

My Lord Bishop, Principal, Members of Brasenose,

This ceremony has taken place, in some form or other, over more than five hundred years, in the process of electing and admitting to office each of our (now) thirty-three Principals. Principal Bowers will be the sixth I have served under, and others present have served under his predecessors: in each case we have met in Chapel to elect, with ceremonial burning of the voting papers (and fire alarms turned off), and then later to admit the new Principal to office.

At the foundation, the original Scholar Fellows, a mere twelve of them, would have squeezed into the modest chapel, where we now have dessert, and cast their votes, before admitting the Principal of their choice, to the princely stipend of £5 p. a. Their very first choice enjoyed this largesse for no less than thirty-six years, the longest yet, and no doubt had to live a frugal life. When I said “the Principal of their choice”, I meant that, on occasions, certain powers might have wanted to impose on us, such as a certain Stuart monarch, who tried to plant his placeman, religious flavour of the month. The Fellows proved wiser, and elected Principal Radcliffe, whose long tenure (thirty-four years) and whose munificence, gave us both our Library, and this very Chapel, the core of the College, where we have space for devotion, form music, for voting, and for ritual.

Not that we were yet proof from outside interference, with a rival Principal imposed by Civil War government, and with the standoff finally resolved when the Fellows’ choice of Principal, and his wife, were finally installed in the chapel, and enjoyed a long and prosperous reign of twenty-one years.

We didn’t always get it right: following an unmemorable Principal who died, an insane nepotist, after over a quarter of a century in post, the six resident fellows elected another long-serving Principal (thirty-five years), who was notorious as an “intriguer, a trickster, a bully”, “truculent, dishonest, interfering [...] sensual”, and other sins which I blush to mention in these hallowed walls. An employment lawyer might have proved useful at the time.

This College has had, right from its foundation, an umbilical link to Lancashire and Cheshire, from where came both our founders, whose portraits we see in the East Window, one clutching the plans, one precariously balancing a miniature BNC. It seems so very appropriate that our outgoing Principal, like the very first, William Smyth, should have come from precisely those traditional happy hunting grounds, which long provided a high proportion of Fellows and students.

Our incoming Principal has a no less appropriate pedigree. That he is a lawyer is entirely within the tradition of recent predecessors: Hart, Nicholas, Windlesham. That today commemorates the birth of another great advocate of human rights, Gandhi, can only be auspicious. But much more important is his association with the see of our Founder, and of our Visitor, whom we are proud to have with us today. The Bishops of Lincoln, when not locked up in the Tower of London, and when they weren't imposing a Principal on us in the interregnum, have over the centuries provided the College with consistently good Visitatorial counsel. And our current Visitor will be especially pleased to see admitted to office a man from his very own diocese, from a resort in Lincolnshire famous for its medicinal waters, who follows a Principal from Manchester, marginally less famous as a spa.

In Hall hangs the portrait of one of the College's best known Lancastrian Principals, Alexander Nowell, he of the fish-hooks, and bottled beer, and the "distinctively personal buoyancy". He was elected at the age of eighty-eight, and resigned after three months in post. Principal Bowers will certainly beat that; and, if the EJRA doesn't allow him to match the very first Principal's thirty-six year tenure, we nonetheless wish him and Suzanne a long, happy and energetic time in the Lodgings, and in the world-wide Brasenose community.

Habemus papam.