Downing College admitted its first twenty-four female students in October 1980, two years after the first female Fellow had been elected. This online exhibition brings together archive documents, images and personal recollections relating to this most significant development in the history of the College.
Downing in the early 1970s

In 1972, Churchill, Clare and King’s Colleges became the first all-male colleges in Cambridge to admit female students, prompting prolonged discussions on co-residence or possible alternatives at Downing. The Governing Body was divided over the appropriate direction to take.

A committee was authorised to approach Girton College “to explore the possibilities of a close association with them” as a first step but, in January 1975, the students expressed fears “that such a merger might be a poor substitute for co-residence.”

“The alternatives appeared to be to retain the status quo, or to form a close association with an existing women’s college, and/or to amend the statutes to provide for the admission of women”.

_Governing Body, 8 February 1974_
“A place in the queue…”

In early 1976, the Master was authorised to claim “a place in the queue of Colleges waiting to admit women” and the JCR urged the College “to keep the future admission of women under active review”. The potential impact on male applications, academic results and even sporting successes was a concern for some.

The Co-Residence Committee began to plan for the admission of women and the results of the students’ co-residence referendum, announced on 5 May 1977, showed the majority of students were in favour of the change.

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**Co-Residence Committee**

A meeting of the above Committee was held at 8.30 p.m. on Thursday, 17 February 1977.

There was agreement that consideration of the implications of co-residence (fall into two parts):

1) admissions policy  2) problems of ‘tricks and mortar’.

There was general agreement on the following points:

1. The minimum number of women to be admitted each year would be 20-30 giving a total of 50-70. This was felt would make for a sensible apportionment between men and women.

2. The total College numbers should remain as at present.

3. In view of the uncertainty of admission grouping among Colleges, and the total applications of suitable women candidates, 1977 would be the earliest realistic date for admissions of women.

4. The question of women Fellows and/or directors of studies with a particular concern for the women members of College would need consideration.

5. Written undergraduates would be treated on the same basis as men regarding accommodation, i.e. first year in College, some options for second year and third year mainly in College (including hostels).

6. Room allocation would be in the Baker, Kemp or Grey stone buildings according to numbers and would be on a floor rather than staircases basis. Allocation in hostels might be on a single sex basis.

7. Some minor additions of equipment might be necessary on some staircases but in general there would be no need for structural alterations.

8. The social facilities in College would be on a shared basis - some review of toilet facilities in the bar area might be necessary.

9. Minor adaptations for changing at Long Road and the Bathhouses would be necessary.

10. In general there were adequate games facilities especially for the first years. This question could be reviewed in the light of experience.

Many of the points made in (v) - (x) above were as a result of investigation undergraduate had made following discussions at other Colleges which had gone mixed.

11. Facilities for women senior members might need reviewing.

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“I am a conservative in all sorts of ways, I am against change. The College had been like this ever since its first foundation and [I thought] it should jolly well stay the same. So I voted against the admission of women… “

John Hopkins

Senior Tutor, 1971-1993

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Extract from Amalgamation Club
Open Meetings minutes, 5 May 1977
The first female member of Downing College

On 6 May 1977, the day after the results of the students’ co-residence referendum, a Special meeting of the Governing Body was held in the Maitland Room. The minutes from that day record the historic moment the change to the College Statutes was finally approved.

On 17 July 1978, Dr Jane Weston, University Demonstrator in the Department of Metallurgy and Materials Science, became the first female Fellow - and member - of Downing College in its 178 year history. (Photograph courtesy of Dr Jane Shemilt)

“...the actual meeting where it finally came up for approval, it needed a two-thirds majority to change the constitution. And it wouldn’t have got that two-thirds majority but for the vote of one Fellow, who we’d elected half an hour before the meeting.”

Dr Martin Mays
Admissions Tutor in May 1977
“At my election I was handed a copy of the College Statutes that stated ‘No woman shall be Master or Fellow or member of Downing College’. This was done with apologies as the updated Statutes had not been printed in time for my election! All the Fellows seemed very supportive, whatever their private views about Downing admitting women… Some of the College servants were obviously finding it a little difficult to get used to a female around the place. I remember being shouted at by one of the gardeners for walking across the grass in the quad before he realised who I was and profusely apologised…

Not only was I the first female Fellow at Downing, I was also the only academic staff member in the Department of Metallurgy and Materials Science, although there were a few female postdoctoral research assistants and postgraduates. In addition to my research, teaching and administrative duties for the University, I also supervised Downing undergraduates in Natural Sciences and Engineering. For some of these young men this was the first time since infant classes that they had been taught by a woman. I hope that they benefited from the experience…”

Extracts from Dr Jane Shemilt’s memories of her time as a Fellow of Downing College, 1978-80 (with grateful thanks).
Preparations for the arrival of women

On 20 January 1978 it was agreed that female students would be admitted from 1980 to allow for room alterations, although the first offer of a deferred place was made a year early. A new admissions leaflet was drafted and students were asked to write to their schools about the move to co-residence.

In the final term before women arrived, *The Griffin* reported on the introduction of mood lighting and ‘Athena masterpieces’ in the College Bar. A student food referendum, coupled with a review of existing amenities, resulted in long-awaited improvements in the catering services for students.

“Our first year was the only one without women. It was by far the most raucous and free, and there were actually a lot of women wandering around the place. Things quietened down once women arrived and the average IQ level went up.”

Male student (1979)
The first 24 women matriculated on 7 October 1980. They were hugely outnumbered, although ratios gradually improved over subsequent years and numbers varied by subject, with female medics quickly averaging around half of those admitted.

Female representation in College increased more quickly. Two women were elected to the JCR in 1981 and five the following year. In 1982 the MCR elected its first female President and the following year Penny Furniss (1981) was elected the first female JCR President. Paula Nock (1980) was May Ball President in 1983.

“Downing was a crazy and exciting place - a poor college with big ambitions, and a wonderful Master - Prof Sir John Butterfield. We may have had a falling-down boat house and famously some of the worst food in Cambridge, but the College sprit was strong and none of that ever stopped us.”

Female student (1980)
First impressions

Despite the initial reservations of a minority of Fellows and students about the admission of women, the overwhelmingly positive impact of their arrival was quickly apparent and their influence by far exceeded their numbers as they threw themselves into College life.

“I was very surprised at how easy it all was. I expected it to be dramatic, it wasn’t. [It] improved the place out of all recognition, socially and academically and I’m cheerfully prepared to admit it!”

John Hopkins, Senior Tutor
(Dow@Cam, 2018)

“Women were admitted in my final year… the first batch was quite small but it quickly made a difference - the college was much less laddish, the JCR more civilised and I think (although it may just be my imagination) that the men started to dress better.”

Male undergraduate (1978)

Blade-winning crew of the Ladies’ May Boat, 1982 (Courtesy of Paula Smith)

Jane Moore (1981) and Vanessa Fox (1980) (Courtesy of Lydia Jones)
College life in the early 1980s

Facilities in College were limited before the Howard Building and the new JCR Bar (the Butterfield Building). Students held parties – and even put on a pantomime and production of King Lear - in the West Lodge and the Music Society put on regular events.

“The middle floor was women and we shared a bathroom with giant baths. The toilet paper was military grade. We drank a ton of sherry that first week...We put on a musical in the West Lodge because there was no Downing Theatre society or theatre.”

Female student (1980)

Penny Furniss (1981, JCR President) with Tom Brown (1983) at a DCBC garden party

Oktoberfest Tug of War, 1984

‘Women of Kenny B’, c.1984
(Images courtesy of Sadie Hubbard)
"College was quite old fashioned. There was one telephone on the staircase which we all shared. There were no fridges and just a couple of ancient gas burners in the kitchen so feeding yourself was a non starter except for breakfast."

*Female student (1981)*

"I remember a lovely Year 3 neighbour taking me under her wing. She was reading History of Art, so for someone who had never been to an art gallery, it was just the beginning of Cambridge opening my mind to new things."

*Female student (1985)*

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*Female student (1985)*
The first women’s boat

The incoming women quickly integrated themselves, virtually taking over production of The Griffin. The first women’s boat (and sports team) was formed by Paula Nock in Michaelmas 1980. Two years later, the Ladies’ May Boat won blades and Claire Strowlger (1980) coxed the Men to their first Headship.

Paula Nock and Kate Panter (1981) rowed for the University in the 1982 Boat Race and internationally in the World Championships. Kate became the first female Downing Olympian when she represented Great Britain at the 1984 Olympics.
Sports Clubs

Other sports teams soon followed. A Tennis team was formed in the first year. By 1991, they were winning Cuppers after reaching the final for the fourth year. A Hockey Team was established in 1982-3 and in 1988 the Ladies’ Football team reached the Cuppers final.

The Netball Team, formed in 1987, was promoted three times in as many years, but had to wait several years for its own court and posts. Downing women also excelled in mixed teams – at College and University level – such as sailing, judo and chess.
Downing’s early pioneers

When the first women graduated in 1983, the Senior Tutor, John Hopkins, wrote in the Alumni Newsletter that "they have graced the higher echelons of the class list in every Tripos [and] they have graced the College by their presence."

“They were pioneering students who went on to have incredibly successful and interesting careers. Having met these impressive women again 30-40 years later, it’s all too obvious that they must have been both very impressive and strong when they first arrived at Downing.”

Prof. Barry Everitt (Master, 2003-13)
Downing women in the Nineties

The proportion of women admitted continued to rise – if albeit slowly - throughout the 1980s, reaching 40% in 1990. However, the number of women applying remained lower than applications to other Colleges and admissions fell again over the following years.

Following discussions by the Governing Body and JCR on ways to increase applications by women, a new prospectus was produced in 1995. It clearly did its job - in 1996 the female undergraduates admitted (56%) outnumbered the men for the very first time.
Into the millenium

In 1997, Dr Susan Lintott was elected as Bursar, overseeing the financial and strategic management of the College, and in 2001, Fellow Dr Phyllis Lee became the first female Dean of the College. Joanna Maitland Robinson was elected one of the founding Wilkins Fellows in 1999.

The re-launch of the Griffins Club in 2000 allowed women to be members for the first time in its 100 year history. Female representation was also increasing on the Governing Body - the number of female Fellows at the Millenium had doubled by 2008. That year, Annie Vernon (2001) won a silver medal in the Beijing Olympics in the Women’s Quadruple Sculls.
2020: Forty years on

Since the first cohort of women were admitted in 1980 (two years after the first female Fellow), the College has welcomed and benefited from more than 3,000 female students and 50 Fellows.

40 years on we are celebrating the achievements of these 24 pioneers and all the Downing women who have followed them. The College was a late starter in admitting women, but we have made up for lost time to establish ourselves firmly as a place of welcome, diversity, and inclusion for all.”

The Master, Alan Bookbinder
40 YEARS OF WOMEN AT DOWNING COLLEGE

Many people – current students, alumnae/alumni, staff and Fellows, past and present – contributed to this project. Lofts have been raided, the Archive’s collection of photographs and other related material has been greatly enhanced and more than fifty Downing women and men shared their personal memories of this important time in the College’s history.

THANK YOU