

EAGLE EYE



ST JOHN'S COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Lent Term 2022

The undergraduate
smashing
stereotypes

Studying death in
the pandemic

From 18th-century
coffee house to
Community Hub



GOODBYE AND GOOD LUCK

‘Nothing brings people together more than sharing food’



Bill with the four-star campus certificate awarded to St John's by Visit England in 2018.

Bill Brogan, Catering Manager, has retired from St John's after spending 17 years serving thousands of members of College in the Buttery, at Formal Halls, graduations, alumni events, and at our spectacular May Balls.

The 63-year-old bade farewell to the College in December when he reflected upon an illustrious career – from leaving school at 16 to catering for the Queen and becoming one of the youngest chefs in the UK to be awarded a Michelin star.

William, known as Bill, started cooking for his family aged only eight. His mum was a chef in the Officers' Mess at RAF Scampton, home of the famous Second

World War Dambusters squadron in Lincolnshire.

Aged 12, Bill got a job in a hotel kitchen and, at 16, he began an apprenticeship. A decade later he was awarded a Michelin star at Le Talbooth Restaurant in Dedham, Essex, where he was Head Chef, aged just 27.

Bill also won a 'Menu of the Year' Catey Award – the hospitality industry's equivalent of an Oscar – and travelled the world as a chef before coming to St John's in 2005 from P&O, where he was a Hotel Services Manager looking after 12 ships.

"Customers will always come back for more if you offer consistently high quality meals, said Bill. "I brought those principles to St John's where food has been at the heart of College life since St John's first began, although in the 1500s I don't think the menus were quite what they are now."

His final interview at St John's saw a major hitch. Bill said: "I was put up in the College and I realised late on the Sunday evening that I only had my trainers. So I went tramping around Cambridge to find some shoes, but I've got big feet and I couldn't find any! Eventually I found some winklepickers. Everyone on the interview panel looked mesmerised by them, but somehow I managed to get the job!"

He has been at the forefront of starting new initiatives in Cambridge – whether it was looking at sustainable practices, serving a menu of insects, introducing

Super Halls, or sourcing local food for special dietary requirements. He and his team have catered for countless high profile guests, including the Queen during the College's Quincentenary celebrations in 2011. "The 500th celebrations were very special for all of us."

Through a quirk of history, Fellows of St John's are the only people outside of the Royal Family legally allowed to eat unmarked mute swans. Bill said: "Swan has not been on the menu during all my years at St John's, although I did speak to a chef who cooked it at College about 35 years ago who said it was horrible and 'as tough as old boots' so I'm not sure it would be very popular even if it was served again!"

Bill is now looking to business ventures in the catering world with his wife Jinzhao, who he met at St John's. The couple have a daughter Nikita, 11; Bill's elder daughter, Lowenna, 33, lives in Australia.

He said: "There's never been anything quite like looking at a 16th century hall full of people enjoying a meal together – it has been a privilege to serve St John's."

■ Bill is opening a restaurant called Market House at the end of April in the former Don Pasquale Restaurant site in Market Hill. It will offer two floors of casual dining and two floors of higher end dining featuring British Food with Asian elements. There will also be a takeaway coffee kiosk and a cookery school onsite.

Farewell retirees

A small farewell tea party was held in December for Claire Aspinall, the College's former Council and Governance Administrator, who officially retired in August after 38 years at St John's but continued to provide administrative support last term.

The party and gift presentation was held in the Chapel cloisters with Heather Hancock, the Master, and

staff from the Master's and President's Office and the Domestic Bursar's Office.

Catering Cleaner Barbara Jurkowska has also retired after nearly 17 years at the College. The IT Department has waved goodbye to three retiring staff members: Chris Woodhouse, Assistant Computer Systems Manager (Admin Systems) has retired after almost 23 years, along with Peter Halasovski, Computer Services Manager, who clocked up nearly 25 years' service. Sue Rogers retired in November after four years as IT Director



following more than 20 years with University Information Services.

Welcome to *Eagle Eye*,
the magazine for staff,
Fellows and students of
St John's College

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Eagle Eye

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Front cover: Mia Myers.
Credit: Nordin Ćatić.

Back cover: St John's at dusk.
Credit: Karen Clare.

NOTE FROM THE MASTER



At the end of February, the President and I seized the opportunity to look behind the green boarding in Second Court and discover how the 'Community Hub' project is getting on. Perhaps, like me, you've been keeping an eye on the webcam shots of the Buttery site, watching yellow-jacketed building contractors assemble the first section of the new oak roof. This looks stunning from the outside, but standing underneath the first section of the roof, with its sweeping beams rising to a rooflight and with the sunshine pouring in, it felt even more special. We peeped into the new café space, which struck us as very light and open, and quite a bit bigger than the old bar.

As we have more freedom from Covid, it's exciting to see this transformation in the heart of the College. We'll benefit from more space for eating and working, and you need only walk past the packed-out temporary Buttery to see that more space is very much needed. The revamped facilities will be inspiring places to work and meet. They'll be welcoming, warm, and relaxing – a model of how centuries-old buildings can respond to the demands of modern university life. These three spaces won't just look good, we are working hard on the food and drink offer being just as

enticing. You'll have noticed our kitchen and catering teams already trying out new ideas, even within the temporary Buttery constraints, and maybe Ean Hogg caught you for his coffee tasting session, as different blends were tried out on Buttery users and people passing through First Court.

We're making so much effort with these new spaces because they are essential to a strong collegiate ethos. The Community Hub is the biggest scheme we've yet implemented from the College's strategic masterplan. It couldn't be better timed to address immediately a major lesson from the pandemic, that reminder it's given us of how much we need and value contact with others. Indeed, with great prescience, the College set '*enhancing collegiality*' as the overall objective for the entire masterplan. Once the Buttery, café and bar open later this summer, the next masterplan project will get underway. This is a year-long scheme to relocate the Cripps Porters' Lodge to the old Chop House at the top of Cripps Lane, facing Northampton Street. We are now developing proposals to make Upper River Court into a meadow, and a space that anyone can sit in to work, read, meet friends or just to enjoy connecting with nature. Other equally exciting and transformative projects will follow, as our supporters and donors generously invest in the life of the College today and into the future.

Last year, in the depths of a lockdown, I kept positive by holding onto the thought that after Covid, we would be sprinting out of the starting blocks. Guess what? We're off!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Hancock". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Heather Hancock
Master of St John's College

NEWS ROUND-UP

St John's alumni recognised in New Year Honours 2022

An Emeritus Professor of Greek and Latin, a green energy champion and the Director of Music at St Paul's Cathedral join the ranks of the College members of St John's to have been recognised in the Queen's New Year Honours.

Emeritus Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Cambridge, James Diggle (1962) received the CBE for Services to Classical Scholarship. Electrical engineer Dr Cathy McClay (1992), Director of Trading and Optimisation at Sembcorp Energy UK, received an OBE, for services to the energy sector and the promotion of decarbonisation. After doing her PhD at St John's, Dr McClay was a Research Fellow at the College from 1996-1998. International singer and former choral scholar Andrew Carwood (1983), who is the Director of Music at St Paul's Cathedral, was awarded an MBE for services to choral music.

Giving Day to bring global community together

St John's will be running its first Giving Day in June. A Giving Day is a digital fundraising event where the global community is brought together to support the College's fundraising priority, the Dobson Free Places fund. The event will allow the community to focus for a moment in time on being connected and united for this particular cause, wherever they are in the world. There will be many ways to lend your support. Jo Beatty, Senior Development Officer, said: "Perhaps you will be one of our stars in the Giving Day film or feature in our social media campaign? Lots more details will be released soon but for now, please mark 23 and 24 June in your calendars and watch this space."

Performers, sportspeople and historian among Larmor Award-winners



Heather Hancock, Master of St John's College, with six of the 2021 Larmor Award-winners.

Seven 'outstanding' St John's students have been honoured in the prestigious Larmor Awards in recognition of their excellent academic results and contributions to College life.

The prize, which began in the 1940s, is named after Sir Joseph Larmor, the pioneering 20th century physicist and mathematician who was both a student and Fellow at St John's.

Award nominees are recommended based on 'intellectual qualifications, moral conduct and practical activities'. Each winner is awarded with a unique piece of engraved silverware designed by a contemporary British silversmith, as well as a financial prize.

Usually presented in the Master's Lodge on the morning of graduation, the 2020 ceremony was online and the 2021 awards were delayed until 25 November, when Heather Hancock, Master of St John's, was able to welcome alumni back to the College for the special occasion.

The 2021 winners are: mathematician Lennie Wells, chemical engineer Cecilia Catuogno-Cal, historian Radka Pallová, History and Politics student Tim d'Aboville, engineer Lawrence Tray, and Modern and Medieval Languages students Richard Decker and Matt Parry.

Six recipients were presented with their awards by Heather Hancock while Cecilia, who was overseas, was awarded her prize in her absence.

Friends invent app

Three undergraduates from St John's have created a new app that aims to take the hassle out of arranging meetups with family and friends. Third years Towhid Ahmed, who is studying Land Economy, Engineer Oscar Saharoy and Chemical Engineer Jack Burt have created the free online tool called Groupi.me with two other university pals.

Brontë story retold

A documentary exploring the Irish roots of the Brontë family, including Patrick Brontë's time as a student at St John's, has aired on the BBC. Patrick, father of the Brontë sisters, moved from Ireland in 1802 to study Theology at St John's and the programme, *The Brontës: An Irish Tale*, features scenes filmed at the College last term. It is available on BBC iPlayer.

St John's pulls together as Advent Service put in jeopardy by illness



Credit: Nordin Caric

George Herbert in St John's Chapel.

'The show must go on' was the attitude of all involved in St John's College Chapel Advent Carol Service, after Director of Music Andrew Nethsingha tested positive for Covid-19 and six out of 16 young choristers were hit by illness.

St John's Organ Scholars past and present, The Choir of St John's, and the Chapel and College community pulled out all the stops to produce two magnificent performances, one of which was broadcast live on BBC Radio 3.

George Herbert, St John's Herbert Howells Organ Scholar, stepped in to conduct the College's world-famous choir two days before the services, when Andrew had to self-isolate. Joseph Wicks, a former St John's Organ Scholar, also stood in at short notice to play the Chapel organ.

With six out of 16 choristers missing due to illness, the remaining 10 boys from St John's College School adapted so well, many listeners never knew their numbers were depleted. Joined by The Gentlemen of St John's – the choir's altos,

tenors and basses – the broadcast went ahead on 28 November to great acclaim around the globe.

Andrew said: "I am immensely proud. George Herbert is one of the finest musicians I have ever known. He had two days' notice that he would be conducting the service in my absence. He did so with extraordinary skill, maturity, calm and profound musicality.

"It was an equally remarkable achievement for the young choristers to sing so wonderfully when illness diminished their numbers from 16 to 10. The Gents were also outstanding as usual."

At 20, George is one of the youngest people ever to conduct the choir in a live broadcast. He said: "I was pretty nervous but I was in the nice position of Andrew having already taught both the choristers and The Gents the music and trained them so incredibly well, that it was inconceivable that anything would fall apart. The choir was inspirational."

'Incredible' medics honoured for peer support

Three St John's medics have been recognised in a University awards scheme for their 'incredible' efforts to support student peers during the pandemic. Cambridge University Surgical Society came first in the Innovative Practice category of the

2021 Outstanding Student Contribution to Education Awards – with former President Kiran Joshi and Vice President Daphne Chia, who are now Junior Doctors, and current final-year Clinical Medicine student Alex Fung jointly nominated.

New Maths School partnership

A new state-funded specialist sixth form in Cambridge will open in September 2023 with a focus on pioneering learning and increasing diversity in the field of maths.

The Cambridge Mathematics School – developed by the Eastern Learning Alliance in partnership with the University – will be based in Mill Road and welcome 16 to 19-year-olds from across East Anglia. Dr Matthias Dörrzapf, Director of Studies in Mathematics at St John's, one of the Cambridge Colleges collaborating on the project, said: "This exciting new school will be a fantastic opportunity to boost high level mathematical skills across the region and to create a truly outstanding institution with great enthusiasm around mathematical sciences."

Memorial service

A memorial service will be held in St John's College Chapel on 5 March for the renowned historian, Dr Peter Linehan. Dr Linehan, who died in July 2020, was a Fellow of St John's for more than half a century and 'enriched countless lives'.

Aquila returns

St John's all-female singing group Aquila held their first in-person concert for 20 months in the Old Divinity School in December. The *a capella* group is made up of female staff, undergraduates, postgraduates and founded and directed by Joanna Forbes L'Estrange

The not so 'Swinging Sixties' says study

Historian Dr Caroline Rusterholz, College Research Associate, has challenged assumptions about the sexual revolution of the 'Swinging Sixties' and sheds new light on the controversial origins of sexual health service the Brook Advisory Centres in a new study.

Pioneering PhD student on TV

A postgraduate scientist from St John's College whose research has the potential to be a 'game changer' in diagnosing respiratory diseases, including Covid-19, has starred in a national TV programme in his home country of Serbia.

Filip Bošković's PhD is in nanoscale biology, a blend of physics and chemistry used to understand how life works on a nanoscale. Filip and colleagues in the Keyser group published a preprint study in November into how to detect multiple respiratory viruses in a single test, including variants of the virus that cause Covid-19. The study is expected to be published in a scientific journal this year. Filip said: "We are of the opinion that they might be a game changer in pathogen diagnostics."

In December, Filip was interviewed about his life and work in Cambridge for Serbian TV show *You and Mira Adanja-Pola* – *Exclusive*.

£22.5m boost welcomed

Cancer Research UK is to invest £22.5 million in its Cambridge Centre. The money, which will be used to accelerate work into diagnosing cancers in children and adults at a much earlier stage, has been welcomed by the Centre's Director Professor Richard Gilbertson, a Fellow of St John's College. He said: "This investment will give us the tools we need to deliver high quality research that will make the biggest difference for patients."

Palace honour

Professor Usha Goswami, Director for the Centre for Neuroscience in Education, Professor of Cognitive Developmental Neuroscience and Fellow of St John's, formally became a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) for services to educational research at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace in December.

'Genius' statistician dies aged 97



Tributes have been paid to Sir David Roxbee Cox MA FRS FBA (Hon) FRSE, a pioneering British statistician, Honorary Fellow and alumnus of St John's College, who has died at the age of 97.

Sir David was an internationally renowned statistician who made outstanding contributions to research in the fields of statistics and applied probability, including the development of the Cox Model, which is widely used in medicine when analysing patients' chances of survival. He died on 18 January.

He was elected as an Honorary Fellow of St John's College in 1989 and was also an Honorary Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, where he was Warden from 1988-1994. He remained affiliated with the Department of Statistics at Oxford after his official retirement.

Sir David's research earned him many awards, medals and honorary doctorates. He was awarded the Royal Statistical

Society's highest honour – the Gold Guy Medal – in 1973, and was knighted by the Queen in 1985.

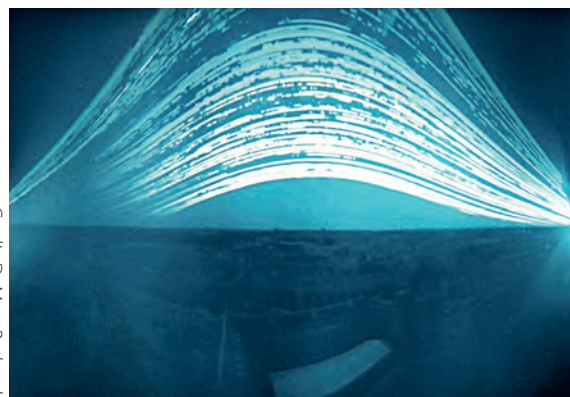
Heather Hancock, Master of St John's College, said: "We were saddened to learn of the death of internationally renowned statistician Sir David Cox. Sir David will be remembered for his hugely significant contribution towards statistical research and for his unfailing support of future generations of mathematicians. It was a privilege to count such an inspiring scholar and alumnus of St John's as an Honorary Fellow of the College."

In 2010 Sir David was awarded the Copley Medal of the Royal Society for his seminal contributions to the theory and applications of statistics, and in 2017 he was the first recipient of the International Prize in Statistics.

Born in Birmingham in July 1924, Sir David studied Mathematics at St John's in the 1940s. The Royal Statistical Society, of which he was a former President, called him 'one of the most important statisticians of the past century... his kindness and humility were as remarkable as his genius'.

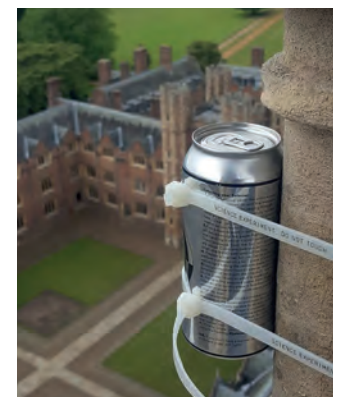
Professor Richard Samworth, College Lecturer in Pure Mathematics, University Professor of Statistical Science and Fellow of St John's, added: "Sir David Cox was a remarkable statistician who had a profound influence on the subject, both within the UK and internationally."

Tower camera records sun's arc over Cambridge



Credit: Dr Matt Bothwell

In summer 2021, Dr Matt Bothwell, Public Astronomer at the Institute of Astronomy at the University of Cambridge, attached a pinhole solar camera to the St John's College Chapel



Tower and left it there for six months. The resulting photo shows the Sun's movement across the skyline of Cambridge from the summer solstice to the winter solstice.

'Hitchhiking' marine invaders threaten Antarctica's unique ecosystems

Credit: Arlie McCarthy



European shore crab, *Carcinus maenas*, found living on a ship that visited Antarctica and the Arctic.

From mussels to barnacles, crabs to algae, marine life hitching a ride on ocean-crossing ships poses a serious threat to the biodiversity of Antarctica's pristine ecosystems, according to Cambridge researchers.

St John's postgraduate student Arlie McCarthy was the first author of a new study, published in the journal *PNAS*, that traced the global movements of all ships entering Antarctic waters. It reveals that Antarctica is connected to all regions of the globe via an extensive network of ship activity. Fishing, tourism, research and supply ships are exposing Antarctica to invasive, non-native species that threaten the stability of its pristine environment.

McCarthy, a researcher in the University's Department of Zoology and the British Antarctic Survey, was involved in identifying 1,581 ports with links to Antarctica, which could all be a potential source of non-native species. Species such as mussels, barnacles, crabs and algae attach themselves to ships' hulls, in a process termed 'biofouling'.

"Invasive, non-native species are one of the biggest threats to Antarctica's biodiversity – its native species have been isolated for the last 15-30 million years," said Professor David Aldridge in the Department of Zoology, senior author of the report.

The scientists are particularly concerned about the movement of species from pole to pole. These species are already cold-adapted, and may make the journey on tourist or research ships. Many groups of Antarctic wildlife have not evolved the ability to tolerate non-native species. Shallow-water crabs, for example, would introduce a new form of predation that Antarctic animals have never encountered before.

"We were surprised to find that Antarctica is much more globally connected than was previously thought. Our results show that biosecurity measures need to be implemented at a wider range of locations than they currently are," said McCarthy. "We hope our findings will improve the ability to detect invasive species before they become a problem."

Credit: Lloyd Peck



British Antarctic Survey research ship Ernest Shackleton at Antarctica.

Fighting hate speech

A Junior Research Fellow at St John's has travelled to the United Nations in New York to showcase the results of a year-long interfaith initiative to fight hate speech, fake news and the stoking of interreligious violence online.

Dr Marie Chabbert is an Interfaith Ambassador for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism and has visited the UN headquarters in the Big Apple this term to take part in an international symposium celebrating the work of the Empowering Dialogue and Interfaith Networks programme, with 17 fellow UN Interfaith Ambassadors from Europe and the Middle East.



Flying into first division

The St John's Ultimate Frisbee team has secured promotion after several years playing in division two of the College League.

The mixed team lost every league game in the 2020-2021 academic year but last season saw them win four games out of six, flinging them into the top division. Team captain Arefin Haque, who is in the second year of his Medical Science Tripos, said: "Getting promoted feels amazing and is a dream come true."

New Fellow

Dr Darshil Shah has been elected as a Fellow in Architecture/Design at St John's. He is an Associate Professor in Materials in the Department of Architecture.

The lost souls of Hart Island



Credit: Evan El-Amin/Shutterstock.

Hart Island, where one million people are buried. Each white marker notes a massed grave of 150 remains.

Sally Raudon is a social anthropologist and PhD student at St John's whose research into what happens to the dead of New York City – especially the poor – saw her doing fieldwork in the pandemic. She told Karen Clare about mass burials, rituals of grief, and more.

More than a million New Yorkers – from stillborn babies to the victims of AIDS, the homeless and Covid dead – are buried in trenches on Hart Island, a one-mile islet off the Bronx. For decades this island of trees, wildlife and derelict buildings has been uninhabited by the living but for the visits of gravedigging prisoners from the city's Rikers Island jail, along with grieving families allowed to visit the burial places of their loved ones.

Hart Island has been in use as a public cemetery since 1869, a 'potter's field', where the marginalised and unclaimed of New York have been interred without ceremony or memorials to mark their lives and their passing. The mass burials include stillborn babies given a 'city burial' in tiny stacked coffins without the knowledge of their grief-stricken families, sometimes for many years.

Sally said: "There's no memorialisation at Hart Island at all, the people are not celebrated, and historically, it's been difficult to even find out information about your relative if you discover that they have been buried there. To not know where your loved one is buried can be very painful."

In summer 2019, Sally set off on a 15-month fieldwork trip for her PhD, to study how citizenship survives death through exploring what happens to the dead in New York City, especially to those who can't afford a funeral. Hart Island was then under the jurisdiction of NYC Department of Correction, with visitors escorted by wardens on a prison boat. Sally had to book a visit 12 days ahead, show photo ID and surrender her communications equipment – anything that might take images or recordings. "It was more like a prison visit than a cemetery usually is," said Sally.

Initially, she thought she would be in New York to document the transfer of management from the Department of Correction to the city's Parks department. But six months into her fieldwork, the pandemic hit. The city swiftly became an epicentre, and Hart Island fell under the media spotlight. "Most New Yorkers hadn't even heard of it until then," said Sally. "When the international coverage started, and the island became very busy with Covid victims, a lot of people were really shocked."

The last time New York had seen such scenes was during the peak of the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s. "Generally, when there's a mass burial, it signals that something's gone wrong. It means there's been a natural disaster, or there has been some sort of social collapse or political violence; an overwhelming amount of death that needs to be dealt with very quickly. It says these people aren't

actually human, they are put beyond our community,” said Sally.

“There are plenty of mass burial sites around the world but Hart Island is unusual, because it’s orderly, and it’s ordinary. Yet people had a sense of this being fundamentally wrong and really distressing.”

Sally came back to the UK to continue her research from afar, but has since returned to New York to complete her fieldwork. During her research, she has spoken to everyone from local politicians and officials drafting policy with activists, to ex-prisoners who had dug burial trenches, morticians, funeral directors, historians, journalists, neighbouring islanders, and, of course, the bereaved. “I’m not a psychologist but I do know that when people discover their relatives are buried on Hart Island, they often feel as though they’ve found the missing piece of the puzzle,” she said.

When you die in New York you become the property of the Chief Medical Examiner’s Office, and your family has to claim you. “So a family may find out that they have a loved one buried there. They could have simply lost contact or couldn’t get to them in time – there are plenty of stories of people being buried on Hart Island after two days, which wasn’t an adequate amount of time for the authorities to find the next of kin,” Sally explained. “Sometimes the relatives would like them back to hold their own funeral. The city is obliged to give them back and will disinter the remains for them.



Credit: Nordin Caric

“These days Hart Island operates like a kind of underground filing cabinet of bodies. They can just go and find the person, get them out and give them to the family. That’s not an uncommon process.”

The Office of Chief Medical Examiner now works hard to find a person’s next of kin and insists that most people are buried with consent. New York City is now ‘committed to ensuring that the public has access to the island’ and has services to help families find and visit the graves of their loved ones. With a lot of new public interest in Hart Island, there now needs to be political will to make the grave site what feels more like a cherished cemetery, peaceful natural burial ground or a city park; some New Yorkers think it should be a national monument.

A Kiwi by birth, Sally did her first degree in English Literature in New Zealand but became interested in researching the issues surrounding citizenship,

the state, the body and death after several bereavements in her twenties. A founding member of the New Zealand Cemeteries and Crematoria Collective and the New Zealand Society of Death Studies, she is a Churchill Fellow and was a Research Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Auckland and a Teaching Fellow at Victoria University of Wellington before moving to Cambridge to do her PhD. She has travelled the world exploring how different cultures deal with death.

Sally said: “The dead work for the living and, when we put them to work in various ways, what we do with them, and the kind of social life someone has after death can be quite varied and creative. People want a physical place to be able to visit, and to locate their love and their memories, and to say this is a place set aside from everything else. This is a place where we go and mourn and remember and pray and think and leave grave gifts, or whatever it is that you want to do.”

Now it is for New Yorkers to decide what happens to Hart Island, where the poor and unclaimed are still being buried in trenches. “In Anglo-European society we expect our dead to have a grave, or a final resting place, to know their names and their dates. When that doesn’t happen, for instance the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, it becomes a kind of a moral rebuke that we got this wrong. So to bury people without recording their individual identity openly doesn’t accord with our notions of dignity and respect,” added Sally.

“There is certainly a reckoning that’s taking place in New York City about what’s acceptable, and what it means to treat people who are your fellow New Yorkers with that dignity and respect.”



Credit: Jacob A. (Jacob August) Riis (1849–1914), Museum of the City of New York, 901.3.4.868.

One of the first photographs of Hart Island’s common trench burials taken by photojournalist Jacob Riis in 1890.

‘Early coffeehouses brought people and ideas together – the Community Hub will do the same for St John’s’

Before tea eclipsed coffee as the nation’s favourite hot beverage, the exotic Turkish drink was exported to England and coffeehouses spread across London and beyond. Jo Tynan looks at the St John’s connection with the bean that powers so many of us through our day – extra hot latte anyone?



All photos credit: Nordin Catlic

From left: Richard Glover, carpentry supervisor, and Barnes Construction site managers Scott Casey and Jonny Oliver.

Back in the 18th-century, students and Fellows of St John’s were likely to have whiled away some of their time in a coffee house based a stone’s throw away in All Saints Passage. The establishment, called Clapham’s, was on a site now owned by St John’s College. Just over 10 years ago, archaeological remains discovered as part of the renovation of the Old Divinity School revealed remnants from one of the earliest coffee shops recorded in the UK.

Clapham’s – named after the husband and wife team that ran the coffee shop from the 1740s to the 1770s – was popular with students and townspeople alike, and a surviving verse from a student publication of 1751 even attests to its importance as a social centre: “Dinner over, to Tom’s or Clapham’s I go; the news of the town so impatient to know.”

The idea of bringing people together over food and drink is clearly not a new

ritual and communal dining has been at the heart of life at St John’s since the College was founded in 1511. So, when it was decided to create a ‘Community Hub’ as part of a College masterplan it was purposefully designed to facilitate how people want to spend their time in Cambridge – eating, drinking, teaching, learning and collaborating but not necessarily in that order.

Contractors arrived at College in July last year to revamp the south-west corner



site is tricky with the height restriction on the Queens' Road entrance but we have worked around it.

"We have slightly shorter working hours than we would normally have so that the noise doesn't disturb the students too much and we already have all the exam period marked in our diary so that we know to work around that. We've even had discussions about what we need to do to help tidy up ahead of the famous May Ball later this year."

Jonny said that it is unusual for locations to have such high sustainability requirements too, he explained: "It is very rare for historic sites to go to the lengths of this project – even the kind of cement and plaster used is scrutinised. It has been fascinating for us as professionals to see how things were done by builders in the past – like the old footings – and we have uncovered original features including a cellar entrance and brick archways. Every week a consultant working for Historic England has visited the site to do a four-hour inspection to ensure building standards are being met."

of Second Court into a contemporary social centre, the Buttery Dining Room (BDR) has already been demolished, and the former Bar and JCR have been dismantled.

Helen Murley, Domestic Bursar, said: "Early coffeehouses brought people and ideas together – our aim is that the Community Hub will do the same for St John's. Fortunately for the schedule of the Community Hub, no archaeological sites of interest have been found during the project! The contractors have uncovered several 17th century fireplaces, notably one in the old JCR, which have been protected during the building and will be carefully recovered with historic panelling, as required by the conservation authorities.

"We have ensured that the building designs are sustainable and have a minimal environmental impact – the underfloor heating is all run from an air source heat pump for example. The project aims to achieve a BREEAM Excellent rating for sustainability, which is the world's leading sustainability assessment method for masterplanning projects and buildings."

The new light and airy dining space will have a feature green wall watered by rainwater from the architect-designed top-lit, freestanding, oak-framed roof – the first of five of the wooden ceiling pavilions has recently been installed and it is becoming easier to envisage how the space will be transformed.

The former patio will be redesigned and raised to create an extension to the dining room and Bar. The kitchen-style garden will have new tables and chairs and in-built seating areas, with disabled

access to the side. The Grade I-Listed gate piers to the rear of the BDR will be moved to the west end of the patio, in line with Kitchen Lane and Kitchen Bridge to create a new gateway to the area. The Bar will be located to where the JCR once was, and the café will move to the old Bar site.

Jonny Oliver, Site Manager for Barnes Construction, runs the team that oversees the project to make sure it goes to plan and completes on schedule.

He said: "Working on refurbishment projects in historic sites is much more challenging than a new build construction but far more rewarding and interesting – it isn't every day that we have something like the Bridge of Sighs as our view from site!

"There has been a lot to consider, restrictions on the weight that Kitchen Bridge, can bear has meant we haven't been able to use certain machinery like a normal forklift, and even access to the

The project is on schedule to be completed by the start of the next academic year with the College steering group now focusing on the interior design of the Community Hub and sampling new menus. Today we might expect to order a chocolate swirl and an extra hot latte to help us cope with essay deadlines and the mountain of daily emails, but 250 years ago, customers would have expected ale and wine on offer as well – the Community Hub will be able to provide it all in one sociable and linked space.



The old Bar area which is being turned into a café.

Educating Mia

Leaving home to go to University was a bigger challenge than for most for second-year St John's undergraduate Mia Myers, who has Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). She tells Karen Clare about what makes her tick, smashing stereotypes and educating others.



All photos credit: Nordin Caric.

“I remember saying to someone once, if you gave me a pill right now, and said, if you take this, you can be completely SMA-free, I don't know if I'd take it. Because it is a massive part of me and I'm proud of it in a lot of ways.

Some of the best people I've ever met is because of my SMA,” said Mia.

“And then there are days when I'm in pain or exhausted or going to the hospital, or when I feel myself deteriorate

and I think, I could do this yesterday, and I can't use this muscle in this way today. Then it is tiring.”

Mia was diagnosed with SMA type three, a rare degenerative neuromuscular



Mia in her kitchen in Cripps.

condition that causes muscle wasting, at about 18 months old when her parents noticed she wasn't walking like other toddlers her age. Although Mia did start walking, she began losing the ability when she was 12. This coincided with major back surgery that included having titanium rods inserted along her spine and from then on Mia used a wheelchair.

"I'd rather not be in the chair, but it gives me my freedom"

The 19-year-old, who is studying Psychological and Behavioural Sciences, said: "I am now on my second electric wheelchair from the NHS and I love it, it has changed my life. Some people say things like, 'oh, they were confined to a wheelchair', and I think that just shows a complete lack of understanding of what it does. Obviously, I'd rather not be in the chair, but it gives me my freedom."

This freedom has enabled Mia to be a trailblazer in more ways than one. The first in her family to apply to Oxbridge,

she is also an ambassador for Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK, a charity for whom she writes articles and presents podcasts. She strives to remove stigma surrounding all kinds of disability, and to make the world an accessible place for wheelchair-users – whether that be trying to improve access in a lecture theatre or city centre shop.

Encouraged by a teacher to apply to Cambridge, she loved the course 'because I love people', and fell in love with St John's when she visited. "Just the thought of living away from home was a little overwhelming because I have extra considerations, and these will change over time with my condition," said Mia. "I knew I'd have to employ live-in personal assistants, and I didn't think there would be anywhere that would be fully suitable for me. I narrowed it down to four Colleges and I came to John's first and when I came through the door I knew it was the one for me – and I had been trying to keep Cambridge at a distance. Another thing about St John's was that

nothing was ever an issue, and I was asked for my input. You can't teach that attitude, it comes from within."

"My PAs are some of my best friends – I recommend interviewing for your flatmates!"

Mia also has to interview for personal assistants, who she self-employs with the help of a specialised company, and with funding from Social Services in her home county of Oxfordshire. She now has two personal assistants (PAs) who swap living-in one week-in, one week-off in her two-bedroom wheelchair-accessible Cripps accommodation. "At this point my PAs are some of my best friends – we get on so well. I recommend interviewing for your flatmates!"

Starting University in the pandemic was another serious consideration for Mia, who is clinically vulnerable, but she was determined. "I never wanted to defer, I always wanted to go to uni straight from sixth form, because I really want to go

travelling after my degree – that’s one of my biggest goals. And I only wanted to do that when I’d had experience of living with a PA. I just had to really think about what uni would look like for me, how Covid would make it different from what I thought it would be, but I ultimately decided to come and I do not regret that at all.

“It’s been helpful that I was expecting it to be the way it was when I came because at least for me, I had already come to terms with the fact that Covid was going to be part of my uni experience.”

Since an early age she and her family have been involved in Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK, which supports research and families. As a child Mia held cake sales in aid of the charity, her grandmother became a trustee, and her dad has taken on various challenges, such as trekking the Great Wall of China. Since the age of 15, Mia has been a mentor, advising other young people with SMA about matters such as applying to university. She writes blog posts and articles and is currently producing a series of podcasts focusing on the experiences of women and non-binary people with SMA, with topics ranging from periods to accessible fashion. “SMA UK is very important to me, everyone is so lovely and supportive. When I go to conferences and socials there’s such a community feel, I love it.”

“You feel like you have to prove yourself a little bit more”

Mia has always loved meeting new people, and is keen to break down barriers. “Sometimes I see people looking at me and not really knowing what to do. Then I think, okay, let’s go do some educating – and that’s not a criticism at all, it’s completely normal. I’ll go up to them and start a casual conversation and instantly try to squash any stereotypes. I think that’s important because they’ll carry it forward and pass it to people that they know, and it paves the way for others.”

She believes her work ethic is partly due to her disability. “You feel like you have to prove yourself a little bit more, and I definitely felt that in my freshers’ year. It’s completely a pressure I put on myself, but you go into a room and you think, okay, people might expect that I can’t do this, so then you work that extra bit more, to push yourself. I think that

probably contributed to my work ethic at the beginning and now it’s just part of me, for better or worse! I also think my SMA helps me to relate to people, to be empathetic. It’s a journey that I’ve been on.”

Mia is now weighing up the chance to participate in new clinical trials that could stop the deterioration of her muscles and potentially give her some strength back.

With spending so much time in hospital, she is considering working in clinical practice in the NHS after she graduates. She is also interested in writing and producing content that is ‘inherently psychological’ and disability-focused, “where the disability is used in a way that we don’t very often see, in the sense that it’s not, ‘oh, this person is in a wheelchair, this story is about why we should feel bad for them’. It’s more like, ‘Oh, they’re in a wheelchair, let’s give them space to share this person’s authentic story and now let’s talk about something else’. And it’s nothing to be afraid of, this thing we can talk about, and decide to be proud of.”

Mia’s dream is to travel the world. “There are lots of things that I want to do, and places I want to go. And lots of places I want to go are not good for wheelchair-users, so I want to work there to try to improve things because I’m very aware that I was born into massive privilege. I was born in this country, I have the opportunity to be educated at Cambridge, I have a loving family and I have amazing friends. And I am in a position that even though I was born with SMA, and that comes with its own advantages and challenges, I’ve been able to get to this point.

“I could have been born into another situation, maybe a context where disability is feared, or without access to adequate healthcare or equipment, or where the terrain and architecture is not suitable for wheelchairs and you just can’t get out, you can’t go to school, you can’t meet people, you can’t learn – it’s hard to contribute. I want to work towards helping change that.”



Mia being admitted as a ‘Scholar’ of St John’s during the College’s historic annual ceremony last year. The honour is given to students who have demonstrated academic excellence by achieving a first class (or equivalent) position in their University exams.

10-minute interview

For 14 years, Fiona Boston has been performing the critical role of supplying the good people of F Staircase, Chapel Court, with biscuits. The biscuit tin in the Domestic Bursary did not see as much action as usual during the pandemic but Fiona found a way to power staff through by doing socially distant deliveries.



You came back to the office as soon as you could after the pandemic hit – why?

I was not happy working from home, partly because I live in a one-bedroom bungalow and there is very little room and partly because a neighbour has three dogs that bark all the time! I returned to my office at the end of April 2020.

What was College like during the lockdowns?

We had a little bubble of staff on our corridor and that worked really well as it gave us all some company. At first it was a novelty having this incredible site to ourselves, but St John's shouldn't be a ghost town, it should be buzzing with students and it was wonderful to watch the College slowly come to life again as people returned.

You were part of the Covid Silver meetings that assessed the operationally critical aspects of the pandemic, what was that like?

Busy! The meetings started before the first lockdown as the College began to prepare for what was ahead. I joined the meetings as secretary when we were working remotely and they were often for two hours every week at least as so much was constantly changing. Questions were asked that no one could ever have predicted such as the difference between a work meeting and a social gathering and whether staff were even allowed to have a group tea break together. The meetings still happen occasionally but hopefully they will disappear forever soon!

It is impossible to count how many biscuits you have dished out during your time at St John's, but you do know how many blood units you have donated. Tell us about that.

I've been donating blood and plasma for more than 40 years and I've given 567 units during that time. I decided when I was 18 that it was something fairly easy that I could do to help others and I've been doing it ever since.

You are also known for your love for the singer Cliff Richard – what is it about the multimillionaire octogenarian that you like so much?

Everything! My favourite song of his is *Carrie* and I once saw him live three times in one year. I decorate our staff room on his birthday – 14 October – and we have 'Cliff cakes' – with little flags in them with his face on. I now also have a giant cardboard cut-out of him which people have their photograph taken with. There's a lot of secret Cliff fans at St John's judging by how quickly the cakes disappear.

You've led a lot of recycling initiatives in College, what other community-minded things do you do?

I teach a Sunday school class for five-year-old children at The Church of Jesus Christ Of Latter-Day Saints in Cherry Hinton and it is really enjoyable as they are adorable and you never know what they will say or do next. One little girl confided in us that her mum had a nickname for her dad and it was 'sexy beast' – we did have to stop ourselves laughing when they came to collect her at the end of the session!

What do you do to relax?

I enjoy seeing friends and going to the theatre. I'm going to London to see the *Life of Pi* with my boyfriend Jim soon (not pictured!). We enjoy getting out and about. I've always followed the Covid rules but I haven't wanted it to restrict my life too much as life is for living.





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