, a formidable, stout, grey-haired lady with the forearms of a navy. She stood no nonsense from anyone and no student dared to defy her! She served a very palatable pint of Mitchells and Butlers Best Bitter to which many of us became quite partial, not to say addicted.

As now (I imagine), extra-curricular activities played a large part in student life. The main event in the Christmas term was Carnival, the student Rag Week. Our target – regularly achieved – was to raise £10,000 for local charities, an enormous sum in those days. The week culminated in a procession of decorated floats through the city centre led, I remember, by a tall student wearing policeman's uniform - minus trousers! The social highlight of the week was the Carnival Ball held in the Great Hall at Edgbaston: full formal dress of course (a first for many of us), a top-flight dance band and celebrity guest star for the cabaret. The Guild Theatre Group was into Gilbert and Sullivan in a big way and I took part in *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers*, in the course of which I met the girl who was to become my wife (now sadly deceased). One of my contemporaries was Brian Priestley who later became a successful journalist with, I think, *The Birmingham Post*. He had a quirky sense of humour and he conceived the idea of forming 'The Seal Society', ostensibly with the aim of training a seal to swim the English Channel, smashing the existing record! Needless to say, no seal was ever acquired, nor was there any intention to do so. It was merely an excuse for some of the more outrageous and irresponsible escapades that students used to get up to. (Do they still? I hope so.) We attracted wide support throughout the Edmund Street community and the Seal Society events and activities were avidly followed and semi-seriously reported in Guild News, the student newspaper. Much beer was consumed.

In the course of my first year I had joined the University Air Squadron, attracted more by the annual bounty of £35 than by any aspiration to make the Royal Air Force my career. It was, after all, around 15% of my total student grant! We flew at that time from the old grass airfield at Castle Bromwich to the east of the city at the end of a tram route. I learned to fly on the Tiger Moth, an ancient biplane type, later replaced by the Chipmunk which had the benefit of an enclosed cockpit. I fear that I did not take it very seriously but it meant that after graduation I began my National Service as an Acting-Pilot Officer (on probation) and went straight on to advanced flying training on the Harvard. I never looked back from then on, eventually securing a permanent commission, logging over 3,000 hours as a fast-jet fighter pilot and retiring in 1985 after 34 years, in the rank of Air Vice-Marshal. I greatly enjoyed my time at Birmingham. A fine education is never wasted and I acquired skills which served me well in a succession of staff appointments as well as widening my cultural horizons. I also gained a wife who gave me four children and 47 amazing years of married life. I look back on my three years at the University with undiluted pleasure.

Ken W England (BSc Mechanical Engineering, 1952)



Unfortunately, I have not stood under Old Joe since Graduation Day 1952 when the late B Hill, his schoolfriend Peter Walters and myself cycled overnight to catch the boat train for a cycling/camping holiday down the Rhone Valley, each clutching our £25 travel allowance, which had to last a month.

Memories – they say as you get older you remember the past better than yesterday, I'm beginning to believe it. My first Rag/Carnival Day 1949 (pictured): Leaping on a bus at Alcester Lane ends in a ridiculous get up and rattling my tin for contributions. Joining the Engineers' Float, finally ending up at the Great Hall exhausted with some young lady I had met en route, who particularly wanted to hear Chris Barber or whoever was the star attraction that year.

Travelling by coach with the soccer teams (I featured in the third xi) for a Wednesday game against Cardiff or Swansea University. Discovering as we neared our destination that King George had died. Not knowing what was the correct thing to do, we respectfully stood for a minute's silence then played our game.

Nervously waiting outside the Great Hall when your future career depended on a three-hour finals paper you were not sure you had adequately prepared for.

The Present: We came to South Africa on loan from ICI and have stayed for 40+ years. Now living in a retirement village within the factory residential area of Modderfontein, Johannesburg.

interests of photography, wildlife and flowers on regular walks (jackal, zebra and antelope, but none of the big five). I also paint watercolours of the old buildings and landscapes.

We travel to Queensland to visit our son and daughter and three grandsons – only the youngest looks like following in his grandfather's and father's footsteps as an engineer.

Alternate years we visit relatives and our favourite places in the UK. Before coming to South Africa we lived in the village where James Cook was born for 12 years – Marton in Cleveland, which gave us a lasting interest in Cook and a love of the Yorkshire Moors.

Morry Van Ments (BSc Physics, 1953)

I graduated in Physics 1953. I remember when I entered the university in 1950. There was a Freshers' Conference at which the President of the Students Union, Brian Priestly, delivered his welcome address swinging at the end of a rope tied to the ceiling of the Debating Hall.

JW Paul Turner (LLB Law, 1956)

My whereabouts on the day of the death of President Kennedy: The annual dinner of the Guild of Graduates was being held on that evening. If I remember correctly, the guest speaker was the then head of the Lucas Electrical Company.

During the serving of the main course, our waitress was seen to be crying. One of the ladies on our table was duly solicitous, and asked the cause, assuming some personal problem. The waitress replied: 'We aren't allowed to say.'

The meal, the toasts and the address by the guest speaker proceeded, and it was only on the way home that we discovered the cause of her distress when I switched on the car radio.

Chris Norman (BSc Mathematics, 1958)

In Remenham churchyard by the Thames there is a grave with a low surround on which is just visible the epitaph:

'To the ever cherished and precious memory of my loved and loving husband William Henry Barber who died on July 2 1927 aged 67. Generous in every thought, kindly in every word, helpful in every deed. His memory lives for ever.

'And to the ever dear memory of his wife Martha Constance Hattie Barber, born May 16 1869, died April 30 1933 who, with him, was a great benefactor of the University of Birmingham.'

The Barbers lived at Culham Court, a Georgian mansion overlooking the Thames about a mile and a half further downstream. We live half an hour's drive away and often go for walks in the Henley region.

1960s

Rod Packman (BSc Physics, 1960; PhD Physics, 1964)

During our first year, 1957, there were extensive renovations being done on 'Joe'. One evening, on a dare, a fellow first year Physics student, whose name has escaped me, but whose face I can still see (and the fact that he was from Wootton Wawen and actually looked like young Shakespeare), decided to climb Joe. Inside that is. And we did. These are my still frazzled recollections of that night.

Getting in was trivial. To heck with the 'Keep Out' stuff everywhere and security - what security? Well, we saw the nightwatchman stroll by and chose the moment. The light fencing was simply there and we boldly just put it aside. The door was unlocked. The SAS could stay in Hereford this evening after all.

The lift was off limits, even if there was a lift! So we climbed and climbed. Initially progress was a walk in the park deal. The original builders, maybe to economise, had employed steps/ladders of constant length, however the girth of the tower decreased with height and, as a result, the pitch of the ladders increased relentlessly with altitude. In synchrony with the more difficult climb, glancing downwards brought to one's immediate attention the huge drop between our legs. Things on the ground looked very, very small and terribly hard.

Those last few spans to reach the loft at the clock level were worthy of Everest with Banshees to my agoraphobic mind. I was prepared to quit, having always believed that saying about discretion and valour – in my case cowardice – but my companion prevailed on me and the rest is now history. We got there. We lived. Physics Rules OK!

And, of course, going up was the easy part!

Valerie Vessey (BSocSc Economics, Politics and Sociology, 1962)

I remember when we had seminars in the huts there were the black stoves in one corner that got very hot. One time, one of my fellow students left his plastic portfolio case against it. Suddenly there was a dreadful smell and smoke – all the plastic had melted.

Richard Crumbly (BA History, 1967)

I read with interest the article about Malcolm X on page 27 of your magazine ([issue 24 \(http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/alumni/BMag-2012.pdf\)](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/alumni/BMag-2012.pdf)). I was there! I remember him referring to the British Empire as: 'The Empire upon which the sun never set, but now the sun rises and you dun can't hardly find it'. There were roars of applause from the audience.

He then went on to comment about Muslims having more than one wife and referred to the young white men in the audience, saying: 'When you grow up and take a wife you will find you have your work cut out trying to keep just one woman happy but if the Muslim can keep four women happy then you have got to give the Muslim credit.' Again, roars of applause and laughter. It was a packed, rowdy and interesting meeting.

At page 16 you refer to the Spencer Davis Group. They may well have played in January 1967. I am sure they played as well in November 1965. I saw them play. They played their new single Keep on Running, which was No. 1 on my 21st birthday (21 January 1966). Spencer Davis had been a student at the University, studying German or other languages. Steve (then Stevie) Winwood, I think aged only about 17, was clearly the star of the group with a great soulful voice. I particularly remember a soulful version of Georgia on my mind and the applause which greeted his piano solo.

Another man I saw about the same time, i.e. 1965/6 was Screaming Lord Such, once again playing at the Union. He had an excellent guitarist playing a complicated

number I don't think I have heard before or since, I believe called Stage Coach by Judge Proctor. I went and had a word afterwards to congratulate him on his playing.

The star turn was, of course, David Such, already well known as a Parliamentary candidate. His star turn was a grisly song called Jack the Ripper with the refrain 'The Ripper, he's the Ripper, Jack the Ripper' containing a line, I believe, about ladies of London walking in fear of the Ripper at night "with his Gladstone bag and his one track mind" and I guess one of the group would dress up as an 1880s lady of the night and was pursued by Such with a knife across the stage. I seem to remember the lady managed to escape his attentions and the knife went into the top of an amplifier.

I also saw JB Priestley at the Union (I did my dissertation on his works) and also heard Jeremy Thorpe speak at the same venue. One of the undergrads Inigo Bing (now I believe a Magistrate) stood up and asked him a lengthy and involved question to which Thorpe answered: 'You should go to the bar.' There was a lot of laughter at this because that is exactly what Bing wanted to do.

Dave Collins (BSc Chemistry, 1965; PhD Chemistry, 1968)

Formative years have more prominence than in later life, the six years I spent in Birmingham were life defining – six years today are just yesterday.

The Swinging Sixties passed us by, we were hard up, and with Chemistry lectures 9am to 12 noon and lab work 2-5pm, there was little time to hang around doing nothing. Our group did no drugs, although Brew X1 was a staple diet.

Somehow we survived Birmingham landladies, the great winter of 1962, Kennedy's assassination, Harold McMillan and Harold Wilson and the Beatles and Stones.

Despite being thrust into the rough end of landlady territory at the tender age of 17, I managed to come through happily married, with two degrees, a driving licence and no overdraft and I had enough affection for the city to live there until 1975.

I do think universal education is a wonderful thing and would deny it to no willing student, but today too many are forced into higher education, which they do not really want, and come out so heavily in debt that the investment in time is not recovered for 20 or 30 years. The Government could afford free education if the graduate group was 10%, as it used to be, instead of near 50% as now. We were a lucky generation but we did work hard for it – good luck to those of you there now.

Hugh Read (BDS, 1968)

From the paternoster to llamas! My greatest memory of the dental hospital is the paternoster lift, and daring each other to go 'over the top' (or does the lift just end somehow?). From qualifying as a Dentist in 1968 and surviving many adventures all over the world, I am at last retired, or rather retired, and living a self-sufficient life in Tauranga, New Zealand, farming small animals, including alpacas and goats. Would love to see anyone from Brum anytime.

Jenny Schwarz (BSc Physics, 1968)

I remember being one of the first students in Wyddrington. Things were not quite finished – we had to wait for bedspreads! The fire alarm consisted of a large triangle on each corridor, which we were instructed to play whilst running up the corridor if we discovered a fire. When a proper alarm was fitted and rang for the first time we all came out of our rooms decided it was a false alarm/just testing and went back in. No health and safety then!

Also remember nearly everyone coming down to the JCR for Top of the Pops! On Saturday evenings we had to make our own supper – collected after lunch. Butter was supposed to be divided into 12 portions to be spread on the allowed two pieces of toast. Latecomers found that the early birds had been a bit too generous with supplies and nothing was left. Happy days!

1970s

Donald Beecher (PhD Shakespeare Studies, 1972)

My last look at the Shakespeare Institute, then still ensconced in the old manse on Edgbaston Park Road, was in late August, 1972. I had given up my bedsit, after sending my car off to Canada, and I had been sleeping (illegally, no doubt) on a little cot in my office up in the west wing of the third floor. Nightly, I managed to wake myself when I heard the turnkeys coming through, and installed myself among my books like a perfectly obsessed student at 3:00am until the all-clear sounded to finish my night.

You wanted some good old gossip about the good old times in Birmingham, like the charmer I met in the Student Union ballroom dancing classes who, after we had learned all but the real the steps together, told me about her engagement to some lucky guy from Bristol. The cha cha cha was the end of my dancing career. Or about the time we piled as many into my MGB as specifications would allow to go out and inspect the brand-new Spaghetti Junction. Or about the trips to Stratford to see Shakespeare on the stand-by tickets, over and over again. Or about the unforgettable T.J.B. Spencer, then Institute Director, who welcomed me to the school with the reminder that I was expected 'to conduct myself at all times with a gentlemanly spirit of enquiry'. Or about the time when I set up shop in the common room with my brand-new viola da gamba and scratched away to the consternation of those within earshot. But I got better. In fact, I was already going over to the Rowe Music Library in Cambridge and up to Durham Cathedral in search of copies of some of the forgotten musical treasures written for the viol.

How could I leave out something about my Canadian life of home and heart, beginning with my beloved Quebecoise who has filled my years with French (de rigueur), politics to be sure (the true teacher of equivocation), art history, Gallic conversation (to coin a word you can put a lot into), culinary concoctions (did I tell you about her tuna, celery, fennel, and grape salad?) and two kids, now in their mid-30s, who inspire bragging rights even when no bias is allowed.

Jim Whitehurst (BSc Mathematics & Computer Science 1973; MSc Computer Science [Software Eng], 1974)

I started at Birmingham to read Mathematics in October 1970. I spent my first year in High Hall and then the second year shared a small damp cold flat in Moseley. We all salivated as we saw the new University flats being built at Griffin Close and applied for a flat for our third year.

Not surprisingly, the flats were oversubscribed, so a draw was arranged to take place in the Aston Webb Building. I think that were 175 flats and 181 applications so it was not too oversubscribed. The initial plan was to draw out 175 names to see who got the flats but after audience participation, it was agreed to just draw out the names of the six unlucky applicants. It was a dreadful few minutes until we realised that we were lucky enough to get a new dry warm flat. I often wonder who those few unlucky applicants were.

Kenneth Chin Leong Lim (MBChB Medicine, 1973)

What happened to Mason Hall and Lucas House? I used to stay there as an undergraduate and during the fourth year at Medical School. I also stayed in the Chancellor's Hall during the vacations. I have been a Consultant Physician in General Medicine and a Rural GP in outback NSW in the small town of Inverell for the last 35 years and love it. No plans to retire yet! I'm the only specialist in town and very busy.

Kate Bartlett (BA English and French, 1974)

Only a few, of many memories from 1970-74:

The slipper baths in the Ladies in the Union basement - we had a house where the water in the immersion was always orange with rust (presumably) so the baths were a godsend

The hairdresser, also in the basement, who charged very little and was always wonderful

Eating what we thought was a healthy lunch in Founders (then a coffee bar) of an apple and half a pound of cheese from the Union shop, that tasted vaguely of soap, but was very cheap, and listening to Roberta Flack sing *Killing Me Softly* on the juke box

One of my colleagues who had done a year out in New Guinea and contracted malaria and had an attack in University House - scared us all rigid, but luckily she got over it okay.

Peering at exam results pinned on the noticeboard in the Mason Building each time and thinking I'd failed because the Combined Honours were listed separately and I always looked at single subjects first

The paternoster lifts in the Muirhead Tower and the Library - with the turnover on the hour, every hour, you had to get in the upward cubicles and go right round the mechanism at the top in order to get down. The French department was on floors two and three of Muirhead, and the downward cubicles were full of those from the higher floors

The English department 'forgot' me and three others who did Combined Honours with a language and were abroad for a year. On our return, some of the courses had been discounted and all or work sent in was 'mislaidd', so we all had to be in the same tutorial and cover the courses that way. We weren't impressed at the time, but it seemed to work out alright in the end

In Rag Week in 1970, the English and Drama departments did an all-night Shakespeare in town. Around 3am, a couple of lads came by on their way home from a nightclub. They had drunk quite a bit and never read any Shakespeare, but joined in for a laugh and got hooked - they stayed about two hours, and a whole world opened up for them - amazing! English department staff brought coffee at dawn. I loved it!

Learning NEVER to drink punch mixed by medical students.

It's all changed a lot, but the atmosphere remains the same. I knew I wanted to go to Birmingham the minute I stepped onto the campus for the interview and I never regretted it.

Since then, I have taught Modern Languages for 13 years, worked for a Local Authority for the rest of my career, in Education, Special Needs, leading on the local Early Years programmes through the late 90s to 2007, then running the local Children's Trust and joint commissioning arrangements. Since 2010 I have been working with CYPSC, a company providing consultancy on children's services and change management to schools, Local Authorities, and third sector organisations.

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