

Memories of One of the First Female Residents of Churchill Hall

In 1978 I was 18 years old, a young woman full of excitement at the prospect of going to university. I came to Bristol and spent my first year as a student at Churchill Hall. Not very remarkable so far, except that I didn't realise 1978 was a very special year for Churchill; this men-only institution was now accepting women for the first time.

To say this came as a surprise is an understatement. Having been offered a place to read Microbiology, I was sent several brochures advertising the various halls of residence. I looked through them all and studied the accompanying glossy photos. All were attractive and appealing, but Churchill stood out for me, I think in retrospect because the style of architecture somewhat resembled the sensible and practical buildings of my school: It looked like a friendly place.

Accordingly, I ticked the necessary boxes, duly acquired the appropriate grades for my A levels, and started the countdown to leaving home. Home, in my case, was Leicester, and a pre-requisite of my university choice was that I should be at least 100 miles from home – I wanted an adventure!

And so sometime in September of 1978 I arrived, only then realising that the Churchill Hall brochure had failed to mention that this was the first time in which women students were to be admitted! In fact, there were only 58 young women in residence during that first year. I can't recall how many men there were; somewhere over 200 I believe. All I remember is that we girls were completely outnumbered!

There were some special provisions in place for women students. We were housed in the blocks closest to the main buildings, and on the upper floors. I was in J Block, and not only did we have a key to enter the building, but a special extra key, issued only to female students which locked a door between our floor and the lower floors. I assume it was intended to keep out curious young men.

Even now I can remember my study-bedroom. It was squarish and brownish, furnished with a sizeable desk, bookcase, built-in cupboard and bed. There were big, square, orangey-brown cork tiles on the floor. The walls, curtains, and paintwork were sensible shades of beige to dun. But it was warm and bright, with a big west facing window, which looked out over the back lawns.

My other memories? I remember long queues to the dining hall, and the huge platefuls of food which the men seemed to require compared to the daintier portions of the women. I remember that the catering staff didn't provide a Sunday evening meal, and so at breakfast on Sunday morning all students would be issued with a picnic bag containing half-a-loaf of bread, pieces of cheese, an apple, and a packet of crisps. The girls rarely ate their entire half-loaf, and by Sunday afternoon the lawns behind our top-floor bedrooms would be littered with slices of bread, thrown out of our windows. There were some very well-fed local squirrels.

I remember the bar, discos, and taking part in a doubles table-football tournament and being the last surviving women's duo in the competition. More generally I remember the long walk in to the university every morning over the Downs and discovering that Bristol is a series of hills. The walk didn't matter though – it was a chance to chat and make friends. One of these friends, a fellow resident of J Block, became my boyfriend. We've now been married for 32 years and have three grown-up children. Our daughter Ellie was married last December, and her new in-laws are also Bristol graduates, her father in-law being yet another Churchillian!

In all respects, Churchill Hall has been an extremely significant part of my life. I, and many of my friends have very fond memories of our time there. I hope that Churchill Hall will continue to generate happy memories for all its students now and long into the future.

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