



**Name:** Ellen Leggate (née O’Hare)

**College:** Merton

**Subject:** Chemistry

**Years of Study:** 1996-2000



### **First Steps**

*“I started running at around the age of 11 and was already an established runner before I came to university, running for the small athletics club in my hometown, Cirencester AC. At this time, I loved running cross country but most of my successes were focused on the track.”*

The summer before she arrived in Oxford, Ellen had already demonstrated her athletic abilities on the national stage, winning the English Schools 1500m title. She went on to begin her OUCCC journey even before her first days in Oxford. Having heard about the club, she attended the pre-season training camp in September prior to her first term, something that many of our incoming freshers still do today! There, she quickly earned the nickname “Freda Fresher” a moniker that stuck with members of the squad for quite some time. As is so often the case with training camp, the freshers are quickly immersed into the club, and continue to be involved for the duration of their time at Oxford. Whilst now the club website and social media are valuable tools for publicity, Ellen managed to make contact with OUCCC before such means were available.

*“At a time when the internet was still establishing itself in everyday use, I’m not quite sure how I got info about the camp or the club though I suspect Athletics Weekly magazine was involved”.*

## **University Life**

Having arrived at university, Ellen's weekly routine became heavily intertwined with the OUCCC training schedule.

*"In a typical training week, I trained with OUCCC for long reps in University Parks on Tuesday lunchtimes, hill reps in South Park on Thursday lunchtimes, and Sunday long run with the club".*

Among her favourite training locations was University Parks, which became a familiar and beloved route. For Ellen, Saturdays were often reserved for races, or a track session for which her home coach would travel to Oxford. *"For most of my time in Oxford there wasn't an OUCCC club coach, but there was a wealth of experienced athletes. The sessions were usually determined by the captains and then posted in the weekly club newsletter. This was delivered in hardcopy by hand every week by the committee to members' college pigeon-holes".*

That era now feels distinctly analogue compared to today's digital communications, consisting of a weekly email alongside other communication platforms including Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. At the time, the club relied on a very different form of club cohesion than it does today, where communication and planning were vital to ensure physical deliveries would make it to club members promptly in time for training.

Beyond the training, OUCCC formed the cornerstone of Ellen's social life. *"As an undergraduate, nearly all my friends and socialising was via OUCCC; in many ways the club was my surrogate family during this time. I really appreciated mixing with like-minded people (i.e. crazy cross-country runners) but also meeting a breadth of people across different courses, colleges and years".*

The tight-knit community of runners in Oxford is often as much of a draw to OUCCC as the sport itself. With shared challenges- whether muddy cross-country courses or late-night essay crises- the community of runners would form friendships that lasted well beyond university days.

*"I joined university with more pedigree on the track than on the country and ran 800m and 1500m on the track in the Easter terms as an undergraduate. The OUAC middle-distance squad was essentially a subset of the OUCCC athletes but I did make friends in OUAC in other disciplines too".*

Taking part in both track and cross country racing, Ellen recalls highlight experiences at training camps and overseas tours. Especially memorable, was her participation in the Achilles Club trip to the United States, a competition that predates the modern Olympics and still takes place today. For the occasion, Oxford and Cambridge athletes join forces to compete against Harvard, Yale, Penn and Cornell. Most recently, March 2025 saw the men's team beat Harvard and Yale for the first time since 2009. At the time where Ellen was competing, the tour also included competitions against Dartmouth and Brown University in the USA.

It was on the US tour that Ellen would meet her now-husband, who was studying and Cambridge and running for CUH&H at the time. *"Meeting him meant I gradually got to know the Cambridge runners too".* As fate would have it, Ellen would one day swap her dark blue vest for a light blue one, heading over to Cambridge to do a PhD in Biochemistry.

*"I found both OUCCC and CUH&H warm and welcoming clubs and very similar in their ethos and approach to training. For me the biggest differences in my experiences in Cambridge (aside from the change in surname!) came from being a graduate student compared to an undergraduate. For example, during my PhD, I was based at Addenbrooke's hospital on the edge of town and so had less opportunity to join in squad training sessions during the afternoon".*

### **Captaincy and Committee**

During Ellen's time in OUCCC she became heavily involved in the leadership of the club, serving as women's vice-captain in her third year, and going on to be women's captain in her final year at Oxford.

*"My aims as captain were to win the women's team event at the Blues Varsity Match and BUCS (then known as BUSA) and to build the depth of the women's squad overall".*

This was no simple task, but with strong talent in the club at the time Ellen knew her ambitious goals were achievable. Oxford's women began with a convincing Varsity victory, 12 points to 29. At BUSA, too, they managed to claim the title, upgrading their bronze medal performance of two years earlier. It would take 25 years for another team outside of Birmingham and Loughborough to top the podium (the lighter blue of Cambridge women took gold in 2025).

*"It was a very successful season and we proudly met those objectives. We got celebratory T-shirts made at the end of the season in recognition – my daughters still wear mine now as 'authentically-retro' fashion".*



*Newspaper cutting from the Oxford Women's BUCS Victory, 2000*



*Ellen's celebratory T-shirt*

*"In my year as captain, I worked in a great partnership with the Club Captain who lead the men's teams. He was known to all as 'Billy Whizz' on account of his hair and running style. I expect there are runners from the time who never knew his real name!"*

## **Varsity**

The Varsity Match was then, as it remains today, a cherished part of the OUCCC calendar. With longstanding traditions, including many outfit changes during the course of the day it was always an occasion to remember.

*“The pre-race routine for the Varsity Match involved travelling down to Wimbledon Common in formal clothes which always felt very alien compared to normal preparation for a cross-country match. Then, of course, shortly after arrival we headed straight over to inspect Beverley Brook and work out how bad the water crossing looked for that year”.*

*“The day was always remarkably intense and exhausting – not just the race itself but also hurtling round the course to support the men’s race, and mustering the energy to dance at the post-race dinner and party. I always also enjoyed the tea in the TH&H clubhouse after the races, though was less keen on the temperature (cold) and water pressure (low) of the showers there as we tried to clean up enough from the race to attend the formal celebrations”.*

Not only were Ellen’s Varsity races filled with great memories, but also with fantastic running performances that put her into the record books for years to come. Competing for Oxford, Ellen made 4 Blues appearances as an undergrad (Ellen O’Hare), after which she made 4 further Blues appearances, but this time for the light blues as a graduate (Ellen Leggate). These included two individual victories in 2001 and 2002.



*Ellen and the Team celebrating their varsity victory*

*“My undergraduate degree was in Chemistry and I was at Merton College. After that I went over to Cambridge and did a PhD in Biochemistry and PGCE (teacher training), both at Peterhouse College. That way I maxed out on the number of Varsity Matches allowed at the time (eight cross-country and eight track and field)!”*

Upon completing her 8<sup>th</sup> Blues race she overtook the standing record for number of Blues’ match appearances (held at the time by Nick Talbot and Warwick Ewers). It was only in 2019 that this number was surpassed by William Ryle-Hodges, who made 9 Blues Appearances (Cambridge 2011-13, Oxford 2014-15, back to Cambridge 2016-19).

## **Life After Oxford**

Running has evolved into a family affair, and a lifelong passion for Ellen. She continues to produce impressive results, recording a 16:48 5k and a 34:42 10k in 2025. Both times would prove competitive among current Blues, and the latter performance earned her an England Masters call-up. Ellen also remains involved in club administration, currently as president of Cambridge and Coleridge AC. In 2018, fifteen years on from her final Varsity, Ellen returned to Roehampton to act as starter for the women's race.

*“Being a student provided a great opportunity for running, both as an undergraduate at Oxford and as a graduate student in Cambridge, and my biggest running achievements all stem from this time. That said, I have continued to run since and have recently been dragged back into competing by my eldest daughter who herself is a very good cross-country runner. It's been fun to get back into events like road relays and there's a club and squad spirit at my current athletics club (Cambridge & Coleridge AC) very similar to those I enjoyed as a student”.*