

We are always delighted to receive your letters and emails. Email CAM at cam.editor@admin.cam.ac.uk or write to us at CAM, Cambridge Alumni Relations Office, 1 Quayside, Bridge Street, Cambridge, CB5 8AB. Please mark your letter 'For Publication'. Letters may be edited for length.

Read more CAM letters at www.alumni.cam.ac.uk/news/cam/letters

Don's Diary



*Professor David Baulcombe
is Regius Professor of Botany*

cigarette card. I still have cards from 1934 celebrating T Frame-Thomson, the Cambridge stroke of 1933, and RWG Holdsworth, the Oxford stroke. **Geoff Parker** (*Pembroke 1948*)

Subterranean mystery

Jesus's air raid shelter (CAM 60) was very grand and solid compared with Trinity's, which was part of a cellar below the Great Hall – the other part of which was the College's very notable wine cellar. They were divided only by a thin wooden fence. Whenever we had to take shelter here, we rather hoped a little bomb would destroy the fence.

Christopher Wade (*Trinity 1941*)

An idler's idyll

[Tom Hodgkinson's piece] reminded me of many pleasant hours spent on the river in the 1960s, both on the Backs and in the almost magical dappled quiet of the upper river. I never heard of the Dampers Club, though I managed to fall in several times myself.

I was surprised to read that the correct position for a punter is 'three-quarters of the way toward the stern'. Those cowards at Oxford were despised for punting from the punt floor – falling in was much more likely from the Cambridge end! **Stephen Butcher** (*Trinity 1964*)

In the main image, by Patrick Lichfield, the punter is standing in the wrong place in the punt, holding the pole awkwardly and apparently with a spare pole in case he loses his first one. He has one bored young lady in the punt with him.

In the second image, by Martin Parr, the punter is pretending to be a chimpanzee. But he stands in the correct spot on the rear deck and is at ease with his pole. He has at least six lively young ladies with him. Enough said. Class will out.

Jon Pasfield (*Trinity 1959*)

"I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

These are Isaac Newton's modest words and they describe how many scientists make discoveries. Of course Newton, like Darwin and a few other giants of science, did not have to look very hard. They had the gift of extraordinary insight and they knew where to find the smoother pebbles. Those of us with more ordinary talent rely on luck; we have teams of beachcombers and we use the equivalent of spades and detectors to help us find these beach treasures.

One of my own smoother pebbles was an extraordinary result with genetically modified plants. With my fellow beachcombers I found that foreign genes in the DNA of a plant could suppress other similar genes. We then used deduction and genetics to track down what was going on. Eventually our work with plants converged with analyses of worms, flies, protozoans and fungi onto a process in which gene silencing is guided by RNA. This 'RNA silencing' is now the foundation of a billion-dollar industry and there are good prospects that it will help cure or prevent disease in plants and animals.

Of course, I am always on the lookout for the next pretty shell. At present, I am particularly interested in the emerging topic of epigenetics which is the study of how nurture can influence nature. Some of our recent work hints at an effect of epigenetics in the emergence of new species and, through this possibility, we are being led into an interest in evolution. When Conrad Waddington, one of the pioneers in this subject, was asked why his research unit in Edinburgh was called 'epigenetics' he replied that it was because it was next to the Genetics Department. I hope that we too will have an Epigenetics Unit next to the Department of Genetics or somewhere else in central Cambridge.

Related to my research I am very concerned about the challenge of global food security and the role of plant science. Last year, I chaired a study group at the Royal Society in which diverse technologies, including crop protection chemistry, agroecology and methods based on traditional farming practice,

were considered alongside GM and other modern approaches. Our report was well received, but I am worried that society as a whole has not recognised the seriousness of this issue. There is a very real prospect of catastrophic food shortage in the next generation if we do not tackle the problems of sustainable food production. It often takes 10 or 20 years to translate basic research into technology that farmers can use, so we need to increase the research effort now.

My link with experimental work is via the students and post-docs in my lab rather than working at the bench. In a typical day I spend quite a bit of time talking with them or helping to prepare their papers for publication. Otherwise I like to keep in touch with what other scientists are doing by reading and talking. Cambridge is central to the academic world and so I can find out a lot by staying here. However I do travel and, during this term, I have been to Japan, Israel, the USA and Italy.

I like to keep administration meetings as short as possible and, until this week, I thought that I was good at making sure that discussions were tightly focused on the business in hand. However I hear that, in my absence, a recent departmental meeting was over in 50 minutes – 10 minutes less than normal. I am sure I can cut this down even more and plan to take the chairs out of our meeting room so that, like the Privy Council, we stand for the meeting.

Since moving to Cambridge in 2008 I have been introduced to rituals and traditions of academic life. Perhaps having some very fixed procedures allows us to think freely in our research and teaching? The most spectacular ritual that I have witnessed was during a royal visit last year when my Professorship of Botany was renamed as a Regius Professorship. Apparently, the Queen wanted to give the University an 800th birthday present, and a Regius title was slightly easier to conjure up than a new college. Once the principle was accepted of creating the first new Regius Professorship since the turn of the century, the Professorship of Botany proved a good candidate for the elevation, since it was previously unadorned – and because it was the anniversary year of On the Origin of Species and JS Henslow, one of my predecessors, was Darwin's tutor.