

“Intimate Internationalisms”

Women and Empire at the University of Oxford, 1891-1947

By Mrinalini Sisodia Wadhwa CC'24 | Laidlaw Scholars Program | Mentor: Professor Sneha Krishnan, University of Oxford

Introduction

Elite British universities such as Oxford were at the crux of early twentieth-century internationalism and imperialism. Educating both a generation of British colonial officers and missionaries, and a powerful class of Indian anticolonial leaders, these sites linked colonies and metropole, their influence extending even beyond independence and Partition in 1947.

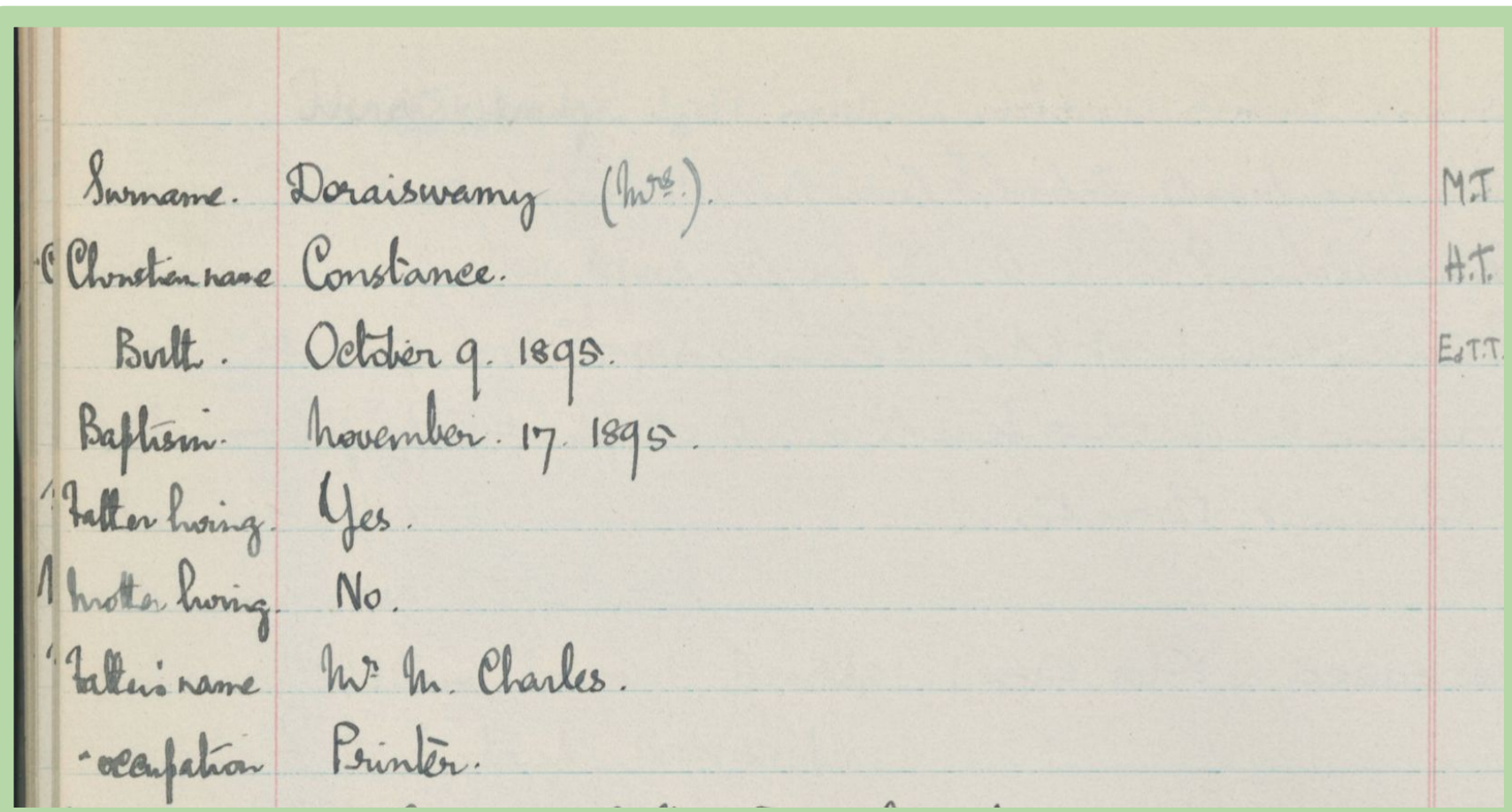
Yet what international histories have left out, in studying the British sojourns of famous leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru, is that a significant number of women with ties to Empire also attended these universities, especially in the 1920s-30s. They were, moreover, hardly homogenous: lower- and middle- as well as upper-class; Indian, Anglo-Indian, metropolitan British; Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Parsi; future Sanskrit academics, anticolonial activists, women’s rights reformers, missionary educators. “Intimate Internationalisms” draws these women into an international history ‘from below,’ examining how they participated in and shaped internationalism during and after their time at university.



Left: Constance Doraiswamy, an Indian Christian student, standing with her classmates at St. Hugh’s College, University of Oxford. Photograph taken c. 1921.

Below: Doraiswamy’s entry in the St. Hugh’s Student Register (manuscript), and a mention of her in the St. Hugh’s College Annual Report, 1922 (typescript).

(Sourced from St. Hugh’s College Archives, University of Oxford)



530 Doraiswamy, Mrs. ... Mahboobia College, Hyderabad, India
3, Commercial Street, Bangalore, S. India



An inaugural class of women at the Society for Home Students [now St. Anne’s College], University of Oxford 1879. (Sourced from St. Anne’s College Website)

Methodology

This project draws primarily on archival materials at the University of Oxford, specifically from its historically-women’s colleges which would have accepted female students from the 1890s to the 1940s: Somerville, Lady Margaret Hall, St. Hugh’s, St. Hilda’s, and St. Anne’s (formerly referred to as the Society for Home Students). We focus specifically on St. Anne’s College because its records remain understudied—many of its students came from lower-middle or middle-class backgrounds on scholarship (as opposed to from elite families), and would not have been able to attend Oxford otherwise.

Within the archives, we primarily considered:

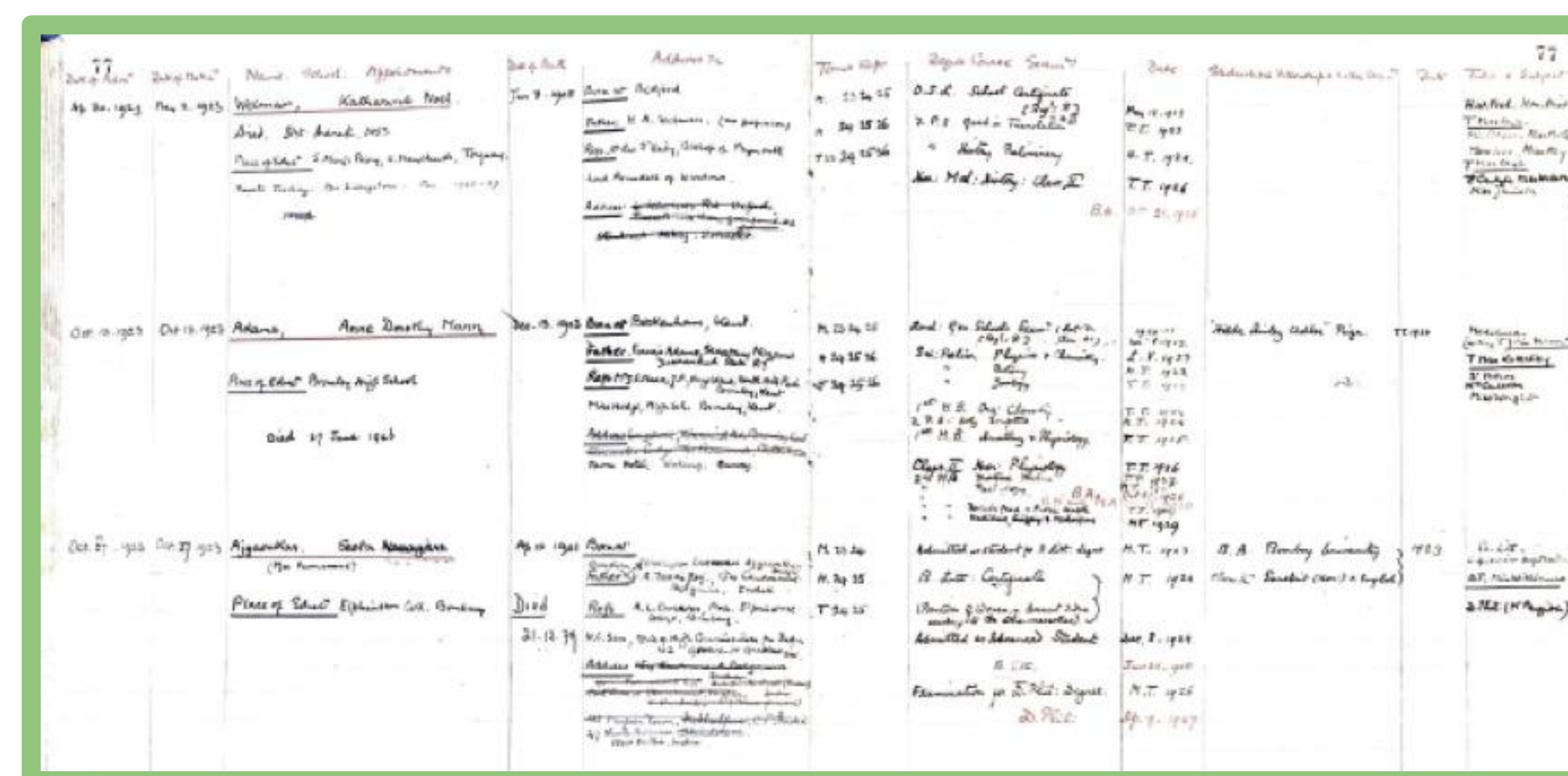
1. **Student Registers**, giving the names, birthplaces, families, and occupations of students who attended, to primarily identify Indian, Anglo-Indian, and missionary women
2. **Student Files** for select students, including correspondances with their college principal, reports, later career/academic updates
3. Oxford’s **Committee on Colonial and Foreign Universities**, which assigned “Junior” or “Senior” status to these Indian students
4. **Student Publications**, both from the 1890s-1940 (for student writing, academic reports, etc.) and from the 1970s-1990s (for former student obituaries)
5. **Graduate theses** (D.Phil., B.Litt) written by these women

Conclusions

We trace the records of 134 women who attended St. Anne’s from the 1890s to the 1940s with ties to Empire: this information primarily covers Indian, Anglo-Indian (i.e. British settlers in India), British missionary women, but also includes other non-white women (with Japanese, Chinese, Maori, Egyptian, and other backgrounds).

With direct paths to Oxford closed off to them, they relied on intimate ties to Western donors and government scholarships—which sought to categorize them on racial and religious grounds, and use education to make them ‘useful’ subjects, such as English teachers in the colonies.

Tracing these women’s heterogeneity—in their backgrounds, courses of study, and interactions—sheds light not only on the imperial interests that shaped internationalism, but also on how these funding sources *disrupted* the colonial categories they presumed. By bringing these women together, they allowed for unlikely social networks to coalesce, opening new possibilities for envisioning internationalism.

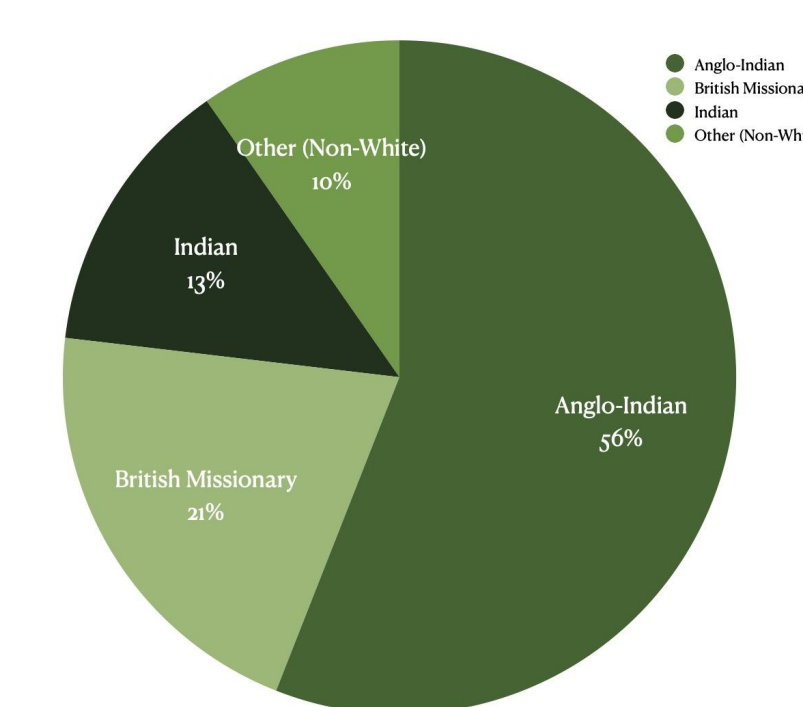


Above: Excerpt from a page in Vol. III of the St. Anne’s College Student Register, containing (at the bottom) the official entry for Seeta Aijaonkar. (Sourced from St. Anne’s College Archives, University of Oxford)

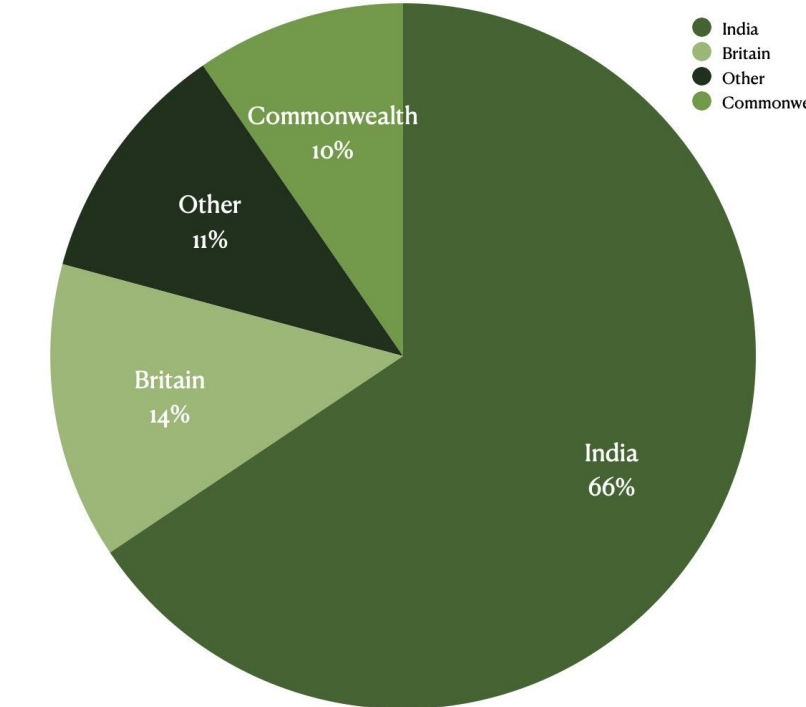
Student Backgrounds

While these are by no means all-encompassing, the below charts help to visualize the sheer heterogeneity of this group of 134 women—women from a range of different ethnic, religious, family, and educational backgrounds, studying together in close quarters.

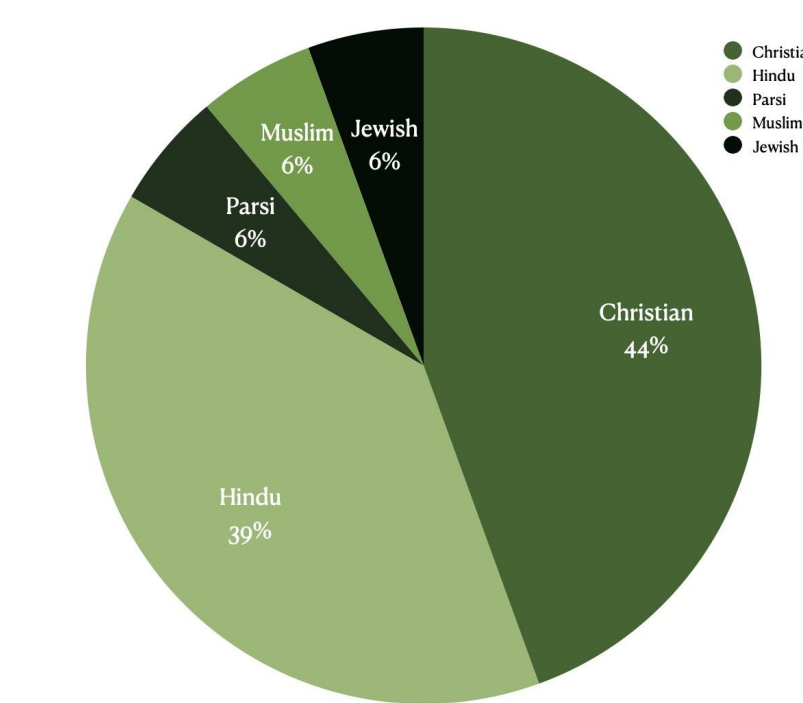
Student Backgrounds



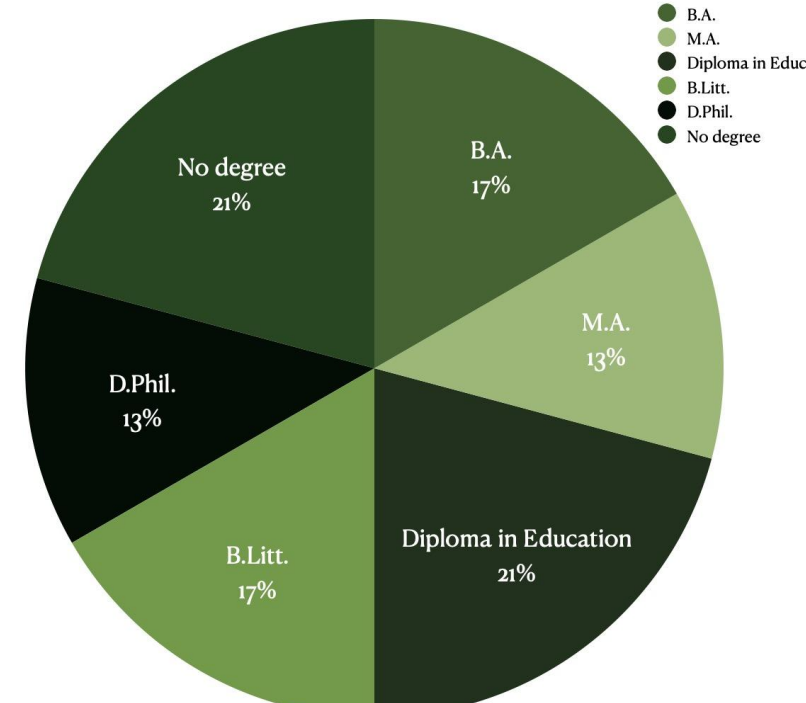
Country of Birth



Religious Backgrounds (Indian Students)



Course of Study (Indian Students)



Source: Registers Vols. I-V, St. Anne’s College Archives
For complete information on student backgrounds, careers, coursework, and time at St. Anne’s College, scan this QR code or visit tinyurl.com/mappingstannes.



“Very dignified and attractive did this woman of modern India appear, in her blue ‘sari’, surmounted by the blue and red gown. (The cap she needed only to carry in her hand, in accordance with a special concession made by the Vice-Chancellor for nuns and Indians wearing their native dress.)”

Description of Seeta Aijaonkar, the first St. Anne’s student to earn a D.Phil. with a Sanskrit thesis entitled “The Status of Women in Ancient India” (1927). She later served in Rajya Sabha, advocating for legal women’s rights reform.

Reference: *St. Anne’s College: A History*, Vol. II, pp. 25-26
(Sourced from St. Anne’s College Archives, University of Oxford)

Selected Archival Sources:

Student Files for various women from St. Anne’s College [Society for Home Students]e, St. Hugh’s College, Somerville College
Student Registers, 1891-1940 (Vols. 1-5) from St. Anne’s College
Student Registers, 1892-1930 (Vols. 1-4) from Somerville College
Committee on Foreign and Colonial Students Papers, University of Oxford
Laidlaw Conference on Education of Anglo-Indians Papers, 1912
Select Student D.Phil. and B.Litt. Theses (Seeta Aijaonkar, 1927; Roma Bose, 1937; Lotika Basu, 1926), Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Selected Secondary Sources:

K. Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism, 1920s and 1930s*
S. Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Indian Identities and Transnational Networks; Nationalism, Education, and Migrant Identities: The England-Returned*
M. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, heuristic of “imperial social formation”
K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*
A. Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule”
S. Mizutani, *The Meaning of White: Race, Class, and the ‘Domiciled Community’ in British India*
C. Hall and L. Davidoff, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*

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More information: available via email at mw2706@columbia.edu or at blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/undergraduate-research/a-journey-to-the-metropole-community-engagement-and-public-history-at-the-university-of-oxford/.

