

Darwin – The First Weeks

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Introduction

I have been a member of Darwin College for nearly 50 years, so I have many memories of it, not to mention a lot of information. I am going to concentrate here on my first impressions, backed by things I learned later; quite a bit is about the building itself.

I was one of the first members of Darwin – I arrived on the 3rd of October 1970, which was the main arrival day. But quite a bit happened before that.

I was interviewed (to read Electronics) in early 1970, by a lovely man named Lewis Ryder. I got to know him better over the years. I was interviewed in Physics (now Marlowe) and had lunch in Eliot. I don't recall a campus tour, and I certainly don't remember seeing Darwin under construction – we didn't see that end of the campus.

Over the next few months, I know that there was quite a lot of discussion concerning the name for College 'D', its working name. Various names were proposed, including Becket (900th anniversary) and Russell (who died that year). Darwin was also in the running because Charles Darwin lived in Kent for many years. The Master-elect (Bryan Keith-Lucas) was not keen on Russell – reportedly, his father and Russell did not get on. I do know that Bryan pulled a lot of strings with the great and the good outside the University, and eventually the name Darwin was approved.

Contrary to popular belief, the architect was not a prison architect! The original concept was to have several mini common rooms/kitchens shared between ten students in adjacent rooms, also providing lockers for eight off-campus students (of which I was one). The common rooms were physically separated from the study bedrooms to reduce noise.

When I arrived, I was met by volunteers, and members of the Junior College Committee (JCC). These, and other College members, had been obtained from other Colleges to build a working College. Since I lived off campus, I was assigned to a common room; M4-8. We were given a coffee party by a volunteer, and I made several long-term friends that day. That room became my base for the year; I kept books in my locker as well as coffee cups, etc. Residents of rooms had small over-sink lockers for coffee and tea materials. Catering facilities were sparse; two hotplates, a kettle, and a very basic toaster (years later, I was involved in the installation of microwave ovens here). The equipment also included an iron, and an ironing board. The chairs had cushions attached by press studs; their easy removal made them invaluable for emergencies when sleeping on a friend's floor!

The building

The building was constructed on a very tight budget, two years after Keynes and for about 65% of the outlay. At one time, half of the workers on site were bricklayers; there was plenty of concrete too, and the internal stairs were pre-cast and lowered in by crane. The facilities were rather basic compared to Keynes, but unlike Keynes there was at least a sink in each room; there were just two bathrooms for general use, but a shower between (typically) five students. Electricity was limited to 2.5 amps per room (about 600 watts) due to very thin wiring (at the time, copper prices were remarkably high).

In those early days, the building still had some 'interesting' features. The front doors were very wide, with no inner counterparts. The pigeonholes for incoming mail were in the foyer. On windy days, the mail would flutter up the stairwell when a door was opened; after the first term, inner doors were hastily added. Later, the wide doors were reduced in size (as were the ones on the balcony).

Most people will know that the College is in the shape of a 'Y'. The arms of the 'Y' were intended as student residential areas, with some blocks (C, H and P) reserved as staff offices and staff flats. The central corridors had the grand name of 'cloisters'. Blocks C to T were here, and the Missing Link – more later - was eventually assigned the letter U).

The stem of the 'Y' was B block. This contained the dining hall, and above it various public areas. Tucked in above the kitchen was a mezzanine floor, where live-in domestic staff were housed (these later became study bedrooms). The public areas above can still be seen today, although much modified. There are still two corridors leading from the balcony. The left hand one led to the Junior Common Room (for students), with other rooms off it – games room (pinball etc.), postgraduate common room, and two TV rooms. The right-hand corridor gave access to the Senior Common Room (for staff), a private dining room, and various offices, most importantly the Master's office. The architect's idea was that the bar would 'bridge' the junior and senior members of the College; it was located between the two corridors, quite near the common rooms; it turned out to be far too small, and it was later replaced by the second bar (which I helped to design) on the left-hand side of the JCR corridor before the whole area was gutted and turned into Origins. I still have a commemorative tankard which was presented to me on 20th October 1977, at the opening of the second bar.

Lastly, 'A' block was the central core of the building, the tallest at six levels; a peculiar shape, a sort of flattened hexagon. The ground floor was the foyer, with the porters' lodge, a cigarette machine and some heavily used phone booths. Concealed behind an innocuous door was a linen room and the Housekeeper's office, and the inside stairs that many have never found (twelve flights, all the way to the top). These led first to a mezzanine floor containing a flat for the Housekeeper, then to the balcony level. The next floor (level four) was given over to a massive room, the study area. Students could use this at any time, and it was particularly useful for those who lived off campus; later, part of it became a College library. Eventually the whole floor was gutted and turned into teaching rooms. On levels five and six, more teaching rooms could be found (only two small ones at the top, because of the massive water tanks that are up there). The view over Canterbury is still worth the climb. 'A' block also has some other rooms which are approached by bridges from the cloisters; the largest one was the home of a secretarial pool for academics with offices in Darwin – it is now a seminar room. There was also a subterranean wine cellar and silver store.

There have been many changes, so I hope the above sets the scene as it was on 'Day 1'.

The first day and beyond

On that first Freshers' day, I arrived at about 2 p.m. I remember speeches from the Master, Bryan Keith-Lucas and from Leslie Harris, the Domestic Bursar, in the JCR. Little did I know that 22 years later, I would be giving the Master's address myself!

On the first night, all four colleges had discos in their respective common rooms, and the bars were packed; I remember very little. On subsequent nights, various bands were put on in the dining halls. I remember seeing the Incredible String Band in Keynes, but I don't remember much in Darwin; it had

the smallest of the dining halls, and was yet to have an electrical supply installed for the use of bands.

Over the next few weeks, many teething troubles were apparent, although nothing major. Many rooms had no waste bins for a while. Some rooms were missing their locks, or they were mastered incorrectly so that the cleaners couldn't get in (rooms were cleaned every day). Students soon discovered that a small amount of filing converted their key into one that would open all five adjoining rooms, which was useful when the occupants were friends (more seriously, the addition of a tiny piece of metal produced a complete master key).

As an interim measure, the pigeonholes for post were relocated to a less draughty part of the foyer.

Other 'notable' events in the first term included:

- A student who eventually gained an entry in the Guinness Book of Records for the very tall house of cards that he constructed in his College room.
- A firework set fire to the rubbish bins at the back of the College; this was gleefully put out by students, with a real excuse for letting off fire extinguishers!
- Just before Christmas, there was a major power cut due to industrial action by power workers. An orange flashing light on Giles Lane heralded the arrival of a University tractor towing a generator, which was enough to power the kitchen appliances.
- There was a nice Christmas dinner, with decorations and crackers, etc. for any students who paid a small surcharge, followed by the inevitable disco in the JCR.

At the end of term, there were a lot of students who were reluctant to go home.

The major event in the second term was on 15th February 1971. A table was set up on the balcony, and we queued to change our cash into decimal currency! It all went very smoothly; the College was well prepared.

Food

Breakfast was included in the rent for those living in College, but it was far too early for many. The toast machine produced remarkably durable toast, and it was said that Darwin toast would be found, untouched, by archaeological digs in the future.

Lunch was on a cash basis, in my case usually a sandwich from the JCR servery. There was also an excellent little shop on the balcony, where milk, tea, coffee, bread, baked beans etc. could be purchased; there were two small guest rooms behind it, and one of these was soon turned into a storeroom because trade was brisk. And, of course, one could visit another College for food.

Dinner was (optionally) included in room rent, and those living off campus could buy dinners for a term at a reduced rate. It was possible to opt out for a day (receiving a partial refund) or opt in (at a higher rate). Most of us used the dinner facilities most of the time.

People

The College had many interesting personalities among its staff, too many to cover in detail. A few are commemorated in the names of some of the Darwin Houses.

Bryan Keith-Lucas was the College Master. He was a real gentleman, a staunch Liberal, and a great believer in making students feel at ease. His office was approached through the office of a nice, but rather dragon-like lady who was the Master's Secretary (later changed to Master's Assistant). There was also a door for direct access to the Master's inner office, (to avoid the 'dragon') with "Members of the College – please walk in" on it (and he meant it). The Keith-Lucas family name is probably unique (see Wikipedia); Bryan's great-niece can now be seen on BBC television, presenting the weather.

Leslie Harris was the Domestic Bursar, later the College Manager, in charge of the day to day running of the College (catering, housekeeping, porters, etc.). He was a very astute man who looked after the purse strings very well – sometimes too well, we thought! He later organised my wedding reception.

Frank Bethray was the College Butler, who looked after dining hall matters, and the wine cellar. He resembled a character straight out of Dickens, with a stoop and sideburns.

'*Tommy*' *Barr* was the Head Porter, a small but very tough man if he had to be! He had been a Chindit during World War II, which tells you all you need to know. He was a very nice man. His wife, Rosa, later became the Housekeeper; she always greeted me, at volume, with "Hello my Bobby" - even when I was Master!

Tutors

Although no longer universal today, at that time every student was assigned a personal tutor, as a first stop for any problems. These were drawn from the student's own discipline. Some students saw their tutors a lot; others only saw them for a statutory "signing-in" at the start of a term, and "signing-out" at the end of a term.

Tutors were given a small entertainment allowance. Some used this for pub visits with tutees, but others (including mine) gave us a nice dinner; mine was in the College private dining room. Staff were also allocated to a College, so every Electronics student in Darwin (including me) had one of two people as a tutor.

The Missing Link

Many people ask what the Missing Link is, exactly. This is the story.

It is not clear what prompted the construction of an outbuilding behind the College, but it was completed at the same time as the College itself. It was apparently intended to be a kind of 'hobbies room', and it had double doors on the side facing away from the College. This was apparently done so that cycles and motorcycles could be wheeled in and worked on. However, this never came to anything, perhaps because of lack of funds.

It wasn't long before Leslie Harris (the Bursar) hit upon a plan to turn it into a pub (it was much smaller than it is now; imagine the building without the Peter Brown room). A brewery (Ind Coope) took an interest, and the pub became a reality. The name was the subject of some discussion, and the idea of the 'Missing Link' (with a slight nod to Charles Darwin) was accepted. The sign was still there until a few years ago, and it showed a slightly ape-looking student next to an academic; once again, it was intended to be a meeting place for both.

The Missing Link was open rather spasmodically, and it was not as successful as it had been hoped. It was eventually closed, and the building used for various purposes until it was finally extended, refurbished, and turned into a set of teaching rooms.

Finally

Most of my life has been tied up with Darwin, and these are only my reminiscences from the early days. At some point I will write more!