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ST JOHN'S COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Michaelmas Term 2021



**Amir – the refugee turned St John's student
Making history – welcoming girls and women
to the Choir
Meet the friendly face behind the Buttery till**

WELCOMES, GOODBYES AND CONGRATS

These gardening boots were made for walking

After more than 32 years tending the leafy grounds of St John's, Mick Ranford has hung up his trowel.

The Deputy Head Gardener retired in October to spend more time with his grandchildren and enjoy his hobbies of fishing and long-distance walking, while recovering from prostate cancer diagnosed during the pandemic.

Mick began his working life as an apprentice mechanic at Marshall's in Cambridge, but found 'it wasn't my cup of tea', and later became a milkman for the Co-op. He enjoyed working in the open air and was encouraged to apply for a gardening job at St John's. He started at the College in May 1989 under former Head Gardener, Vaughan Crook.

"I never did learn the Latin names for all the plants," said Mick, "but I have always enjoyed just coming to work come rain or shine, being responsible for my own plot, and working with such great people. There's always a nice atmosphere."

To mark his 65th birthday in 2019, Mick did the 192-mile Coast to Coast walk from St Bees in Cumbria to Robin Hood's Bay in North Yorkshire. He has also completed

Photo: Nordin Caric



Mick Ranford, who has retired from St John's after 32 years.

the 96-mile West Highland Way and now has designs on walking Hadrian's Wall.

In March 2020 he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and is making a good recovery after having brachytherapy, a type of radiation treatment. "It spurred me on to take life a bit easier, really," said Mick, who is also now eating more healthily and ensuring he gets his daily dose of exercise.

He is now looking forward to spending more time with his wife Denise, who is a bedder at St John's, along with

their daughters Amy and Clare, and grandchildren Oliver, George, Millie and Daisy, who are aged between one and 13. A big fishing fan, he also enjoys working on his own large garden and allotment – although these may now be neglected as he has just bought a small VW motorhome with some of his retirement money.

Favourite memories from his time at St John's include uncovering and restoring a fish pond in the garden of a student hostel on Madingley Road, playing College five-a-side football matches, and the Royal visit during the College's quinqucentenary in 2011.

"The Queen waved at me as she drove down The Avenue during the 500th anniversary celebration," recalled Mick, "it was a moment I will never forget".

The Gardening Department said their farewells to Mick with pizza and cake on 18 October. David Austrin, Head Gardener, said: "Mick has been a fantastic member of the team, we will miss him, his knowledge of the College grounds, and the years of experience he brought to his role. We wish him all the very best in his retirement."

A toast to staff

A drinks reception was held in the Hall on 24 September to celebrate the contributions of all staff during the pandemic, and to mark the departure of those who have retired from St John's or left to pursue new opportunities.

Fond farewells were said to former staff Sharon Hall, Housekeeper at the Master's Lodge; Angela McKenzie, PA to Librarian; Claire Aspinall, Council and Governance Administrator; Alison Hart-Arkley, PA to Librarian; Cei Whitehouse, Academic Administrator; Omar Zein, Housekeeping Assistant; Davina Turner, Bursar's Secretary; Susie Renshaw, College Counsellor, and Emma Manuel, Lead Clinical Nurse.

Meet our new Fellows

Seven new Fellows were admitted to St John's at the start of the academic year: Dr Christiana Scheib, Archaeology and Biological Anthropology Fellow; Dr Nick Friedman, Law Fellow; Mr Richard Partington, Senior Tutor; Dr Benedek Kruchió, Classics Fellow; Dr Marie Chabbert, Modern & Medieval Languages Fellow; Dr Rosalba García Millán, Physics & Astrophysics Fellow, and Dr Anna Florin, Archaeology Fellow. Pictured from left are Dr Millán, Dr Florin, and Dr Chabbert.



Say hello to Monty



Gemma De-Grammont, Accommodation & Bookings Manager, and husband Lee welcomed their firstborn, Monty, to the world on 3 October. He weighed 8lb 2oz.

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

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Eagle Eye

This magazine is produced by The Communications Office, St John's College.

Editor: Karen Clare,
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Front cover: Amir Kadkhodaei, who is in the first year of his degree at St John's after fleeing the regime in Iran three years ago.

Back cover: The Choir of St John's.

Front and back cover photo credits:
Nordin Ćatić.

NOTE FROM THE MASTER



There's a purposeful air about the College this Michaelmas Term. I like it. We are calmly and effectively restoring College life.

We haven't quite recovered to 'business as usual', but we are close. A power failure in New Court and Cripps just as students returned to College gave us fair warning of a bumpy ride to the end of the year, and a reminder of the Maintenance department's mystical abilities to coax modern performance from our historic buildings.

Then, with the lights back on and heating restored, Catering was jolted by the labour and supply chain challenges. We are no different from other Cambridge Colleges or the city-wide hospitality sector in having to face these issues, but the response here in St John's does set us apart, thanks to dedication, flexibility and extra shifts in Catering. For 500 years, communal dining has fostered collegiality and all the benefits that flow from it; maintaining dining has a totemic significance as we reclaim our College from the clutches of Covid-19.

This edition of *Eagle Eye* is evidence that St John's isn't settling for the status quo as Covid is subdued. The term has already witnessed an historic decision

to admit women and girls to our world famous College choir from 2022. The complex and challenging Buttery and Bar redevelopment is (fingers crossed) going according to plan, and before long the Community Hub webcam will be a window onto something creative rather than destructive.

The planning that's underway for other important projects isn't so easy to observe, but is just as intense. The Development Office is leading a huge effort to secure the matched funding needed to create a £25m Free Places endowment, and a successful Telethon reinforced how much this commitment resonates with alumni.

A committee is planning how, throughout 2022, we can mark the 40th anniversaries of the admission of women to the College as Fellows, postgraduates and undergraduates. Our climate response is progressing as, led by a working group of Fellows and staff, we are gathering and analysing data to understand the best ways to make a drastic cut in carbon emissions from our use of energy. The pace is picking up around the College masterplan, with architects commissioned to design a new Porters' Lodge and office space in the old Chop House and Merton Arms.

Last year, I promised that we would emerge optimistic and energetic after such gloomy times. I hope this glimpse of what's afoot excites you about the next few years, that there is no let up in our determination to help great minds to do great work by creating an environment where education, learning and research thrive and talented people succeed.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Hancock".

Heather Hancock
Master of St John's College

NEWS ROUND-UP

Walking for legal aid

Law students and Fellows from St John's were part of a team who put their best feet forward to support a justice charity helping people in need.

On 4 October, a team organised by the Cambridge University Law Society (CULS) Pro Bono participated in the Cambridge Legal Walk, part of a series of sponsored 10k events raising funds for The Access to Justice Foundation.

Dr Jodi Gardner, Director of Studies in Law, College Associate Lecturer in Law and Fellow of St John's, said: "St John's students came out in force."

Professor Albertina Albors-Llorens, St John's Fellow and Lecturer in Law and Professor of European Union Law, helped to lead walkers around the route.

First Turing AI Fellowship

Professor Zoubin Ghahramani, Professor of Information Engineering, Distinguished Researcher at Google and Fellow of St John's, was awarded one of the first Turing AI World-Leading Researcher Fellowships to conduct groundbreaking work on Artificial Intelligence's (AI) biggest challenges. Five researchers in total were named as the new Fellows by UK Research and Innovation in July.

Membership accolade

The oldest learned society in the United States has named Professor Deborah Howard, Fellow of St John's, as one of its members. The American Philosophical Society was founded in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin. Professor Howard is Professor Emerita of Architectural History in the Faculty of Architecture and History of Art in the University of Cambridge.

Covid survivor's choral work performed at Royal Festival Hall

Photo: Nordin Caric



A collection of diary entries written by nurses when a St John's Fellow was in a coma after being struck down by Covid have been transformed into a concert.

Professor Peter Johnstone was kept alive by a ventilator at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge after he caught Covid at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, following a visit to the United States to sing tenor with The Bach Choir, one of the world's leading choruses.

He remained unconscious and on life-support for several weeks. A nurses' diary shows he suffered seizures, worryingly low blood pressure, developed pneumonia and his temperature spiked dangerously. Finally in June 2020 he was successfully taken off the ventilator.

His battle with the virus has been made into *Vision of a Garden*, a spectacular choral piece featuring The Bach Choir and a string orchestra. It is named after fragments of memories Professor Johnstone has of visiting a garden at Addenbrooke's during his recovery and was performed on 24 October at the Royal Festival Hall in London.

David Hill MBE, conductor and Musical Director of The Bach Choir and former Director of Music at St John's, persuaded Peter to turn the diary and his recollections into text for the music by Ivor Novello award-winning composer Richard Blackford. Baritone Gareth Brynmor John, another Johnian, sang a solo. The Bach Choir was joined on stage by the NHS Chorus-19, a group of medical and nursing staff at Addenbrooke's, for one piece.

Mathematician Professor Johnstone, who is known for his ground-breaking contributions to Topos Theory, said: "I wanted to find a way to give something back as I was lucky enough to live when so many perished. This is my way of telling the world what it is like to battle Covid-19 and survive.

"I will forever be in the debt of the incredible NHS staff, and I will never forget the kindness shown to me."

Honour for scientist

A Research Fellow from St John's who has helped to develop artificial leaves to produce renewable energy has been recognised for representing Romanian academics overseas. Dr Virgil Andrei was named Student of the Year in the 2021 League of Romanian Students Abroad Gala for his pioneering research and being a mentor and ambassador for Romanian expats.

University Challengers

Four students from St John's have been seen on our screens taking part in the latest series of BBC Two's *University Challenge*. Jonathan Chan is studying Veterinary Medicine; Thomas Clark completed an MPhil in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics last term; Louis George is doing an MPhil in Sociology after completing his undergraduate degree in Human, Social and Political Sciences, and Kyanna Ouyang is studying Natural Sciences.

Scientists can predict serious pregnancy complications

Women who will develop potentially life-threatening disorders during pregnancy can be identified early when hormone levels in the placenta are tested, a new study has shown.

Nearly all the organ systems of the mother's body need to alter their function during pregnancy so the baby can grow. If the mother's body cannot properly adapt this leads to issues including fetal growth restriction, fetal over-growth, gestational diabetes, and preeclampsia – a dangerous high blood pressure in the mother.

Many complications lead to difficult labours for women with more medical

intervention and lifelong issues for the baby. Now scientists have found a way to test hormone levels in the placenta to predict which women will have serious pregnancy complications, so they can be treated earlier.

Dr Amanda N. Sferruzzi-Perri, a Fellow of St John's, runs a lab in the Department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience and is the lead author of a paper published in *Nature Communications Biology*.

She said: "We know that the placenta drives many of the changes in a women's body during pregnancy and our study found hormonal biomarkers from the

placenta could indicate which women would have pregnancy complications. We found that these biomarkers are present from the first trimester of pregnancy, normally women are only diagnosed with complications during the second or third trimester when disorders may already have had serious consequences for the health of the mother and her developing baby.

"This is a highly important finding given that pregnancy disorders affect around one in 10 pregnant women... This work provides new hope that a better understanding of the placenta will result in safer, healthier pregnancies for mothers and babies."

Bride and groom celebrate graduation



The newly married couple celebrating graduation with Joshua's parents Sarah and John Snyder, who met when Sarah was a student at St John's in the 1980s.

Newlyweds Joshua Snyder and Hania Adamczyk met at St John's College as undergraduates – and walked down the 'aisle' together in September as graduands, a year after finishing their postgraduate studies.

Joshua and Hania met at St John's in 2016. Joshua, who read Mathematics, and Hania, who studied Economics, wed in the bride's home city of Opole, Poland, in June this year. The couple returned to St John's to celebrate their graduation, which, like many students around the

world they formally did in absentia, after they had finished their postgraduate MMaths and MPhil in Economics in 2020. "It's so special to be back at St John's and celebrating our graduations together," said Joshua, originally from Cambridge.

The couple got engaged after being separated for three-and-a-half months by the pandemic, with Joshua in the UK and Hania in Poland. The pair have now launched a time management app called TimeNavi.

Rowing boats launched

Rowers gathered at the College's Lady Margaret Boat Club in September to celebrate the launch of two new boats. A men's eight was named after Professor Sir Christopher Dobson,

scientist and late Master of St John's, and a women's four was named after Dame Louise Makin, businesswoman and Honorary Fellow of the College.

Queen Elizabeth I 'would tax the rich'

A new book about how Covid-19 rocked the world argues that Elizabeth I would have supported the poor in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The Tudor Monarch introduced the world's first universal welfare state in 1601 in response to repeated plague outbreaks and famines. The 'Poor Laws' required all of England's 10,000 parishes to take responsibility for their poor.

The book's co-author Professor Simon Szreter, Fellow at St John's, said: "The evidence of history is that societies and economies fare much better with a strong welfare state and when you cut welfare to make savings, you damage society and the economy."

In *After The Virus – Lessons from the Past for a Better Future*, Professor Szreter and co-author Hilary Cooper explore why the UK was so unprepared for the pandemic and suffered one of the highest death rates and worst economic contractions of the major world economies.

Antiquity Prize

St John's Fellow Professor Graeme Barker is among a team of archaeological scientists to have won the 2021 Antiquity Prize for their outstanding research into the remains of a Neanderthal unearthed in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Fresh feat for engineer

Professor Duncan McFarlane, St John's Fellow, was recognised in the University of Cambridge Vice-Chancellor's Research Impact and Engagement Awards 2021.

Professor McFarlane, Professor in Industrial Information Engineering and Head of the Distributed Information and Automation Laboratory, was a runner-up in an award highlighting Collaboration for his tireless work during the pandemic, using engineering to help hospitals address the challenges of Covid-19.

Fund to aid historians

A fundraising campaign in memory of a 'legendary historian' has been launched to financially support students at Cambridge as they uncover the secrets of the past. A historian of medieval Spain, Dr Peter Linehan, Fellow of St John's, died at Addenbrooke's Hospital in July 2020 aged 76. The 'Dr Peter Linehan Fund' has been launched in his memory to continue his legacy of supporting young historians.

johnian.joh.cam.ac.uk/linehan-fund/

Extinction evidence

Geneticists have finally proved why mammoths went extinct – climate change.

A 10-year research project, published in *Nature*, was led by Professor Eske Willerslev, Fellow of St John's College and Director of The Lundbeck Foundation GeoGenetics Centre, University of Copenhagen.

His team used DNA shotgun sequencing to analyse environmental plant and animal remains taken from soil samples collected over a 20-year period from sites in the Arctic where mammoth remains were found. The scientists discovered the animals' food source – vegetation – was practically wiped out by the wet habitat caused by icebergs melting.

Poland honours world expert on Chopin



Photo: Kuba Modzelewski / Fryderyk Chopin Institute.

Professor John Rink wears his Bene Merito medal of honour at the special ceremony.

A St John's academic and world-renowned expert on the Polish composer and pianist Fryderyk Chopin has been awarded a medal of honour at a special ceremony in Warsaw.

Professor John Rink received the Bene Merito, an honorary decoration of the Republic of Poland awarded by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for contributions to activities strengthening Poland's position in the international arena.

A ceremony was held at the Fryderyk Chopin Museum on 17 October – the 172nd anniversary of Chopin's death at the age of only 39 – to present the medal to Professor Rink, who is Professor of Musical Performance Studies in the University of Cambridge Faculty of Music, and a Fellow and Director of Studies in Music at St John's.

At the event, Arkady Rzegocki, Head of the Polish Foreign Service, praised Professor Rink's contribution to the promotion of Chopin's music and legacy.

He said: "Undoubtedly, the basis of Chopin's fame was his outstanding talent, sensitivity, virtuosity and musical innovation, which gave a new direction to European music. But fame also needs its promoters. After all, we know how many outstanding artists remain underappreciated in life and after death. That is why we need people like Professor Rink so much: committed, devoted and sincere in his love for Chopin."

Professor Rink directs the Cambridge Centre for Musical Performance Studies and two major online projects on Chopin's works, and is a jury member for the Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Poland. He said: "I am extremely grateful to have received the Bene Merito award. My efforts to promote Polish culture over the past 35 years or so through my work on the music of Fryderyk Chopin have been inspired not only by my inexhaustible passion for his music but also by the warmth and generosity of the friends and colleagues in Poland."

Runners burn bright

The Chariots of Fire relay race returned to Cambridge on 19 September after a year's hiatus and three teams of runners from St John's pulled on their trainers to represent the College. A group of John's medics came second in the mixed team category, an academics team came first in its category and a team of staff, students and Fellows also competed.

AstraZeneca Fellowship

A pharmacologist at St John's has been awarded a prestigious Royal Society Industry Fellowship to work with AstraZeneca on developing life-changing medicines. Professor Graham Ladds, who is a Professor in Receptor Pharmacology and a Fellow of St John's, will be seconded for four years to AstraZeneca, which was among the first in the world to produce a Covid-19.

DNA from hair confirms living descendant of Sitting Bull

A man's claim to be the great-grandson of legendary Native American leader Sitting Bull has been confirmed using DNA extracted from Sitting Bull's scalp lock. This is the first time ancient DNA has been used to confirm a familial relationship between living and historical individuals.

The confirmation was made possible using a new method to analyse family lineages using ancient DNA fragments, developed by a team of scientists led by Professor Eske Willerslev, Fellow of St John's College, and Director of the Lundbeck Foundation GeoGenetics Centre. The results were published in *Science Advances*.

The technique searches for 'autosomal DNA' in the genetic fragments extracted from a body sample. Since we inherit half of our autosomal DNA from our father and half from our mother, this means genetic matches can be checked irrespective of which side of the family the ancestor is from.

Autosomal DNA from Lakota Sioux leader Sitting Bull's scalp lock was



Sitting Bull's great-grandson Ernie Lapointe.

compared to DNA samples from Ernie Lapointe and other Lakota Sioux. The resulting match confirms Lapointe is Sitting Bull's great-grandson, and his closest living descendant.

"We managed to locate sufficient amounts of autosomal DNA in Sitting Bull's hair sample and compare it to the DNA sample from Ernie Lapointe and other Lakota Sioux – and were delighted to find that it matched," said Professor Willerslev.



Sitting Bull c1885.

Lapointe said: "Over the years, many people have tried to question the relationship that I and my sisters have to Sitting Bull."

Lapointe believes Sitting Bull's bones currently lie in Mobridge, South Dakota, in a place with no significant connection to the great Native American leader and the culture he represented. The site is also a visitor attraction. Lapointe now hopes to rebury Sitting Bull's remains in a more appropriate location.

Becca makes a splash

An 'inspirational' undergraduate at St John's was named University of Cambridge Sports Club Personality of the Year 2021 last term after helping to keep the women's water polo team afloat through the pandemic.

Rebecca 'Becca' Howitt was described as 'one of a kind' by her team mates after she stepped up to the role of women's water polo Captain and Social Secretary from being the youngest in the Cambridge University Swimming and Water Polo Club (CUSWPC). Becca organised Zoom workouts and events to keep everyone feeling united and happy during the lockdowns.



The Modern and Medieval Languages (German and Spanish) student, who is spending her third year abroad, said winning the award was 'a wonderful experience'.

Telethon boost

A dedicated team of students raised £271,622 in this year's Telethon fundraising campaign in aid of the College's ground-breaking Free Places scheme. All gifts are matched, which doubles the impact of the donations.

Historical saga

A St John's Fellow has written a novel based around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A world-renowned expert in microwave energy, *The Young Alexandrians* is Dr A.C. (Ricky) Metaxas's first work of fiction.

Platinum green award

St John's achieved the top environmental award in the University of Cambridge Green Challenge this year, after scooping Gold with a debut entry in 2020. The Platinum Colleges award is the highest accolade in Green Impact, a United Nations programme designed by the National Union of Students.

Poetry emotion

The annual *St John's Poetry Pamphlet* is back in publication after a year off in 2020. The pamphlet has been showcasing the work of poets at St John's since 2017 and is produced in Easter Term. It features translations, art, photography and poetry by students, staff and Fellows.

joh.cam.ac.uk/st-johns-poetry-pamphlet

From refugee to student: ‘How I came to St John’s is a miracle’

First-year undergraduate Amir Kadkhodaei has faced more challenges than most to achieve his dream of coming to Cambridge. He told Karen Clare about his journey to St John’s after fleeing the regime in Iran.



Photo: Nordin Caric

Amir in his room at St John's.

Three years ago Amir was an ordinary 16-year-old student in Tehran but when his family converted to Christianity, they were forced to leave the country of his birth for fear of religious persecution – and found themselves on the long and difficult road to Europe.

After spending two months in Turkey, the family travelled through Germany to the UK, where they were able to claim asylum.

There is no religious freedom in Iran. The country's authoritarian regime governs the theocratic republic based on Ja'fari Shia Islam and persecutes religious

minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Sunni Muslims and Jews. Many face imprisonment, exile and even execution.

'We would have been in danger if we had stayed in Iran'

Amir's childhood and early teenage years were relatively uneventful. "I went to a normal school in Iran. Like everyone else, I had all my friends and my relatives. My parents converted to Christianity and then one day we had to leave everything behind," he remembered.

"It was especially hard for my mother, as we had to leave my grandmother, but

we would have been in danger if we had stayed in Iran."

After arriving in the UK in February 2019, Amir and his family moved to Birmingham where, at a local church, Amir met a remarkable new friend who would change the course of his life.

Having obtained excellent exam results in Iran, Amir found himself unable to attend a state school to study for his A-Levels because his qualifications were not recognised in the UK.

He said: "I met someone called Alex through the church. He saw some



Fourteen-year-old Amir on a beach in the city of Ramsar, in north Iran, next to the Caspian Sea.

translation and transcription work I had done and, without me even knowing, he applied to a boarding school called Repton School in Derbyshire, where I was eventually awarded a free place with an 80 per cent bursary and 20 per cent academic scholarship.

“The school was a turning point in my life, I was very welcomed and given so much support, the tutors really helped me. I did not have much English when I arrived – only the alphabet, basic reading and writing was taught in high school in Iran – but going to boarding school improved my English massively.”

Having been coding and programming computers since the age of 14 in Tehran, where the school day lasted 8am-9pm, Amir was encouraged by his teachers at Repton to apply to Cambridge to read Computer Science. After gaining four A*s at A-Level in Maths, Further Maths, Physics and Persian and an A in AS-Level Computer Science, he was offered a place at St John’s.

Since arriving in Cambridge, Amir has thrown himself into College life. Among other things, he has taken up rowing and ultimate frisbee and is treasurer of Cambridge University Persian Society.

His mum and dad, two sisters and young nephew, who all now live in England, are very proud of his achievements and, on a recent visit, they stocked him up with Iranian food.

‘My family’s Iranian snacks are a little taste of home’

“That’s one thing I do miss,” admitted Amir. “My family bought some Iranian snacks with them, I put them in my fridge freezer and now every time I eat them, it is a little taste of home.”

One day he hopes to be able to visit his homeland.

“Iran is a beautiful country, it’s very different to what you hear on the news. People are nice, the food is delicious, and I miss my relatives and friends, but it is not possible to return under the current regime. Maybe some day.”

For now, Amir is focusing on studying and making the most of life at Cambridge.

“If someone had told me three years ago when I was in Tehran, going to school and focusing on my studies and planning to apply to universities in Iran, ‘you’re going to Cambridge University for a first-class education’, I wouldn’t have believed them,” he said. “But I think God has a plan.”

“I have seen many miracles since I came to the UK and one of them is the story of how I came to St John’s.”



Amir with his family.



The St John’s student aged around six or seven in Iran.

Always looking up

You might not know her name, but Norma Paterno-Lotto is a very familiar face in the Buttery – she is the cashier who asks if we really want to buy a bar of chocolate or would we prefer a nice tangerine instead?! Jo Tynan finds out more about the Argentinian catering assistant who has been known to shed a few tears when the students graduate.



Photo: Ben Phillips.

Norma helping to prepare the Buttery for lunch.

I met my husband in primary school at home in Argentina but he was only my classmate then. He went off to study in Buenos Aires and I was in Formosa where my mum still lives in the north of Argentina. Every summer he would come back to Formosa and there would be a party for school classmates and we would meet. One year he came back for work and we crossed on the corner and started to chat. I always say that true love is just around the corner.

I waited for him for five long years. He went off to work in England and we only saw each other once or twice a year when he came home. I once came on a holiday for a month and we visited Cambridge and we came to St John's as tourists. I thought straight away that

it was a very nice College but I never imagined I would work here.

I was a PE teacher at home in Argentina but I couldn't speak any English when I first moved here. I could only say 'excuse me, hello, yes, sorry and thank you!' I wasn't scared of not knowing the language but I was scared of the cold! I began teaching myself English from a dictionary when my husband was at work at his job as an electrical engineer. We lived in a house share to begin with and whenever anyone spoke to me, I would get my Spanish to English dictionary out. I've been to several language classes since. I am still learning, my English isn't the best but it is better than when I started. We should all keep learning.

I volunteered at Oxfam near The Grafton centre to get some work experience. That is where I got to know the money here and I practised English. I started as a casual worker in the Catering department at St John's in 2007 and then I got a permanent job as a lunchtime cashier and it works around my family. My husband Max and I have one son, Giovanni, who is 10.

Even after all these years working at St John's I still can't believe that I work somewhere so beautiful. I walk through the College and I try to imagine what the first students felt 500 years ago when they arrived in the cold in Cambridge. My favourite spot is looking through the big door frame of the Eagle Gate as I arrive at the College through

Cripps. It is like a picture and I often walk more slowly or stop for just a moment. My mum always says to me that when you go to a new place, never look at the floor – always look up. Now I always do that and spot something new.

I'm here because the students are here and all the staff are here because the students are here. I have my problems but I don't think it is right that they come into the Buttery with me because maybe the day of the person I'm serving is worse than mine. A student might be stressed or something might not be going well for one of the staff, they need me to be cheerful, they don't need me to be grumpy. I try to be a happy face.

I haven't seen my mum for three years, I know what it is like to feel homesick. We had a visit home booked for just after the first lockdown happened and we haven't been able to go home since. Before I moved here I bought my mum her first computer but she didn't know how to use it. We would talk every day when I first came here before I had a job. We are hoping to visit Argentina next Easter and we WhatsApp call every week now.

When coronavirus happened, there wasn't any time to say goodbye. A lot of the students know me because I work on the till, I don't always know their names but over the years we get to know each other a little and we joke together. When they had to go home, it happened so suddenly that we didn't

get a chance to say goodbye. Many of the students would tell us when it was their last day when they got their final meal from the Buttery but because of the lockdown, I didn't know if I'd ever see the Covid students again. I cried during general admission this year when the 2020 group who had missed out came back to graduate. It was very, very nice to see them again.

The lockdown was strange and at first I came into work and it was scary driving down Histon Road when no other cars were around. I was furloughed and then I was able to homeschool my son. He corrects my English and I correct his Spanish.

I don't miss my old life, but I do miss my family. In Cambridge you can walk down the street or even just at St John's and if you listen you can hear Russian, Italian, Korean, Spanish, German, Polish – lots of us are a long way from home. Sometimes we practise our language together, sometimes a student will ask to practise their Spanish with me and I will reply in English. I like how many different people there are from lots of different countries, it makes the College a very friendly place.

Sometimes I mention it if someone just has chocolate for lunch. I don't want to make anyone feel bad but I do sometimes feel like their mum. I know what people like to eat, and I mention if something is missing from their tray that they usually get. Everyone likes

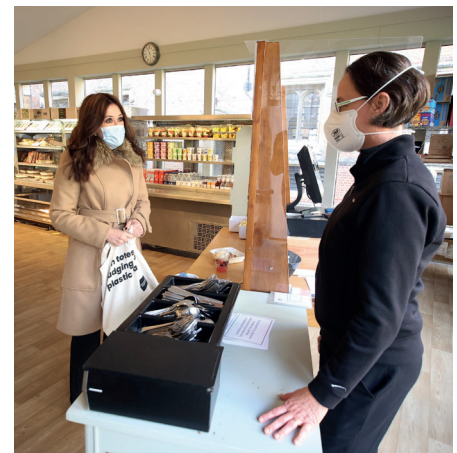


Photo: Ben Phillips

Norma working behind the till in the temporary Buttery.

roast dinner day now they have returned to the Buttery.

I try to eat healthily and I'll often have fruit for my lunch when it is time for a break. I've learned a lot of recipes from the menus at work, I make toad in the hole at home for Max and Giovanni and they love it. We didn't have that meal in Argentina.

I love knitting, my grandmother taught me to knit and we learned at school too. I find it very relaxing, I've just finished knitting a cape for a friend. And my husband and son like trains so we often have days out to look at them.

My son wants to study at St John's when he grows up. He will change his mind but at the moment he thinks it would be nice to see me every day in the Buttery. I would make sure he ate his vegetables like I'd like to do with the students!



Photo: Nordin Catic

Norma on the far left and other members of the Catering team just after the old Buttery closed its doors for the last time.



Photo: Nordin Catic

History-maker: why one man decided it was time to spearhead the move to open St John's College choir to girls and women

Andrew Nethsingha, Director of Music, spoke to Jo Tynan about why breaking a 350-year-old tradition and inviting girls and women into The Choir of St John's College as full members was the right – and only – equitable thing to do.



Photo: Nordin Catic

The news that St John's College was going to be the first Cambridge or Oxford College to include boys and girls, men and women as full members of its choir rang out across social media like church bells on a Sunday morning.

Many hailed the decision as 'pioneering', 'bold' and 'transformative', others said it was 'brave and brilliant'. A handful of people, often those with avatars obscuring their identity rather than profile pictures, were rather more negative and felt it signalled the end of times for the College as a whole, which was a bit of an overreaction but heartfelt nonetheless. It also led to renewed enthusiasm for the choir with many

more people attending Evensong after the news was released to the media than before.

The choir was founded in the 1670s and the sight of the choirboys in bright red robes walking to and from the Chapel every day has been a familiar one for centuries. Their excited chatter can often be heard as they head over the Bridge of Sighs and pass through the College from St John's College School on Grange Road where they all board. And from next year, girls will be able to don the iconic cloaks for the first time in history and join the boys as choristers. Women, largely recruited from the student body of St John's, will also join

the men in the choir for the first time.

Andrew, who was himself a chorister at Exeter Cathedral, under his father's direction, said: "A lot of time was spent looking at the possible options of how to provide musical training to girls at the same standard and with the same opportunities offered to the boys. The only way to be completely fair was to open up full membership to girls and women.

"I am very excited about creating an opportunity for boys and girls to sing together every day from the age of eight and I'm delighted that my proposal was so warmly endorsed by the Master,

THURSDAY, MAY 6, 1937



ASCENSION DAY AT ST. JOHN'S
Ascension Day singing on the tower of St. John's College took place again today. Our picture shows the Rev. S. Senior conducting members of the college chapel choir.

A clipping from the Cambridge Daily News in 1937 about the Ascension Day Eucharist from the Tower rooftop, still an annual tradition.

the Dean of Chapel, the College Council and the Governing Body. They asked pertinent questions about how it would work in practice, what it would mean for the distinctive sound the choir is so famous for, and the move was very much welcomed. I was offered a huge amount of support which was very heartening.

"The reaction from the public was overwhelmingly positive, with some negative views expressed too, but that was to be expected and we still felt that if 2021 wasn't the right time to announce this pivotal step, when would the time ever be right?"

Andrew is the latest in a long line of eminent Directors of Music of the choir, and follows in the footsteps of Dr George Guest, Dr Christopher Robinson and Dr David Hill. He studied at the Royal College of Music, where he won seven prizes before going on to study as an undergraduate organ scholar at St John's. He was previously Director of Music at Truro and Gloucester Cathedrals, and Artistic Director of the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival.

In 2016, Andrew launched the College's own recording label 'St John's Cambridge', an imprint of Signum Classics. The choir's first release, in May 2016, entered the specialist classical charts at number two and won five-star reviews and the Choral Award at the BBC Music Magazine Awards 2017.

The choir sings at daily Evensong services at the College Chapel and Sung Eucharist on Sundays during university term. Its repertoire spans more than 500 years of sacred music. One of the choir's more unusual traditions is the Ascension Day Eucharist.

Andrew himself has a reputation for

encouraging young singers, championing contemporary music, and commissioning new work from established and emerging composers. The inclusion of girls and women in the choir will begin in 2022. Choristers typically join in Year 4 of school and sing until the end of Year 8. The choristers come to Cambridge from a wide variety of backgrounds and generous scholarships are provided to support their education – the aim is that no child is prevented from joining the choir on financial grounds. He is always pleased to hear from parents of children who might be interested in joining.

Andrew said: "The transition will be very gradual. New choristers generally join in Year 4; it will be four or five years before all five year-groups contain both boys and girls. Boys' voices tend to reach their peak around Year 8, whereas girls' voices will continue to develop for many years after that. Our choir will continue to celebrate and give a platform to these unique moments in boys' vocal development. My hope is that the overall soundscape will become even more colourful. The St John's style is to nurture the individuality of each singer, rather than trying to strait-jacket the voices into uniformity ... and to move the listener rather than simply impress them with technical accomplishment. None of those things will change."

Andrew is married to Liberal Democrat Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, the Leader of Cambridgeshire County Council, and the couple have three children together – all of whom welcomed the news that their father was spearheading the bold move.

"Andrew said: "Alongside climate change and reducing income inequalities, having men and women respecting each other as equals is one of the most pressing issues for our society. I hope this small step will bring the day closer when there is gender equality among composers, organists and conductors, as well as among politicians, business leaders and other influential professions. How wonderful it will be for boys and girls to coexist in this unique environment from such a young age."

Does Andrew have any misgivings about the change? He thoughtfully replied: "I continue to believe in the value of single-sex choirs; indeed my life's work for the past 27 years has been running such choirs. Cambridge will still have two all-male and two all-female treble lines.

However, I hope that many parents of prospective choristers will like the idea of their children being part of a mixed-gender choir. I always want the choir to seem like a happy, warm, supportive family – and many families contain both boys and girls.

"In addition to their musical training, the choristers learn innumerable skills including team-work, attention to detail, self-confidence, leadership, professionalism, responsibility. These attributes stay with them for the rest of their lives. The choristers create something of extraordinary beauty every day."

Is he apprehensive about the musical challenge ahead given some of the criticism has been about how to blend male and female voices successfully?

He said: "No one knows exactly what the choir will sound like in the future, but that is what makes this so exciting as we are entering uncharted territory. This is only the beginning; now I need to prove that it will work. The transition will be very gradual but there will be a lot of eyes on us. To anyone who thinks the choir's sound will become 'less good' or 'less distinctive' I simply say, give me a few years to try to prove you wrong and then we can talk."

Perhaps the final word ought to be given to the choristers themselves who were gathered together and given the news in person by Andrew on the October morning the plan was finally made public. According to Andrew, their reaction was 'really lovely' and they were excited that they would be part of history. Andrew added: "One of their main concerns was whether they would be able to continue playing football against King's College Choir! And the answer was, of course, yes."



Andrew in his set.

Photo: Ben Phillips

■ Evensong at St John's College, Cambridge, is sung daily at 6.30pm during university term-time. It is free and open to all.

'Mudcub' sculptures celebrate diversity and hope for future

A contemporary art installation that brings together the themes of diversity, inclusion, ecology and humanity has moved to St John's College for the academic year. Karen Clare found out more.

Photo: Nordin Caric



From left, Dr Morag Morrison-Helme, Heather Hancock, Master of St John's College, student Hetty Opayinka, President of The Dobson Society for Education, and sculptor Nicola Ravenscroft with the mudcubs at the launch event.

The 'mudcubs ... with the heart of a child' exhibit features life-size bronze figures of children – along with two penguins – created by Nicola Ravenscroft, the award-winning British sculptor who was recently commissioned to create a national memorial to frontline NHS and care staff who lost their lives to Covid-19.

The sculptures, which have had previous residencies in Cambridge and London, have been on view in the College Chapel this term. Their installation is thanks to a successful College Annual Fund application by Fellows Dr Morag Morrison-Helme, Director of Studies in Education, and Dr Jodi Gardner, Director of Studies in Law and College Associate Lecturer in Law. The Fund supports innovative projects of up to £25,000 a year that benefit St John's and any resident member can apply.

Representing the peoples of seven continents, thus the whole world, the mudcubs celebrate diversity, inclusion and hope for the future, for the betterment of humankind.

Dr Morrison-Helme said: "The mudcubs represent unity and diversity, they express

our desire to be an ally to students of any background – a supportive community of people from many cultures ensuring all students can not only feel they have had the best education, but also the best College experience while here in Cambridge."

The sculptures were shaped in clay before being cast in bronze and placed on plinths. The penguins represent Antarctica and their spiky 'hair' can be gently twanged to produce musical notes.

Sculptor Nicola Ravenscroft said the mudcubs are 'a brave new international

army of eco-earthling-warriors' that inspire us to think deeply about the future. "The mudcubs remind us of our humanity and our need to take care of our shared home, planet Earth. They remind us that we are all formed in spirit love and stardust and therefore we are one," she said. "I am thrilled that they are now on loan to St John's."

The mudcubs' arrival was celebrated during a launch event on 9 October for The Dobson Society for Education at The Old Divinity School. Named in memory of Professor Sir Christopher Dobson, late Master of St John's, the society was founded by its President Hetty Opayinka, a second-year student in Education, Policy and International Development, for all undergraduates and postgraduates interested in or studying Education at the College.

At the exhibition launch, PhD Education student Niyi Adelakun, who is Vice President of The Dobson Society, spoke to the gathering about how, as an ethnic minority individual, he chose to apply to St John's to do his undergraduate degree after seeing the statue of slavery abolitionist William Wilberforce, a St John's alumnus, in the Chapel. "It was really important for me to see that because it felt like an environment I wanted to come to learn in, I felt welcome and supported. These things matter."



Dr Jodi Gardner (far right) and guests admire the sculptures.

Photo: Nordin Caric

10-minute interview with Georgia Rawlins

A science fiction musical co-written by astrophysicist Georgia Rawlins during the pandemic was abruptly cancelled when Covid-19 restrictions tightened shortly before it was due to be performed. This term *Astrid* finally made its stage debut at the ADC Theatre with a new cast and received rave reviews.



Photo: Nathaniel Wright

What is *Astrid* about?

Astrid is the first baby born in space, after her mother snuck onto a spaceship when she was pregnant to escape an abusive relationship. What *Astrid* really wants is to experience life on Earth and when disaster strikes, she and the crew of the spaceship she lives on have a chance to risk everything to make it home.

My friend Helena Fox and I co-wrote it, very broadly she wrote the lyrics and I wrote the music but there was a lot of overlap. We sketched out the plot together and paced the songs out carefully to make sure there was the right ratio of music to dialogue.

How did you get into music?

I had a really lovely combination of parents in that my dad got to play lots of music as a kid and my mum really wanted to but never had the opportunity. So both of my parents were really keen that their children would play lots of music. I started with piano when I was seven and I hated it! My parents made me stick at it and I'm so glad they did because once I could play for fun, I really began to enjoy it. I play the piano, flute and reeds now.

When did you first start writing creatively?

I wrote my first musical age 15 when I was at school. It was an absolute mess that will never see the light of day but it taught me a lot. I think writing is something you get better at by doing.

Why did you decide to study science at university rather than music?

Because I was better at science than at music, in the academic sense anyway, and I thought if I dropped it after A-level that I'd never pick it up again whereas I knew I could still be involved in music no matter what. I also didn't want to turn music into something I had to do rather than something I do because I love it.

Why did you apply to Cambridge and St John's?

I wanted to study Natural Sciences at Cambridge because I couldn't decide between physics and chemistry and most universities make you choose between them. I applied to John's because of all the extracurricular music opportunities available. I sing with St John's Voices and I've done orchestral stuff with St John's College Music Society and played in lots of pit bands in lots of musicals. John's is very close to the ADC Theatre, which is very handy!

You are now doing Part III Astrophysics after three years as a Natural Sciences student, what is the course like?

Astrophysics is cool and very interesting. We look at the structure and evolution of stars, extrasolar planets, galaxies, cosmology and black holes. My research is focused around exoplanets and white dwarfs.

Have you always loved musical theatre?

I went to the theatre a few times as a kid and I remember being blown away by *Wicked* which reinvented the genre

with its very distinct style. I've been back again and again and always sit in the cheap seats in the back but it is worth it because the music is just so good.

My favourite musical at the moment is *Come From Away* which is set in Newfoundland in the week following the 11 September terrorist attacks. It is an incredibly moving piece of theatre with an uplifting reminder of the power of humanity at its core.

Do you act as well as write and direct?

No, absolutely not. My mum fondly tells me I tanked my acting career age six during the nativity production when I told Mary and Joseph to come into the inn as there was plenty of room!

What was it like finally seeing *Astrid* performed on stage to a sold-out audience?

I have never actually seen it performed in full because I'm always playing in the band. But the reviews have been incredible and the feedback we have had, often from people we don't know, has been really great. It shouldn't be so unusual to have strong female characters interacting without romance at the heart of the plot, but it is still very novel and people really responded to it.

Why do you think some people look down on musical theatre?

Like anything, musical theatre isn't for everyone. But it is a visual spectacle that brings in the most money for theatres by far – some people might be snobby about it because it is so popular with the masses. I also think people just have to find the right musical for them. Musicals can still wrestle with important, relevant themes and challenge the audience even when the story is presented via the medium of singing, dancing and acting. They can also be pure escapism into a magical world where people sometimes start tap dancing just because they can.



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