The complex history of Hertford is reflected in the contrasting experiences of its more notorious or famous old members, who include, from Hart Hall and the first Hertford, the Roman Catholic Jesuit martyr Alexander Briant, the poet John Donne, the legal historian John Selden, the satirist Jonathan Swift, Henry Pelham, Prime Minister 1743-54 and the Whig statesman Charles James Fox; and from Magdalen Hall, in addition to Hobbes and Wilkins, William Tyndale, translator of the Bible, and Edward Hyde, earl of Clarendon, first minister to Charles II (1660-67). As well as the usual slew of academics, clerics, lawyers, writers and politicians, among the more notable members of the new Hertford College could be listed the philosopher and writer Alain Locke, the first African American Rhodes Scholar who was admitted to read classics at Hertford (1907-10) after other Oxford colleges had refused him entry because of his race; the novelist Evelyn Waugh; James Meade, fellow 1931-7 and Nobel Laureate for Economics, and Dom Mintoff, Prime Minister of Malta (1955-8 and 1971-84).

We hope that you enjoy your visit to Hertford College.
Our History

Many Oxford colleges can trace an unbroken corporate history back over the centuries. Hertford both is, and is not, part of this ancient tradition, being the heir of the medieval Hart Hall, a failed eighteenth century college, Hertford College, and the annexation in the early nineteenth century of that college’s site and assets by another former medieval foundation, Magdalen Hall. The present college dates from 1874, when Magdalen Hall was dissolved and incorporated as the new Hertford College.

From Hart Hall to Hertford College

Sometime in the 1280s, Elias de Hertford established Hart Hall on the site where the oldest parts of the current college, the Old Hall and the north east corner of the Old Quadrangle are currently situated. Although presided over by a Principal, who owned or leased the property, such halls, while developing corporate characteristics- dining halls, kitchens, libraries and in time tutors specifically attached to them- were not incorporated as colleges.

In 1314, Hart Hall was owned by Richard of Wydesdale, rector of Crediton who sold it to the bishop of Exeter and founder of Exeter College. Almost immediately, Exeter College (then known as Stapledon Hall) moved to its present site on Turl Street, but retained the freehold of Hart Hall, the rents from which subsidised the fellows of Exeter until the eighteenth century. From the fifteenth century Hart Hall began to develop as a distinct institution, gradually continuing to absorb more of the neighbouring tenements and halls on Catte Street- Arthur Hall, Black Hall and Cat Hall, which occupied most of the present Old Buildings site (where you are now). Parts of the existing buildings date from the sixteenth century onwards, including the Old Hall, built under Principal Randell (1549-88), the Old Library and SCR (OB4) and the main door embossed with coloured flowers, which date from the seventeenth century.

In 1740, Principal Newton, against furious opposition, managed to secure a charter and statutes incorporating Hart Hall as a full college in the university, Hertford College. The Cottage (OB5) and Library (originally the chapel) date from this period. Overly ambitious in conception and grossly under-funded in practice, Hertford College soon foundered. In 1805, the college was dissolved, part of the remaining assets being transferred to the university to create the Hertford Scholarship. The last fellow of Hertford, Vice-Principal Hewitt, retained his fellowship until it expired in 1818. Symbolically, in 1820, the medieval front of the now defunct Hertford College collapsed into Catte Street.

Hertford Reborn

The demise of the first Hertford College created a new opportunity for another institution to expand as part of what looks like a coordinated scheme. Magdalen Hall had been founded by William of Wyndflete, bishop of Winchester, in 1448, a decade before his grander collegiate foundation of Magdalen College. Although operating from 1602 as a separate hall independent of Magdalen College, and boasting a vibrant intellectual identity of its own (including the philosopher Thomas Hobbes and John Wilkins, one of the founders of the Royal Society). Magdalen Hall still occupied the site adjacent to the main college buildings originally intended by Wyndflete for his grammar school. In 1816, an Act of Parliament allowed Magdalen College to acquire the site for Magdalen Hall. Conveniently, in 1821 much of the site had been destroyed by fire. In 1822, led by Principal Macbride, Magdalen Hall took possession of the Hertford College site on the completion of two new wings on the Catte Street frontage (the front of OB1 and the Old Lodgings). With Magdalen Hall came its remarkable library, long housed in the Old Library, now in the Henry Wilkinson Room. As the plight of halls became more precarious in the nineteenth century, Principal Michel sought to elevate the Hall to collegiate status. This he succeeded in doing, thanks to a benefaction from the leading financier Sir Thomas Baring MP.

An Act of Parliament refounded Hertford College in 1874, comprising Principal and Fellows of Magdalen Hall and a number of other fellows chosen by the benefactor. Under Principal Boyd (1877-1922), the new college became fully established and expanded with new buildings by the popular architect T.G. Jackson: Lodge and Hall (1887); OB2 (1889); the south and east blocks of the New Quad (1901-2); chapel (1908), the bridge across New College Lane (1913), and the Octagon (now the Middle Common Room) posthumously in 1931, a refashioning of the Chapel of Our Lady at Smith Gate of c.1520. To accommodate growing numbers, the Holywell Quad was added (1976-81). Other residential blocks were completed in south Oxford at Abingdon House (1990), Warnock House at Folly Bridge (1995) and the Graduate Centre at Folly Bridge (2000), this last reflecting the major increase in postgraduate study at Oxford since the 1960s. The most significant change in the last 150 years came with the admission of women as undergraduates in 1974, Hertford being one of the first five single-sex Oxford colleges to do so. The first woman fellow was elected in 1978.