

50 Years at University

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Introduction

I joined the University as an undergraduate in 1970, and I retired from being a member of academic staff at the end of 2015. I have maintained my connection with the University in various ways since then, although there is no official recognition of my ongoing connection. I have many memories of my College (covered separately) but also of the University as a whole.

Buildings

I arrived as an undergraduate on 3rd October 1970; Darwin College had just been (mostly) completed. Eliot, Rutherford, and Keynes were already up and running. Other buildings included:

- the original Registry (Beverley farm), and the new Registry (where it is now)
- the Rutherford ‘bungalows’, intended as Masters’ residences but not often used (now demolished to make way for Tyler Court)
- the Keynes Master’s House (the building with the pointy roof adjacent to Keynes), now repurposed as the Careers Service
- off-campus, Darwin had number 8, St Stephen’s Hill as a Master’s house
- a small Cornwallis Building, just a portion of what is now Cornwallis South (although it was a bit bigger on the western side of the entrance)
- a Gulbenkian Theatre, with a smaller front
- the catalogue (entrance) hall of the Library, and the part to the east of that
- the Physics building (now Marlowe), without the northern addition
- a few houses in Giles Lane, used mainly as offices
- the Chemistry building (now Ingram), but without the Biosciences part on the back
- the Sports Hall (smaller, just one hall)
- the Electronics building (now Jennison), although that was not completed until Christmas 1970

There was little else, but I think there were about 2000 students at that time – a far cry from the numbers now. There are now many more buildings, and many of those that I used have been renamed; it has become policy to rename buildings so that the name no longer reflects their function, thus making them a little easier to repurpose should the need arise. An example would be the Physics building, which became Marlowe. Many of the names (not Marlowe!) are now those of people whom I knew as colleagues or as teachers – Jennison, Stacey, Ingram, Templeman, Chipperfield, Sibson. I have also known several people from the Keynes and Darwin families, as well as one of Rutherford’s godsons!

I think Darwin started the tradition of naming rooms in Colleges after people, but I may be wrong about that. There are now quite a few, but since this was usually done by the College Masters (who have been effectively abolished) this will probably stop. Darwin has some of the houses named after former members of academic and non-academic staff, as well as a couple of rooms named after former Masters.

The University made some building changes to make occupations harder to set up. They didn't go as far as the University of Essex (a hotbed of protest) who fitted large, very solid doors to block off corridors. This was necessary because most of the University was in one sprawling building. Those doors resembled the flood doors on some parts of the London Underground.

Facilities

I remember the catering arrangements in those days. If you lived on campus, breakfast and dinner were included in your rent. If you lived off campus, you could pay a lump sum to get dinner every day (including weekends). You could opt out of a day by signing a book outside the dining hall, or you could opt in (if you had opted out for a term) by signing another book. The former gave you a small refund to your account, and the latter charged you a little more.

I didn't use the Library that much (it didn't acquire the Templeman name until much later, and in fact the VC at that time was none other than Geoffrey Templeman). It was common to buy quite a lot of books, mainly from Dillon's bookshop, conveniently located within the front of the Library. There was no need to pay for books at the time; charges were added to a termly account.

Each College had a small shop selling essentials such as milk and bread, and a common room servery selling hot and cold snacks. These have now disappeared in favour of more ambitious outlets.

Undergraduate years

My first year was uneventful, apart from the initial exams after Christmas. Most people got through those OK. I was following a general Natural Sciences first year, that gradually specialised as time went on. Terms were all ten weeks each, with exams in the second half of the summer (Trinity) term.

Because I had marginal A level results, I hadn't managed to get a room on campus in the first year. I had lodgings off Wincheap, with a lovely lady and her mother. I subsequently had dealings with a member of staff who was her son-in-law, and later still with his daughter. The University is everywhere in Canterbury!

My second and final years were spent living in Darwin – which was very convenient. Car parking was a lot easier than it is now, and I used to drive a vehicle full of students from Darwin to Electronics every morning for our lectures.

This was an era of protests and building occupations. I remember the first one, which was (I think) in early 1971, when the Gulbenkian Theatre complex was occupied for some time. The occupiers brought in hotplates from student kitchens, and they purchased vats in which to make curry and similar concoctions. As was often the case, the protest was about student rents.

The 1960s and 1970s were also a time for student pranks. The defining prank was not at Kent, but in Cambridge, where some enterprising engineering students managed to place a car on top of the Senate House. The full story is at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1030091/Revealed-50-years-The-secret-greatest-student-prank.html>.

Although not inspired by the Cambridge incident, there was a successful prank at Kent in 1973. One morning, staff and students arrived to find two massive wooden signs, one at the eastern end of Giles Lane, and the other at the western end of University Road; each read: "WELCOME TO KENT ZOO – PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE STUDENTS". On entering the University, they saw that ALL the mini sign boards, giving directions to buildings, had been 'modified' by having cartridge paper pasted over

them. Neatly and consistently stencilled on each were 'alternative' names for each building; I only remember a few, but Darwin was the Monkey House, the Registry was the Reptile House, and the Senate was the Snake Pit. These all survived for a fair while.

In the spirit of the Cambridge incident, some explanation of the prank is necessary. The work was carried out by twelve students working in pairs. One pair transported the wooden signs and assembled them, with guy ropes, 'on site'. The other pairs modified the smaller signs, working separately but in sequence. One would wander along with a carrier bag containing heavy duty wallpaper paste and a piece of cloth. They quickly wiped the front of the sign and moved on. They were followed a couple of minutes later by their accomplice, carrying a backpack full of rolled, stencilled paper. The correct paper was quickly affixed. This was all done in the small hours, exit from the Colleges (without going past porters) being accomplished by dismantling windows.

Postgraduate years

I then spent a year nominally attending the University of Essex, although most weekends were spent visiting Canterbury and sleeping on floors in Rutherford. While doing this, I was invited back to do research in Computing, so back I came. Once again, I lived in Darwin, this time for four years.

The big news in 1974 was, of course, the collapse of the railway tunnel. This ran from the back of Giles Lane car park, emerging in the grounds of the Archbishop's School at the bottom of the hill. This tunnel was built in 1829-1830, and it seems that clay shrinkage played a part in the disaster. The Cornwallis building dropped by about 18 inches on one side, and the main computer was evacuated to the other end of the building. The bridge between Cornwallis and the Gulbenkian was demolished before it collapsed, as was most of the west wing of Cornwallis itself (you can still see the asymmetry about the main entrance of Cornwallis South).

In late 1975 I helped to set up a small coffee bar called the 'Charlie D', aimed at students who didn't drink much in the bar. I remember meeting a tall, slightly weird girl, and declining an invitation to coffee back in her room. Less than two years later, we were engaged, and two years after that, we were married. She has never really let me forget that rejection.

Early employment

In early 1978, the Director of Computing sidled up to me and said "There's a lectureship going; you'd be a fool not to apply"; I did so, and I got the job. I started in October 1978, and thereafter was continuously employed until December 2015!

A year later, I had settled into the job and my fiancée and I felt secure enough to get married. Our wedding was in November 1979. I was a young lecturer in a rented flat, but I was able to use Darwin College for our reception, with food provided (for a reasonable price) from the College kitchen. We were married by David Hutton, who had been a chaplain and the Deputy Master of Darwin – often to be seen in the bar; by that time, he was chaplain of the London Hospital, Whitechapel, but he travelled down for the weekend. Hutton House (in Darwin) is named after him.

Over these and subsequent years, the buildings in the University multiplied and extended rapidly. By 1980, my job also included looking after (and unofficially managing) the main University computer (we only really had one). This continued (with a change of computer) until 1992.

In the early 1980s, the University (rather than the Student Union) decided to put on a Graduation Ball. For some reason, I (and the Deputy Master of Rutherford, John Whyman) ended up being deputed to organise this. With all rooms fully booked, we erected a marquee to the west of the Senate building. To our surprise, it went off well, and John and I became friends.

There was one amusing event which occurred around the mid-1980s. The Computing Laboratory agreed to provide extended training, for about three months, to new recruits of a major defence contractor; these were Arts graduates who were to become programmers (presumably there was a shortage at the time). The Student Union argued that (a) the University should not be working for a defence company and (b) the accommodation should be used for 'real' students (this was newly built accommodation, at the end of an academic year, so there were no students to occupy it). The training went ahead, but to minimise confrontation the trainees were told to ditch their normal working suits and use their old student clothes as a disguise! The course went off without serious incident.

Work was generally enjoyable. I believe that if you find a job that you like, you never really feel you are working! This went on in an uneventful fashion until 1991, when a lot of my colleagues retired. The University decided it was time to separate the Computing Laboratory into two parts – the Computing Service, and a Computer Science department. Unfortunately, it was deemed impossible for me to work for both, so my “looking after the computer” came to an end. I was sorry about that because the job had brought me into contact with many people all over the University – much more than if I had been a mere academic.

The next year (I think) a few students decided to change their names to single words; examples would be something like Titan and Stoa. This was fine, but it did cause the student records computer system a few problems; I think they were given an initial of X, as the system didn't accept students with just a surname.

Becoming a Master

Having lost my computer minding job, I prepared myself for more teaching, and research (for which I had never had time). Then I discovered that elections were taking place for Master of Darwin, from October 1992. I won! As a result, my teaching duties stayed that same, I spent the other half of my time on Masterly duties, and I moved into an office in Darwin. My first speech to new students was 22 years after I had attended a similar speech by the founding Master (incidentally, he was one of the first to congratulate me on my election).

Being a Master was interesting, if exhausting – I didn't realise how exhausting until I stopped doing it ten years later. I was grateful for all the help I received from my fellow Masters, particularly Derek Crabtree, who ended up being a Master for twenty years – I managed ten. There were many duties that I hadn't really realised were part of the job, although some had been obvious:

- hosting High Table dinners on a weekly or fortnightly basis, often with distinguished guests; this also involved choosing menus, designing seating plans, etc. For example, who do you put next to the head of Ofsted when the table is full of teachers? He wasn't popular among the teaching profession, but I had a neat solution to that.
- meeting with, and assisting, the student committees when they were organising large and small events. This often involved compromises because of health and safety (for which I was responsible)

- being the College Fire Officer, organising regular fire drills and inspections
- managing the portering staff
- handling student discipline, ultimately evicting someone from University accommodation if they were causing serious problems. This also involved fining students – the money went towards various funds for students
- handling student welfare. I took two courses on counselling, and it was rewarding to see someone graduate knowing that I had helped them though. This also involved handling deaths of students from various causes, arranging transport to funerals, and holding memorial services – the first death happened when I had only been Master for three weeks
- giving small temporary hardship loans to students, as well as allocating money, each term, from the University Hardship Fund.

There was much more, but the above gives an idea of the work involved. I could not have done it without the office staff – the Master’s Secretary (I got through four of them) and her assistant (always the same one, who was brilliant, until that post was abolished)

At the same time, I was still teaching as well.

There was an interesting (but sad) interlude in autumn 1993, when a former Chancellor, Jo Grimond, died. I discovered (less than 24 hours before the funeral) that the University was not sending a representative. Since Jo had been a Senior Member of Darwin College, I decided to go. This involved getting up at 3 a.m. the next day, taking two flights to get to Kirkwall airport in Orkney by 10 a.m. Luckily, a former colleague from the University of Edinburgh lived in Kirkwall; I was not only met and taken to the cathedral, but my friend was locally prominent, and we were seated in the row behind the family. After the burial (we were taken in buses to Finstown), we had ‘refreshments’; I have never seen so much whisky in my life. Jo’s widow (of the Bonham-Carter family) was very pleased that someone had come all that way from Kent. I returned to Heathrow sitting next to Clement Freud.

Another interesting event occurred at one of the annual Darwin Feasts – a splendid dinner occasion. One of the academics invited an ambassador – who shall remain nameless. Suffice it to say that security involved Special Branch lurking outside, and two additional guests who had telltale bulges under their arms, visible through their dinner jackets!

There were regular reviews into the Masters’ offices, and it was clear that some of the management wanted them gone. In 2002, the hours allowed to Masters were reduced and the working conditions changed. I was asked to stay on (as an appointee rather than being elected now), but I decided it was time to go.

Back to Computing

At short notice, I was found a rather strange little office in Computing. To fill my time, I was made examinations officer for the M.Sc. degrees. That lasted about six weeks, until there was a change of management and I was asked to help with Admissions, as the department was worried about falling numbers.

I spent the following years, until retirement, running Admissions for Computing. When I started, our annual intake was about 70 students – when I left, it was about 220; I’m quite proud of that, but of course I had many excellent helpers.

I knew just about every student we admitted, and I was careful about the selection of tutors, based on the needs of each student. I ended up having about twice as many tutees as anyone else, partly because my training had helped me understand them better.

There are few stories I can tell about Admissions, but there is one that sticks in my mind; the applicant never actually came to Kent. They turned up with their mother, which was fine as parents often came along, and we operated a separate programme for them all day. In this case, the mother absolutely assisted on accompanying their 'child' everywhere; there was no cultural background that would explain this, as far as we knew. It put a bit of a damper on the student programme, but there was no real option. We did, however, insist that the parent did not attend the actual interview (and even that was a struggle).

Final Parting

I shouldn't really go into my reasons for retiring when I did; suffice it to say that in September 2014 it became clear that I was no longer as happy as I had been. I built an extensive spreadsheet which showed that I would be better off financially if I 'retired'. For a while, my boss couldn't believe that I was resigning! But I did, in December 2015.

Epilogue

I continue to give talks to students, and I am involved in some other stuff.

Four months after I left, I was visiting the head of Computing at Canterbury Christchurch University. I was early, and the visitor before me knew me and asked why I wasn't at work, so I told them. At this point, the head of Computing asked me: "Do you want a job?". I did that (part time) for three years.

Finally

Most of my life has been tied up with the University, especially with Darwin College. I still maintain contact, although I have no formal link since I was not senior enough to be awarded emeritus status. I am on the committee of the Former Staff Association, and I am a life member of the University Court, in common with some of my former lecturers! Little remains of the Darwin connection, now that College Masters are effectively no more.

These are only my reminiscences and opinions. I am sure that others can add a lot more.