

## Churchill College Review, 2000

### POSTGRADUATE MEMORIES, 1966-69

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So many of the best things in life are pure luck. This includes my choice of college for my PhD years, a happy one for which I can claim no credit. Two things did it: my first degree (maths) was Oxford, at Trinity, with which Churchill is twinned, and I worked (on probability) under David Kendall, a Fellow of Churchill then and now.

The College was new enough for the memories of the founding few – prefabs, mud, building works etc. – to be fresh in folk memory, but already well-settled as a going concern. What I didn't realize till later was how lucky I was, as a non-Cambridge graduate, that it was Churchill I was joining. The place was very cosmopolitan and very science-minded, and the postgrads felt that the place belonged to them (I hope the undergrads felt the same!). Over the years, I heard many contemporaries complain privately that joining an older Cambridge College from elsewhere left one feeling rather a second-class citizen – in the place, but not quite of it.

As always, it's the people that make the place, and they were an interesting and varied bunch. There were the Troglodytes – the bridge-playing fraternity, who would have dinner as breakfast, go off for a hard night's bridge, and come down to breakfast as dinner before turning in to sleep. I didn't play bridge, but I remember Pete McConkey, a Canadian ex-Jesuit, as one of the most effortlessly funny people I ever met. There were the runners (of whom more below). There were the academics-in-the-making, like myself: Mark Casson, toweringly tall then (though my son James is as tall now, and not unusual), an economist who read Dirac's *Quantum Mechanics* for pleasure, and was the first of my bunch to get a chair (Reading. He'd written upwards of a dozen books at the last count, while I'm still sweating on my third ); Wojtek Zakrzewski, the physicist from the year below, bursting with exuberance and constantly waving his arms around (he's HoD of Maths at Durham now, and still waving his arms around, I'm told).

My generation well remembers Canon Noel Duckworth, who had heroic status as a surviving Japanese PoW. His passionate attachment to the Rowing Club, and inability to hold his drink, were equally disarming. This last characteristic he shared with Ken McQuillan. Ken's introduction to the College of the then new Master, Bill Hawthorne, was particularly unforgettable.

I spent my first year in Whittinghame Lodge, a lovely place, famous for Fisher's Mice. R. A. (Sir Ronald) Fisher, the greatest of all statisticians and also a great geneticist, had lived there while Professor of Genetics at Cambridge (1938-59), and conducted genetic experiments on mice, some of whom escaped and whose smell could still be detected. Then I had two years in the main building (Staircase 34). Of course, the College is much bigger now, but the new and the old sit very well together: the place is ageing well.

I'd run – cross-country – as a schoolboy and an undergrad, where I was middle-of-the-pack College standard. I continued this at Churchill, where I discovered distance running, largely thanks to the towpaths along the Cam. Two races stand out. One was a 4 x 2m Inter-College Relay, held somewhere on the footpaths round Fen Causeway. I was by far the weakest link in a very strong team, over a distance way too short for me, a situation any runner would dread. John Haselden, a Blue (international standard, as I recall) ran first, and handed over a big lead (60 yards, maybe). John Booth, a tough medic, ran second, handing over a smaller lead (40 yards, maybe) to me. I vowed to myself I would keep the lead, and did (how I don't know - a tribute to the power of adrenaline, as athletically I was quite out of my depth). I handed over a lead of maybe 20 yards to Paul Hockley – who went haring off in the wrong direction and got us disqualified. A moral victory, as John Haselden philosophically put it (John Booth was less diplomatic). The results of the second race I carry to this day, as a broad six-inch scar on my left calf. For some reason I turned up for a cross-country race on a freezing, muddy day with road-running shoes. Of course I had no traction on the corners - and lost an argument with a barbed-wire fence in consequence. I still run, for Barnet & District Athletic Club, where I am one of the stalwarts of the M50 B Team (our M50 A Team, the Awesome Foursome, are national standard).

The formative political experience of my generation was the Vietnam War. I remember breakfast, the morning that Johnson had announced his withdrawal from the 1968 presidential election, following the Tet Offensive. We had many Americans, and they were quite delirious with joy. Several of them got up on the tables, stood on their hands, and walked the length of the tables. I love to see grown men so moved that they revert to the small boy within, and whenever I do, I think of our Americans that morning in Churchill.

Churchill is still home from home. I visit regularly, on academic business as well as socially. David Kendall is still going strong. So is Peter Whittle, a

New Zealander who arrived in 1967 (then aged forty). For years he looked like a schoolboy, then like a schoolboy with grey hair; he now looks as if he might be approaching retiring age. Several other friends of mine are Fellows now: James Norris (another grey-haired schoolboy) and Geoffrey Grimmett, both fellow-probabilists; Jennifer Rigby, that most gracious of Bursars; Anthony Kelly, whom I met when he was VC at Surrey, who kindly asked me for this piece.

I left Churchill to spend thirty years as an academic in the University of London, before joining Brunel University recently. I have never ceased to be grateful for what my Churchill years gave me.

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*Postscript, 2009.* This piece was written in 2000. I was at Brunel 2000-03 and Sheffield 2003-06. I am now at Imperial College London (n.bingham@ic.ac.uk).

My postgraduate supervisor David Kendall died in 2007. My obituary of him appeared in *The Independent* on 1.11.2007, and is also on my homepage.

I am now a stalwart of the Barnet & District AC M60s team.