

John Meade Falkner at Oxford
Michael Daniell

In *Memories of Victorian Oxford* Charles Oman wrote of his matriculation, his formal entry into the university, on 10 October 1878.



“Our stately dean conducted his party of thirty odd freshmen – six scholars in the ample gown, some thirty commoners in the more skimpy two-tailed commoner’s outfit, down High Street and across Saint Aldates. ... When we reached the rather

Pembroke College *obscurely situated gateway of Pembroke College we were ushered into the hall, where we found the Vice-Chancellor of the year, Dr Evan Evans, sitting in state at the high table with certain vaguely seen officials about him. The cheerful old gentleman duly admonished us in Latin, when we had been introduced to him by our dean, presented each of us with a bound copy of the University Statutes, and directed us to write our names in Latin in the Great Matriculation Book.” (i)*

Two days later, on 12 October 1878, John Meade Falkner was to be one of a much smaller group setting out from Hertford College for the same purpose.

Accompanying JMF were:

Wilfred Sandilands, 18, from Cheltenham, son of Revd Percival Richard Sandilands

Orton Bradley, from Greenwich, son of a doctor. He later became a farmer in New Zealand

Robert Todd, from London, son of a doctor. He became a coroner and medical administrator in Australia

Frederick Holligan, from Barbados

John Swinton, from Edinburgh

Thomas Crampton, from Brentford, who later became a vicar in Teddington

John Mead (sic) Falkner, 20, from Manningford Bruce. (ii)

The Oxford University archives hold a registration slip that would have been completed in preparation for the entry in Latin in the Matriculation Register:

So perhaps JMF intentionally reverted to the spelling “Mead”, the form in which his mother’s family used to spell their name. On the other hand, the spelling of his birthplace as ‘Mallingford’ suggests the possibility that clerical errors could be made.

JMF was allocated Room 19 on Staircase 1 at Hertford College. It could well have looked out over New College Lane, and that of course sets one wondering whether it was furnished with the wicker chair of *The Lost Stradivarius*. It was a room JMF had until the end of Michaelmas



Hertford College

Term 1880. There were two other residents on the staircase: initially they were Bassett who would become a vicar in Lincolnshire (later succeeded by Lowry who became a vicar in Carlisle and then Birkenhead) and Roberts.

There were other undergraduates that JMF would have known. On the college list my eye was caught by Arthur Treadgold who would go on to write a book about his experiences in the Klondyke! Richard Davenport-Hines has written about Henry Vassall, a contemporary of JMF at Marlborough and an outstanding sportsman playing rugby for England, and also Charles Lynam who went on to found the Dragon School in Oxford (iii).



Charles Lynam

It was probably Lynam who encouraged JMF to join the University Chess Club. Lynam was on the club's committee in 1880 and of the 41 members, six – including JMF – were from Hertford College (iv.) There are records of JMF playing in two matches for the university against Oxford City Chess Clubs. In May 1881 he won against the Revd H.A.

Pickard (v). In November 1881 the two were matched again, this time JMF being less successful. Pickard, then aged 49, was a tutor at Christ Church College and also an HMI.

CHESS.—A match between the University and City Chess Clubs was played on Friday the 4th inst., play commencing at 7 p.m. and ending at 10.30 p.m., the result being a victory for the City by one game. Score:—

CITY.		Games won.	UNIVERSITY.		Games won.
W. A. Jacks	...	0	v. G. E. W. Wainwright, Univ.	...	1
H. Ward	...	1 ½*	v. B. R. V. Mills, Ch. Ch.	...	0 ½*
H. S. Underhill	...	0 1	v. C. C. Lynam, Hertford	...	1 0
W. H. Ward	...	0 0	v. W. P. Emerton, Ch. Ch.	...	1 1
G. W. Andrews	...	½*	v. E. J. Crosse, Exeter	...	½*
H. Robinson	...	1 1	v. T. A. Wise, Lincoln	...	0 0
F. Wolff	...	1 1	v. T. M. Walker, Wndham	...	0 0
W. A. Thompson	...	0 0	v. W. N. P. Beebe, Trinity	...	1 1
G. W. Webb	...	1 1	v. A. B. Wilson, Balliol	...	0 0
Rev. H. A. Pickard	...	½ 1	v. J. M. Falkner, Hertford	...	½ 0
C. M. Underhill	...	1 1	v. R. D. Ackerley, C.C.C.	...	0 0
J. Stilliard	...	1 0	v. G. H. Hodge, Koble	...	0 1
J. Gilbert	...	0 0	v. W. H. Heatou, B.N.C.	...	1 1
W. Forshev	...	0 0	v. C. D. Loocock, University	...	1 1
Total	...	13½	Total	...	12½

The games marked thus * were adjudicated upon by Mr. W. Parratt.

The entry in Jackson's *Oxford Journal* 12 November 1881

By this time JMF, though still a member of Hertford, was no longer recorded as living in college. His mind must have been turning towards his final exams in history. The Oxford exam system divided candidates into "passmen" and "classmen", i.e. those trying for an honours degree. For his first two years JMF would have studied classics and he would only have been able to study Modern History

for his last two years. He would have answered exam papers on the history of England to the accession of Queen Victoria, and on one of four periods of European history (perhaps choosing 1328-1648?). Candidates aiming at a first- or second-class degree would also choose a special subject from the following:

- 1 Charles the Great and his Dynasty
- 2 The reign of Henry II of England
- 3 The age of Lewis the Eleventh and Charles the Eighth
- 4 The Great Rebellion
- 5 The establishment of English power in India 1784-1806
- 6 The French Revolution (vi)

For JMF this may not have been an inspiring range and it perhaps accounts for his only attaining a third-class degree. But despite a disappointing degree, JMF's four years as an undergraduate at Oxford gave him a core of lifetime friends and acquaintances, as well as a deep appreciation of the city and its countryside that he was to put to full use in guide-books, history, and poetry.

[I am most grateful for help from Dr Lucy Rutherford, Archivist at Hertford College, and Simon Bailey, Keeper of the Archives for the University of Oxford.]

- i Sir Charles Oman, *Memories of Victorian Oxford* (1941) p.73
- ii Information from Hertford College Archives - consulted 9 January 2019
- iii Richard Davenport-Hines, *John Meade Falkner – Abnormal Romantic* (2018) p.62 *passim*
- iv J.M. Walker, Oxford University Chess Club (1885)
- v Jackson's *Oxford Journal* 20 May 1881
- vi Oxford University Examination Statutes (1882) pp. 86-87