

St. Catharine's College May Ball, 1929

May Balls have a long history in Cambridge, though somewhat confusingly they usually take place in the last two weeks of June! May is a time of exams in Cambridge and so the Balls must wait! Originally Balls and other festivities were held in May, in the final week leading up to the year end exams, but in 1882 the May boat races were moved to June and the rest of the activities followed suit.

First and Third Trinity held their first official May Ball in 1866 (so called as it was originally organised by the First and Third Boat Clubs), King's College in 1892 and Clare College were holding regular May Balls by 1898. A precise date for the start of the tradition at St. Catharine's is not known, but the earliest surviving photograph dates from 1920 and they seem to have become a regular occurrence in the 1920s. Initially happening irregularly, every year for a few years, then tailing off, before coming back on a regular basis, St. Catharine's College Balls are now held every 2 years and are a significant date in the College calendar with the whole College being taken over by a theme agreed by the Ball Committee. Recent themes have included 'Atlantis' (2006), 'Narnia' (2008) and 'Make Believe' (2010).

The focus here is on the the Ball of 1929, one of the earliest Balls for which records survive. Happening between the two world wars, but at the start of the Great Depression, the Ball would probably be considered quite bland by today's standards.

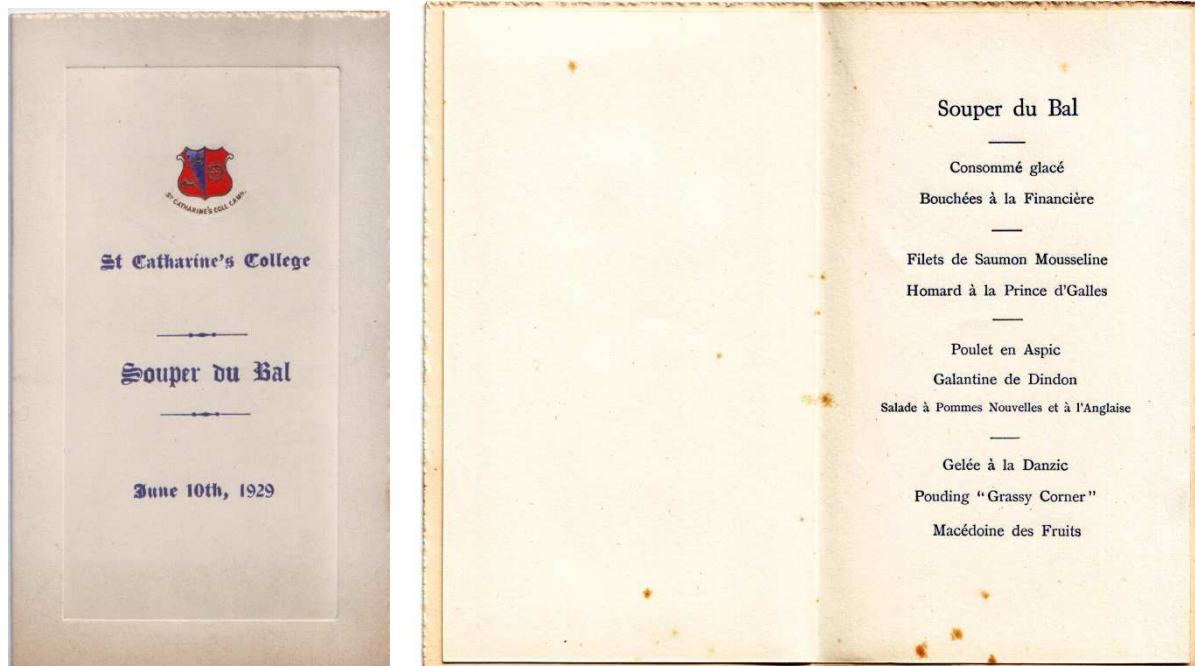


St. Catharine's College May Ball Committee, 1929 Reference: PHOT/10/1929/3

The Ball Committee would have been responsible for the organisation of everything related to the Ball, from the provision of food and selection of the dinner menu, to music and decoration. In 1929 the Committee consisted of (l-r, standing) R. H. S. Hatton, H. M. McCleery, R. W. Smeddle, (l-r, seated) E. H. F. Jones, G. W. Chapman, J. M. Y. Phillipson, and W. Guy Morgan.

Hatton had come up to St. Catharine's in 1928 to read Archaeology and Anthropology. As well as organising the College Ball he produced Gilbert and Sullivan performances and played Hockey for the University. He went on to become a teacher. Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1906, McCleery came up to St. Catharine's in 1928 to read Geography. He went on to become Secretary of the College Society from 1961, until his death in 1977. Smeddle played Rugby for England, having also played Rugby for the University. Chapman who received his BA in 1929 went on to work for the Colonial Service Forest Department in Cyprus, Iraq, Turkey and Morocco. Phillipson was ordained in 1934. He died aged only 43 in 1950 whilst Vicar of St George's, Waterlooville, Hampshire. Morgan went on to be Welsh rugby captain and later a teacher at Radley.

Returning to the 1929 Ball, the menu for the formal dinner can be seen below.



Ball dinner menu, 1929 Reference: U/10/1929

Later Balls tended to have a 'Survivors' photograph, taken in the morning, usually about 6am as a memento for those who had lasted the night. The photograph below shows an exceedingly smart collection of people and so is perhaps an 'Attenders' photograph rather than a 'Survivors' photograph!



Ball photograph, 1929 Reference: PHOT/10/1929/1

In the background can be seen A Staircase of Main Court and to the left Sherlock Court. Note that the Lodge Bell and its tower is not in position; the Bell was not presented to the College until 1960, and not installed into Main Court until 1994.

As Easter Term draws to a close this year the College will be hosting a June event, a smaller scale celebration due to the current building work being carried out to complete the new College Centre. The theme will be 'Metropolis' and full details are available at <http://catzjuneevent.co.uk/>.

The Archivist is always pleased to answer questions about College activities and happy to receive records relating to College activities. Enquiries should be directed to archivist@caths.cam.ac.uk, or call 01223 338343. The Archivist only works for the College on Thursdays and Fridays so there is sometimes a delay in being able to answer queries.