

“His name is John¹”

Five Oxford Johns and their place in Oxford's Christian Heritage

John Wycliffe 1331 to 1384

John Owen 1616 to 1683

John Wesley 1703 to 1791

John Henry Newman 1801 to 1890

JRR Tolkien 1892 to 1973

1200s	1300s	1400s	1500s	1600s	1700s	1800s	1900s	2000s
	Wycliffe			Owen	Wesley	Newman	Tolkien	

1. Introduction

“What’s in a name?” asked Shakespeare. In conducting tours of Oxford’s Christian Heritage the name John comes up more than others. Why is that? While there is a famous, young and beloved disciple in the New Testament called John, the bolder characters in Oxford’s Christian heritage remind me more of the radical John the Baptist, martyr and the last of the pre-Christian prophets. He was a fiery, courageous individual who challenged the powers that be, prompting a remark from Jesus on ‘forceful men’. St John’s College in Oxford is named after the Baptist as is the Order of St John of Jerusalem, the famous Knights of Malta who resisted the Ottoman Empire. It is more likely of course to be pure coincidence.

The purpose of this article and the choice of names is little more than as a vehicle for bringing out some facts about each one. Undoubtedly readers will be more familiar with some than others. I hope that shedding fresh light on the less well known will be edifying and prompt more reading. Tradition has been called the ‘democracy of the dead’ and it is helpful to hear the voices of more of those who have gone before, and not just to listen to the most recent as if they are automatically to be preferred.

2. Catholic or Protestant?

Of the five Johns I have chosen, two are Catholic, two are Protestant and one was both.

The Catholics I have chosen are one of its greatest scourges, **John Wycliffe**, and the writer **JRR Tolkien**. John Wycliffe was only Catholic because there was little choice of church. He challenged the papacy and transubstantiation not because he disliked the church but because he loved it and wanted to reform it. JRR Tolkien was the least publicly courageous of the Johns I have chosen. Perhaps surprisingly for supporters of the reformation who want to see ‘progress’ going in only one direction, he is the most recent of the Johns. He was a lifelong Roman Catholic who attended St Aloysius church in Oxford on the Woodstock Road.

The two Protestants are **John Owen** and **John Wesley**. John Owen was a puritan and John Wesley



Grave of JRR Tolkien and his wife Edith in Wolvercote cemetery, Oxford

¹ Luke 1:63

an Anglican. Both were evangelical. John Owen was dubbed 'the Prince of Puritans' and John Wesley one of the chief names associated with the evangelical revival of the 18th century. John Wesley's mother Susannah is buried in the same dissenters' cemetery in London, Bunhill Fields, as John Owen.

John Newman (I am refraining from using titles of any kind, but he was of course canonised, or made a saint in the Catholic church in 2019) was first an evangelical, then an Anglican and then converted to Catholicism in 1845.

I am quietly pleased that without any particular selection, the Johns I have chosen happen to fall this way. Oxford's Christian heritage is not the preserve of any one group or denomination.

3. Oxford connections

All five Johns have very strong associations with Oxford. I will take them in chronological order.

John Wycliffe was Master of Balliol College, one of the three oldest colleges in the University of Oxford. There is much we do not know about Wycliffe, including his year of birth. Known for translating the Bible from Latin into English, the Oxford theological college Wycliffe Hall is named after him, as is the organisation Wycliffe Bible translators.

John Owen was a student at Queen's College and during the Protectorate (when Oliver Cromwell governed the country and we had no monarch) he was Dean of Christ Church. As someone who was also vice-chancellor during the Protectorate, he arguably held the highest university position of all five Johns.

John Wesley was a student at Christ Church with his brother Charles. However, he is most commonly associated with Lincoln College on Turl Street where he was a Fellow.

John Newman was a student at Trinity and a Fellow of Oriel. Oriel's links with the University Church of St Mary the Virgin led to Newman's appointment as its vicar in 1828 at the age of 27. Although often thought of as a Victorian and living his whole life in the 19th century, he had reached the pinnacle of his influence in the Church of England before Queen Victoria even came to the throne. He resigned from St Mary's in 1844.

JRR Tolkien (whose first name is of course John and he was known as 'Ronnie' or 'Tollers' but, like his friend CS Lewis, he is best known by his initials) was a student at Exeter College. However he is always associated with Merton where he was a Fellow. Merton and University are the two other colleges competing to be the oldest.



'The world is my parish.' My friend Shiva Quashie in John Wesley's reputed room at Lincoln College

4. What are their best known writings?

There may be some different opinions here, but in my view they would be:-

- For **Wycliffe**, his translation of the Bible into English;
- For **Owen**, the *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. His writings on Hebrews and the Holy Spirit are also still read today;

- For **Wesley**, his journal, although I never tire of reading his sermon *Scriptural Christianity*, which was the last sermon he preached in Oxford after which he claimed that he had 'delivered himself of the blood of Oxford' - clearly, he was not aiming for further invitations;
- For **Newman**, the most prolific writer of the Johns, his autobiographical '*Apologia pro vita sua*'. The book helped me think through what was happening and not feel so alone when I was making a transition from one Christian denomination to another;
- For **JRR Tolkien**, it has to be the Lord of the Rings.



Plaque on the pulpit in St Mary's the University Church in Oxford where Newman preached.

5. Whom did they influence?

They each had huge influence which continues to this day. But for immediate personal influences, the following should certainly be included:-

- For **Wycliffe**, Jan Hus, Rector of Prague University, who in turn influenced Martin Luther. Hus was executed following the papal Council of Constance in 1415 (when, bizarrely, there were three popes), which also ordered that Wycliffe's body be exhumed and burnt posthumously;
- William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania and theorist for the Quaker movement was a teenager at Christ Church when he sought out the recently ejected **John Owen**, who was 25 years his senior. Owen had been ejected from his role as Dean of Christ Church following the restoration of the monarchy;
- For **John Wesley**, I would say George Whitefield, the joint best known figure of the 18th century evangelical revival in England. Whitefield was a student at Pembroke College which is across St Aldates from Christ Church in Oxford.
- For **Newman**, unusually I would like to say Father Richard Benson. Benson was a second generation member of the Oxford Movement which Newman founded. Although he is not known nationally, he is a towering figure in the early history of East Oxford where my family worship. His legacy includes at least two churches, a home for incurables, local schools and a hall named after him.
- For **JRR Tolkien**, it has to be CS Lewis.

6. Unusual facts

John Wycliffe once said that the word **CARDINAL** was an acronym for "*Captain of the Apostates of the Realm of the Devil, Impudent and Nefarious Ally of Lucifer*". Given his brashness, it is probably a good thing that Twitter hadn't been invented, or his burning might not have been post-humous.

John Owen was MP for Oxford University in 1654. This was the same year that the first coffee shop in Europe opened in Queen's Lane in Oxford - right next



Reputedly the oldest coffee house in Europe, opened 1654

to his old college - and it is still there. He tried to ban academic gowns and mortar boards. He had 12 children, of whom 11 sadly died in infancy and one married, only to die shortly afterwards.

John Wesley. Instinctively conservative, he supported George III in the American War of Independence and in spite of being known as the founder of Methodism, said, 'I live and die in the Church of England.'

John Newman was a gifted violinist. Interrupted once in his playing to be told he had been awarded a fellowship at Oriel College, Newman "*merely answered 'very well' and went on fiddling.*" More importantly, Vatican II, the revolutionary Catholic Council which allowed Catholics in all conscience to recognise truth and regard as Christians those outside the Roman Catholic church, has been called "Newman's Council". This is an extraordinary achievement for anyone, let alone an Englishman, given our historic relationship with Rome.

One of **JRR Tolkien's** most fearsome creations has to be the spider Shelob in the Lord of the Rings. Did this have anything to do with his being bitten in infancy by a baboon spider in South Africa where he was born?

7. Conclusion

If the coverage of the five Johns is shallower than you would have liked, that is intended. In modern echo-chambers we tend only to study people who are like us or who share our views. If the article prompts further investigations of someone you are less familiar with, then it will have achieved its purpose. As Owen would have said, we have nothing to fear and everything to gain from learning.

In summary, all these men were called John. All of them are forever associated with Oxford. And all of them died 'looking forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.' They are each a part of Oxford's Christian heritage.

James Greig
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