

## Notes from Ivory Flats

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### *How old is The University?*

I have worked most of my life at what they call one of the 'old Universities', set in, of course, a beautiful town, with gothic colleges scattered throughout. On a summer's day it is a pleasure to guide friends and visitors through the colleges, taking in the glories of King's College chapel towering over the green lawns, or cutting through dark and seemingly secret passages to emerge into the medieval court of Corpus Christi, or to see the wisteria-draped walls of Sidney Sussex. On a wind-swept, cold November afternoon as the darkness falls, it is less enjoyable, but even then, as chapel lights glow through stained glass windows, it remains a place of beauty.

Inquisitive visitors usually want to know all the facts – who founded Queens' College (try to avoid getting bogged down into where the apostrophes go in the various colleges names)? Where did Darwin study? Where Isaac Newton? Where Thandie Newton? Swelling with pride at the antiquity and lustre, frequently aided by a swift check on Google on the phone, one answers – by rival Queens, Margaret of Anjou and Elizabeth Woodville, Christs, Trinity and Downing respectively. If in doubt, Henry VIII or Jesus are good all-purpose answers.

People seem to be particularly interested in how old is this college or that one? This is, by and large easy, as there is usually an answer – Peterhouse, the oldest, was founded in 1284, followed (among the ones that survived, as closing colleges down is not just a twenty-first century thing) by Clare College in 1326, and so on through to Robinson in 1977. If you wonder how much of a nerd I must be to know this, it's because I'm an evolutionary biologist, and biologists I have to come up with analogies for how old life is, as 'three and a half billion' is hard to grasp. Usually one compares it to 24 hours, when life appears at 4 am, life on land around 10 pm, and humans, pause for drama, only in the last two minutes before the end of the day. Years, hundred metre races, and, for Bill Bryson, the span of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, all serve equally well. To add local colour, I used the foundation of the colleges for this purpose, so that Peterhouse was full of single cell organisms, and Downing dinosaurs. Good for cultivating college rivalry and groans in lectures.

Life gets a bit harder if asked 'how old is the University?' The year 1209 is claimed. I have a lapel badge saying that, the only gift I have ever received from the University, so it must be true. However, all that refers to is when some refugee migrants from Oxford moved to Cambridge, an unlikely model for celebration in these times. In 1226, Cambridge invented its own Charter, and in 1231 King Henry III made it more than self-advertising when he recognised Cambridge as a scholarly institution. The first college was founded in 1284. In practice the whole package was gradually put together over a hundred years, and so you can pretty well pick any date for the founding of the University, and any number for how old.

I pick 10 years, or thereabouts. Admittedly a bit younger than most historians would accept and undoubtedly controversial, so let me explain. At Department and other committee meetings, there are always the usual exciting items on the agenda, as there have always been – student admission numbers and quotas, timetables, use of space, what biscuits in the tea-room. These are discussed, for the most part in the same way – one colleague wants more students, another wants less, nobody wants 9am Monday or Friday afternoon, everyone hasn't got enough space, and the biscuits are impossible to resolve. But in the last decade or more a new player has crept into these discussions – 'the University'. The HoD will suggest that 'the University thinks we should have more students', or 'the University has centralised the timetable' or 'the University has imposed a formula for space allocation'. As far as I know the University has no views on biscuits other than that they must come from a preferred supplier.

It took me a while to realise the seismic shift that was taking place in Cambridge, and I am sure in other universities as well. I had, of course, across my many years as lecturer and professor, talked about the University, often very favourably, but it was never as something separate from me, from my colleagues, from the students. We were all the University. We, the University, may not have the powerful rhetoric place after of 'We the People', but it does represent the idea of the University as it was founded, and as it was over hundreds of years – a community of scholars, a mixture of students and teachers, a home for research groups, and above all, a self-governing institution. Universities vary in their governance, but at Cambridge at least, it is the Regent House, that is sovereign, and that is, broadly speaking, all the academics who provide the research, the money, and attract and teach the students. To refer to the University as anything other than this community would stray a long way from this understood usage.

And yet this is what has happened. To my younger colleagues, 'the University' is 'them'. Indeed, it is probably, in their minds, 'The University', rather than 'the University'. It is a place from which directives and instructions come. It is a place from which permission must be sought, and by which approval is granted. It is the source of power and policy, and as remote from them as the Royal Court to a medieval peasant. It is the 'they' heard so often in British discourse generally.

It would, though, be quite hard to pin down exactly who 'they' are. In my more cynical moments, it is of course Human Resources, as it is in many modern institutions, that are the dark sources of power. At other times it is a more benign amalgam of the various pro-vice-chancellors and deans and heads. More usually it is just 'the administration', or possibly 'The Administration'. I am sure there is no explicit definition of The University, nor even any self-recognition of those most likely to be The University. Maybe even within the depths of the University

administration, there are outer echelons who refer to the University as something other, and this continues in ever decreasing circles. Much as I would like to believe there are secret handshakes and mason-like meetings, the sad truth is that the power of The University comes from the fact that it is as much in our heads as in any grand or cunning plan.

How and why did we manage to change from 'We the University' to 'They the University', a move I think has happened in all universities, in some probably to an even greater extent. There is no doubt that the shift was in part due to external pressures. The call for accountability and endless reporting demanded more and more of a central response and central decision-making process. A former Vice-Chancellor said to me once, when I moaned about the increasing managerial approach, that the University was statutorily required to provide more than 500 pieces of data to central government each year.

However, much is also self-inflicted, or at least arises from the complicity between external pressures and internal strategies. Most of these revolve around the monetisation of higher education; more and more money is not just the currency of operation, but also the blood that flows through the universities arteries and veins, and money requires, again, more centralisation. We can't all have our own individual bank accounts in the university! And it is probably a sad fact of life that where money is involved, democracy goes out the door, and the more the money, the faster and tighter the doors close. The result is empowering those at the centre, and disempowering those on the periphery, and ironic as it may seem, it was the lumpen academics who were at the periphery. These doors we stare at turn out to have 'The University' written on them.

With peripheralisation comes disengagement, and so a growing acquiescence to a 'them' and 'us' world, fuelled by impossible workloads, an increasingly competitive and demanding environment in which publications and grants become the focus, and involvement in the mechanics of the University a distraction – much better to leave it to others, and to get on with the next *gel/ode/archive/experiment* (delete as appropriate). And so the ratchet of centralisation continues – an intimate dance of repelling actors. Stress, anxiety, increasingly ignorance of the way The University works, and ultimately subservience to hierarchy completes the process. In the deep past, egalitarian hunter-gatherers gave way to more and more hierarchical structures, and perhaps it was the same, inevitable drivers of competition, levels of work, and complexity that made it happen.

Relationships among people in universities have, in the deeper past, been communal in structure. You did things because there was a genuine sense of working together, and if the Vice Chancellor said we should help students more, or take some level of pay restraint, it seemed a reasonable arrangement among peers, rather than between employers and employees, let alone between supplier and customer (aka students). But once the University is 'The University', this appealing to better nature and collegiality has little force, and even less as the pay gap between the Vice-Chancellor and the rest yawns wider and wider – and, in my view, so much more has been lost rather than gained in that change.

I would not suggest for a moment that before The University there was a utopia of that happy community of scholars; there were many other perils and inequalities,

but the 'them' and 'us' that structured an often chaotic academic environment seemed more fluid, with individuals moving between them according to situation much more frequently and easily, and the checks and balances against centralisation more effective. I certainly felt more in control of my working life as an anonymous lecturer thirty years ago than as a senior professor in the last decade.

Can anything be done? Probably not, and perhaps those in the know (The University) are right to think that stronger hierarchies, and a citadel of decision makers, is the way in which modern universities can survive and thrive, and navigate the often hostile oceans of higher education, but I can't help feeling that a worse system has replaced a better one. My only evidence for this is crumbling morale and the stress I see around me. I would also guess that many of the more centralised processes that have been brought in to cope with the Covid emergency are likely to remain in place, enlarging the gap between what someone called Eric Blair called the Inner and Outer University<sup>1</sup>.

So, next time I am asked how old Cambridge is, I shall release my inner pedant and ask, do you mean the University, or The University? While the University may have been founded in the mists of time, The University is a more recent and possibly sadder foundation.

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<sup>1</sup>'Last man in the university: it's 13 o'clock on campus', by Eric Blair, *Times Higher Education*, April 7, 2016