

OXFORD REMEMBERED by our own old correspondent, Pa Stit.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY presented a kaleidoscope of images to the newly matriculated student. Its alter egos and dreaming spires hit you straight between the eyes; its academic excesses struck you right between the ears; and its public school undertones went straight up your nose.

I arrived at Oxford railway station in October 1969 freshly laundered and regretfully kissed, from a grammar school education in Birmingham. And for three years the city wrapped me in its warm embrace of high-flying scholasticism and overbearing culture. Struggling up into town, encumbered by pre-war suitcases, I felt about as much at home as a bluebottle at the Annual Arachnid's Ball.

Forget the glossy images. I wasn't in a Chariots of Fire-type college festooned with candelabra and chaise longues. The porter led me across the road to my room which exuded the air of a Rachman cast-off. High ceiling, naked central light bulb (circa 49 watts) and rugs which had suffered at the paws of a pack of bull terriers. The lady-what-does completed the picture in her shapeless pink overall and dangling fag, but her heart of gold warmed these lost specimens of washed-up humanity. The block, however, echoed with lack of soul.

Accommodation in the second year was only marginally worse. Turning regretfully from the overpriced boarding houses of north Oxford, three of us descended among the gloomy portals of Iffley Road.

The landlord lived downstairs behind a loud television but his door was ever open in case we dared take anything forbidden upstairs with us, in particular anything in a skirt. The largest resident was a moth-eaten and flea-bitten black labrador which was considerably past its 'best before' date. Its milky and half-seeing eyes did little to lighten the murk on the enclosed landings.

By the third year our college had completed its much heralded new block, all golden stone and gently hissing doors. And central heating! No more miserly meters or extra jumpers. The inter-connecting pipework had other advantages; when the decibels from the next door's Tangerine Dream became excessive, a subtle drum roll on the radiator with an old spoon worked wonders.

All meals were provided and the much crumpled academic gown was freshly baptised in custard by our fast moving waiters; total immersion was narrowly avoided.

However, my warmest memory was of the night I misguidedly applied a liberal dose of Sloan's Liniment to a groin injury; I awoke in an agony of emasculated fire, rushed to the sink which I straddled in my birthday suit whilst desperately anointing my vitals with cold water in an attempt to cool the ardour that was within.

Once such joys of college living were past, there was work to be done.

(continued overleaf)

Each morning's semi-comatose grapple with an unco-operative roll, plus excessive cups of ground coffee, was followed by dispersal of students to all corners of learning around the town. Communal spirit was abandoned for academic isolation.

Each day revolved around lectures, tutorials, libraries or solitary confinement, in which ever-increasing piles of notes accumulated while the standard of calligraphy took a dive.

Most of us found satisfaction in this work, though often the satisfaction was that akin to the satisfaction of the five-stone weakling who has survived the bell into the second round before having his lights put out. Those of us blessed with mediocre brains slugged it out, the lure of an Oxford degree within our grasp.

However, excessive study can seriously damage your personality, so happy hours were spent restoring the mind in a bevy of leisure activities. Hearty and hefty sportsmen paddled gruntingly up the Isis, whilst on playing fields across the city, hockey sticks, mud and sundry balls flew in all directions. Such physical excesses were too much for the effete or downright bone idle for whom leisure involved erudite discussions or death by protracted pickling.

Summer was a honey-dewed halo of punting, tennis and pastoral meals on the river bank. And, of course, there were the famed Oxford Balls where the opulence of the costume contrasted strangely with the earthiness of student lust.

The sun rose on a dishevelled crumple of semi-inebriated humanity presenting a pathetic finale to a night of unrestrained flesh pots.

Girls were rare. Male colleges were sanitised and perfume-free. Hearts beat more quickly when creatures wearing blouses were imported into the college choir or when tennis matches were arranged against colleges which just happened to have an all-female cast. Entertaining the fair sex was a frugal yet costly affair with a student grant, but at least you awoke with a smile on your face next morning.

And so three years ended with an anonymous second class honours degree, yet the anonymity negated that magical 'B.A. (Oxon)' after your name. Later conversion to an M.A. was statutory, reflecting the supposed superiority of the alma mater rather than a surfeit of cranial cells.

All the hard work and harder play was validated by good memories, a satisfying education and an assured future.

