

A History of St Catherine's College, Oxford



St Catherine's (or 'Catz' as it is fondly known) is Oxford's youngest, and largest, undergraduate and graduate college. Founded in 1962, it celebrated its 50th anniversary as a College in 2012, although its roots actually date back to the nineteenth century.

Following the 1852 Royal Commission, which recommended that access to Oxford and Cambridge Universities needed to be widened, a 'Delegacy for Unattached Students' was formed in Oxford in 1868. This allowed students to be members of the University without being a member of a college, thus avoiding (what were considered for many) the prohibitive costs of an Oxford college.

Initially occupying just one room, with students living in affordable lodgings around Oxford, the Delegacy quickly banded together in quasi-collegiate fashion. In 1884 the Delegacy for Unattached Students was renamed as the Delegacy for Non-Collegiate Students, but lack of an identifying name for social and sporting purposes continued to frustrate students.

In response to this problem, the Boat Club and other groups began using the name St Catharine's (sic) Club, taken from a hall used for club meetings. The spelling later changed to St Catherine's (probably to differentiate itself from its Cambridge namesake), and in 1931 the Delegacy was officially renamed the St Catherine's Society – the origins of St Catherine's College were well under way.

The 1950s saw the biggest change in the history of St Catherine's. In 1952 the historian Alan Bullock became Censor (Head) of St Catherine's Society. Bullock brought with him strong leadership and a vision to further develop the Society. In 1956, with University considering plans for expansion, Bullock obtained approval to transform St Catherine's Society into a fully residential college – the search for a site and funding began.

An ambitious fundraising campaign began, focusing on the national shortage of scientists and on Bullock's proposal of an increased number of science students at St Catherine's than was usual for an Oxford college. In 1960 almost eight acres of Holywell Great Meadow was acquired from Merton College and the College's chosen architect, Arne Jacobsen of Denmark, began to implement his design. His modernist masterpiece was to become the most important 20th-century collegiate buildings in Oxford, and is now Grade I listed.

In 1962 St Catherine's College opened its doors (while still under construction) with Alan Bullock as its Master. The first undergraduates were admitted, and were quickly dubbed the 'Dirty Thirty' owing to the lack of running hot water. 1964 saw the ceremonial opening of the College by the then Chancellor of the University, Harold Macmillan, and ten years later in 1974, staying true to its forward-looking ethos, it became one of the first colleges to admit women.

Today, St Catherine's remains as vibrant and dynamic as it has ever been. Its connection with the saint that shares its name is highly appropriate for a college founded on an ethos of high academic standards combined with a doggedly independent streak. The College celebrates its patron saint each year with a special 'Catz Night' dinner.

For those wanting to find out more about the history of St Catherine's College there is a dynamic and lively compilation available called [St Catherine's, Oxford: A Pen Portrait](#): a memorable tribute to St Catherine's past and present.