



Florida State University

ARF News Special Feature

2013



Cambridge Then and Now

by
DeWitt Sumners

THEN

In September 1963 I went to the University of Cambridge as a Marshall Scholar, freshly graduated in physics from Louisiana State University. I went to Cambridge for PhD graduate study in pure mathematics, a change in subject from my undergraduate studies at LSU. I was admitted to the university as a member of Pembroke College. The University of Cambridge, founded in 1209 is the 2nd oldest university in the English-speaking world (Oxford is the oldest), with (at last count) 12,000 undergraduate students and 6,000 graduate students. The university is the collection of 31 individual colleges, each college a private institution with its own dining and residence halls, Fellows (faculty) in all subjects, chapel, sports grounds, wine cellar, etc. etc. The university organizes lectures across the academic spectrum and awards degrees, but each student is admitted to the university as a member of one of its colleges, and undergraduates and unmarried first year graduate students live and take meals in college. Undergraduates also receive academic supervision (tutoring) from Fellows (or graduate students) in their respective colleges. Undergraduates spend 3 years reading their subject, and take the Part II Tripos exams in their academic specialty at the end of their third year—6 hours of exams for each of 5 days, and performance on these exams determines the level of one's honours degree (first, second, third, ordinary, special). These days, most colleges admit men and women, a big change from the days when I was in Cambridge as a graduate student (1963-66) when Pembroke was an all male bastion. As was recently explained to me by a fellow mathematician whose son is a student at Cambridge, one is allowed to apply

to one and only one college in either Oxford or Cambridge (one cannot simultaneously apply to both Oxford and Cambridge), and then one takes entrance exams in a specific subject, and then (if exam results are good enough), one is invited to an interview, and then if the interview goes well one is offered admission. In other words, to get in to Cambridge as an undergraduate, one needs to be very good at something and have an informed idea as to which college is likely to offer admission.

The Marshall Scholarship Commission got me into Pembroke (founded in 1347), and Pembroke assigned me a room in the top floor of V staircase of the Orchard Building. As Meredith Dewey (then Dean of Pembroke) put it to me, the Orchard Building was "One of the few buildings at Pembroke with central heat (radiators), and it is where Pembroke puts "ex-colonials" like yourself who would otherwise perish in the cold of a 300 year old room with gas heaters into which one feeds shillings." In late May 1964 I took Part III of the Mathematics Tripos (these were my PhD qualifying exams), and did well enough to be invited to stay on to do my mathematics PhD. My supervisor at the time was Christopher Zeeman, who was in the process of leaving Cambridge to found a mathematics department at the brand new University of Warwick. He invited me to follow him to Warwick, but I decided to stay on in Cambridge and asked John Hudson to take me as his student. John was only 4 or 5 years older than myself, had been a PhD student of Zeeman and was a new Fellow of Gonville and Caius College. Upon being informed of my decision to stay in Cambridge, Chris told me "Ah, you have decided to cling to the old stones!" Cling I did! Neddy and I were married in August 1964, and we spent another 2 years in Cambridge. In 1966 we went with Hudson to the University of Chicago, where he was a visiting professor and I was a visiting PhD student. We spent 1 year in Chicago, and in February of 1967 I interviewed for an Assistant Professorship in mathematics at FSU. I took the FSU offer, arriving in Tallahassee in July 1967, and we have been in Tallahassee ever since



Donald Low and myself taken at the mill in Cambridge in spring, 1964, showing the river Cam in the background. Donald was a good friend, a PhD student in English at Pembroke. Donald became professor of English Literature at the University of Stirling in Scotland, and sadly recently passed away.

St. John's College May Ball in June 1965 (the Cambridge May Balls are always in June—go figure!). From the left, it shows David Rottenberg, Shelly Rottenberg, Neddy Sumners, myself, Margaret Sumners (my mother), and Cecil Sumners (my brother). David was also a Marshall Scholar, and has remained a good friend and research collaborator over the years.



The Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences is a national UK institute in mathematics located in Cambridge. The Newton Institute hosted a programme in “Topological Dynamics in the Physical and Biological Sciences”, lasting July-December, 2012. I was invited to spend time at the Newton Institute in fall, 2012. The picture shows the front door of the Newton Institute.

NOW

I decided to visit the Institute for 2 months, September and October 2012. The Institute arranged a flat for us in Clare Hall, a (relatively) new postgraduate college in Cambridge. We had a lovely 2 BR flat in Clare Hall, and upon learning that we had an extra bedroom, we enjoyed a series of visitors, including David and Shelly Rottenberg, and my Tallahassee daughter Joanna Snyder and my grandchildren Maggie-Hayes Snyder and Kellett Snyder. We greatly enjoyed our time back in Cambridge—our first extended visit since student days. We saw a number of dear friends from those days, and went to a number of pubs and places we remembered. Many of the pubs are still there, but the pub food is better now—some are now “gastropubs” with upscale dining along with the pints. The most famous Cambridge pub is the Eagle (opened in 1667), where American airmen spent the evening at the RAF bar before flying missions over Germany in WWII, writing with smoke from burning candles on the ceiling during blackouts. It is also where Crick and Watson came over from the nearby Cavendish lab on Free School Lane in February 1953 to announce to startled patrons their discovery of the double helix DNA structure.

Cambridge students used to wear gowns to all lectures and to eat in the hall in the evening. I still have my lecture gown, and my scarlet PhD gown that I now wear to FSU graduations—a very heavy all wool job with a funny floppy hat! In the 60’s one used to see students zooming about on bikes with gowns flapping behind in the wind. The rules were that young gentlemen (university students) were required to wear gowns when out on the town in the evening—this was the real town and gown situation. The wearing of a gown of course gave the locals a target for pub punchups! The university enforced the gown rule by having a proctor and bulldogs (three guys in Elizabethan collars and tophats) prowling the streets on the lookout for students not wearing gowns. In 1965 Neddy and I were stopped one evening on our way home from a restaurant dinner by the proctor and bulldogs. Being questioned, I told them that I was just an American out on the town, and said that I was not a university student—just a wee white lie, and I went my merry way!

Some proctors and bulldogs marching along Trinity Street last October—these days they perform mostly ceremonial functions for the university.





Now, students wear gowns for special occasions and formal dinners in hall—students in front of King’s College in gowns for matriculation day in October 2012.

David and Shelly Rottenberg visited with us in Cambridge for a few days, and we relived some memories from the 60s. We visited Madingley Hall, a stately home near Cambridge which housed graduate students in the 60s (David and Shelly lived there), and is today a University of Cambridge continuing education center. Pictured on the next page are Shelly, David, myself and Neddy at the Madingley front door in September, 2012.





Punting is a summer treat in Cambridge. A punt is a shallow boat which one poles along the river Cam—being careful to pull the pole up out of the mud or the boat will leave you hanging on the pole and slowly collapsing into the river, to the delight of onlookers. These days one can hire a punt with a chauffer who poles along and gives a running commentary on Cambridge sights and history. Glenda Parks (an old friend from Baton Rouge who visited us in Cambridge) and Neddy are being punted by chauffer Caz.





The backs along the river are stunning on a late summer's day—the beautiful college buildings glowing in the soft sunlight. King's College chapel taken along the backs from our punt.

While in Cambridge Neddy and I gave a sherry party at our flat in Clare Hall, inviting a number of participants from a Newton Institute workshop that I co-organized in September. Included were a number of old friends--Cambridge dons. They told us (and I quote here)—“How 60s—I haven't been to a sherry party in 25 years!” Well, how were we to know we were so dated in our entertaining? In any event, we had a great time and the sherry and wine flowed freely!

Pembroke College was kind enough to name me a Visiting Scholar for the time I was in Cambridge, giving me high table privileges in the Pembroke dining hall. The Cambridge dining halls have high table on a platform where the Master, Fellows and guests eat, and the other off-platform tables, where everyone else eats. High table has the good wine and better food! Unfortunately, Pembroke was a half hour walk from our flat in Clare Hall, so we dined at high table only a few times during our stay. We did get to visit Pembroke a number of times, Neddy and myself at the gateway to Ivy Court in Pembroke.

