



PARCHMENTS AND
PALIMPSESTS

UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE
SUCCESS

IN CONVERSATION
WITH DAVID SEDLEY



Pieces

ISSUE 48 • MICHAELMAS TERM 2025

welcome

FROM THE MASTER

Welcome to the Spring issue of *Pieces*.



It turns out that the most exciting event at Christ's in 2025 actually took place at Easter last year. These days the BBC record a series of *University Challenge* in three mammoth sessions to broadcast at their extended leisure. In the spring of 2024, various people around College had an inkling that our team had progressed to the final session of the series, because the four contestants needed permission to absent themselves from Cambridge and, when quizzed, spilled the beans to their supervisors.

By the end of January, the episodes showing Anniko, Brendan, Linus and (captain) Oscar win their first and second round matches had aired. Christ's proceeded smoothly through to the semi-finals having seen off Warwick and Imperial (for my money the second best team in the competition). Bristol put up only token resistance to the Christ's juggernaut in the semis.

At no point did any team member betray the result to me, but I noted that they all responded with alacrity when I suggested a College screening of the Grand Final. On 12 May, I joined about 200 students and Fellows, crammed into the Yusuf Hamied Theatre. The team sat on the front row in the same order they appeared on screen, all as cool as cucumbers. After the first 'starter for ten' and three bonus questions, Christ's had 25 points, Brendan's knowledge of Sardinian history helping us to a perfect start. I settled back to enjoy a rout; after all, we'd already beaten Warwick.

The next twenty minutes didn't go according to plan. With four minutes to go, Warwick had 175 points to the 115 of Christ's. I began composing a speech of consolation in my head: "amazing achievement even to reach the Final, first time since 1970... a series of dazzling performances but pipped at the post." But then something extraordinary happened. With hundreds roaring their support, the Christ's team answered every starter and racked up the bonus points, while the Warwick captain also incurred a five-point penalty.

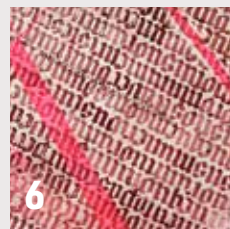
With seconds left, the score stood at Christ's 170, Warwick 170. Anniko had just identified Agamemnon as Menelaus's brother and the team moved on to the bonus questions, all about royal names. Brendan unerringly identified 'Frederick' as the given name of George II's eldest son, and whispered the answer 'Alexandrina' as Queen Victoria's first name. Answering for the team, Oscar corrupted that slightly to 'Alexandrine', and we all groaned when Amol Rajan refused to accept the mispronunciation. What we didn't appreciate was that at this point in the taping there was a lengthy pause as the boffins argued whether the answer was close enough. We heard only the unfavourable outcome. The last bonus question listed a king's seven Christian names, but the gong sounded before anyone could answer. Christ's had won *University Challenge* for the first time in 54 seasons. Wonderful!

McDonald of Salford

IN THIS ISSUE



3-4



6



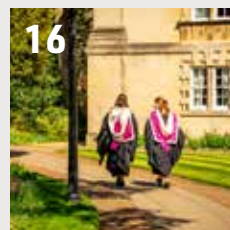
8-9



10-13



14-15



16

3-4 NEWS

5-7 MAKING HER MARK...

8-9 RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

10-13 IN CONVERSATION WITH
DAVID SEDLEY

14-15 DIGGING DEEP

16 STAY CONNECTED

FRONT COVER IMAGE: Paul Everest

PHOTOGRAPHY:

Pages 5 and 10: Stephen Bond
Page 8: ITV-Lifted Entertainment
Page 15: Paul Everest

COLLEGE EDITOR:

Jonty Carr
alumni@christs.cam.ac.uk

DESIGN AND PRINT MANAGEMENT:

Andy Harvey Design Limited

Pieces is printed with vegetable based inks on paper containing material sourced from responsibly managed forests certified in accordance with the Forest Stewardship Council®.



The planning application for our newly configured library space was submitted in May. If approved, the project will transform an unsightly and impractical part of the College into a beautiful, light-filled library within an inclusive and fully accessible environment in which our students can thrive. It will provide a 100% increase in study space compared with the current Working Library, as well as help meet the College's sustainability and environmental targets on the pathway to net-zero carbon emissions. More information can be found on the College website!

A portrait of Professor Margaret Stanley was unveiled in the Hall in July. The portrait was painted by Miriam Escofet, a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters who painted the late Queen Elizabeth II in 2019. This is the first time Professor Stanley has had her portrait painted, and after the unveiling she remarked: "I think that it is a stunning portrait, I look happy, and I am delighted that the artist saw me this way. It was made very enjoyable by Miriam who was so easy to talk to, funny, interesting and totally engaging. She made the sittings a positive experience." Professor Stanley was awarded an OBE in 2004 for services to virology in honour of her research into human papillomavirus (HPV), the cause of cervical cancer, and vaccines to prevent HPV infection.



It was a pleasure to welcome alumni back to College in March for a *Treasures of the Old Library* event, showcasing some of our recently conserved Coptic manuscripts. Conservator Flavio Marzo was on hand to talk about the process and techniques involved, and we were also joined by Egyptologist Dr Alex Loktionov who spoke about his research into Ancient Egyptian justice and religion. Another *Treasures of the Old Library* event is lined up on 4 December – all welcome!





The Darwin-Hamied Centre was opened on the 2 July by Dr Yusuf Hamied, alongside its founding director, Professor Daniel Field. The new centre exists to promote invaluable research at the intersection of biodiversity science, conservation and economics. Based at Christ's, the centre will host two senior Research Fellows for five years to begin in late 2025, and two PhD students who will begin their research in October 2026.

Later in the day, students were treated to a unique evening with Dr Hamied in conversation with the Master, illustrated by extracts from the documentary *Fire in the Blood* which charts the fight to sell AIDS medication for less than \$1 a day.

This September, the Christ's Choir embarked on a mini tour to Belgium, performing English choral music from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. With concerts in Brussels and Mechelen, the Choir performed music including Parry's *Songs of Farewell*, Howells' *Requiem*, Tallis, and arrangements from Christ's alumna Annabel Rooney.



In a clean sweep year for Cambridge, Christ's was proud to boast not one, not two, but three winning rowers in the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race this year. Final-year medic Katy Hempson rowed in the Women's Blue Boat, winning by two-and-a-half lengths, while Eugenie Dodds, a third-year law student, helped set a new course record, securing the win by three lengths in the Women's Lightweight Crew. Meanwhile, astronomy PhD student Alex Tocher and his partner won the Lightweight Men's Pairs in the spares race. All three students only took up rowing at Christ's!



Despite getting off to a rainy start, this year's Family Day was a roaring success and it was a pleasure to welcome so many of you and your families back for the occasion. Alongside classics such as the teddy bear zipwire, this year we introduced some new additions to the programme including a fossil hunt, rocket launching in Third Court, and the construction of bug hotels made entirely of materials found around College. The Bursar, known as Michael "Pawsons" for the day, took on the mantle of teddy bear zipwire operator, and we were also delighted to have so many Cambridge students on board as volunteers on the day. We're already looking forward to next year's event!



MAKING HER MARK

Doctoral researcher Madison Bennett investigates and recreates lost techniques of medieval parchment and vellum production, alongside her creative work as an artist and bookmaker.

Originally from the US and with a background in fine art and calligraphy, Madison's first foray into parchment production came during her MFA degree at the University of Iowa's Center for the Book, where she studied historical and contemporary methods of bookmaking. "When I started looking at medieval manuscripts for inspiration, the material felt so texturally different to the paper I was used to working on. Naively I wanted to know how I might be able to buy that type of parchment, but it turns out we really just don't stretch and prepare animal skin for bookmaking anymore, and hadn't done so for centuries. So I said to myself 'oh well, I guess I'll have to make it myself' and assumed along the way I'd figure out how they did it 700 years ago. So I worked at a tannery and did some backyard experiments, and as I got deeper into the world of parchment making I got connected to a team based in Cambridge on a project called 'Beast to Craft', led by Matthew Collins, who's now my supervisor. They had historians, conservators and scientists on board, all analysing parchment from different angles in order to uncover production techniques and glean more information

about animal husbandry during the Middle Ages. They thought it would be helpful to have the perspective of an artist on the material too, and I was fortunate to be able to join the project."

After a Master's in Cambridge, Madison has been able to continue her studies at Christ's thanks to support from the Geoffrey Thorndike Martin PhD Studentship in Archaeology, named after the late Fellow and Honorary Keeper of the Archives at Christ's. "I don't have a traditional background in medieval studies but it's been incredibly interesting working with scholars across the discipline", she says. "The more you look at medieval craft production, the more mind-blowing it is. There were sophisticated ateliers operating out of France in the thirteenth century that were producing large quantities of parchment at a really high level, and although we have all these fancy machines today, no one's quite figured out how to reproduce the quality of the material that they made. If only they'd written it down on some parchment, they could've saved me a lot of trouble."



There’s no such thing as a typical day in Madison’s PhD – her work ranges from scientific analysis and imaging to preparing the vellum, a process that involves submerging the animal skin in a lime bath for two weeks before it’s rinsed, de-haired and stretched on wooden frames, and manually scraped – often for several hours. It’s a labour-intensive process motivated by Madison’s desire to understand both the parchment as a material and the methods with which it would have been prepared: “I’m more interested in the how than the why”, she reflects. “Unlike paper, metals or ceramics, we don’t have a particularly good vocabulary for talking about the archaeological materiality of parchment. People have only recently started to pay attention to the different levels of production quality for vellum, and how that might be affected by things like the species of the animal, how old the animal was, or its sex. It’s interesting to see if there was some sort of intentionality and strategy behind which types of animals were killed, what kind of knives were used, and whether there was any kind of chemical preparation that separated certain layers of the skin to make it easier to scrape.”

Despite the evident aptness of Madison’s involvement with the Cambridge team, she admits to having some initial reservations about embarking on her studies here: “Before

I started at Cambridge I didn’t really understand archaeology as a discipline, which I think is a byproduct of growing up in the US, where our relationship to pre-modern societies is not the same as in Europe. When I first arrived I thought that I didn’t really belong here, but the more I met others working within the department, the more I realised we were asking the same sorts of questions. I have a friend who looks at axes and arrowheads from the palaeolithic era and he’s doing all these crazy experiments with 3D modelling, but while I might be looking at parchment and metal knives, at the heart we’re both looking at human behaviour and our relationship with tools and material.”

Working with parchment has also provided Madison with inspiration in her artistic endeavours: “What’s been interesting is the creative path this has led me down. As a maker, I’ve really connected to parchment as it’s highly responsive and very different to writing on other materials; it does feel like you’re in communion with the parchment when you write on it. When it receives the ink and the moisture seeps into the substrate, there’s a reaction – a sense of give-and-take – that I’ve never felt with paper. In that sense it’s a really rewarding process, even more so because of the intertwined nature of being a sort of scribe that also makes her own material.”

For her upcoming show, Madison has been exploring how parchment can be folded and manipulated to create lanterns. “I’ve been really inspired by how we can image the parchment and illuminate different anatomical areas – it has this magical translucent quality that naturally diffuses light. In the same sort of way that Isamu Noguchi folded paper to make his famous light sculptures in the 1950s, I’m using parchment as a folding substrate to create lanterns that look like little orbs floating in space”.

THE PALIMPSEST IS ONE OF MY FAVOURITE CONCEPTS TO PLAY WITH NOT ONLY BECAUSE IT HAS A HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE BUT ALSO BECAUSE IT’S A REALLY FUN WAY TO MAKE ART THAT ALLOWS FOR MISTAKES.

In discussing Madison’s practice it is clear that the line between art and research is difficult to draw: “Sometimes they feel very separate, then I’ll have a breakthrough moment and realise that it’s actually all connected. For instance, I’d been teaching a creative workshop where everybody gets a piece of vellum and has to divide up the skin and assemble the pages into a folio, and the way I demonstrate this is by saying that – in my experience – the skin itself will effectively tell you where it wants the pages to go. Early on in my research, I met with one of my advisors who was explaining how medieval manuscripts were made, and how an essential part of the process was folding the quires before handing over the manuscript to the scribes. Depending on the suppleness of the parchment, certain parts of the skin needed to be in certain places – for example, the middle folio has to fold the tightest, so you’d never put a quire that contained the neck (the thickest part of the animal skin) in the centre, but rather as an outer wrapping around other pieces. That would have been an essential component of medieval bookmaking, and was something that I’d noticed in my artistic practice without realising the implication on my research. It’s often like a feedback loop where if I keep making the art, it will keep informing the research, and if I keep doing the research, it will keep inspiring the work.”

Madison is also the recipient of the annual Christ’s College Art Prize in 2025. Her entry *Souvent me Souvient* will hang in the MCR and replace work by former Christ’s artist-in-residence Tom de Freston. Using walnut ink, gouache and acrylic, the College grace is repeatedly written on the vellum, erased and replaced in part with new text. She explains more about her piece: “I knew I wanted to work on parchment, and that I wanted it to be informed by my time at College but also by Tom’s piece, which is very intelligently composed with hidden ‘easter eggs’ to Western European art throughout. I chose the College grace for the piece, as one of the responsibilities of being a scholar is that you read the grace once a term. When I first did it I was so nervous that I spent a long time studying the Latin to make sure I understood the pronunciation and cadence, so that I could read it by heart.”

Madison’s calligraphy is written in ‘blackletter’ – without spaces – the way that medieval scribes would have written

it, giving the effect of letters illegibly clustered together on a page. The piece combines calligraphy, pochoir (printmaking using stencils) and erasure on vellum, on which an initial layer of script has been scraped away and short quotes from notable Christ’s alumni written over the top. She adds: “In the same way that Tom’s piece had vignettes of Western European art, I decided to include the quotes from Milton and others as a final touch. The palimpsest is one of my favourite concepts to play with not only because it has a historical significance but also because it’s a really fun way to make art that allows for mistakes. I’ve always been someone who measures once and cuts twice, and the act of making a mistake is essential to me. Some calligraphers are really meticulous, but I can’t imagine having an unforgiving substrate that requires everything to be perfect – I’d find it tedious.”

Even the back of the piece tells a story: “With parchment, you can’t just cut a rectangle as it’ll react to the humidity and start to curl. I decided to wrap it around a board using a technique that I learnt at the University Library’s Conservation Lab to create ‘tackets’ from the parchment itself to hold it in place through a sort of locking mechanism. In a way, it’s a shame that you won’t see the back, but I hope that the nature of the work is that there’s always something beyond the eye.”

MATERIALITY IS THE OPPOSITE OF AI – IT’S ABOUT TOUCHING REAL THINGS AND SOLVING PROBLEMS

In a world where digital media and artificial intelligence are becoming ever more prominent, Madison’s work places the onus back onto material understanding and experimentation, something that she’s keen to emphasise: “I was listening to a debate that related AI to the invention of the printing press, as if they were similar. But with the birth of the printing press, all of a sudden information could be accessed and disseminated by the labour class, with the obvious threat to the ruling class that such an innovation posed. With the adoption of AI it feels instead like we’re giving away our ability to think critically, and that’s so dangerous because the people in control of this technology are the oppressors of the modern world, and we’ve never been more willing to relinquish our ability to fight for ourselves.”

“Materiality is the opposite of AI – it’s about touching real things and solving problems, and to work with tangible objects is to think critically. People say ‘touch grass’ when they talk about spending less time online. That’s right. Touch a book. Touch parchment. Touch ceramics. Touch textiles. Touch anything you want, but touch something, because that’s what roots you as a person in the world and reconnects you with what it means to be human”.

More examples of Madison’s artistic work can be seen on her website madbenn.com.



Souvent me Souvient, by Madison Bennett
Front and reverse (inset)

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

After a near miss as runners-up in the 1970 edition of the programme, Christ's emerged victorious in this year's series of *University Challenge* for the first time in the competition's 63-year history. After they were presented with their trophy by Sir Ian McKellen at Cambridge's ADC Theatre, we talked to the team of Brendan Bethlehem, Anniko Firman, Linus Luu and captain Oscar Despard to hear more about their experiences on the show.

More than a year had passed from the moment the gong sounded, signalling the narrowest of victories, to the evening in May 2025 when the cat was finally let out of the bag. "I'd managed to delude everyone into thinking that we'd only reached the second round", Anniko recalls of the lengthy requirement for confidentiality. "When the Warwick team came over to Cambridge for the prizegiving we went out for lunch together afterwards, except nobody was allowed to know the result so we had to be very secretive about it. We tried to get Amol [Rajan] to come along but he thought there was too much of a risk of the news getting out."



Receiving the trophy at the ADC marked the end of a journey that had started in late 2023 when Oscar got the ball rolling to find the next Christ's team: "We set up a society under the auspices of the JCR to manage the process, then the best performers from an online quiz went through to an in-person round with a buzzer. The President of the University's Quiz Society, Rhys Lewis, then helped make the final decision about the make-up of the team." Having been at University for only a matter of weeks, self-confessed "organisational disaster" Brendan very nearly missed out: "I overslept on the day of the trials and had to sprint over", he recalls, "having eaten nothing but a handful of chilli almonds". Whereas the others had already been involved with the University Quiz Society in some shape or form, Anniko's path to the team was less conventional: "I filled in the questionnaire for fun and was amazed when I was selected for the team – and even more surprised that we ended up on the show!"

Once the team had been decided upon, the task of dividing up topics for revision began. "There are obviously recurring topics, so for instance you need to have someone who knows all the Shakespeare plays, Dickens and Austen novels," explains Oscar, "as well as the monarchs of England, Scotland and ideally other European countries". As Linus recalls, "we were quite systematic about it and had a big, chunky spreadsheet to make sure someone was covering a particular area." For Linus, flashcards were the way forward, whilst others took a different approach to absorbing knowledge. "I did a lot of Sporcle quizzes to help memorise things like all the Indian states and Chinese provinces", says Brendan. "The one I didn't tackle was Brazil, and typically that was the one that came up on the show."

While the whole team had a collective fear of questions on cricket, they each had their own bugbears during revision – Nobel Peace Prize winners for Brendan, and modern art for Anniko: "I'm much more into classical art so memorising the Turner Prize winners was basically a lot of rote learning of people I'd never really heard about and whose exhibitions I've never seen nor cared to go to!"

Meeting every Monday, the team's early methods were surprisingly rudimentary: "For the most part we practised by watching University Challenge episodes", Oscar explains, "but we didn't have a buzzer so someone would just say 'buzz' and we'd pause the recording." Although they later borrowed buzzers from the University Quiz Society, the team were still not fully prepared for the televised show: "The biggest change from practice to the real thing was actually that the buzzers are much harder to press; it would be very difficult to buzz in accidentally on the show."

How did the team find their experience of the matches and dealing with the pressure? "It was very scary under the lights the first time – there were all these cameras and lights, but no audience. Once we got into the swing of things it became less nerve-wracking and really fun", says Linus. Anniko adds: "There isn't really a studio anymore, it's just Amol, the two tables for the teams, and the lights overhead. You sit there

and look at the red dots where the camera is in the distance, and the rest is just black – it's quite disconcerting. Once the questions start though, you just focus."

Accompanying the team was a one-eyed, four-winged mascot known as 'the serious goose'. What was the story behind the feathered talisman? "I'd bought it on holiday in Krakow with the intention of running it for JCR President", says Brendan, "before deciding that probably wasn't a good use of my time. We were struggling for mascot ideas so the goose came with us to Manchester." Despite the good fortune that the mascot evidently brought, the serious goose did not have long to bask in the limelight of the team's success: "Unfortunately I left it on an East Midlands train", laments Brendan. "I did submit a lost property request but never got a response, so it's definitely gone forever."

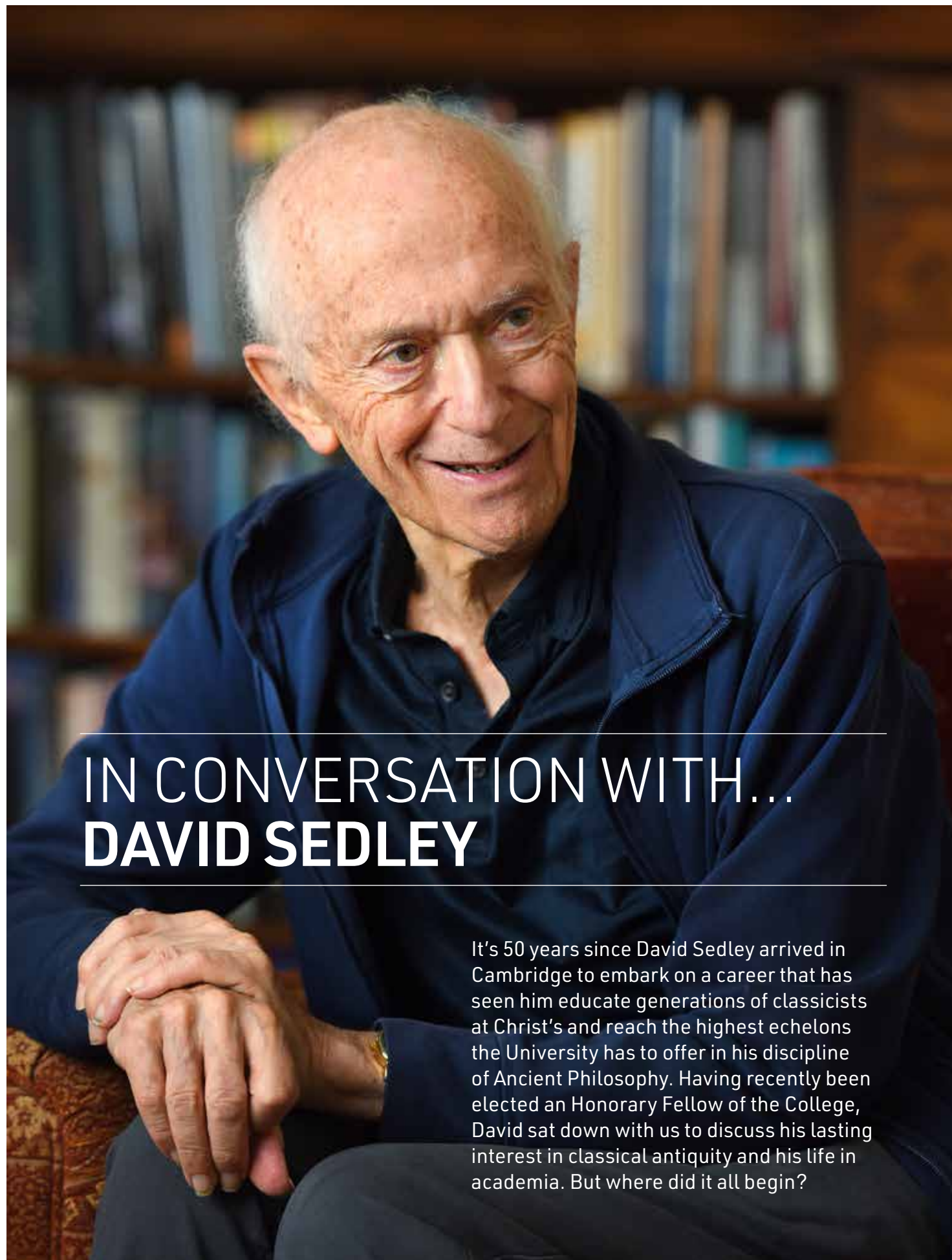
Between the recordings, retakes and last-minute cramming, the team were able to relax by exploring Manchester, with Linus' highlight being a trip to see the city's Vimto monument – which Brendan dubiously calls "an intriguing sculpture". For him, the real icing on the cake was the opportunity to meet Roger Tilling, whom he refers to as the "great, big, booming voice" of the show.

As they progressed through the first and second rounds to the quarter-finals, did the team allow themselves to look ahead to what might be possible? "After we beat Imperial I thought there are now solid, logical grounds for believing we could do quite well after this point and that we may have a reasonable chance," reflects Oscar. For Brendan, their results nevertheless brought added pressure: "you do feel the weight of it, and you feel very watched in a weird way, even though there's nobody out there in the dark."

Over the course of the series, the contestants became minor celebrities in their own right and the subjects of much discussion on the internet, not least about Brendan's attire: "We did seem to get a lot of support – I think people maybe thought we were a bit quirky. When it came to the final I knew I wanted to wear that jumper, but I'd actually forgotten to pack a shirt, so had to borrow one from the BBC!"

Watching the final was stressful enough for the viewers, so what must it have been like for the team? "We were so far behind in the final and I remember thinking, 'we're going to lose this and it's going to be such a terrible feeling having come this far and not actually winning'", remembers Anniko. "Then, somehow we managed to catch up. We knew there wasn't much time left and when I got the last buzzer, I just leant back in a daze and I was too shocked to even hear the last bonus question."

With victory secured, how did the team mark their success? "We all bought a bottle of Vimto as our celebratory drink, which was a very sweet moment", says Oscar. "Then the day after we came back from winning *University Challenge* we entered a quiz organised by the JCR, and promptly came last!"



IN CONVERSATION WITH... DAVID SEDLEY

It's 50 years since David Sedley arrived in Cambridge to embark on a career that has seen him educate generations of classicists at Christ's and reach the highest echelons the University has to offer in his discipline of Ancient Philosophy. Having recently been elected an Honorary Fellow of the College, David sat down with us to discuss his lasting interest in classical antiquity and his life in academia. But where did it all begin?

"I was lucky enough to be taught both Latin and Greek at school, and I fell in love with these languages and the cultures to which they offered privileged access. From the standpoint of the Judaeo-Christian culture in which I was educated, to enter and explore the pagan world of classical antiquity was tremendously exciting."

After a first degree in Oxford, David opted to pursue a doctorate in London. "I was particularly enthusiastic about the Roman poet Lucretius, and wanted to understand better the Greek philosophical system, Epicureanism, which he was reframing in Latin verse. Embarking on postgraduate study was not at all the tightly regulated procedure it is today; you just had to negotiate with the university department where you wanted to pursue a PhD. If you got a First you were guaranteed a full maintenance grant for three years, at the end of which you were expected to submit a PhD thesis. In between, there was no compulsory seminar attendance, and no intermediate Master's degree like today's MPhil. For various reasons I wanted to do my PhD in London, and I applied to UCL knowing shamefully little about its Classics department. In response, UCL's Professor of Greek, Eric Handley, wrote to me to say that he didn't know much about the Epicureans himself, and that I should perhaps talk to his colleague Professor [Arnaldo] Momigliano, who had written something on the Epicureans – albeit several decades earlier!"

"Around the same time my cousin Michael Seifert told me that he had a friend named Myles Burnyeat who was teaching in the Philosophy Department at UCL and specialised in ancient philosophy. He arranged to take me round to the flat that Myles shared with the wine writer Paul Levy in St John's Wood. The flat seemed to be a regular stopping off point for philosophers passing through London, and that particular evening the centre of attention was the eminent American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, holding forth about the absolute impossibility of such a thing as artificial intelligence! But Myles did find time for a one-to-one chat with the shy Oxford undergraduate, and he told me that the person I should really meet was a Sophocles scholar called [Tony] Long, recently returned from New Zealand and now teaching in the UCL Classics department, where he was working on Plutarch's anti-Stoic treatises."

Having received both pieces of advice, David took up an invitation to meet Momigliano for lunch in the canteen at UCL: "Momigliano – a very great ancient historian, but not any sort of specialist in ancient philosophy – said exactly the same thing: that I really needed to talk to this man named Long, and "Oh", he added, "there he is!". We were duly introduced, and that meeting became a decisive juncture in my life. Tony Long proved to be the ideal supervisor for my project, and in due course a wonderful friend and co-author."

David's years at UCL helped develop an interest in the study of philosophical papyrus fragments. "During the first year of my PhD, I met UCL's eminent Professor of Papyrology, Sir Eric Turner. He was just back from Naples, where he had been advising a new International Centre for the Study of the Herculaneum Papyri (CISPE). He asked whether I would like to be a millionaire, explaining that CISPE was

offering an annual studentship of one million lire. It wasn't as much as it sounded! Still, I applied for and was awarded the studentship, and so spent much of the year 1971 in Naples.

"The Herculaneum Papyri are part of a 1st-century BCE Epicurean philosopher's private library, buried by Vesuvius in its famous eruption of 79 CE, miraculously preserved by carbonisation thanks to the intense heat, found intact by the 18th-century excavators of Herculaneum, and now kept in the *Officina dei papiri ercolanesi* (Herculaneum Papyri Workshop) in the National Library of Naples. When I arrived in 1971, there was much excitement about the powerful binocular microscopes that had recently been acquired on Turner's advice. The papyri that I and a small group of Italian research students were working on had nearly all been transcribed and edited before, but with the new optical equipment we could decipher the traces of writing much more accurately than previous scholars. There was no prospect on the horizon of what is now, thanks to X-ray tomography and digital analysis, at last under way – reading whole scrolls unopened. Many had instead been gently prised open, with inevitable damage, and could be read only in part, mainly the last part, which being at the scroll's centre had been protected from the worst damage. I was permitted to edit an otherwise unknown book of Epicurus – Book 28 of his treatise *On Nature* – which in due course formed the basis of my thesis. Perhaps as a result of too much time misspent on solving crosswords in my teens, I found that filling the gaps in incomplete words was already second nature to me!"

David's work on papyri clearly benefitted his doctoral project, bringing his classical skills directly into the study of philosophical texts. And while the modern conception of the epicurean brings with it connotations of gluttony and excess, David is keen to point out the inaccuracy of this depiction: "It's a misconception, weaponised by Epicurus' critics since antiquity. Gourmets came to be called epicures because Epicurus was a hedonist, but his version of hedonism actually takes the opposite stance: if you indulge in unnecessary luxuries you do not add to the net pleasantness of a simple life, and your dependence on them disrupts your pleasurable tranquillity with the painful anxiety that you might in the future be deprived of them. The pleasures of the mind in any case outweigh those of the body, and are centred on friendship, simple living, and tranquillity in the face of two unfounded but ubiquitous terrors: fear of gods, and fear of death. Most people view death as a transition to a worse state, and therefore vainly strive to build protective walls around themselves, when death is in fact simply a return to non-existence. You will be dead for uncountably many years, during which you won't be any more subject to mental or bodily pain than you were during the countless years before you were born."

It's an attitude that seems to have a lot in common with secular humanism. Is there anything that we can read into Epicurus' beliefs below the surface? "Yes, I am happy to label Epicurus a 'secular humanist'. But you are also right to add the qualification 'below the surface'. In the ancient world, as in many if not most historical and modern societies, to profess atheism was to court marginalisation, exile or even death.

For the first of these penalties, think of the USA, where no serious candidate for political office can afford to self-identify as an atheist. Even in ancient Athens, admired for its tolerance of freethinking intellectuals, and chosen by Epicurus for the location of his main school, less than a century had passed since Socrates’ judicial execution for allegedly refusing to acknowledge the city’s gods. The regularity with which new Epicurean communities continued to spring up in cities around the Aegean and beyond attests a degree of toleration by local regimes that an openly atheistic movement could not have dreamed of. Although his critics regularly denounced Epicurus as an atheist, the Epicureans doggedly denied it. Indeed, in a published epitome of his ethical doctrines Epicurus pointedly affirmed his theism, writing ‘Gods do exist’. Scholars who consider these words sufficient to disprove the charge of atheism are underestimating the likely social and political costs of openly endorsing, let alone teaching to the local youth, this dangerous doctrine.”

In that context, should Epicurus’ affirmation of the existence of the gods be disregarded? David thinks not: “I believe that Epicurus was sincere in proclaiming that gods exist, but unavoidably less than candid about what he meant here by ‘gods’. I side with a well-founded minority view, according to which Epicurus’ gods ‘exist’, not as extramundane living super-beings, but primarily in our own minds, as visualised paradigms, whether conscious or unconscious, of our innate core values. They are a correct instinctive visualisation of the ideally good human life, as defined by Epicurus. When in dreams, in epiphanies, or while venerating monumental cult-statues, people catch sight of these larger-than-life, super-relaxed and unageing idols, they are actually picturing the kind of supremely pleasant life that they themselves aspire to and dream of. These paradigmatic figures’ perceived unageingness represents for Epicurus not biological immortality, but an innate human intuition that total freedom

from the fear of death – to which every Epicurean aspires – is basic to making our finite human lifespan as blissfully godlike as it can be. Those who instead strive for political power or other mistaken goals have lost sight of this core intuition, obscuring it behind a veil of acquired false values. Accordingly, the gods they picture and venerate are likely to be paradigms of the power-wielding oppressors that they themselves would like to become. The terror of the gods that blights the enjoyment of a human life arises from this misconception. When Epicurus’ pupils followed his advice to participate in local cults, there is no reason to see this as collusion in a hypocritical cover-up of his atheism. It is enough that they were expressing due reverence for the ideally blissful human life that the gods epitomised, while disregarding the accretions of coercive control or vengefulness that others continued to project onto them.

“If I am right, Epicurus’ take on the phenomenology of religion – at least the polytheistic religion of his own culture – was an inspired and deeply humane one, but destined to be overlooked by history because civic pressures compelled it to come in such heavy disguise. He can hardly be blamed. The remarkable growth and spread of the Epicurean movement during the following half-millennium would not even have got started without its founder’s pragmatic decision to represent his *de facto* atheism as the true theism.”

David’s own texts are many and wide ranging – he has written books on Lucretius, on Plato’s *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*, and on the ancient origins of the debate about creationism, as well as co-authoring with his former supervisor the two-volume source book *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, known commonly as ‘Long and Sedley’, or just ‘LS’, which remains an indispensable text after almost 40 years. Of his literary productivity, he says: “I found myself able to keep writing, journal-editing and so on even in

intensely busy periods, including my two years as chair of the Faculty Board of Classics, partly for the sheer pleasure of escaping from those more mundane tasks into the work I was really passionate about. But I loved teaching too, and never considered it a chore.

“I WOULD LOVE TO UNDERSTAND WHY, THROUGHOUT RECORDED HISTORY AND IN MOST CULTURES AROUND THE WORLD, AN OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF THE HUMAN RACE HAS ACKNOWLEDGED AND REVERED AT LEAST ONE SUPPOSED SUPERHUMAN BEING OR POWER.”

“Of course, writing is one of the things that have undergone a total transformation in my lifetime. Nobody had a personal computer in the 1970s, so when cutting, copying and pasting I was literally doing just that, with scissors and glue or Sellotape at the ready alongside the single shared Olivetti typewriter which was all my partner and I could afford. When I wrote my PhD thesis at UCL the writing-up process was complicated further by the fact that I had to be constantly switching between the Greek and Roman alphabets. There were two ways of doing it. One was to leave spaces for the Greek characters and fill them in later with – if you were lucky enough to have access to one – a state-of-the-art IBM electric typewriter fitted with a Greek alphabetic golfball. But it was fiendishly difficult to position the paper accurately enough. The alternative, which I opted for, was to use a unique double typewriter housed in the UCL Classics department office. It had been purpose-made for classicists, and had two juxtaposed keyboards, one with the Greek alphabet and diacriticals, one with the Roman, and between these an industrial-scale lever that clanked the carriage back and forth between them. The departmental secretary used it every working day, so I could have access to it only during evenings and weekends. The result? Though I had fully drafted the thesis during my third year, it took an entire further year of out-of-hours work to type it up. Even with that superior typewriter the typing was incredibly fiddly, and Tippex correction fluid frequently came to my aid. The top copy of my thesis is presumably still in London, stored in the Senate House Library. But half a century has passed since it was deposited there. I hope the Tippex has not flaked off, turning my precious thesis into an error-strewn palimpsest.”

There is much to look back on over a career in Cambridge that included fourteen years as the Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy – a position that saw David following in the footsteps of luminaries that included his long-time mentor and colleague Burnyeat. “By now it feels as if the Cambridge ideology was all along just the right one for me, because it treats Ancient Philosophy as an integral part of Classics, rather than, for example, as exercises in analytic philosophy written long ago in a foreign language. But I’m probably deceiving myself, because if instead of Cambridge I had secured my first tenured post at, say, Oxford or Harvard, or even in Italy, I would no doubt now be saying the exact reverse: thank goodness I ended up here, and

not at Cambridge. To get job satisfaction as an academic it can pay to adapt yourself, so far as possible, to your adopted intellectual milieu, whatever that may be. It’s just an accident of the job market that I’ve needed to mould myself into the Cambridge way of doing things. But that is who I now am. So in retrospect the accident feels to me uncannily providential.”

Although soon after his retirement David was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, and in due course had to give up lecturing and supervising, he has continued to write, and is currently working on a book of essays on ancient Greek theology. He explains his decision to place this topic at the top of his agenda: “I have no religious belief myself, and relish the neutrality that this makes possible. But I also own up to facing the corresponding disadvantage, that I can’t pretend to know, from the inside as it were, what it is like to undergo a genuine religious experience – if indeed there is such a thing. I would love to understand why, throughout recorded history and in most cultures around the world, an overwhelming majority of the human race has acknowledged and revered at least one supposed superhuman being or power. Are religious experiences a primary source of such beliefs, or their after-effects? Greek philosophy offers some promising perspectives on this. The book is a set of essays, some old, some reshaped, some entirely new. Parkinson’s is a curse because it interferes with memory, makes multitasking difficult, and limits worktime. But I seem still able to think and write coherently, so I remain hopeful of completing the book before I finally shut down my laptop.”

The enduring legacy of Epicurus has provided scholars like David with a rich vein of material through which to examine the history of philosophy and, ultimately, ourselves. As a self-confessed Epicurean sympathiser, with no religious conviction, does David find himself concerned with the notion of what he might leave behind? “Yes, very much so. Interestingly the Epicureans were criticised exactly on this score, because they insisted that once you’re dead nothing can matter to you. Why, their critics asked, if what might happen after our death does not matter to us, did they follow the custom of drawing up wills? Good question! I find Plato’s idea of legacy an appealing one. According to Plato, everybody craves immortality, but literal deathlessness is a uniquely divine privilege. What we can aspire to instead is the closest possible human approximation to divine immortality, achieved by continuing to make our mark on the world through the progeny we leave behind as our representatives. Across the natural world, organisms, though they must die, strive to achieve this vicarious immortality by leaving behind offspring that inherit and perpetuate their form. But superior to this biological immortality is the distinctively human capacity to live on indefinitely through one’s artistic, moral or intellectual progeny. In this sense of ‘immortality’, Socrates, Plato and Epicurus, along with countless other inspirational thinkers from Greco-Roman antiquity, fully earned the immortality which, although not here to witness it, they still enjoy today.”

David Sedley was first appointed as a Fellow of Christ’s in 1976. He was elected an Honorary Fellow in May 2025.



© RACHEL VOLLERTHUN, JULY 2016

DIGGING DEEP

After working for seven years as a teacher, James Foster pursued a passion for working in nature to retrain as a gardener in 2020 and two years later joined the team here at Christ's. We spoke to him about what life looks like as a college gardener.

AFTER THREE YEARS, HOW HAVE YOU FOUND YOUR EXPERIENCE HERE AT CHRIST'S?

It's a real privilege to be a college gardener, particularly at Christ's, which feels like a little oasis in the middle of the city centre. We are a really strong, skilled team, led brilliantly by Sergio, the Head Gardener, who's always got an eye for encouraging things that we're good at and allows us the freedom to nurture our skills and interests.

There's a sense of academic excellence within the college environment and I think that filters through to all the other departments, along with the expectation for things to be done with that same attitude of excellence. So, whilst there are pressures to get things done, the priority is that you do things properly, even if that means taking a bit more time. The knowledge that we're all working to that same high standard allows each of us to do our jobs well. Every so often you do catch yourself thinking "oh my goodness, I'm chopping limbs off Milton's mulberry tree", and it's quite humbling to remember that you're one of the many gardeners over the years who have kept these plants alive and cared for.

HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERISE THE GARDENS AT CHRIST'S?

The gardens here don't feel stuffy but they do feel intentional. There's a good balance between a sense of formality from the historic architecture and a soft naturalistic side which is most noticeable in the Fellows' Garden – in places it feels like a woodland walk. There are obvious focal points like the wisteria in First Court and the mulberry tree, as well as a striking display in Third Court where we have a lovely collection of irises in spring and salvias in late summer.

We also have places that are a bit more experimental, for instance in summer in Second Court we have a seasonal vegetable display that we harvest and leave out for the students, staff and Fellows to enjoy. It's taking something that you might traditionally see on an allotment or farm and presenting it in a formal context in a way that looks wonderful but is also functional. My favourite spot is at the very bottom of the Fellows' Garden, behind the mulberry tree; it always feels very peaceful and still there. Something that often goes through my mind is the number of people throughout the centuries who have enjoyed that spot too, the

conversations that have happened and the ideas that have been discussed there.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE TIME OF YEAR TO BE IN THE GARDEN, AND WHY?

Autumn is my favourite time to work in the garden – everything has slowed down a bit, the temperature is much nicer and the weather is a bit more predictable too. It doesn't have that frenetic energy of spring and summer but there's still a lot of colour and sunlight. It's also lovely to be out in the garden in summer and see visitors and students enjoying the garden after the rush of spring.

YOU ALSO LOOK AFTER THE COLLEGE'S BEEHIVES – HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THAT?

I was interested in beekeeping before arriving at Christ's as I have fond memories of visiting a relative who kept bees – and getting a jar of honey to take home. When I was offered the opportunity to train with the Cambridge Beekeepers Association I absolutely jumped at the chance. I very quickly became absorbed, which led to lots of reading and research into the beekeeping world. There have been bees at Christ's for a very long time (the College has records that show bees were kept as far back as 1540) and it's something that's interwoven with the fabric of the College and the gardens; there actually used to be a role in the Fellowship for an Honorary Keeper of the Hives!

AND WHAT DO THE BEES GET UP TO THROUGHOUT THE YEAR?

The bees are particularly busy as soon as the temperature outdoors consistently climbs above around 14°C, as that's the signal for them to get out and start foraging. From April onwards, the brood is increasing, the Queen is laying lots of eggs and the worker bees are developing and increasing at an almost unbelievable rate. At the moment we have some rather prolific queen bees and this year we've doubled the number of colonies since Spring. There are those three months from April to June when, as a beekeeper, we're noticing the signs that tell us that the bees are thinking about swarming. The old queen leaves with a large proportion of the workforce, carrying her genetics somewhere new and the original colony is left to raise a new queen chosen from one of her many daughters. It's a natural occurrence which indicates a healthy colony who've outgrown their space but losing so many bees can of course be a bit of a setback. Also, being in an urban environment, it's something we need to manage, as even though the swarms aren't inherently dangerous it can be a bit of a shock for students and visitors to encounter thousands of bees buzzing around the gardens!

CHRIST'S PRIDES ITSELF ON ITS SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES – HOW DO THE GARDENS SUPPORT THIS?

There are practical things that we do like looking at our resource consumption, pursuing appropriate planting, and moving away from petrol-powered tools. But I think the main role the gardens play is in building an appreciation for the natural environment for the people who work here, the students, and visitors to the College too. We have a great group of dedicated student volunteers who help out and it's lovely to see the enthusiasm they have for the gardens.



Stay connected

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

2025	1 DECEMBER Christmas with Christ's (St Lawrence Jewry, London)	4 DECEMBER Treasures of the Old Library	4-6 DECEMBER Fairbairns Cup and Boat Naming	2026	11 APRIL MA Congregation	25 APRIL Head of the Cam and Boat Club Dinner	18 JUNE Alumni Evensong
	27 JUNE Family Day	4 JULY Old Members Reunion Lunch for 1968-70 and 1977-79 matriculants	4 JULY Association Dinner (open to all alumni and guests)		5 JULY Fisher Society Lunch	5 SEPTEMBER Reunion Dinner for all matriculation years up to and including 1966, and 1976	19 SEPTEMBER Reunion Dinner for 1980-1984 matriculants

2025-2028		JULY REUNION	FIRST SEPTEMBER REUNION	SECOND SEPTEMBER REUNION
	2025	2011-15	Up to and including 1965, and 1975	1970-74
	2026	1968-70 and 1977-79	Up to and including 1966, and 1976	1980-84
	2027	1985-89	Up to and including 1967, and 1977	1990-94
	2028	1995-99	Up to and including 1968, and 1978	2000-05



www.facebook.com/christscollegecambridge



www.linkedin.com/in/christs-alumni



www.x.com/christs_college



www.instagram.com/christscollegecambridge