



# **GATSBY AT TRINITY – THE EVIDENCE**



# INTRODUCTION

**“He told me once he was an Oxford man”**

In chapter 3 of *The Great Gatsby*, the novel's eponymous hero mentions that he had been 'at Oxford.' In chapter 4, he pulls a photograph from his pocket,

**“a souvenir of Oxford days. It was taken in Trinity Quad – ”**

as proof. At different times, Gatsby confides both that he was 'educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years', and that he came to Oxford as a demobbed US army veteran after the Armistice in 1919.

Can any of this be true? Throughout much of the novel Jay Gatsby remains a reserved and shadowy figure who reveals himself only slowly to the narrator Nick Carraway, and never without an element of doubt or contradiction.

This exhibition from the Archives of Trinity College examines the historical evidence.



**Could Jay Gatsby have been a Trinity man?**





## ***WHERE WAS THAT PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN?***

**“It was a photograph of half a dozen young men in blazers loafing in an archway through which were visible a host of spires. There was Gatsby, looking a little, not much, younger, with a cricket bat in his hand.”**



# DURHAM QUAD?

Generations of Trinity-based Gatsby historians have dismissed Gatsby's claim as obviously untrue. The young men are assumed to have been loafing in Durham Quad, Trinity's earliest and, for many years, only quadrangle, which remains at the heart of the college today.




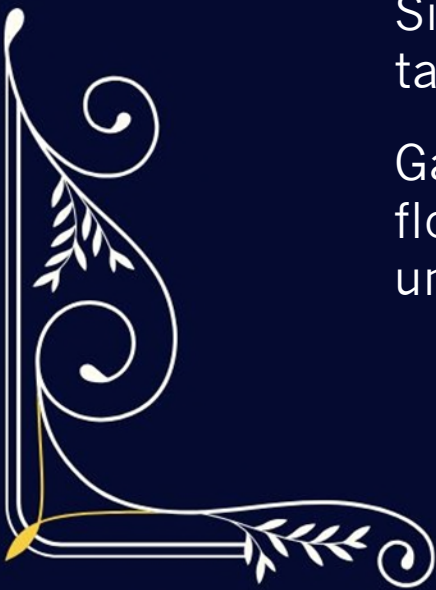
Gatsby's photograph was not taken here.

This photograph is part of a series taken for a feature in *Country Life* magazine in 1930. The Chapel Arch is too deep to reveal 'a host of spires' beyond, while in the opposite direction, the Hall and three-storey block of staircase 17 are too high and the passage through to Garden Quad too narrow to allow any view of the skyline at all.



## GARDEN QUAD?

But what if Gatsby's photograph was taken in Garden Quadrangle? Built in stages between 1665 and 1828, this is where Trinity's grandest student rooms are to be found, and for many years it was the location for all formal group photographs. Always called a quadrangle despite its obvious lack of quadrangularity, even before the foundations were laid it was famously dismissed by its architect Sir Christopher Wren as 'a lame one, somewhat like a three-legged table.'



Garden Quad is a fine place to loaf in the summertime, fragrant with flowers in the window boxes and vibrant with bees in the borders and undergraduates relaxing on the lawn.





As this photograph from the album of an unknown undergraduate in about 1900 reveals, however, although Trinity's tall chimneys and the looming profile of Balliol's Hall could perhaps be described as spires, the rectangular gate to the garden is most definitely ***not*** an arch.

It's another No for Gatsby.

# FRONT QUAD?



By Gatsby's day, however, Trinity had three quadrangles, and the Front Quadrangle, named for obvious reasons, is the largest of them all. The handsome Victorian block of the Jackson Building, completed in 1885, was known as The New Building until the 1960s. Jay Gatsby could well have had rooms here, and a photograph taken at an angle through the arched garden gateway by the President's Lodgings could have included the skyline of Broad Street, Turl Street and beyond. This fragile albumen print taken from the Chapel tower in about 1885 suggests which dreaming spires might have been visible before the trees grew large enough to block the view.

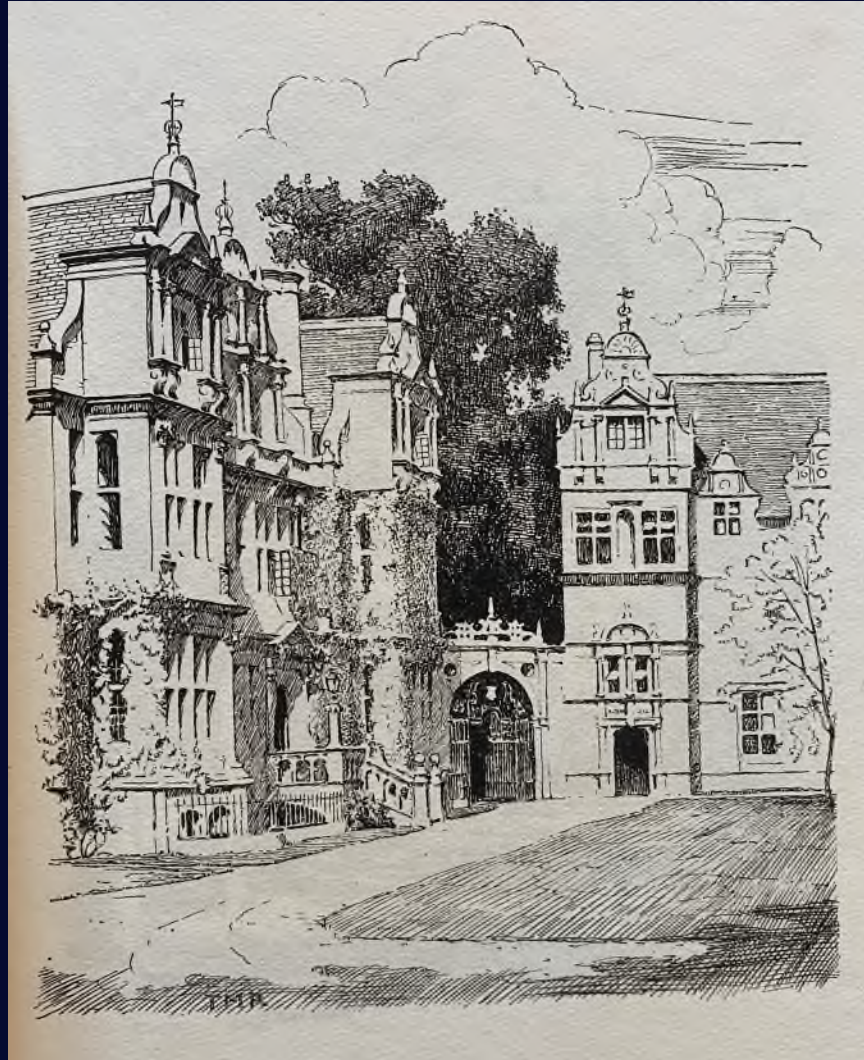




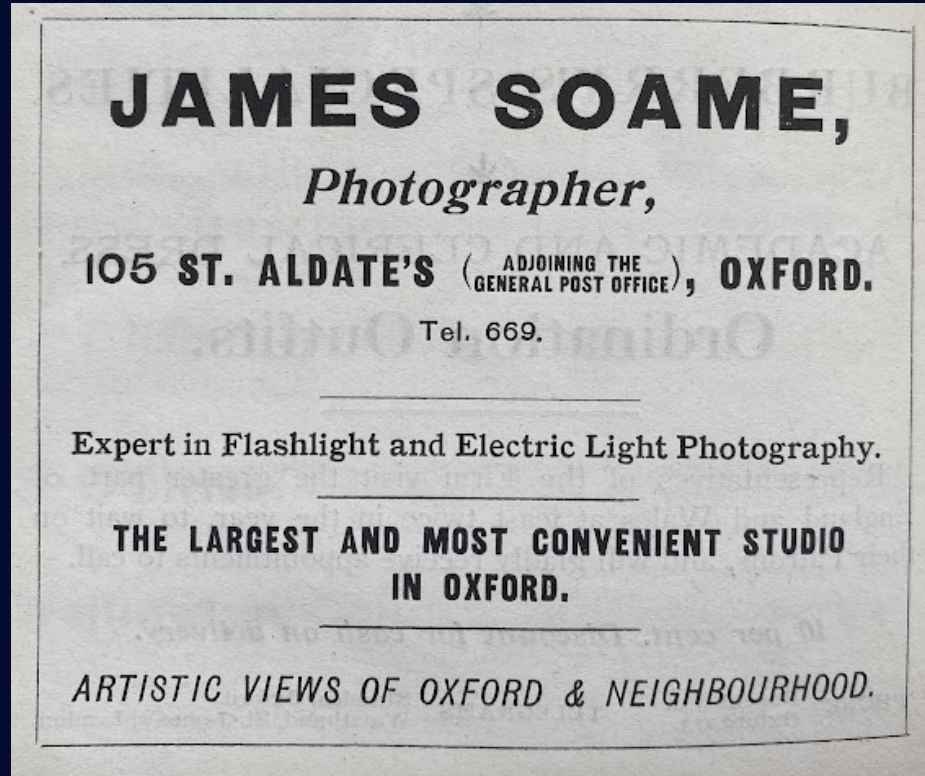


Martine Ronaldson's  
1904 *Drawings of  
Trinity College* includes  
an exquisite engraving  
of the garden gateway.

Was this the spot where  
Gatsby and his friends  
were photographed?



# WHO TOOK THAT PHOTOGRAPH?



Photography was an expensive pastime in the early years of the last century, and the majority of undergraduates relied on professional photographers to provide the souvenir images which they collected or sent home to their families. Large glass plate negatives could produce multiple prints of Oxford's buildings and gardens, and were also used for formal group photographs of college clubs and teams.

James Soame had a studio next to the Post Office on St Aldate's, and in the *University Calendar* of 1920 he advertised 'Artistic Views of Oxford and Neighbourhood' for sale.



In the years before the First World War, Thomas McClelland (1911) filled his handsome leather-bound album with the work of Soame's great rival and future partner Gillman & Co. McClelland's photographic purchases included this fine photograph of the College Barge, embossed with the photographer's name. This was where members of the Boat Club would change into their kit and wash in river water in the years before the inauguration of the Boat House.



GILLMAN & CO.  
PHOTOGRAPHERS  
OXFORD.







# A CAMERA OF ONE'S OWN

**“I only stayed five months”**

In chapter 7 of *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan challenges Gatsby on his Oxford status, and he plays it down. A single term and a vacation would hardly have filled an album. Happily, however, owning a camera oneself had by now become relatively affordable for some, and taking snapshots of one's friends was a very real possibility. It is not known how this Sybil Imperial camera, produced by the Newman & Guardia company in 1910, comes to be in Trinity today, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that it was simply left behind by a careless owner of a century ago. It is a highly sophisticated machine, with adjustable shutter speeds and focal lengths, and a six-pack of plates that could be slotted in and out.





Even before the First World War, undergraduates' albums reveal the increasing ubiquity of what we might call snapshots, small enough to be carried easily in the pocket. The modestly sized album of Hugh Morris (1914) was donated to the Archive by his son David Morris (1953). It includes a number of charming shots of his friends and college scenes.



Could Gatsby's photograph have been one such as these?



# HOW DID A YANK GET TO OXFORD?



In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there were three routes by which young American men were admitted to Trinity. The largest group, by number, were the Rhodes Scholars. Established by the staggeringly munificent bequest of Cecil Rhodes in 1902, these generous bursaries were intended to bring together the great empires of the USA, Great Britain, and, by a codicil, Germany.

Trinity's first two American Rhodes Scholars, William Crittenden from California and David Porter from Maine, appear together in this 1906 photograph of the light-hearted debating society the Gryphon Club. (Back row, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> from right). Another pre-War Rhodes Scholar at Trinity was the poet, author and later Pulitzer-Prize winner Robert Coffin (1916).

Then as now, Rhodes Scholars were highly academic graduates of prestigious universities. Jay Gatsby never mentions or hints at such elevated status.

# THE TRINITY FAMILY

**“The man on my left is the Earl of Doncaster”**

**“I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West – all died now”**

Early in the novel, Jay Gatsby blusters,

**“I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition.”**

Such a grandiose statement would have been very plausible for a member of the English middle or upper classes – the Earl of Doncaster for instance – but from Gatsby it was immediately identified by Nick Carraway as a lie:

**“He hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford’, or swallowed it, or choked on it.”**



The earliest American citizens admitted to Trinity all had British family connections. The first to sign into Trinity's admissions register was one William Murison who matriculated in 1869 but had come up from an English public school. More than 20 years were to pass before the entry of his compatriot, Charles Henry Conrad Wright in 1891. Charles appears in this group photograph taken in the summer of 1892, standing in the doorway of staircase 14. He was born in Chicago in 1869, 10 weeks after the death of his father, and spent much of his childhood travelling in Europe with his English mother before she settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Before Trinity, Charles had attended Harvard, where he returned to become a professor of French literature.



There were **no** Trinity families from the USA in the 1920s.







# GATSBY THE VETERAN

## ***‘MAJOR JAY GATSBY – FOR VALOUR EXTRAORDINARY’***

In chapter 4 of *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby describes an act of First World War heroism that led to his promotion to major:

**“130 men with 16 lewis guns, and... they found the insignia of three German divisions among the piles of the dead.”**

Nick is sceptical until Gatsby produces a seemingly genuine although obscure Montenegrin military decoration, the Order of Danilo, engraved with his name and rank.

He follows this immediately with the Trinity photograph and suddenly Nick is convinced:

**“...then it was all true.”**

Although entirely forgotten in the popular memory of today, the rugged Balkan nation of Montenegro was a valued ally in the First World War.

There is no reason to disbelieve Gatsby’s account.



***“It was nineteen-nineteen”***

Later, in Chapter 7, Jay Gatsby appears to come clean to Nick. His hopes to win back Daisy are unravelling and he becomes emotional:

**“usually I drift here and there trying to forget  
the sad things that happened to me”**

before confessing



**“I only stayed five months. That’s why I can’t really call myself an Oxford man.”**



He then explains that ‘after the armistice he tried frantically to get home, but some complication or misunderstanding sent him to Oxford instead.’

## WE EXTEND TO THEM A WARM WELCOME

of Treasurer.

We have with us for this Term something over 150 American soldier-students, ranging from Lieutenant-Colonel to Private. Coming as they do from nearly every State in the Union, and from Colleges and Universities of very various types, these soldier-students are thoroughly representative of young America. We extend to them a warm welcome. They can hardly expect in one Term to penetrate very deeply into the life of the University. Still, with goodwill on both sides, something worth while can be achieved in eight weeks. Our visitors themselves are desperately anxious to make the most of the time at their disposal. They catch us, as we all know, at a moment of pressure and distraction; but we are not so distracted but that we can, all of us—Dons as well as Undergraduates—offer a friendly hand to our Transatlantic cousins. We must try to secure that they carry away from Oxford an impression worthy of the place and the occasion. And we on our part can learn from them. Let us not miss the opportunity.

The *Oxford Magazine* is represented at the Peace Conference by its former Editors. Mr. Henry William

Gatsby is referring to an obscure detail of post-Great War Oxford that has largely been forgotten, but it is indeed true. In an attempt to stagger the return of so many US servicemen from the conflict in Europe, an arrangement was made for some officers to spend a term at a French or British University. Some 150 arrived in Oxford in the Easter Vacation of 1919 and they were welcomed in the editorial in the *Oxford Magazine* of 2 May 1919.



# SIGNING IN

Three US soldier-students duly arrived in Trinity on 26 April. They called on the President, Herbert Blakiston, and were invited to sign the Admissions Register. This tradition, going back to the very first register introduced by President Bathurst in 1664, continues to this day. In 1919 the required information included the name and rank of your father, your place and date of birth, and details of your previous education. The Register records:


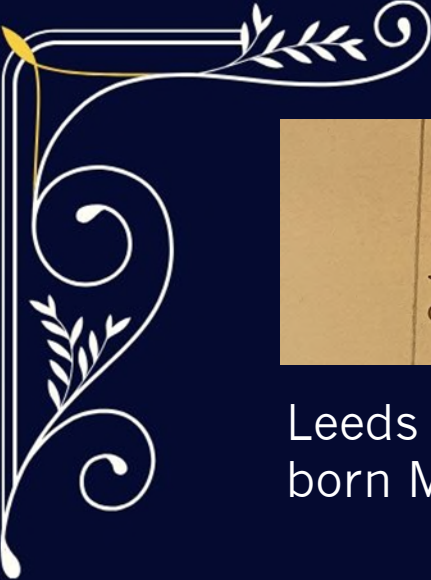
2537  
Bradford, Eugene Francis, fifth son of the late Wm. Henry Bradford, Insurance Agent, born 5 March 1889, at Bangor, in the state of Maine, U.S.A., educated at Bowdoin College and Harvard University, admitted Commence April 26, 1919, as an Officer in the American Army.

Eugene Francis Bradford – 5<sup>th</sup> son of Henry Bradford, insurance agent – born 5 March 1889, Bangor, Maine – Bowdoin College and Harvard University.

2538  
Robertson, Archibald Gerard, Second son of Alexander Fauch Robertson, Attorney-at-Law, of Stanton, in the State of Virginia, U.S.A., born there October 6<sup>th</sup> 1889, educated at the University of Virginia, admitted Commence, April 26<sup>th</sup> 1919, as an Officer in the American Army.

Archibald Gerard Robertson – 2<sup>nd</sup> son of Alexander Robertson, attorney-at-law – born 6 October 1889, Stanton, Virginia – University of Virginia.





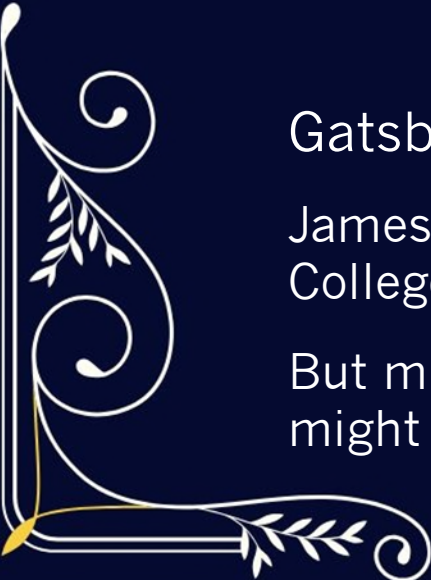
Wheeler, Leeds Armstrong only son of Frank  
Leeds Wheeler, manufacturer, of Allston, in the  
State of Massachusetts, USA. Born there March 21, 1897,  
educated at Harvard University, admitted commisioner  
April 26, 1919, as an officer in the U.S. Army.

2539

Leeds Armstrong Wheeler – only son of Frank Leeds Wheeler, manufacturer –  
born March 21, 1897, Allston, Massachusetts – Harvard University.

**“Shiftless and unsuccessful farm people...”**


**“He stayed there two weeks...”**



Gatsby's parentage was undoubtedly humbler, and he was a college drop-out:

James Gatz – son of Mr Henry C. Gatz of Minnesota – born North Dakota – St Olaf's  
College, Minnesota.

But much can happen in the fog of war. Any college connection, however slender,  
might have been enough to qualify a heroic officer like Gatsby for a trip to Oxford.



# PULLING TOGETHER

The only one of Trinity's trio of US army officers of whom a photograph survives in the Trinity Archive is Leeds Wheeler. He was photographed (seated, far right) in the Second Eight of 1919, still in uniform as was required of a man not yet de-mobbed.





# ***DID GATSBY PLAY CRICKET?***

**“...with a cricket bat in his hand”**

Cricket first became popular on the country estates of England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Via the public schools it was soon well-established in Oxford. Trinity's undergraduates originally rented a field in Cowley for their matches but in 1898 a fund was raised to purchase a proper sports ground and build a pavilion.



However keen on the game, it is highly unlikely that an American citizen would have been considered for the Trinity College First XI, comprised as it was of men who had been playing the game since their early boyhood.





The First XI photograph of 1920 shows the team in a wide array of blazers, indicating their membership of other, even more prestigious teams.

Take a close look at the man seated on the ground front right. He was clearly unavailable when this photograph was taken, and in the days before photoshop, the only way to include him was to cut him out from another team picture and glue him on.

Gatsby may not have played in the Trinity First XI – but Nick would have surely noticed if the photograph of him with a cricket bat was a fake.



# THE TRINITY TRIFLERS

Trinity College however had a second team, the Trinity Triflers, who played the game not for glory but for fun – and quite often in fancy dress.

These photographs of the Triflers in action were preserved by Philip L Gordon (1919).

Was this Gatsby's team?















## CONCLUSIONS

### **“I’ll tell you God’s truth”**

If somebody wants to invent an Oxford connection, the name ‘Trinity’ is one that trips very easily off the tongue. There are many Trinity Colleges in existence.

On the other hand, Gatsby’s explanation of his time at Oxford is entirely plausible, and so is that snapshot of him with a cricket bat in the Front Quad.



### **Do YOU think Gatsby was telling the truth?**